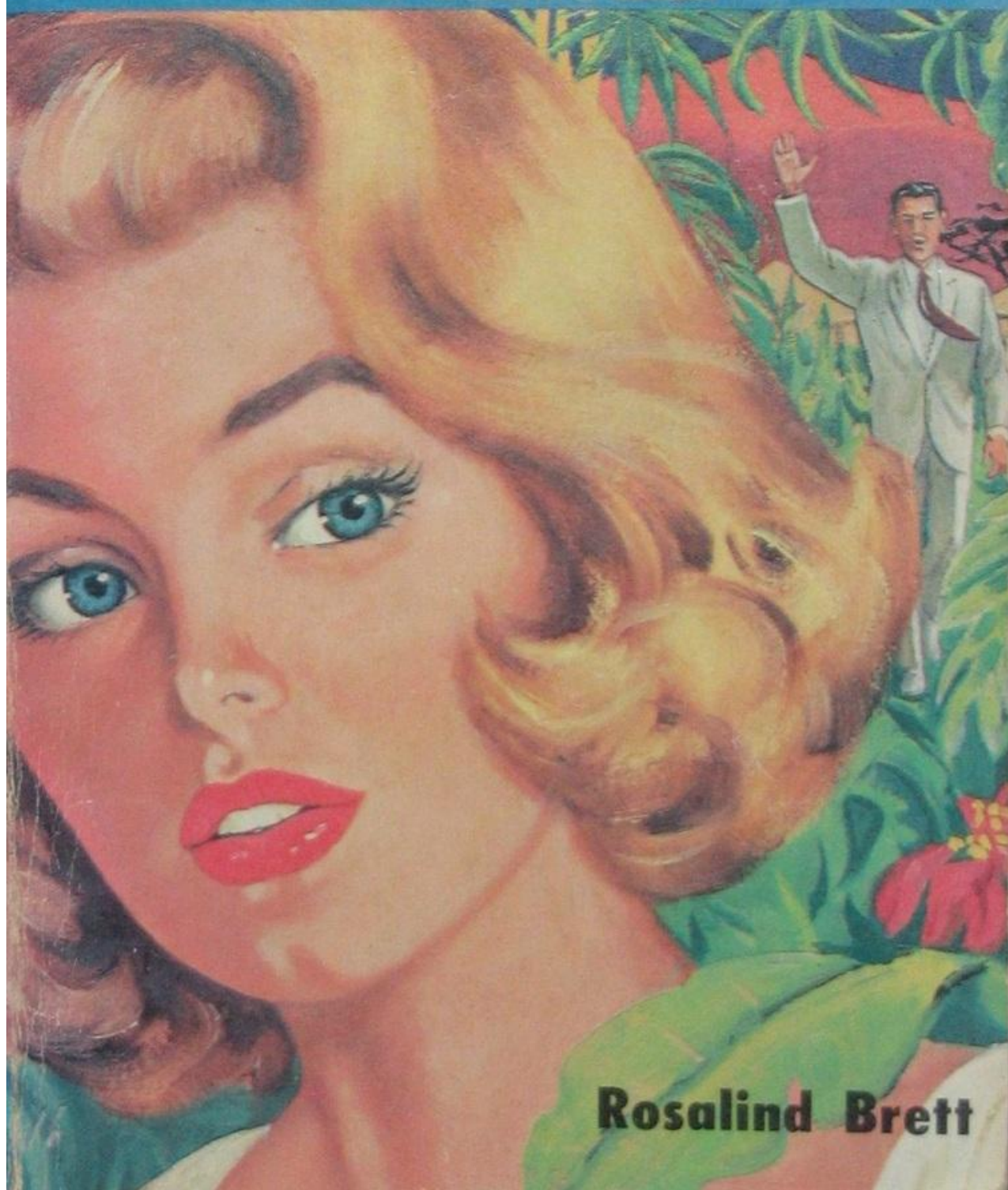


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MILLS & BOON

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WHISPERING PALMS



The whispering Palms by Rosalind Brett

It takes a very special type of courage to admit defeat, but Lesley and her father now had to face the inevitable. Two tobacco crops had failed, and reluctantly they must sell up and start again elsewhere. But the buyer of their farm was Fernando del Cuero, chief engineer of the nearby hydro-electric scheme. And Senor del Cuero announced that the valuable mineral, berillium, had been discovered on their land. Lesley was unwilling to profit from an industry that would ruin the beautiful land she loved, and was instinctively antagonistic to the man who had stepped in and taken over their lives. But she found events slipping out of her control. The arrival of Virginia, her elder sister, disturbed her deeply. This glamorous young woman's actions were always self-interested. She came to Africa anxious only for what she could take, not what she could give.

This story was written in , and the Africa of today is much changed. Yet its beauty, its everlasting fascination, were as irresistible then as they are now.

Chapter I

"IT'S no use minding," said Lesley, her tone resolute. "We've decided to sell, up, and I suppose we must count ourselves lucky to get the price we're asking. It will pay off our debts and go a long way towards a bungalow in Buenda. I do wish, though," with a rueful smile, "that the farm hadn't sold quite so quickly. It's only a week since we advertised it."

Her father looked up from the desk through which he was systematically searching. He saw her clear profile against the window, her short, fair curls with the hint of red in the waves, and the slim lines of her shoulders, and he answered with a sigh, "I haven't done too well by you, have I, my dear? You were just getting nicely established with those advertising people when I hauled you out to Africa."

"You couldn't help being ill."

"We might just have taken a holiday in the South of France. It would have helped. But instead we fancied ourselves as tobacco farmers, and what a first-class hash we've made of it!"

Lesley's eyes shone. "It's been a marvellous experience, anyway," she declared. And so, in many ways, it had. She had never pretended to herself that it had made her happy to give up the career upon which she had scarcely embarked, but her father's illness had swept away most of her personal desires. When a specialist had pronounced it essential that Edward Norton should spend a year or two in a warm climate, Lesley hadn't hesitated. Her sister Virginia, of course, had been furious. Surely, she'd said, it would have been sufficient to transfer Father from the North of England to an hotel in Bournemouth or Torquay? How was she possibly to entertain her friends at the weekends if there was to be no cottage to take them to? Lesley must realise that it was fatal to be without a home. It was so foolish to panic; other men got over these prolonged illnesses in England, and there was no reason to believe that Father would not do the same.

The odd thing was that Lesley, who had never in her twenty-one years defied her older sister, now found herself completely deaf to Virginia's selfish logic. She had answered her unemotionally. "If you don't want the trouble of keeping on the cottage, that is your

affair. The doctor recommended a high altitude location in a sub-tropical climate, and that's where we're going.'

There hadn't been much money, but the firm of auditors with whom Edward Norton had been employed, had generously made him an advance on his pension and guaranteed that a job would be there for him when he came back, which had rather lessened the sense of risk.

Never, if she could help it, did Lesley look back upon those first weeks away from England. Her father had weakened and rallied and weakened again. Intrigued by their first experience of Africa, they had moved up from Durban to the north-west of Natal. Then they had read about Amanzi Farm, which was near a place called Buenda in Central Africa. Excellent soil, three thousand feet above sea level, and near a river which flowed into

the Zambesi; there was a good brick and stucco dwelling, and only a quarter of the purchase price need be found at once. By post they took an option on the farm, and thereafter, by easy stages, they travelled up the continent and at last came to the scattered little town which gave its name to the Buenda district.

Although they had known nothing at all about tobacco-growing, their first year's tussle with eelworm and the disease known as wildfire would have given them enough experience to succeed with the second year's planting.

Other factors had crept up on them, however, and most of the next crop had been lost through damp rot. Two bad seasons were more than they could possibly finance. As for ploughing up and planting again, it was out of the question. Fortunately, Lesley was gifted with a sense of proportion.

They had settled in Buenda because the air had suited her father better than that of any other place they had visited. The warm, invigorating winds which flowed off the mountains into their rooms had put a faint glow into his face and a spring in his step, and the sun had tanned and toughened them. They had an abundance of fresh, plain food, and good neighbours in the Pembertons, whose tea plantations roamed over the adjacent hillside.

Sometimes circumstances cast a person in a certain role — and the world accepts, and looks no deeper. Lesley was the younger sister, the shy, self-sacrificing one . . . But her dreams, her desires were her own, guarded and precious.

After all, they had come here in order that her father might regain his health, not to make a fortune out of tobacco. Naturally they had no wish to leave Amanzi; even in two years one could come to love the house and the views from the windows, the little beds of flowers, and that beauty of the darkness which is peculiar to the wilder parts of the subtropics. But nothing really counted beside the fact that Edward Norton was happy and well.

By now her father had found the inventory of out-buildings and implements he had been seeking. He flattened it out on the desk, and Lesley came to his side and leant over it with him. "The curing-shed will have to be repaired by us," she said, "and I'm not sure that some of the implements aren't missing." "Seeing that this Spaniard is going to pay up without a quibble, it's only fair that we replace the missing items. However, I'll talk that over with him when he comes this afternoon."

Lesley straightened, to lean thoughtfully back against the desk. "Doesn't it strike you as odd, a Spaniard buying a farm he hasn't even seen, in Central Africa?"

"He's living only thirty miles away, and according to his letter the man has driven along our boundaries a hundred times. He's viewing 'today, before signing anything binding.' Her father smiled at her. "You'd better be nice to him when he comes. He can still withdraw the offer."

Lesley half-wished that that was What the man would do. When they had first advertised the farm a small gleam of hope had lain in the back of her mind; that whoever bought Amanzi would be willing to be friendly with the Nortons, so that they need not sever all connection with the tobacco lands. This man Fernando del Cuero killed that hope. He was in charge of the new hydro-electric scheme which had been materialising during the past months at the Kalindi Falls. The contractors were an English firm, but this Señor del Cuero was connected with them financially, and also reputed to be something extra-special in the way of engineers.

He was supposed to be coming at three. Did Spaniards drink tea? wondered; and what did they eat with it? Well, there were tea, scones, and coconut biscuits, and if he didn't like them he could leave them. Upon which drastic conclusion she went to the kitchen and prepared the tea-trolley, covered it with mosquito-netting, and told Solomon, the house-boy, he was free till six o'clock. Then she went out into the blazing afternoon and walked down from the small garden into the sloping pasture where the two horses were grazing in the shade of the hedge of mopani bush. She walked swiftly, the tan linen skirt swinging about her slim hips, her tailored white blouse tucked in neatly at the waist.

She sighed as she felt the hot sun on her back. Her feelings about Africa were mixed. She was more grateful than she could have said for the difference the hot climate had made in her father, and an affection had grown in her for the mountains and the wild little river, the thick-growing jungle, and the occasional herd of game which could be seen on the distant plains below the mountains. Yet - she wanted something more than life offered here. Her father had grown accustomed to a leisured life of semi-retirement, but how was she to get along with nothing to do, and no chance within a couple of hundred miles of earning a living? A bungalow with four rooms and a handkerchief-sized garden wouldn't keep her occupied, and she couldn't help looking ahead to the time when their money would have dwindled. For an auditor, her father was awfully impractical, but she hadn't the heart to persuade him to go home to a desk in a dim office.

Lesley made her way along the edge of the fallow fields which had yielded diseased and stunted tobacco. She looked back at what she could see of the house. It was square and white, with bougainvillaea climbing up one corner and well over the green painted iron roof. By this time she was too hot to go farther, and she turned back towards the house. Just in time to see the cloud of dust from the road which announced their caller.

Lesley did not hurry. She knew her father was waiting on the small veranda, and thought it might be as well to let them get their meeting over while she was absent. Besides, she felt reluctant to meet this Spaniard, to whom, apparently, money meant so little that he could buy a farm by post. She took her time, entered the house by the back door, and put a match to the ring on the paraffin stove. She turned the flame low, washed her hands, and went through to the living-room.

Lesley was unprepared for Fernando del Cuero. He was tall, and had a proportionate width of shoulder and hip. He was dark, of course, but not so jet dark as most of his

compatriots; in fact, one would have described his thick hair, ironically enough, as only a few shades darker than tobacco-brown. And his face! Lesley had never before seen so much strength and vitality in one set of features. It made her feel weak just to look at him. His chin was fearless and angular, and his jaw might have been carved from seasoned teak. His eyes were so piercingly dark, so impossible to evade, that her gentle blue ones were unwillingly magnetised. He was overwhelming.

"This is my daughter Lesley," said her father, his brows quizzically raised. "Señor del Cuero, my dear."

"How do you do," she managed.

Fernando del Cuero gave a small practised bow. "I have seen you before, Miss Norton. You once came to the Falls with a party of young people."

"So I did," she admitted. "But I'm certain we didn't meet you."

"No. I saw you from my veranda. I am using the white bungalow near the power house. Some of your friends, if I remember, were a little vocal about their disapproval."

Lesley went scarlet. She remembered the incident very well. However, she answered him with spirit. "The power house has spoiled the Falls, and the men showed their resentment." A bad beginning, thought Lesley. Her father was smiling humorously and indicating chairs, and she hurriedly sank down with her back to the window, while their visitor took the chair at the other end of the desk.

Edward Norton gave a brief description of their fruitless two years, to which the other man listened politely, occasionally offering a remark. His English was perfect, his voice deep and pleasant, and just sufficiently foreign to make it interesting.

"Perhaps you'd like to take a look round now?" said her father at last.

Fernando del Cuero leaned forward and smiled charmingly. "Mr. Norton, I decided while you were talking to be very frank with you. If I had wished, I could have bought your little farm and told you nothing of my plans, but now that I know you I do not think that would be fair, whatever the price."

"You sound very mysterious."

"There is no mystery, I assure you." He paused, cast a fleeting glance

across at Lesley, and then addressed himself exclusively to her father. "You have heard of beryllium, Mr. Norton?"

"Don't they use it as a neutron source in atomic physics?"

Fernando's smile warmed. "You have read about such things? You are a man after my own heart. Some weeks ago I had a geologist friend staying with me. At my request he took samples of granites—some of them close to your boundary—and he has crushed and analysed them. Those nearest your farm were found to contain beryls of good size, and there is reason to believe that there is an exploitable quantity to the north, nearest the river."

"Good heavens!" Edward Norton stared at him. "Then the farm must be worth much more than we thought."

"Exactly. My offer to take the farm at your price was a matter of form, until I could discuss this with you. The discovery is important to Central Africa and to Britain. I suggest we form a company; that you sell the farm to that company and retain an interest."

Edward Norton was so staggered that he merely lay back in the chair at the desk and tried to take it all in. But to Lesley, who hadn't the smallest knowledge of such things, the fact of there being crystals of beryl in the granite outcrops which scarred the farmlands was unremarkable, though she was prepared to believe the stuff might be valuable. However, she saw the personal aspect more clearly than the business one,

and for Fernando del Cuero she had conceived the sort of aversion which nourishes distrust. He knew too much, this man, and he was too suave. "Don't you think it would be best to get a Government geologist on the job?" she asked.

Fernando looked at her. Patently, he was not in the habit of allowing women to interfere in his plans, and possibly he considered it a mistake that she had been present at this interview. "My friend is a Government geologist," he said, with exasperated patience. "His name is Madison. His mother and mine were sisters." There followed a short silence, during which Mr. Norton's bewilderment became tinged with a mild astonishment. Obviously he found this current of enmity which flowed between his normally gentle daughter and their caller somewhat incomprehensible. Quietly, with the vestige of a twinkle, he suggested, "As Señor del Cuero is half-English, he might like a cup of tea, Lesley."

She went straight to the kitchen and turned up the flame under the kettle. Away from the man she could absorb more readily what he had just said, and she found that her knees were beginning to tremble and a nerve to jerk in her throat. In a wild flight of imagination she saw her father happily engaged in a fabulous business venture and their financial worries overcome. It was sad, though, to think of lovely Amanzi becoming a scar in the fertile greenness. First the beauty of the Kalindi Falls was being wrecked by the power house and barrage, and soon the savanah would be marred with transmission lines and splodged with transformed substations.

The next step was mining gear and swift-growing, ugly towns. Good for the prosperity of the country, maybe, but all this beauty would be sacrificed.

She made the tea and placed the pot on its stand on the trolley. For a moment she stood there, listening to the men's voices in the next room, and then decisively she opened the kitchen door and wheeled in the trolley.

FERNANDO politely got up, placed the trolley where she wanted it, and stood beside her while she poured. He insisted on giving the first cup to her father, and when they were all served he spoke to Edward Norton, as if continuing a conversation. "It would be best if we register the whole claim at once. My cousin, Neville Madison, is on long leave, and I know he would like to work the surface here for a few weeks before we arrange finance. Therefore it would be competent, perhaps, if I bought a half-interest in the farm for the time being, at a figure to be arrived at with a lawyer. The rest can be arranged when we form a company. You agree, Mr. Norton?"

Mr. Norton nodded, but waved a hand to include his daughter. "Lesley will have to agree, too. She brought me here, and she's done more of the farming than I have. Sometime I must tell you just how much she has done for me."

"I'm sure Señor del Cuero wouldn't be interested," she said quickly.

"On the contrary," he replied smoothly. "If your father and I are to have business connections, there is no reason why they should not be friendly. After all, I may be instrumental in helping to make you . . . not rich, but comfortably off."

"I'm not sure that money which grows out of ugliness is worth having."

"NO" He was smilingly undisturbed. "It depends on which is the more beautiful, progress or stagnation. Industry will bring prosperity to the people of this district. You cannot halt that kind of thing; it has to happen, and I, for one, am proud to work towards that end."

When her father had finished his tea he stood up. "If you're not in a hurry, Señor del Cuero, I'll look for that book I mentioned. It has quite a long section on beryllium."

"Please," said Fernando. "I would be glad to borrow it."

When Edward Norton had gone, a strange little hush settled over the room. Lesley put down her cup and hoped her father would not be long.

"I believe you wish you had already sold Amanzi to someone else," Fernando said. "It is very unreasonable, your attitude, and seems to be based on the fact I am not English. Do you not like the Spanish?"

"You're the first I've ever met, but I've heard they're a friendly and hospitable people."

"Yes, they are like the country itself. The people of San Feliz, which is an island belonging almost entirely to my family, are some of the finest

in the world, and they have an affection for the English." He let a few seconds pass before adding, purposefully but with complete courtesy, "You must get the correct angle on this project, señorita. It is fortunate that you and your father happen to be the owners of Amanzi at this time. A year or two either way, and you would have had no share in whatever might come out of the land. For my part, I am glad that after two years of failure you are to discover that the farm will not be unrewarding."

This savoured so strongly of patronage that she retorted at once, "Well, the farm is ours, after all, and we can do what we like with it."

"No, I do not agree." She saw that his glance had sharpened. "Seemingly you have not heard of what are called prospectors' rights. Minerals are so valuable that one can search for them anywhere, at a certain distance from a house. If I wished, I could register a claim on your land and pay your father only what the portion is worth as farming acreage—until I should strike something of value."

"But that's grossly unfair!"

He shrugged, a deep, expressive shrug. "In the narrow view, yes. You and I look at life from opposing points, Miss Norton. You cling to the cosy, old-fashioned things, whether they be good or bad, and you let sentimentality distort your perspective."

"Sentimentality doesn't always distort," she said hardily. "It also softens."

He gave a brief laugh. "You should have lived two hundred years ago, Miss Norton, if you are so opposed to progress where it is badly needed."

Lesley never knew how she would have reacted to this challenge, for her father had come back while Fernando was talking, carrying the book he had sought. If he noticed a strain in the atmosphere he did not remark upon it. Their guest showed an immediate interest in the volume, though Lesley guessed that he possessed more modern and complete dissertations upon the subject of mineral ores.

What an extraordinary man he was! Almost machine-minded, and apparently with very definite ideas on most things, yet there was a deference and an extreme courtesy in his manner when dealing with her father. Probably he didn't care whether women liked him or not. Which was exasperating. He stood up now. "So we understand each other, Mr. Norton? I will arrange a meeting with the lawyer in Buenda and let you know about it. We will go there together. With your daughter, naturally," he tacked on as an afterthought.

"Next time we meet," said Edward Norton, "I shall have become accustomed to this news you've brought us. At the moment it hasn't much substance."

"The beryl on your land, amigo, has much more substance than wilting tobacco. We shall see!"

Lesley and her father walked down the path with him to the road. With one hand on the door of a long maroon car which glittered in the sunshine, Fernando bowed to her.

"Perhaps we shall convert you," he said, a sudden and startling charm in his smile.

"You may not believe it, but I,

too, can find pleasure in untrammelled nature!" After which he got into the car, gave them another distant but friendly nod, and drove off.

THEIR neighbours, the Pembertons, were the first to congratulate and to counsel caution. Anna said, "Bill's father prospected all over the land and found traces of several valuable minerals. He even collected enough gold dust to make my wedding ring, but there was nothing in marketable quantities, and we've always made our living from tea. I hope the Spaniard is right about your land, Lesley, but don't count too much upon it."

Anna Pemberton was plumpish, nearly forty, heavily engaged in local affairs. Bill, who was fifty-five and something of a plodder, admired his wife tremendously. He had married late, only ten years ago, and it was a constant source of surprise and pleasure to him that he now possessed a fine-looking wife and a seven-year-old son.

Lesley had ridden over to Grey Ridge the day after Fernando del Cuero's visit, and found Anna Pemberton preparing a list of people she proposed to invite to a camp-fire supper one day next week. Anna had listened, made a few delighted comments, and called Bill from the sheds. After a talk, during which warnings and blessing were dispensed, Bill had gone back to his work and Anna had reconsidered the list on her writing-table. "What is he like, your senor?" she asked, her grey eyes bright and inquisitive,

"Tall and arrogant, quite the aristocrat."

"Really?" Anna gave her merry laugh. "I'd like to meet this Fernando. Do you suppose the camp-fire party would be in his line?"

"I'm sure he won't come. He's thirty miles away."

"So are the Hindleys and Macintoshes, but they'll be here. When do you see him again?"

"We had a note by messenger this morning saying he'd fixed an appointment with the lawyer for Saturday at nine. He's picking us up."

"Fine. Then you can invite him for me."

Lesley awoke on Saturday morning with a sensation of resignation. She put on a blue-and-white striped dress, and brushed back her honey-coloured hair till the waves shone. She stepped out on to the veranda and took a glass of orange juice and a piece of toast from her father's breakfast table. It was a golden morning. The grass was spattered with yellow petals from the silky oak, the cannas opened dozens of pale orange trumpets, and black-throated canaries were trilling in the jacarandas. There was even a yellow butterfly poised on the wooden veranda rail. Her father, in flannels and a navy blazer had drawn away from the table and was smoking his pipe while he contentedly surveyed the garden. Solomon cleared the breakfast things with a gloomy expression and sighed heavily as he went out to the kitchen.

Edward Norton looked up from prodding with a match at the bowl of his pipe. "What's Solomon upset about, do you think? His wife?"

"I imagine so. She was the belle of his village, and beauties are always difficult to live with."

"That's so. You didn't find your sister too easy, did you?"

"Virginia?" She paused to think a moment. "Virginia is lovely and admired. She could make a man happy, if she wanted to."

"Do you think she'll marry this man Boland whom she wrote about?" "She may. He sounds suitable."

"Virginia's definition of a husband is different from yours," he said, smiling gently.

"She's so brilliant. I hope you'll both marry, but you can wait for a while. She's twenty-seven, though, and getting more difficult to please."

"It's odd that she should find so much satisfaction in travelling round England with that job of hers. It must be rather wearing." There was no time for further discussion. Both heard the car and saw dust rising above the hedge.

They met Fernando at the gate. Though prepared for his darkness and his distinctive features, Lesley caught herself staring. Everything about him was a little larger than life, and it occurred to her as really odd that her father took the man so much for granted.

"Good morning," Fernando said, his smile pleasantly aloof as his glance flickered over the fresh picture she made. He put Lesley into the back of his car and her father into the front, and from behind the wheel he asked, "No regrets from either of you?"

"None from me," answered Edward Norton.

"And your daughter? Has she forgiven me for tilting at her pretty ideals?"

"Ideals are apt to become stronger when they're opposed," Lesley said lightly. "Even if we could save the farm from being carved up, we couldn't afford it. You have us where you want us, I'm afraid."

"It will not be so bad," he said with a reasoning smile over his shoulder. "You have your gardens and rockeries, and who knows, even you may come to realise that it is better to pin your faith to something which damp rot and, eelworm cannot destroy."

They entered the town by the newly surfaced wide avenue which had a neat strip of grass down the centre, planted at regular intervals with the evergreen flowering shrubs of the tropics. On the whole it was a new town, sparkling clean and completely African in its mixture of white buildings and old, leaning palms left growing wherever possible. The chief necessity in an African town is shade for shop-windows and shoppers, and in Buenda the pavements were covered with wide cement porticoes which were pillared at the kerb. It was a pleasant, rather sleepy town.

Fernando drew in the big car alongside the office of the only lawyer in Buenda, and with a lightheartedness which was remarkable in so tall a man, he came round to open the doors. The faintly mocking amusement on his lips irritated Lesley. She got the impression that this venture, which meant so much to her father, was an interesting and enjoyable experiment to the Señor del Cuero.

They were shown into a plain, book-lined room, and Fernando introduced the lawyer, a youngish man who showed more keenness about the existence

of the beryl than gravity over the legal aspects of the business. However, within half an hour or so his draft agreement had been amended and retyped, stamped, signed, and witnessed. Amanzi was now owned equally by Fernando del Cuero and Edward Norton.

Back in the car, Fernando said, "We should celebrate this partnership, should we not? This afternoon my cousin, Neville Madison, arrives here, and he will stay for the weekend with me. Mr. Norton, will you and your daughter have dinner with us tonight at the Falls?"

"We'd like to, but we haven't a car. It would be much easier if you came to us," said Mr. Norton.

Fernando half-turned to look at Lesley. Perhaps he was expecting her to back up her father's suggestion. Actually, her mind was darting swiftly over the contents of the modest paraffin refrigerator, and her hesitation was natural, though likely to be misconstrued. Belatedly she said, "Yes, do bring your cousin to have dinner with us."

Fernando's mouth had thinned and the humour gone from his eyes, leaving them cold and sardonic. His shoulders lifted, and he turned back to switch on the engine. "After all, we have nothing as yet to celebrate. Let us wait till we isolate the first good-sized beryl." And he eased the car out from the kerb and accelerated down the road.

Lesley sat back in the corner behind him. She felt foolish and angry. With an Englishman she would have laughed it off, telling him the truth: 'Sorry I didn't seem to be bursting with hospitality, but you know how it is. It's Saturday, there are only the two of us, and I was just casting a mental eye over the pantry. Come along and take pot luck!' But you couldn't talk like that to Fernando del Cuero.

He took them straight back to Amanzi. Her father, fortunately, was too occupied with the fact of having sold a half share in the farm to notice her constraint, and Fernando talked naturally about the steps which would be taken within the next month. At the house, all three got out and Fernando pushed back the gate.

Edward Norton tapped the long official envelope he had been holding. "I'm apt to be absent-minded, so this had better be locked away at once." He smiled. "Goodbye for the present, partner."

Fernando answered and gave his smiling bow. As her father moved up the path Lesley hesitated, fervently wishing she had made no promise to Anna Pemberton. "I've a message for you," she said quickly and not very clearly. "Mrs. Pemberton, who lives at the next farm, Grey Ridge, is giving a camp-fire party on Tuesday. She would like you to be there. I told her you'd probably decline, but she insisted that I should ask you."

"And why did you conclude that I would decline?" he asked with cool deliberation.

"What reason, apart from being otherwise engaged, would I have for doing that?"

"You've never met these people," she said confusedly. "You've been here a year or more without entering their circle, so I thought .. ."

"I know what you thought, but it is wrong. Please tell Mrs. Pemberton that it will make me very happy to meet her and her good friends on Tuesday. If you wish, you may also add that I find her kindness to someone she does not know distinctly refreshing. Good day to you, Miss Norton!"

Lesley did not stay to watch him go. She went straight into the house. Thank goodness, she thought, the house itself was still indisputably her father's, though she was coming round to the feeling that she wouldn't mind how soon they got out of it. In the long run her father might make more money by retaining an interest, but nothing could compensate for this frustration—being bound to a scheme with which neither she nor he had a real sympathy.

NEXT morning, Lesley and her father took a picnic lunch down to the river. A beneficent pioneer had once put rainbow trout into this particular reach of the Kalindi, and it was still possible, now and then, to hook out one or two good specimens. They wound in their first trout just before lunch, and the second at about three o'clock. Mr. Norton then sat with his back to a tree for a snooze, and Lesley took a stroll along the river bank, sometimes stopping to dip her toes into the clear water which purled among the stones and ran strongly for several miles to the Falls. She came to the bridge and ducked under it, shivering in the sudden delicious coolness, and she paused there, enthralled by the utter stillness of a long, pale green fish which seemed able to rest without discomfort upon the rocky and turbulent bed of the river.

She heard a car speed overhead and thought, idly, that the Pembertons were again having visitors for tea. She went on watching the fish, and presently she gently flicked a twig into the water to make it move. Then she heard the snapping of twigs on the

other side of the bridge, and realised that she and her father no longer had possession of this part of the Kalindi. A man, who had apparently slithered down the bank at the side of the bridge, stood staring at the water as if it presented a problem. He was above average height and slimly built, probably in his early thirties, though on prolonged inspection he looked lined and cynical. A pleasant face, though, what Lesley could see of it; thin and aquiline, the mouth narrow but not ugly. He was darkish, and wore shorts and a white shirt. Lesley felt she ought to make her presence known. She moved sideways from under the bridge, and by the time she had straightened the man had seen her and was giving her a nonchalant, attractive smile, which crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Well met," he said. "I'm needing some advice." She smiled back at him. "Mine?"

"A woman can sometimes offer a novel way out of a difficulty. My radiator's boiling and only half full. I should have attended to it before I started out, but I forgot. The position now is that here's plenty of water

and there's the car—" with a nod back over his shoulder at the road—"but I've no means of carrying the one to the other. I didn't even bring a hat!"

"I can certainly be of help. My father's along the bank, taking a doze beside our picnic-basket. We have an empty milk bottle."

"Fine!" He looked her over appraisingly, from the top of her head to her shapely bare feet. "I've lived in different parts of Africa for eight years, but this is the first time I've ever come upon a sprite near an African river." He stopped, and added interestedly, "I say, you wouldn't be Lesley Norton, would you?"

"Yes, I would. Did the Pembertons tell you about us?"

"The Pembertons? Who are they?"

She laughed a little. "We're at cross-purposes. Let's go back to the beginning."

"Very well. I'm Neville Madison."

"Oh."

He gave her a cynical grin. "Does my name mean something not very palatable?"

"Of course not." Her smile had faded, though. "You're Senor del Cuero's cousin, the one who's taking a busman's holiday discovering minerals. You plan to hack beryls out of Amanzi."

"My dear girl, you don't know your luck!" he said. "At the present moment I'd give my ears to own Amanzi. Beryl is fetching a fabulous price, and even a small amount is worth quarrying. Aren't you pleased about it?"

"I'd rather have been a successful farmer. When are you going to start?"

"It depends to some extent on you and your father. That's why I came over this afternoon. As a matter of fact I was going to ask if you'd mind my converting one of your sheds into living quarters."

"They're log buildings, and not waterproof. Why not build a rondavel lower down, near where you're going to dig?"

He raised one eyebrow. "I will if you insist, though I'm not too keen on eating and breathing granite dust."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think of that," she said contritely. "We have a spare room, but it's unfurnished. I dare say we could fix it up for you."

"Wonderful. I was hoping you'd say something like that. I'll fix it up myself. A roving geologist carries his gear wherever he goes." He bent towards her conspiratorially. "I'll tell you something. The use of one of your sheds was Fernando's idea. He doesn't want you to be bothered any more than necessary."

"It won't be any bother, and my father will enjoy having another man in the house," she said. "You'd better come along and meet him."

NEVILLE Madison was as different from his Spanish cousin as even she could wish, Lesley discovered within the next half-hour. He took life tolerantly and pleasurably. Between them they filled the radiator of his old tourer, and then he drove Lesley and her father home to the farmhouse.

She made tea and brought it to the veranda, and joined in the general conversation. It was not till nearly six, when Neville got up to leave them, that he again mentioned the purpose of his visit. "You're quite sure that I shan't be in the way here, living in the house?" he said to the older man.

"Glad to have you, my boy," was the cordial response. "Nothing like receiving a daily report on operations!"

"It'll be two or three weeks before I can do much. We've sent up-country for a new drill and some other plant. Still, I shall be able to uncover some of the surface. Do you mind if I move in with you soon?"

"Not at all," said Lesley. "I'll have the room cleaned tomorrow."

"Thanks. All my stuff is stored with some friends. I'll go along for it and be back on Thursday or Friday." He said goodbye to Edward Norton, and Lesley walked with him down the path to the road. At the car he held out his hand. "We're going to be friends, Lesley," he said. "I feel it in my bones. Shake on it." They did, smiling, and he added, "I believe it's going to be a profitable holiday for me, after all."

"How long is your leave?"

"I have four months, and there's still more than half to go." His hand on the door of the tourer, he openly considered her once more. "Fernando didn't tell me you were pretty." "He probably prefers raven-haired lovelies in mantillas."

"Maybe," he agreed carelessly. "He's never had time to be much of a ladies' man, but he certainly has a way with women. What did you think of him?"

"I understand that he's a first-class engineer and a good businessman," she said with reserve.

"He's more than that. They actually postponed installing the hydroelectric plant at the Falls till he was free to superintend it. And he seems to have a sort of instinct for minerals. He found your beryl—I didn't."

"Doesn't he ever live in Spain?"

"When he takes leave he divides his time between San Feliz and London. He was born in San Feliz—it's a marvellous island off the North African coast—and he was educated in Spain till he was of an age to attend an English university. He and I were at Cambridge together, and we joined the Air Force together, too. After the war he went back to San Feliz for a while to help install a hydro-electric project there; the island is mountainous, and there's plenty of rushing water. Fernando loves San Feliz, but there's not enough construction work on the del Cuero estate for a man of his temperament, so he leaves a manager in charge. You should see him there—the grand caballero!"

"I can imagine it," she said drily. "Even here he has everything well in hand."

"He is an autocrat," Neville agreed, "but he's done me many a good turn. This Amanzi job is another. I shouldn't be surprised if it isn't the best thing that's happened to me, both financially and otherwise!" he ended, his brown eyes glinting.

She caught his meaning and laughed, her cheeks bright. "I must confess that I'm glad you're not a Spaniard!"

He took his seat and thumbed the starter. "So long!" he called through the window space. "I can hardly wait to move in!"

Lesley was still smiling when she went indoors to her father. He had spread himself on the divan and was staring, his expression remote, at the asbestos board ceiling.

However, he turned his head her way and said affectionately, "Things are moving fast, aren't they? Madison's a nice fellow. I don't think he has Fernando's ability, but we'll find him a good companion. Too bad he couldn't stay to supper."

"We only caught two trout!"

"You'd have thought Fernando would have come with him, wouldn't you?"

Slowly Lesley answered, "I don't somehow think our senor will come to the house again, without an invitation." And in a way she hoped he wouldn't. With a man such as Neville Madison one knew more or less where one stood; he would philander a little in a complimentary fashion; he would jest and generally enjoy himself. From the fact or two he had let drop, he couldn't allow himself to be taken seriously by any woman, which suited Lesley perfectly. The less she saw of the Spanish caballero the better.

CHAPTER II

THE spare room needed a more thorough cleaning than Lesley had anticipated. Their trunks and boxes had been stored against the walls, and she was appalled to discover that they had joined themselves to the plaster by a thick green fungus which must have appeared since the last rains. A film of mildew she had been prepared for, but this smelly growth was something quite outside her knowledge. Together, she and Solomon swept and scrubbed, but the walls were irrevocably stained. There seemed to be nothing for it but to apply a new coat of distemper and keep the window wide open. Lesley did the distemping on Tuesday, finishing at about half-past five with such abominably aching shoulders that she was half-inclined to stay away from Anna Pemberton's camp-fire party. Had it not been for the fact that Anna had detailed her brother-in-law to pick up Lesley, she would certainly have remained at home with her father. But Tod Pemberton breezed in at seven-fifteen and expressed himself willing to wait just ten minutes while Lesley got into a sweater and skirt, so she braced herself and tried to hurry.

It was a glorious night. A wind plucked at the big leaves of the teak trees and rustled drily through the thorns. The sky was spangled black velvet except where it was touched by the glow of the camp fires which had been lit just beyond the Pembertons' garden in the lee of a group of old coffee trees.

It was nearly eight, and the smell of grilling sausages and lamb chops

was remarkably appetising. Trays full of rolls, baked earlier in the day, were keeping warm near the brick fireplace, and a table was laden with plates and glasses and heaps of fresh fruit.

There was the usual crowd. Tod had brought his young wife in from the forest reserve where he worked; the young farmers were here with wives and sweethearts; there were a couple of bank clerks, the doctor's son, and the twin daughters of a colonel who farmed citrus. And at the other campfire, about twenty yards away, Lesley saw, thrown into relief, the dark, distinguished head of Fernando del Cuero. She moved back into the shadows and out of the range of those scorching flames, and with an oddly quickening pulse she watched Fernando toasting a steak fillet as if he were used to

doing it every night of his life, and talking with an air of smiling charm with the middle-aged doctor's wife. Against the orange glow his face and throat were burnished copper. One knee was drawn up, and he rested an elbow on it carelessly.

The accordion was suddenly very loud, and those who had finished eating began to sing. Fruit was offered and the dishes replenished, and gradually the guests withdrew from the dying fires and sat on folding chairs or cross-legged on the grass. The doctor's son sung a Dutch song which his father had taught him, and the colonel's twins, who were pretty if rather empty-headed, rendered popular tunes learned from the radio.

Then Tod said, "What about a Spanish song, Señor del Cuero?" Fernando smiled, showing those very white teeth in the flickering darkness. "I am no singer. Even our national anthem I sing off-key."

"Well, tell us about Spain—appropriate subject on a night like this. What is it like in the land of grapes and wild honey?"

"It is very beautiful," he answered calmly. "Very beautiful indeed, and the cities are highly civilised. In the island of San Feliz it is like the Costa Brava of Spain. We still have some Moorish architecture and the lands are rich with fruit trees, canes, olives and palms. My own house there has a fine colonnaded patio which has existed for four hundred years, and in the season we hold a wine feast in the gardens and patio for our vineyard workers. We try to make it possible for every islander to visit Spain at some time, but they all come back."

Bill said heartily, "They say your Spanish women are the most beautiful in the world."

Fernando gave an airy flick of his long fingers. "It may be true. They have good skin and clear eyes, vivacity, and an inherent simplicity because their lives are sheltered. And, being simple, they make good wives!"

"Better than English women?" demanded Anna.

"Only in Spain would I dare assert that! Many of our men have married women of other nations, and I believe—" with a light, wicked laugh—"they have made good husbands.

One can take it that such a marriage is not dull. But then, the Spanish are never dull!"

Lesley wanted to ask questions, to find out more about the laughing señoritas, the fiestas, the cathedrals and palaces of Spain. But Anna was at

her side, whispering, "Will you be a dear and run up to the house for me, Lesley? Just look into Terence's bedroom and make sure he's sleeping."

Lesley left the crowd which was scattered between the two fires, and walked through the trees to the garden path which curved round through a shrubbery and crossed the wide lawn to finish at the back door of the farmhouse. It was very quiet. A lamp was turned low in the kitchen, and another was placed on the narrow table between the doors of the main bedrooms. Terence's bedroom door was ajar, and she tiptoed into the room and over to his bed, to look down in the darkness at Anna's son.

She smiled down upon the boy as a woman will, for no other reason than that a sleeping child is good to look upon. The smile was still on her lips when she returned to the kitchen. It froze there because the door was open, and Fernando stood in the doorway. She stared at him in the dim light for a long moment, then recovered quickly.

"You frightened me," she said.

"I am sorry." He remained there, unmoving and wordless for a few seconds. Then brusquely, "I wish for a word with you." He cast a glance at the hard white chairs and added, "But not here."

She passed him and stepped down to the path. He pulled shut the door and took her elbow in a light, firm grasp, and she was suddenly conscious of his nearness. His nod

indicated the front of the house, and she walked with him to the garden bench below the front veranda. Because he seemed to expect it, she sat down. He dropped down beside her and leaned back, half-facing her. Warblers and weavers were restless in the trees, and Fernando said, "The birds do not care for camp-fires and singing after dark, and you, I think, have sympathy with them. You did not appear to be enjoying yourself back there."

On the point of remarking that her shoulders ached and she was tired, Lesley checked herself. "I like camp-fire parties," she said firmly.

"Do you mean That you would be enjoying this one if I were not here?"

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, I was quite interested in the little you told us about Spain. It sounds charming."

"You must travel there some time," he said with irony. "You would find that we are not all made to pattern. The fact that we are more capable of love than are the English should not deter you. You have much to learn about life and the passions of men!" Lesley blinked. She hadn't expected this kind of comment from Fernando.

She stole a glance at him, saw that the irony still lingered in his expression and gave a humorous twist to the well-cut mouth. He was laughing at her! "That is enough of Spain," he stated, before she could think up a retort. "I would like you to remember sometimes that I am as much English as I am Spanish. I wanted to speak with you about Madison. He tells me you have invited him to stay in your house."

She nodded. "You haven't seen our sheds, or you wouldn't have suggested his living in one of them. The thatches are threadbare."

A shrug. "It would take only a day or two to effect repairs. He has lived in much worse places."

"There are double doors, and the log walls let in the rain."

"There are also remedies for those things. Señorita, a word of warning. Madison is my cousin, and I have no desire to speak against him, but I must tell you that he has a reputation for infidelity. A few years ago he broke off an engagement to a delightful Englishwoman, and since then he has been transferred twice for reasons into which I will not go. At the time he made that girl in England very unhappy; I should not like to think he would do the same to you."

"He won't," she replied confidently. "He seems nice, but .. ."

"Neville always seems nice—increasingly so as one knows him better. But underneath there is the instability, the lack of character."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather wait and weigh him up for myself," she said coolly.

He looked at her, his face taut as if he were on the verge of anger. "You are small, but very independent, Miss Norton, and when you take a dislike to someone you do it thoroughly. Well, I do not object to that; I am a thorough man myself. But there appears to be one aspect of this of which you lose sight. Your father and I are in business together, and your name does not come into the agreement. If I order that one of your sheds is to be made habitable for Neville, it is to be done, and he is to live there. It is understood?"

Vexation had risen so precipitately to her throat that she had to swallow hard in order not to make a choking sound. With an air of nonchalance she was far from feeling, she said, "You don't have to bark; I'm not hard of hearing. What do I do? Turn him away when he arrives on Thursday?"

"No. If as you say, the log walls are not weatherproof, I will send over two boys and some sheets of boarding of a type we are using for partitioning in our own settlement. Neville may sleep at your house till the shed is converted."

"I'm sure he'll be very grateful," she said drily.

There was a brittle silence between them. Muted came the blare of the accordion mingled with many voices. For some reason they were singing "Annie Laurie" with comic pathos; at least, it was comic in the distance. Lesley knew an absurd desire to laugh hysterically and to try the high notes; she was suddenly strung-up. But Fernando appeared quite unconscious of the singing. He was leaning forward with his arms along his knees. And when he spoke he seemed to have forgotten that her last words had been tinged with acid. "The nights here are good, not unlike the nights in San Feliz. Often when I am alone I take a walk before bed. The air at the Falls is unbelievably clear and invigorating at midnight, a compensation for the steamy mornings."

"Where were you before you came to Kalindi Falls?" she asked curiously.

"In the Western Congo." He gave a shrug and a brief laugh. "We were deep in the jungle. In twenty months I saw only three women; two of

them were wives of Government officials, and the third was the sister of my assistant. She had fever and we sent her home."

"An English girl?"

"Yes, perhaps a year or two older than you. She was plucky and sweet."

Lesley knew an inexplicable thrust of—it couldn't be jealousy? She pulled herself up sharply. As if she cared whether he married or remained an arrogant bachelor! It was only that it was odd to discover that he had once been acquainted with a girl—an English girl—whom he had presumably liked and admired. Though she had known him only a short time, she had formed the habit of thinking of him as lone and aloof. Somehow it had helped to regard him as somewhat invulnerable where women were concerned. "Don't you ever hanker for a more social life?" she queried quickly.

"Yearning for something which is perhaps three years away is a waste of time. We have card-parties and picnics. We are friendly with the officials, and I know several people on this side of the river. In a few months I shall be moving on."

"And do you take the same staff with you?"

"Not all of them. Some are engaged only for the contract, and have wives to go home to."

"Don't you encourage the men to bring their wives?"

"No. Wherever we go the country is crude, and in the first stages we are troubled by big game. Women are too nervy, and I . . ." He shrugged. "I must confess I am impatient of nerves; there is too much to be done. Also, this pioneering of women in the jungle is something I cannot tolerate. I appreciate that English women have much freedom, but I cannot say I agree with the system!"

"It's easy to see why you are not married," she remarked.

"Yes?" He slewed round to give her a disconcertingly direct stare. "I wonder how near you have come to the truth? Tell me what you think."

It was confusing to be gazed at like that. In this light his eyes were black and unreadable, but she could see that his mouth mocked, and it rekindled within her the spark of animosity. "There are probably two reasons," she said unflinchingly. "The type of woman you'd want to marry wouldn't line up with your idea of the sort of woman you should marry, if you are to live in wild places."

"How true!" he said with satire. "And the second reason?"

"The woman's viewpoint., I don't think you'd understand it."

Apparently intent upon following the discussion to its end, he said, "You mean I am not romantic in your sense of the word? But how can you know?" He snapped his fingers

in a totally foreign gesture, and smiled tantalisingly. "I have it! I have disappointed you. We are alone in the dark, and I should have taken advantage of the fact instead of commanding that you behave carefully with Neville Madison. Any one of those young fellows—" with an inclination of his head to indicate the other end of the garden—"would by now have you in his arms. He would kiss you and tell you he loved you, and tomorrow, if you should meet, you would agree

that it was a good party and go your ways, unremembering." Then startingly, he added, "Would you like me to take you into my arms and kiss you?"

"Good heavens, no!" she exclaimed, and sprang to her feet as if poised for flight. He laughed, his head thrown back as he stood above her. His throat was brown and strong, his laughter short but entirely spontaneous, and though she knew it was directed at her particular brand of innocence, she was not, this time, annoyed. In a way even she was glad, because one of the strands of the barrier between them had snapped, and she felt able to breathe more freely in his presence. But she was still not entirely at ease.

"Don't be frightened," he said, still smiling. "I am not given to philandering. In a country like this it could be too distracting." He took her elbow again, but more gently and companionably. "Let us go back to the party. I must leave soon."

THE spare room at the farm was a sparkling pale yellow when Neville Madison arrived at noon on Thursday. Lesley had given him her own rug and dressing-chest, and when Solomon had put up the camp bed and brought in several other articles which Neville presumably found indispensable on tour, she supplied fresh linen and blankets, and shared the task of bed-making and rearranging the chest and folding chairs. Neville professed himself highly satisfied with the result. "Mustn't get too cosy, though," he said with his attractive grin. "Fernando considers it thoughtless of me to accept your hospitality. He says you've been working much too hard for two years and need a rest. I did remind him that a new friend about the place might be a good form of relaxation for you, but he wasn't amused. Did he tell you he's going to have your sheds repaired?"

"Yes, he told me." Unwilling to discuss Fernando, she turned to practical details. "You can have breakfast at whatever time you like. We mostly have ours at about seven-thirty on the veranda. Lunch is at one and dinner at seven. There's generally a cup of tea going at eleven in the morning and four in the afternoon."

"I'll fit in. I'm the most accommodating chap in the world. I shan't have much work to do till we get some men and the drill. Do you own a spare horse?"

"We've only two hacks, but I dare say you can borrow my father's. They're dears, but unexciting."

"Which is what you aim to be yourself, isn't it?" he said whimsically. "To have lasted two years here without acquiring even an engagement-ring you must have lethal tactics."

She laughed. "I really haven't had time for love affairs."

"Well, you're free now! Let's go riding into the sunset this evening and see what happens!"

Neville was like that. Possibly it was a line which he had found, over the years, to bring most cheer with the least responsibility. Lesley didn't

mind it. For one thing, it was refreshing to have a man of his age—he was thirty-three—so openly finding pleasure in her company.

As the days passed she found herself liking Neville and feeling rather sorry that the conversion of the smaller shed was going ahead so quickly. To her relief, Fernando did not come over that weekend after all, and once a new week had begun she thought it unlikely that he would trouble them till the following Saturday or Sunday.

A single bed arrived from the Falls, together with a few pieces of plain furniture for Neville's use. At the newly created window in his log hut, she hung short flowered curtains, and the cement floor was covered with natural grass matting. A rattan chair from the house veranda completed quite a pleasing apartment, but Neville did not hasten to take up residence down there on the edge of the fallow land. Indeed, it took a cable from England to shift him from the spare room.

The cable arrived at mid-morning. Neville had ridden up from his first attempt at quarrying, and was sitting on the veranda reading a two-days-old newspaper.

The telegram was from Virginia. "Leaving today by plane. Meet me Broken Hill on the fourteenth."

Mr. Norton read it twice, and so did Lesley. They regarded each other in bewilderment, and she said hollowly, "It's taken three days to get here. Tomorrow's the fourteenth."

"A tragedy?" inquired Neville.

"The reverse," she said quickly, almost as much to convince herself as to convince him. "My sister's coming—arriving tomorrow at Broken Hill. We're supposed to meet her."

"It can be done," he said easily. "Broken Hill is only three hundred miles away."

"How can we get there? There's no railway anywhere near here, and if there were we couldn't order a train. We don't possess a car."

"But I do. It's not in the pink of condition, but it'll take us six hundred miles. Does your sister say what time the plane gets in?"

"I expect she has to get connections. She wouldn't know."

"All right, we'll travel tonight and wait for her. This afternoon I'll run down into Buenda and get the bus greased and filled up. We'll leave this evening."

She smiled at him gratefully. "I wish we could accept, Neville, but I really don't think my father should travel through the night. He's well enough now, but .

"I'm over that business," said Mr. Norton. "It won't do me any harm." "It might. I refuse to let you take the chance."

"But Virginia will expect me to meet her; I haven't seen her for two years."

"A few hours more won't hurt. I can't let you go all that way." Belatedly she gave Neville his cup, and after a moment she asked him, "How long would it take to get to Broken Hill?"

"Six hours, with luck."

"Couldn't we start now, and put up at an hotel there tonight?"

"My car needs attention. I wouldn't dare take it so far without a mechanic looking over it first. There's hardly a hamlet on the road and certainly nothing in the way of a service station. The wisest thing would be to start at midnight. Then we'd travel while it's cool and, even allowing for a puncture or two, would get there in time for breakfast."

"Very sensible, too," nodded Mr. Norton. "It's exceedingly kind of you, Neville."

"I'm only too glad there's something I can do for you."

The arrangement was not entirely to Lesley's taste, but she was too dazed with the news to think of anything better. Virginia coming to Amanzi! It was fantastic, incredible. Somehow she must have wangled a long holiday; that part of it was comprehensible. But for Virginia, who had always clung very tightly to her salary, to spend such a colossal sum on a trip to Africa was something at present quite beyond Lesley's powers of absorption. She would like to have thought that her sister had at last decided

her family was worth a visit. But for years Virginia had been independent of her father and Lesley, and impatient of their lack of worldly ambition. Her letters had been dutiful and without affection—hurtfully so, because Lesley had never quite lost her fondness and admiration for the gold-and white beauty who was her sister, and Edward Norton had a proud love for his elder daughter.

Neville broke into her thoughts. He said, wryly, "This means that I definitely get out of your spare room today. Would you like me to leave the camp bed there?"

"Will you—just until we have time to buy a bed?"

"You're welcome to it till I have to take it on tour again." At last he got up and bade them, "So long."

But a few minutes passed before Lesley was able to say, "I can't get over it—Virginia coming here! She's been so against our staying, so contemptuous of our settling here, and farming."

"You're not being just, my dear. Virginia hasn't our leanings, that's all. I'll admit it's rather a blow, her choosing to come by plane."

"A blow?"

"The whole trip will cost several hundred pounds, but I don't suppose she has a long enough holiday to come any other way."

Lesley looked at him and said slowly, "Have you written to Virginia since the discovery of beryl on Amanzi land?"

"Why, naturally, my dear; I sent her an air letter the day we sold • the half-share in the farm. She has a right to be the first to hear of our good fortune."

There was nothing more she could say without annoying or hurting him, but it was all painfully obvious. Virginia was coming out to check up on the luck which had come their way. She had known that in the circumstances she could rely on her father paying the plane fare, and she had

probably taken it for granted that he had bought a car or could easily hire one in which to pick her up at Broken Hill. Lesley didn't want to think about Virginia in such terms, but there seemed to be no alternative.

BY the time Virginia's plane touched down at Broken Hill, Lesley was so tired that she could have collapsed. The journey through the night had been interminable and wearing, mile upon mile of unmade road which in places was still slippery and potholed from the last rains. Neville had been kind and tirelessly blithe. He had talked and jested, stopped to give her coffee, and asked her innumerable questions which it taxed her ingenuity to answer, and all with the intention of helping to speed the hours. They had arrived just after seven and Neville had airily knocked up one of his friends and demanded breakfast. The plane, they had learned, was not due till five in the afternoon. Somewhere about noon, a bedroom had been placed at Lesley's disposal, but sleep was as elusive as ever, though she was lightheaded with the need of it. Emotionally she alternated between an urgent desire to see Virginia again and an ungovernable and desperate hope that her suspicions would prove unfounded. How lovely if Virginia were coming simply because she wanted to see them!

The sun was sinking, as they made their way to the airfield, and an evening breeze bent the grass when at last the plane was sighted. After that it was only a matter of minutes till it touched the runway and came to a halt. Lesley watched the passengers descending, saw the trim figure in a grey silk shirt and trousers, and slipped a hand into Neville's. "That's Virginia," she said huskily.

He gave her hand a squeeze. "I thought so. You're played out, my pet. Go back to the car and I'll meet your sister as she comes from the Customs."

Blindly Lesley obeyed him, and presently as the orange light faded, she saw them approaching, and left the car once more to greet Virginia. Virginia was so beautiful and bandbox-fresh that Lesley knew the old leap of admiration and love. Her kiss touched a smooth, cool cheek.

"Hallo, darling," said Virginia, scarcely looking at her. "Where's Father?"

"We thought he'd better wait for you at Amanzi, and I'm glad now that he did. We had to travel through the night and hang about all day. How are you, Virginia? You look marvellous."

Virginia's smile was perfunctory, her glance wandered over the dusty tourer. "Thanks. Where do we go now?"

Neville put in, "We can get a meal at the hotel and start back to Amanzi. You'll have to rough it on the road, I'm afraid. This is Africa, and my springs aren't as new as they once were."

Somehow, the awkward five minutes were over. Virginia's case was stowed away and they moved off to the hotel. The two in the back seat sat like friends who have gone different ways and can find no path back to common ground. Lesley tried to explain a little about the country, and

Virginia sat regally composed, her green eyes secretive as they gazed out over the dusk-laden countryside.

It was the same at dinner. Virginia surveyed Neville and found him attractive; she was also experienced enough to read those lines of dissipation and to parry his particular type of nonsense and flattery. But she was cold and uncaring; Lesley felt it as she had felt it years ago, when Virginia had defied her mother, or the aunt who had taken over after her mother's death. She was bent on continuing her own way, in her own fashion. They started back for Amanzi in the dark. Neville calculated it would be about three in the morning when they reached the farm. "That is, if the old lady will stand up to it," he ended, patting the wheel. "She seems to be protesting in all her joints, but she's done it before and I've got through. Not afraid, are you, Virginia?" His friendliness had an edge of sarcasm. Perhaps he knew that Virginia saw through him more clearly than Lesley did.

Virginia shrugged. "I don't seem to have any option, do I? Give me a cigarette, will you?" She had changed over and was sitting in the front seat, where the jolting was less pronounced. Possibly because he had had no more sleep than Lesley had, and had spent the day drinking and card-playing with his friends, Neville was not driving too well. The headlights picked out huge holes, but somehow he could not avoid them. He was getting sleepy.

Virginia had grown silent. She was really no different from the Virginia they had left in England a couple of years ago, thought Lesley, though she had seemed to kindle slightly when she talked about Father. Such a pity they would arrive in the small hours and awake him. It was the wrong time altogether for a reunion.

Lesley dozed in a series of nightmarish jerks. At long intervals they met an oncoming car, but as the night wore on they had the road to themselves. Then another car approached, and this time it slowed till it was level with them, and gave a couple of hoots as it passed and pulled up.

"Cousin Fernando," said Neville laconically as he braked. "Did you see him, Lesley?"

Yes, Lesley had seen him. The lean brown face, the big shoulders as he had turned in his seat to draw their attention. Oddly, she was both uneasy and exhilarated, and also

unable to move, though she knew the big car had reversed and stopped right behind them.

He came to Neville's window, looked in swiftly at Lesley and her sister. "I came to meet you," he said. "Mr. Norton was anxious when you had not come by dinner-time, and he arranged for Mr. Pemberton to come to me with a message." He swung open the back door. "Come, little one, you must be very tired. And you, Miss Norton. I will drive you the rest of the way." He spoke again to Neville, and his smile was cold and exasperated. "You should have known better than to use this contraption of yours for such a purpose. What will Miss Norton think of us?"

Virginia, looking at Fernando, had a charming and startled smile. Watching her, Lesley remembered her own reaction at her first meeting with him, the utter astonishment at his Spanish good looks, her inward delight at the alien inflection in his tones. Hurriedly she introduced him to her sister. She saw his glance take in the fine, pointed features, the silky wave of light hair above the white brow, and the dark greenness of her eyes. Just perceptibly, his eyebrows rose a fraction, as if he, like Virginia, were pleasantly startled.

As though it were hers by right, Virginia got into the front seat of Fernando's car. Lesley, in the back, was given a pillow and a rug and told to rest. Neville raised a careless hand as they passed, and then Fernando put on speed, and in the comfort of his car the road seemed to smooth out beneath the wheels. Lesley slept. She was not truly conscious of anything that happened during the rest of that night. At Amanzi, Fernando helped her from the car and insisted on almost carrying her inside, lest, in her hazy condition, she should fall. Virginia hugged her father and began to talk to him with much more verve and affection than Lesley had thought her capable of. Lesley slipped between the sheets on the hard little camp bed, felt foolishly unhappy for a few minutes, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER III

VIRGINIA'S presence in the house at Amanzi altered the whole atmosphere. Lesley decided that she must have felt a little weary and constrained on leaving the plane, because she now took the trouble to find out all there was to know about the way they lived and what sort of people they had for friends. She had come for an indefinite length of time, she said. She could always go back to her job if she wanted to, but it did appear rather pointless now that they were not penniless. The rest of her clothes were on the way by air in two trunks. Coming at freight rate, they ought to get here in about a week. Her father was so happy at having both daughters in the house that Lesley felt everything might turn out well, after all. She still couldn't make out quite what was at the bottom of Virginia's decision to throw up her job and come to Africa, but a conversation a couple of days later was partially enlightening.

Virginia was altering the bedroom. She had turned out the bookshelves and taken the writing-table from the living-room to put in their place, and when Lesley was making the bed she turned and said, "Lesley, will you tell me something in confidence?"

"Why, yes, if I can."

Very evenly, Virginia asked, "Has Father made a will since he left England?"

"I don't think so," said Lesley blankly. "He's owned so little that I don't suppose he thought it worthwhile."

"Would he have told you if he had?"

"He'd be sure to. I've been running everything. I even have the key to the box in which he keeps his private papers."

"I see. Well, I think you'd better give the key to me. The responsibilities here are mine now."

Lesley straightened, and a chill feathered over her skin. Virginia had never spoken to her like this before. Even in England, when she had been under age, her sister had not bothered to deal with any of the numerous official matters which cropped up from time to time. Lesley had had to handle the rent and taxes the food bills, and other household details. "You mean you're taking over the housekeeping?"

"Good heavens, no! You can have an allowance for that; I was never any good in the kitchen. But I'll keep a rein on the farm finances. It's my duty."

Lesley might have reminded her that she had come rather late to a realisation of the fact, but after the first unpleasant shock she took it philosophically. Virginia wasn't working now; she had time to give to the accounts-book.

Now that Neville was installed at the hut, he came to the house only for dinner, but over that meal he and Virginia indulged in a form of verbal sparring which amused Mr. Norton and puzzled Lesley. Neville didn't seem to care what Virginia said. Yet Lesley would have wagered any day that he was far more sensitive than her sister.

One afternoon she went down to the quarry and met him there. It was not yet very deeply dug, and the traces of beryl so far discovered were infinitesimal, but it was interesting to have the composition of the granite explained, and pleasant to sit on the edge of the quarry dangling her legs while he poured tea and let her drink first. It was he who mentioned Virginia. "I know it's no use warning an infant like you against her own kith and kin," he said, "but I must do it, nevertheless. Beware of Virginia, my sweet. She's hard as nails and ten times as sharp. You know why she came to Africa in such a hurry, don't you?"

"Neville, I don't want to talk about it."

"I know you don't—loyalty to flesh and blood and all that. If you were in a spot she wouldn't lift a finger for you. Do you realise that?"

"I don't see that it matters."

He hitched along beside her on the ledge and took the cup from her. "It does matter, and you've got to look at it without sentiment. Virginia showed no special interest in your father until he wrote her about this stuff." He waved vaguely at the outcrops. "He told her it was valuable, and she

instantly remembered she was the elder daughter and entitled to a large share."

"Oh, stop it!"

"Money speaks to Virginia, as family affection never could, and she believes that at heart everyone is the same—even you. If you get in her way she'll deal with you drastically."

Lesley could believe that, and had already made up her mind not to cross Virginia. "All right, you've warned me," she said. "Now let's discuss something else."

Neville shook his head and stared musingly over the slope which ended at the Amami boundary. "Women!" he murmured. "They're so alike in some things, and so utterly different in others." Then, ruminatively, "I was once engaged, you know."

She had sometimes wondered about that engagement of his. "What happened?" she asked.

"Something very stupid but revealing. We had to be apart for a couple of months, and during that time I met a woman who was everything my fiancée was not, and fell for her. It wasn't terribly serious—the affair—but it forced me to the conclusion that the girl I was going to marry just hadn't got what I needed. I behaved like a rat. I walked out on her."

There wasn't much feeling in his voice, and Lesley felt bound to observe, "It must have been dreadful for her."

"Yes," he said drily. "She had all the sympathy and I caught the brick-bats, but she married and I didn't."

"Have you any regrets?"

"Not now. She was a little like you, Lesley, but she hadn't your courage and stamina."

Abruptly changing the topic, he said, "More tea?"

"No, thanks. I must go. Come a bit earlier tonight. Someone has lent us a few records."

"As a matter of fact, I don't think I'll come at all," he said, dropping a pebble into the shallow digging and watching it bounce. "I'm meeting some fellows at the hotel in Buenda, and I may as well have dinner there, too."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Is it Virginia? Does she annoy you?"

He gave her his wry smile. "It's not Virginia. I need a roaring night out, and no reproachful audience when I stagger home."

She laughed at him and left him. Neville invariably made her feel light and airy, because even in his serious moments there was a wry humour about him. She knew that at times he drank too much and did some heavy gambling. But about one thing she was certain: he liked her and respected her. As she reached the back garden she stood still and brushed the granite dust from her slacks. Her short, honey-coloured hair stood out with the breeze except where sweat had pasted tendrils close to her forehead. Then she went on into the living-room, and the moment she had entered she would have given anything to be back with Neville. For Fernando was there, rising from one of the cane armchairs as she entered, and eyeing the light patches on her navy blouse and slacks with interest and distaste.

"Oh, Lesley, you've been with Neville again," said Virginia in soft reproof. "You've ruined that blouse."

Fernando's dark eyes were even more critical than Virginia's as he took in her sensitive, unsmiling face. "What is it that you do at the quarry?" he wanted to know.

"I just watch, and we talk."

He apparently decided to leave it there. Completely ill-at-ease, Lesley sat in the chair he had placed for her and looked down at her blunt-toed brown shoes. It seemed that her coming had interrupted a conversation, for Virginia was speaking about Spain in the smooth, half-intimate tones she adopted with Fernando.

"During a cruise it's only possible to see a fraction of the sights, but the impressions I had of Barcelona were unforgettable."

Fernando leaned towards Virginia and nodded affirmatively. "I have much affection for Barcelona. It has a spirit which is individual. Did you visit the Casco Antiguo?"

"Of course. It was marvellous."

"Did you touch at Tarragona? Yes? It is a magnificent city, the old so well preserved beside the new. The harbour is splendid, did you not think so?"

"It was like a dream. I'd have loved to have spent a whole month in Tarragona."

Fernando voiced the hope that next time she went to Spain she would be able to stay longer. Lesley was glad when Solomon came in with the tray and her father sauntered indoors from the veranda.

It seemed that Fernando had been invited for tea. For some reason Virginia had kept it to herself, not even mentioning it to Edward Norton till the very last moment. Rather than admit she had had tea with Neville, Lesley drank from the cup which Fernando had handed to her, and presently excused herself and went into the garden. Vaguely miserable, she wandered across the short lawn towards the old citrus trees which she and her father had pruned so thoroughly the year before that they were thick with new green growth but devoid of fruit. She pushed through a gap in the hedge and came out on to the road. Looking backward, she could see Fernando's opulent car at the Amanzi gate, and though it was unlikely that he would tear himself away from Virginia just yet, she thought she had better get off the road as soon as possible. A little way down there was a diamond-mesh gate to the Pemberton lands; it was nearly a week since she had seen Anna.

Walking quickly, she came to the gate, opened it and dropped it back into position. The path led upwards between a thick matting of young trees and vines which provided just enough shade. Forest flies winged back and forth, and sunbirds clung in all their brilliant beauty to the slim branches of the mopani. She stopped, tiptoed, and took a cautious peep into a nest which held three tiny grey eggs. A canary's

probably. The birds were as common in these part as the sparrow in London.

"Lesley!"

Her heart leapt, warmed, and went chill. She turned and looked down at Fernando. HE was at a bend in the path, advancing with long, swift strides. He was so tall that though his body was in shadow the sun bronzed his head. "So," he said as he came level. "As I left Amanzi I saw you in the distance, going through the gate. I thought I would follow you and find out why you were so silent in the house, and so deliberately slipped away."

"Your business was with Virginia, wasn't it?"

"I did not come on business. Your sister had the goodness to ask me to take tea on my way back from Buenda. You will remember that I had an appointment there today."

"I didn't know."

"Perhaps not. You were very tired in the car the other night, and may not have heard."

He rested upon her a long, calculating glance, and gave an impatient sigh. "What is it with you? I would say you are a girl of much intelligence, yet you will not permit yourself to believe the worst of Madison, nor the best of anyone else." A pause, then, "Speaking of Neville, you did travel through the night with him, did you not?"

"I did." She tugged a leaf from a vine, and her tone hardened. "He was very considerate and helpful."

"I suppose he would be; there is a lot of good in him. But if you grow fond of him he will harm you; he cannot help it. I cannot forbid you, but for your own sake it would be better if you did not go to the quarry."

"What would you have me do—sit in the house and count my fingers? We can't do any farming, and it's hardly worth putting in any work on the garden and orchard."

"But you have worked enough—too much for a woman. This should be a welcome rest." His voice was softer as he said, "Listen to me, my little one. I know that for the good it has done to your father's health you are fond of the farm. Can you not try to regard this discovery of minerals as an additional benefit—to your father?"

"You don't understand," she said.

Before she could elaborate he broke in, "It is too hot for you here, and there are mosquitoes. Where were you going?"

"To see Anna."

"Why did you not use a horse? Or was it, like the visit to the quarry, merely an impulse?" He shook her wrist. "You say I do not understand. Come back with me to the car and make me understand."

Well, she hadn't much option but to do as he asked. She had fled up

the path to evade him, and having failed in that she might as well please him. Once in the car, they crossed the bridge, and saw the Kalindi bubbling away over the stones to lose itself among the thick trees and ferns. Presently they took the turn away from Buenda and ran along the road which eventually led to the Falls. After a mile or two he braked and switched off the engine. With an apology he leaned across and wound down her window so that the hot, imprisoned air could circulate. She felt the vibrant strength of his closeness. She would have liked, at this moment, to possess Virginia's poise, but the best she could do was to maintain a silence till he should speak.

"I am ready," he said mockingly, resting an arm on the wheel and looking at her. "I promise you I will do my utmost to follow your reasoning."

"It's not much use; you wouldn't agree with it. I really don't want to quarrel with you, Fernando . . ."

"Ah, now that is something! To me it has been very obvious that you want nothing so much as a first-rate quarrel with the overbearing engineer who has not even the grace to be an Englishman. Perhaps I shall do the talking, yes?"

She nodded cautiously. "But if I'm silent, don't take it as agreement."

"Very well. It seems to me that you have very much for which to be grateful. There is no other place quite like Buenda in Central Africa, -because here you are an agreeable height above sea level and can really enjoy almost a tropical climate. Soon you will be able to live in one of those villas on the edge of the town, and your father, if he wishes, may give some time to the Amanzi Mineral Holdings. I have no doubt at all that both you and your sister could find excellent husbands in the district. What is there about such a prospect that displeases you?"

"There can't be anything," she said abruptly. "It sounds like Paradise."

"But you are not yet ready for Paradise?" he inquired quizzically. When she made no rejoinder his manner changed and he added quietly, "You are unhappy, little one. Why?"

Her first inclination was to deny it but where would that get her? "I'll get over it," she said.

"But you must let me help you."

"You?" She looked quickly into his eyes and saw no brown in them, only the colour of steel. It was a trick of the light inside the car, but it pulled her up sharply. Fernando was suave and persuasive, and that smile of his might wrench secrets from any woman's heart. But thank heavens she still had her sanity. "It's good of you, but there's nothing you can do."

The next second she had clapped a hand to a stinging eye. Particles of grit had flown straight through the open window on the breeze, and it felt as if several of them had landed on the ball of her eye. Swiftly Fernando took a handkerchief from his top pocket and he drew down her hand. He dabbed at the streaming eye, leaned towards it, concerned and vexed. "Let me look." Firmly but gently he lifted her eyelid, and when the water

ran away he murmured, "That is good. It will wash away. Blink again, and tell me if the pain has diminished."

"I . . . I think it's clear." She dragged her own handkerchief from her pocket, but having used it previously to knock dust from her knees she thought it hardly fit to put close to an eye.

He smiled, almost paternally. "Keep this one of mine. You are very young, Lesley."

"It isn't only the young who catch grit in their eyes," she answered crossly.

"No, but it is to the young that everything happens at once." He gave a characteristic lift of his shoulders. "You are unhappy, so you wander down to speak to Neville, because he is capable of giving sympathy without demanding explanations. You come back to the house and find Fernando in your living-room, and for some reason—" satire edged his tones—"Fernando is the last person you wish to see. But the inconvenient man must follow you and imprison you in his car, and the last straw, as you would say, is a piece of grit in your eye from a window he has opened. Life is very hard for you, Lesley."

She took the handkerchief pad from her eye and shook it loose before redoubling it.

"Harder than you know," she said with a hint of acid.

"Yet you refuse help, or to give reasons, because I am Fernando del Cuero and not John Smith!" Then mercilessly he demanded, "Why did you hate to find me at your house? Others visit you and your father without the fact annoying you. I cannot comprehend that."

"It isn't that I don't want you to come," she instantly protested.

"I am glad to hear that," he said with irony. "What is it, then?"

How to explain that it was just a series of small things, that today she would have loved to see him there, nonchalantly installed in the rattan chair, if he hadn't looked so cosily tete-a-tete with Virginia? What an admission that would be! And it couldn't be true, either; of course it couldn't. "I think you'd better take me home," she said.

His regard was keen. It raked her features, and she was aware that anger glittered in his glance; it also showed in the grip of the strong brown fingers on the wheel. Without another word he started the car and swung it round. In five minutes they had covered the distance to Amanzi. He opened the door for her.

"Thanks for the handkerchief," she said. "I'll let you have it back." "Do not trouble," he answered coolly. "It has served its purpose. You have my permission to throw it away." A day or two later, Virginia's two large trunks arrived. She had been fuming for several days before the advice came through that they were ready for collection from the agent in Buenda. For want of indoor space, the trunks had to be opened on the veranda, and Lesley spent a busy couple of hours carrying the innumerable cocktail and evening

creations, the sun-dresses and tailored linens and silks, the shoes and piles of lingerie, into Virginia's bedroom. Quite what Virginia had packed into the two trunks forwarded from England, Lesley had not bothered earlier to surmise, but she had imagined that among the contents would be a few trinkets and personal treasures. All that emerged from them, however, were clothes and still more clothes, and practically every item was brand new. At the bottom of the second trunk there was just one article which had no connection with feminine apparel. Thinking it was a piece of cardboard packing which had slipped from a box of stockings, Lesley picked it up, and discovered it to be a photograph.

Virginia, from her stool nearby, held out a hand. "Give it to me. I'll tear it up."

"No, don't. He's nice." Lesley held back the photograph from her sister's grasp and took a second look at it. "He looks very quiet—not your type at all."

"You're quite right." Virginia's lips curved downwards in disdain. "About money he has the same bee in his bonnet that you have."

"Who is he?"

"Martin Boland. I mentioned him in my letters to Father. At that time I thought Martin and I had a lot in common, though from the beginning I hated his work."

"What on earth is he?"

"A veterinary surgeon."

Lesley laughed. "I wouldn't mind being a vet myself. I dosed old Bessie when she was sick, and sat with her for days."

Virginia raised her eyebrows in disdain. "You should have been in England at that time. I'd have passed Martin on to you."

Lesley ignored the subtle insult. "If you don't care about him, why did you bring his photograph with you?"

"I didn't put it in the trunk. He came to the flat while I was packing, and he must have dropped it in himself; it's just what he would do." Virginia shrugged and began taking still another pair of gilt sandals from their tissue wrapping. "I suppose the reason I was attracted to him at all was because he wasn't like the rest. I had a narrow escape."

"Aren't you going to write to him?"

The fine, pale features were set in a smile as she answered, "No, I'm not. I did think I might, but since coming here I've changed my mind. After all, what I really liked about him was his utter difference from the playboys I knew. The others did well financially, but they lived up to the limit. Martin, though, had a different set of values." She paused speculatively. "In those days, of course, I'd never met anyone of Fernando del Cuero's sort. He's something special."

Lesley laid the portrait aside, glanced into the empty trunk and pulled down the lid.

Very evenly she asked, "Would you marry a man like Fernando?"

"What a question! Wouldn't any woman?"

"I wouldn't."

Virginia gave that little laugh of hers which was never quite genuine because she was never wholesomely amused. "You say that because you know you don't stand a chance with him. Fernando is a top-liner in his profession, and apart from being a director of one of those companies he works for, he must make a fabulous salary. In addition, he practically owns the island of San Feliz. Imagine being mistress of a Spanish castle!"

"I was thinking of him as a man. He's charming, but I believe if he got really angry he could be cruel. And he's far too astute. I don't care for the kind of man who sees through everything you do,"

Virginia brushed scraps of paper from her lap. "You're talking rubbish, my child. No man ever sees through a woman—he only thinks he does. The really clever woman keeps him thinking that way." She flipped her fingers. "But you needn't worry about such things. Fernando needs much cannier handling than you're capable of."

Which, Lesley admitted to herself as she gathered up the last armful of underwear, was probably right. She never felt truly at ease when Fernando was about.

VIRGINIA had always found her young sister a bore. She herself had grown up swiftly, so that at eighteen she had been thoroughly

adult while Lesley was still an ink-stained twelve-year-old. Deliberately, because it had paid to have a young and homely sister, Virginia had played down Lesley's attempt at carving a career for herself, but Edward Norton's illness had defeated her. Even now she did not acknowledge that the trip to Africa upon which Lesley had insisted was a

turning-point which had brought them luck. It pleased her that there had as yet been no official celebration of the discovery of beryl at Amanzi, and she had only been waiting for her clothes to arrive before arranging a party which would also serve to launch herself in Buenda society. A veranda party was not enough for Virginia. She booked the hotel lounge and most of the dining-room, and even the news that Fernando was prevented from coming by the arrival of some intricate piece of machinery, which had to be installed at once, was not permitted to mar the evening. For Virginia, the evening was a personal triumph.

During the following week, news came through that the sale of a half-share in the farm had been completed and the purchase price paid into the account of Edward Norton. With a sense of deep joy he paid off the bond and his creditors, gave Virginia a sum which covered her plane fare and other expenditure, and in the traditional manner provided a bean and kaffir-beer feast for the six farm men and their families. He bought a small new car for the two girls, and found himself with a modest but heart-warming balance in the bank, which would comfortably tide them over till the beryl was mined in sufficient quantities to bring in a share of the profits. Life at Amanzi was changing radically. They entertained

formally once a week, and one third of their guests were bachelors in Government service. "I can't stand the dull crowd you've become friendly with," said Virginia. "Anna Pemberton is just a smart know-all, and as for that big, beefy husband of hers . . ." Actually, Lesley's 'crowd' cared as little for Virginia as she did for them. At Grey Ridge one Sunday, Lesley was given a lecture on her foolishness where her sister was concerned. Anna was serious. "She's spoiling everything for you, Lesley," she finished. "And you're an idiot to let her."

"She's my elder sister, and she has every right to run our house as she pleases. My father is satisfied, and he's the one who counts."

"Why are you looking so peaked? In your worst days at farming you didn't look like this."

"Perhaps prosperity doesn't agree with me."

Anna frowned. "What share have you had in it? One new dress that you made yourself! Sometimes I feel I'd love to pour a few words into the ear of your father."

"You mustn't. It would worry him." Lesley smiled. "He's always had a sort of amazed pride in Virginia, and he really feels that life is complete now that he has her with him. She's always been terribly independent, and it makes him feel wonderful to be able to give her things she was never quite able to afford herself. She used to have lovely clothes and run a car, but the clothes were only of the business and cocktail type, and the car belonged to the firm she worked for."

"So she can enjoy herself and peacock around as much as she likes, while you still go about in faded slacks and shirts!"

"I happen to feel comfy in slacks and shirts, and she doesn't. Honestly, Anna, I don't envy her a scrap."

"I hope not!" She paused. "Look here, Lesley, come over and stay with us for a week or two. If your father and sister are happy together they won't mind, and it would give you a break and help you to decide what you're going to do with yourself."

Lesley was tempted. It would be so pleasant to stay with Anna and Bill and their sturdy little son, but she ought to think it over from all angles first. "You're a darling, Anna," she said impulsively. "I'll sleep on it and let you know."

She got back into the saddle and guided Bessie, her mare, down the road between the tea bushes. It was very quiet everywhere. The tea thrived in regimental rows which

sloped away over the hillside, and beyond them only the humps of the mountains were visible, misted blue and gold with the westering sun. At the Amanzi boundary she looked at her watch. It was four-thirty, and Virginia would, as usual, be having tea in bed before taking a bath and dressing for this evening's guests. Lesley turned the mare, rode along the boundary for half a mile, and entered Amanzi by the new gate near the quarry. No one was working today, of course. Lesley rode on as far as Neville's log dwelling, which had once been the tobacco-curing shed, and dismounted. Probably he was

out. Lately he had been coming less and less often to the farmhouse, and he hadn't encouraged her to come again to the quarry. Fernando was at the bottom of it, Lesley thought; Virginia, too.

She tapped on the wooden door and heard nothing, tapped again with a similar result. She was about to call Bessie when she was stopped by a creaking sound on the other side of the door. Sharply she called, "Are you there, Neville?" and without waiting for an answer she turned the handle and walked in. He was lying in bed; his face was pale and glistening, the lips white and drawn in. "Run away, there's a good girl," he said thickly.

She did nothing of the sort. Instead she closed the door behind her and came to his bedside. "You're ill," she said, concerned. Then, more urgently, "You're very ill. Neville, why didn't you send up to the house? You can't lie here like this!"

"It's nothing—just a return of fever. Leave me alone."

"I won't. I'll get Dr. Waterson."

"It's no good. He's down south, golfing. I've got over this before without assistance.

Run along." Before he had finished speaking his teeth had begun to chatter so uncontrollably that he stuttered. He gave her a washed-out, apologetic grin.

"If you've had it before, you know what to do for it," she said practically. "Tell me and I'll do it."

"Blankets and barley-water," he managed. "A rip-roaring sweat."

A few seconds later she was in the saddle racing up to the house. Bessie, astonished at being allowed the run of the garden path, pulled up with a whinny at the back door, and Lesley flew inside to collect blankets, towels, and a bottle of lemon barley-water from the cooler. In no time at all she was back at the log hut, piling the blankets over Neville, wiping his face and neck and slipping an arm under his head while he drank, his teeth rattling against the glass like castanets. His rigors were really frightening, and once or twice he said something unintelligible, as if his mind were elsewhere. At one moment he looked at her strangely and said, "I'll bet Virginia would scoot for her life if she saw me like this. Don't bring her here, will you?"

Lesley didn't remind him that Virginia wouldn't come to the log but in any circumstances. She gave him another drink and his tablets, dabbed away the continual sweat and turned the pillow. He closed his eyes, but she knew he wasn't sleeping. She stood back anxiously, and stared about the room. It couldn't be good for him to lie there in a bath of sweat. He needed a fresh pillow and a change of pyjamas and sheets. There ought to be a man here with him; but her father wasn't equal to it. As she came to the end of the staccato succession of thoughts, Lesley went closer to the bed. Yes, she could leave him now for a little while and make some sort of arrangement for the evening and night. She became aware that sweat was coursing down her own back, and decided to make another hurried trip to the house.

VIRGINIA was in the living-room when Lesley appeared, drifting from one bowl of flowers to the other and rearranging the blossoms here and there. She wore a clinging frock of rose-pink silk. Her high-heeled sandals were white and dainty, her wrists and ankles small-boned and delicate. In her extreme fairness she was like a sub-tropical flower. She looked at Lesley with some displeasure. "Need you have come back so late? We have people coming for cocktails and a buffet supper—remember?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to get along without me. I prepared the cocktail snacks before I went out, and Solomon will get the supper. He knows what you're having."

"What are you getting at? Surely you're not going back to the Pembertons?"

"No. Neville is ill." Briefly she gave details, and finished, "So I've come back here to change my dress and get some food. After that I'll have to find a boy to go down there with me."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Virginia angrily. "How do you know he hasn't picked up something contagious? He's always with the Africans at the quarry. We don't want fever in the house!"

"You won't get it. It's malaria, or something similar. He's had it before, and from what I've heard about the fever, the rigors he's having are typical. I'm not leaving him down there alone, for you or anyone else."

"We'll see about that!" Virginia moved swiftly to the door, but Lesley was there first, barring her way. "Let me pass, you little fool!"

"So that you can tell Father? What good would that do? He'd agree with me that Neville mustn't be left alone; in fact, he'd go down there himself."

Virginia paused, her mouth tight and her eyes narrowed. Perhaps it occurred to her that Lesley was right about Edward Norton: he was notoriously kind-hearted. "All right," she said coldly, grudgingly. "We'll keep it from Father until tomorrow, anyway. We don't want to spoil our evening. But I must say you're acting like a child. If Neville doesn't have to eat or take medicine more often than every four hours, I don't see why you need stay with him. You could be here and supervise the supper if you liked."

A sharp sense of revolt rose in Lesley. She spoke abruptly. "I'll prepare the supper if you'll sit with Neville while I do it."

Virginia shuddered and flung round, away from the door. "He's your boy friend, not mine. The less I hear about him the better!"

Lesley, her heart beating fast, went along to the small bedroom. She washed, then crossed to her bedroom to put on a clean cotton dress. In the kitchen she cut some bread-and-butter, scooped a portion of cheese from the soft mound in the fridge, took a couple of the savouries she had prepared, wrapped the lot in a napkin and returned to the cabin.

Neville appeared to be more or less as she had left him, except that he muttered occasionally. Lesley hunted through his few books, found one

dealing with tropical ailments, and read the chapter on malaria. In a recurrence of the fever, she learned, the chief danger was from a chill caught during or just after the most shattering of the rigors. 'Very well,' she thought. 'At all costs we'll protect him from a chill.'

She found a thriller and read until the light failed, when she set a match to the single lamp and ate a little of the bread and cheese. She didn't get round to finishing the meal, because Neville had another shivering spasm which brought him wide awake, and this time he really was delirious. He drank again, seemed unable to stop drinking,

and again the sweat ran in rivers, so that even his hair was black with it. Exhausted, he closed his eyes. She tucked the blankets about his chin with a care that disguised the panic she was feeling. It was all very well for Neville to say he had been through it all before and would come through. She wouldn't mind so much if the doctor had seen him and pronounced the shiverings and the delirium normal.

It was just on nine. She got Neville to swallow more quinine, and covered him closely. He was quieter now, but those drenched pyjamas and sheets bothered Lesley. Outside in the warm, starry darkness, she scanned the house. The supper would be over, and the guests would be dispersed in talking groups. Being Sunday, it was not likely they would stay late, and one of, them, surely, would be glad to drive down to Buenda and bring back the doctor. Bessie, of course, had strayed off to the pasture, so there was nothing for it but to walk the quarter of a mile to the house. Virginia would be furious, but that couldn't be helped.

She went through the trees to the pasture and up the path, whistling intermittently to the horses. But Bessie had had enough; diplomatically she remained out of sight. Then, just ahead, Lesley saw the advancing figure of a man in a white dinner-jacket, and she began to run and stumble up the slope. Simultaneously with the urge to hurry came the knowledge that the man was Fernando. No other man was so lithe in his movements. She stopped in front of him, breathless, gripped both his arms in a rush of joy and relief. He stared down at her, held her shoulders so that her hands had to drop, and bit out something that sounded furious and very Spanish. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Did no one escort you home?"

"Home?" she echoed dazedly.

"Virginia said you have been to the Pembertons for tea. Did you not stay with them for dinner?" He glanced over the top of her head at the thatched roof of the cabin showing above the trees. His voice was ice. "It is not possible that you would be so foolish as to spend an evening there with Neville! Careless though he is, I do not believe he would permit you to do so."

It took her a moment to realise that Fernando knew nothing. She said "Why did you come, here?"

"From the veranda of your house I saw the light of the cabin, and I thought I would like a word with Neville about the digging."

"I have been with Neville . . ." His fingers tightened quite brutally over

her shoulders, and she winced and gasped a little laugh. "Please! Let me explain."

It had to be said all over again, but Fernando's reaction was nothing like Virginia's.

Long before she had reached the end, he had an arm under hers and was propelling her back to the log hut. "How long have you been with him?"

"It was around five when I found him, and he was quite lucid then. He did try to turn me out, but I wouldn't go."

"No, you would not," he said, with mingled annoyance and understanding. "You are not to worry about this. I have seen him with malaria, and we can only go on doing what you have already done."

They were inside Neville's room now, and Fernando was bending over his inert cousin. He laid the back of his hand to the wet brow, and gave Lesley an impersonal but reassuring smile. "Do not be anxious for him. I will stay here with him tonight, and by tomorrow he will be over the worst. Now I must take you back to the house and make my apologies to your sister. I will also borrow some cushions from you. This chair of Neville's does not look accommodating!"

There could surely be no other man, thought Lesley half in despair, who had that knack of imbuing the most outlandish situation with a natural calm.

AS Lesley and Fernando made their way back to the house, Fernando had questions to ask. "What made you call upon Neville when you left the Pembertons? It seems to me you are too intrigued by the unconventional situation."

"I haven't seen the quarry lately, so I rode that way. I couldn't pass the cabin without knocking."

"Being alone, you could certainly pass it!"

"Well, I didn't. I hadn't seen him for some time."

"You are missing Neville these days?"

"Missing him?"

"He only calls upon invitation, as I do, does he not?"

"Yes," she answered slowly. "Did you arrange that?"

"I did, at your sister's request. She, as well as I, was concerned at the friendship which was developing between you. You see, Lesley, neither she nor I would like to see you form an unhappy attachment for any man. We agreed that Neville could never make you really happy."

With an odd harshness in her throat she said, "You and Virginia must have some wonderful discussions. I suppose it's no use asking to be left out of them?"

He gave her arm a peremptory shake. "How quick you are to lose your temper. And how very untrusting. Tell me, why did you not acquaint your sister with the fact of Neville's illness? She must have been disturbed when you had not arrived home before dark."

Lesley would have liked to make an inquiry of her own. What was at the bottom of Virginia's secrecy about Fernando's visits? She had said nothing at all about his coming this evening.

They were in the garden, and instinctively she made for the back door. But before they reached it Virginia had seen them and was crossing the lawn. "So you've found her!"

The exclamation was a shade off-key, and the green glance glittered a warning at Lesley. But she took her sister's loyalty for granted. "Darling, where have you been?"

It was Fernando, this time, who did the explaining, and Lesley who listened woodenly, while she watched the appropriate shades of sympathy pass across Virginia's face.

How strange, she reflected abstractedly, yet with a roughness in her throat, to love a sister and despise her at the same time. She moved away from them, saying off-handedly, "I'll send Solomon to help at the but with Neville. The clean sheets are in the bottom' drawer of the chest, and his pyjamas are in the second drawer."

Virginia's hard, brittle tones echoed after her. "Don't mind Lesley's sharpness, Fernando. She's upset over Neville, and can't help showing her feelings. Please tell me if there's anything I can do."

Fifteen minutes later, after she had made a flask of coffee, given it to Solomon and sent him off to the hut, Lesley went to bed. Lying in the darkness she heard the cars depart and her father locking up. Lights were switched off, her father called good night, and the house grew quiet. Odd to know that Fernando was so near. What was he doing? she wondered. Reading and dozing, and rousing at intervals to administer drink and medicine? Did he come out into the darkness for a breather, and look up at the low-hanging stars? And what did he think about? His great power-house, or his island of mountains and waterfalls, or Virginia? Possibly all three, she thought bitterly, or only the last two.

It was a long time before she slept, and still dark when she awoke. Her watch said four-thirty-five, and she got up quietly and went to the kitchen. As usual, Solomon had left everything ready for early tea, so she lit the paraffin ring under the kettle and returned to her bedroom to put on a frock. She prepared the tea methodically, slipped on an old tweed coat, unlocked the back door and picked up the tray. It seemed a long walk in the dark, particularly as she had to be careful of the stones in the path. At the cabin she stopped, her mouth dry and her pulses knocking. The curtained window beside the door showed a small light, but it did not beckon. It took real courage to support one edge of the tray in the crevice between two logs while she knocked. The door was opened, Fernando gave her a narrow, unsurprised stare, and took the tray. He had discarded his jacket and tie, but he didn't look tired, merely sharp-eyed and withdrawn.

"I thought you'd like some tea," she said awkwardly in an undertone.

"Thank you. Perhaps you will pour it for me."

She looked towards the bed, and saw that the sleeping Neville had been propped up on two pillows and that his colour was better. Without speaking, she took the cosy from the pot and poured the tea.

He took the cup and looked down at her coolly, dispassionately. "I am drinking this because you were good enough to bring it. Do not take it that I approve of your walking all that way with a tea-tray, in the dark. Your intentions are good, but occasionally you behave with an utter lack of thought."

"The night must have seemed awfully long to you. I daresay you'd rather have had coffee but . . ."

"I would rather you had stayed away," he said curtly. "What you really came for was a look at Neville, was it not?"

"I'm very relieved to see he's better, of course."

"Yes, he is better. He spoke of you in the night." Fernando drank the tea as if it tasted horrid, and put down the cup. "These bouts of his are weakening. In a few hours, when his temperature is down, I shall take him to my house at the Falls for a rest. The quarrying will have to cease until our manager arrives."

"Won't Neville come back?"

He shrugged. "He will please himself."

Lesley's part of the conversation had been whispered, and Fernando's spoken low and without expression. His last remark left little to be said. She had thought to find him friendly and conspiratorial, had even seen herself standing with him near the trees to witness the thin flames of dawn licking across the sky. One could be beguiled into believing anything during the dark hours. Not looking at him, she said, "You'll need an early breakfast. Will you come up for it, or shall I send it down?"

He put on his jacket, set a glass of water within Neville's reach, and opened the door.

"Let us go. I shall drive at once to the Falls for breakfast and a change of clothing, and I shall be back in time to give Neville his tablets. I will come up the quarry road right to the cabin, so that he will not have to walk."

That path which was becoming so familiar was traversed in silence. From habit he held her elbow, but he was icy and aloof, and he marched her along too quickly for speech. She went with him to his car, gave him a duster with which to mop up the moisture which had settled on the windscreen, and took it back from him.

He looked down at her, his mouth thin. "You will now go in and complete your night's rest. Perhaps you will dream of Neville, as he dreamed of you."

His manner hurt something deep inside her. "Perhaps I will," she said defensively.

"You are childish and stubborn. You make it very difficult for me to be nice to you."
"I don't want your niceness." Tears welled into her voice, and in quelling them she sounded hard. "I only wish . . ."

"Yes? What do you wish?"

Her voice cracked completely, but she managed to keep her face averted so that he should see no trace of tears. "That you were ordinary and human, and an unbiased judge of other people," she burst out. "You never will be

that, though, because the only qualities you admire are those which fall into some pattern of your own."

"You are up too early, and I never cross swords before breakfast," he said with cold mockery.

"You never cross swords at all," she said bitterly. "You can get your own way without that." To which she tacked on one of those statements which are nearly impossible to retract. "I don't think I've ever disliked anyone so thoroughly in my whole life!

CHAPTER IV

IN the middle of the following week, Lesley put her suitcase into the back of Bill Pemberton's car, wished her father and sister au revoir, and went off to spend a week or two at Grey Ridge. For Lesley's sake her father had been happy to see her go. The house at Grey Ridge was less than four miles away, but the atmosphere there in the midst of a prosperous tea plantation was so different from that at Amanzi that he thought she could not help but benefit from the change. The weather was hot and unsettled. Clouds rolled in from the mountains, and though there was not much rain in Buenda itself, the higher parts of the district were known to have had many hours each day of torrential downpour. The Kalindi was well above its normal level for this time of the year, and it was said that the Falls were now at their most vaporous and beautiful—or they would have been if the authorities had not chosen to harness them. But there were other, if lesser, waterfalls in the neighbourhood, and Anna arranged a picnic near the chief of them which ran strongly down to swell the Great Falls of Kalindi. The Pembertons kept a canoe at the Little Falls because Bill was constantly smitten with an urge to fish, but it was too dangerous just now to use it.

Lesley's days at Grey Ridge slid by peacefully. The place was known as 'Open House' and when the news got round that Lesley Norton was a guest there the local bachelor farmers came even more often.

"They're after you, Lesley," said Anna tolerantly one morning. "I'm afraid it's natural in some men to marry for love but to love where money is."

"There's no money where I am," Lesley answered lazily from the canvas swing. "You might tell them that and see what happens."

The older woman looked up from her letter-writing at the veranda table. "Are you serious? Hasn't your father made separate provision for you?"

"What no one seems to understand is that he hasn't much money yet. It was a cheap little farm, if you remember, and no mineral valuation will be made till Neville is back on the job. The sale of the half-share was a windfall which paid off everything and made my father feel secure, but we can't afford to be extravagant."

or three vacant houses at the settlement, and Virginia has been invited to select one of them."

Lesley's hands were cold and damp; her knees were clamped tightly together to still their trembling. "That can't be so," she whispered. "Virginia didn't mention a word about it in her letter."

"Does she ever divulge her plans?" His mouth went down at the corners in an expression of complete dislike. "She accepted Fernando's offer unconditionally. They had great fun fixing a nominal rent your father will have to pay."

"How do you know all this?" she inquired thinly.

"Because I was there," he told her sourly. "The whole thing was arranged when Virginia and your father came to the Falls for dinner last Saturday."

For a very long moment Lesley was wordless. So Virginia had visited the house at the Falls. She had wandered through Fernando's rooms, dined with him, and flattered him with her interest in his home. In that endless moment the hurt was almost too much to bear. "It will be strange, living at the Falls," she managed jerkily. "I don't think I shall like it."

His arm came companionably across her back. "Cheer up. It'll come to an end sometime, when the financial side is clear. Then your father will build the house he wants."

Dogged, in spite of her pain, she said, "It may not be good for him to live at the Falls. It's at least a thousand feet lower than Buenda."

"Fernando mentioned that. He's arranged for your father to have a check-up by the construction company's doctor, a very good man who's recently come out from England."

"It sounds as if your cousin is very anxious to have my sister living near him," she commented.

His shoulders lifted. "Fernando does do a great deal from the goodness of his heart, but I'm sure he'd think twice before taking a couple of women to the settlement. Being his friends you're safe, of course—from the predatory male, I mean." He withdrew his arm and pressed the starter. "What he thinks of Virginia is anybody's guess, but what she thinks of him is a little more obvious. Allowing for the fact that she's entirely mistress of her moods and fancies, I'd say she's fallen hard for our Fernando."

Neville drove on, keeping parallel with the river and eventually leaving the road to the Falls to follow a narrower track which led to the native township. There were no other cars in sight, and at last they sped round a bend on a hillside which gave them a long view over the surrounding countryside. Low mountains and grassy lands, maize and yams at the harvesting stage, groups of thatched huts with sisal plants about them, aloes sprouting their trees of orange and white flowers, and streams of African people in bright clothes wending towards a huge area where the elephant grass had been shorn and a thatch roof on poles erected to shelter the guests from the African sun. Neville parked at the end of the line of cars. They must have been almost the last arrivals, for all the seats had been taken. Unerringly Lesley

picked out Fernando, and with a throb of relief she saw that his companions were men. He had not invited Virginia.

"I'll bribe someone to find us a couple of chairs," Neville said. "Stay here where it's cool. I won't be long."

She nodded, and stood very still in the shade of the redwood, watching the scene. When she looked back at Fernando's chair it was empty. Oh, heavens, he'd seen her. Her impulse was to escape. But when a tall, distinguished man is striding determinedly

in one's direction, and other people can see him doing it, self-discipline demands that one holds one's ground and smiles as if this is indeed a happy meeting.

BUENOS DIAS!" he said very pleasantly. "You will answer me in Spanish, no?" She obliged with a catch in her breath and he laughed at her accent. "I presume Neville brought you here. He had no right to, of course, because he has no official connection with the Buenda district; he should not really be here himself. However, we do not quarrel about such things." A pause. "I hope you are feeling much brighter after your stay at Grey Ridge?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good." A critical glance at her features. He nodded, and gave her a charming smile.

"You do not look so pale and angry as the girl who disliked me more than anyone she had ever met! Your vehemence that morning almost convinced me!"

"But afterwards your ego decided for you that it couldn't be true!"

He laughed again briefly. "I forgive you, because once or twice I, too, have disliked you." He shrugged. "It is unavoidable, I think, that people like you and me should sometimes distrust one another. There is always distrust where understanding is lacking, and we are agreed, are we not, that we do not understand each other?"

He was mocking at her in a charming way, and she recalled, with a tiny shock, his terse coolness the last time she had seen him, after the night he had spent with Neville at the hut. Something had gone right for him since then, and her mind instantly leapt to the likeliest solution. But still, her heart reiterated, he hadn't invited Virginia here this morning.

"It's not really important, is it?" she said, more to gain time than to extend the discussion.

"Perhaps not," he conceded, thereby unaccountably vexing her a little. He looked up at the hazing sky. "I believe I hear the drone of a plane. We must take our seats."

"Neville has gone to find chairs for us," she told him hastily.

"He will be unsuccessful. Already there are too many people for the seating accommodation. Come with me, Lesley. I will send a message after Neville."

She had no option but to obey. The people who were seated in an arc at the side of the cropped field had naturally been watching the two under the trees, because there was so little else to hold the attention, and it would have appeared extremely odd to them had Fernando left her standing there without an escort.

"If you'll make sure that Neville knows where I am," she murmured, and allowed him to use a gentle pressure at her back and lead her to his chair.

The increasing noise of an approaching plane, carrying the Government officials, drew everyone's attention. The plane circled once more, below the haze this time, then came in smoothly to land. The engines were stilled, the drums beat their tattoo of welcome, and the tribal chief, a youngish man in a well-cut European suit, came forward from the place he had occupied with his people to join the Commissioner at the foot of the steps which had been placed near the plane.

It was all very formal. Four men in white drill suits descended from the plane. There was much shaking of hands and bowing, and then the group of six moved over to take their seats under the palm-thatch awning for the real greeting.

A sudden concerted yell announced a bevy of dancers. They sprang into motion, and writhed and leaped their way to the expanse of grass in front of the awning, where they proceeded to stamp and throw up their arms in an abandon of absolute joy. The recent rains proved a boon in so far as they had ensured that today's audience would not be choked by the dust raised by the stamping. The dancers glistened with sweat, but were

tireless. The haze thickened into a sultry pall. The sun had vanished, and gradually the breeze died. A few stared apprehensively about them, at the strange darkness which was coming up behind the low mountains, but none dared move till given the signal. At least, one dared. Neville came to them from the stool he had occupied at the end of the row. "We're going to have a shower," he remarked. "My tyres are worn flat and they don't grip on a dry road, let alone a soggy one. I think I'll get back to Buenda. Had enough, Lesley?"

Fernando said, "You may safely leave Lesley with me. I will take her home. It is wise for you to go now. Apart from the danger of that car of yours on wet roads, it would do you no good to catch a chill. I will expect you at the Falls at the weekend."

Neville lifted his shoulders at Lesley. "Sorry," he said with his tired grin. "You'll have to bear it." With a "So long!" which included them both, he sauntered away.

Fernando looked speculatively at Lesley, and she returned him a glance both annoyed and amused. Bother him; he knew she was half-afraid of being left to his mercies. She wished she could think of something sophisticated to say. All she could do was tilt her chin as if nothing mattered, though the abnormal beating of her pulses proved otherwise.

It was only ten minutes before they left, but by that time white lightning was cutting between the clefts in the hills, accompanied by rolling thunder. Drops of rain splashed the windscreen, but the storm still seemed reluctant to get under way. "Nevertheless, we are going to have a good rain," said Fernando, after Lesley had voiced a remark to that effect. "Also, it is very late for lunch. At what time will your father expect you home?"

"We didn't arrange anything, but I dare say we'll find you something to eat."

"He will not worry if there is a storm and you are not there?"

"No, he'll think I stayed on with Anna. He didn't know I was coming here today." She looked out anxiously at the blackening sky rent by those white flashes of lightning.

"Don't you think we'll beat the worst of the rain?"

"It is impossible and you must certainly have food." His tone was even as he went on,

"You and I are always on the verge of exchanging strong words and the remedy for that is to learn more about each other. I will take you to my house for lunch. The houseboy has a holiday, so we shall have to prepare the meal together. Over eggs and bacon we will have some conversation."

Lesley's cheeks had gone hot, but she contrived a smile. "Without a duenna?"

"Without a duenna," he stated, that smiling glitter in his eyes. "We could not talk about ourselves with a duenna present!"

"You'll be disappointed. There is very little to learn about me."

"You mean there is only reserve under the reserved exterior?" he asked banteringly. "I refuse to believe it. Look," he nodded ahead, "we are coming within sight of the Falls."

It was raining faster now. Big globules banged on to the roof of the car, and the path they travelled was already dark red with moisture. Lesley saw the new power-house, and the settlement on the hillside. Between the two stood a square white house, unfenced and without a flower about it. The car shot up the incline behind the power-house and stopped at the foot of the veranda steps. Strangely excited, she waited till he had come round to open her door, then she stepped out to be hurried into the lounge of Fernando's house.

"I SUGGEST we heat a tin of soup and make a macaroni cheese," said Fernando.

"Eggs and bacon would be much quicker and easier."

"We are in no hurry," he shrugged good humouredly, taking a dish of cooked macaroni from the refrigerator, "and neither do we take the easy path, you and I. You will heat the soup and I will make the macaroni cheese."

"Shouldn't it be the other way about?"

"No," he said decisively. But he was' endearingly charming. Gravely he pointed out the row of tinned soups in a cupboard and let her make a choice. He opened the tin and left her to empty the concentrated contents into a saucepan and thin it down with milk. Stirring gently, she watched him prepare the macaroni cheese. For a man who never lived without servants his movements were deft and certain.

Curiously she asked, "Fernando, where did you learn to cook?"

"At Cambridge, in my student days. I was eternally hungry, so I bought one of those table-model electric ovens and experimented." He took a look into her saucepan and added conspiratorially, "I will admit to you a secret; though. Macaroni cheese and toasted sandwiches were the only things I ever mastered! Come. While this stuff is cooking I will show you the house."

It was odd, thought Lesley, how you could walk into a house and know it didn't belong to an Englishman. This one was constructed on the usual lines of European dwellings in Africa, and she had often seen dead-white interior walls in other houses. But she had never seen another house furnished just like this one. All the essentials were there, but perhaps it was the Spanish vases and pictures which gave the atmosphere of foreignness. A grey tweed divan suite in the lounge, tomato-red rugs on the polished floor, a desk, and a couple of kidney-shaped tables; in the bed-rooms were the usual suites with mid-blue curtains and bed-covers, and cream rugs. And the dining-room . . .

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. "I've never seen stools instead of dining-chairs before." He smiled and ran a hand over the carved, X-shaped legs of the stools. "It is an old custom from my country. A craftsman of San Feliz made these for me and they travel well. The two dining-chairs with arms for Mama and Papa, and four stools for the children. He was very sad when I said four stools would be enough! Come, let us find mats and cutlery for the table."

It was a delicious meal, accompanied by a fine Malaga wine, and the fruit and coffee with which it ended were just right. Rain slashed down outside and thunder still rolled, but within the house it was cool and somehow remote from the angry elements.

In the lounge he had guided her into a chair and himself taken the corner of the divan nearest her, and for a minute or two they drank a second cup of (toffee in peace, and looked out through the French window at the grey curtain of rain.

Presently he asked a point-blank question. "Why are you less happy since the beryl was found at Amanzi? I know the reasons you have put forward—that mining is soulless, that you do not want easy money—but there is something deeper, which you have not told. What is it?"

"Well, it leaves me with nothing to do," she said simply. "Are you sure that is all?"

"I think so. I've always been busy, and while you're busy you feel wanted."

"But, my dear child, I can assure you that you are very much wanted," he said, concerned. "When your father came here last weekend, he said how he missed you. Then there is your sister."

"I meant needed," Lesley put in quickly. "My father and I had such good times while we were farming and I think we'd have gone on being happy if we'd sold Amanzi outright and built the bungalow in Buenda which was then the apex of our ambition. I dare say with a little persistence I could even have got some sort of job."

"And you think that would be life, working for someone and keeping house for your father?" he demanded, a new, crisp note in his voice.

"It doesn't sound too bad to me."

"Then you are something of a fool, Lesley! Your ambition is drab and unworthy. I thought better of you."

His vehemence brought her half round to face him. "I know it's modest, but on the whole I'm a modest person, and I've learned not to hanker for anything that's out of reach."

"Marriage is not out of reach!"

"No, but . . ." She hesitated, and gave her attention once more to the wall of rain beyond the veranda. "One doesn't reckon on marrying until there's someone who . . . who makes one think about it."

"And is there no man," he persisted inexorably, "who has ever fluttered that timid heart of yours—made you wonder whether there is not a great deal you would like to learn, with him?"

This direct approach brought colour to her cheeks. She lowered her glance and said, with as much demureness as she could muster, "One of these days I must tell you all about the affairs I've had. You'll be surprised."

"I shall also be furious," he said, his smile mocking her innocence. "You have an odd effect on me, Lesley, and I think it is because you are so young and so ridiculously brave."

"Brave?" she echoed incredulously.

"Did you not know it? But you are very brave. At nineteen you brought your sick father to Africa and started farming—tobacco, of all crops! You battled for two years, and you were willing to go on struggling. I respect your father, but I find his obtuseness aggravating. He is fond of you, but he does not realise the half of what you have done for"

"I did it for us both, but I wasn't very successful."

"You accomplished what you set out to do. I believe Mr. Norton is a thoroughly healthy man today. It is time you thought first of yourself, followed your own inclinations. There must be something you wish for more than anything else?"

How to answer this? With the truth? 'Yes, Fernando, there is something I want very much; I want us to be friends, great friends, and not to look too far into the future; that would be enough, for now.' Her spoken reply

was defensively flippant. "Are you asking me to divulge my girlish dreams?"

His laughter came warmly across to her. "No. It is sufficient that you have girlish dreams. Keep them safe; they are precious."

In the silence which followed, it occurred to her, suddenly, that he was no longer taunting her with being attracted to Neville Madison. He and Neville must have been alone together during the past couple of weeks, and it was possible Fernando had put it to his cousin that Lesley Norton was too inexperienced to be used as a means of amusement. He, Fernando, couldn't quite believe her capable of holding her own, and his protective and chivalrous instincts were strongly developed, she knew.

THE silence grew till she felt a little on edge. "It's four o'clock," she said. "Do you think we can go on waiting for the rain to ease up?"

"I was just considering that," he remarked evenly. "This could continue until midnight.

We will have some tea and then go to Amanzi."

"Won't driving be awfully dangerous?"

"You certainly cannot stay here!" he told her sharply.

"I didn't suppose I could," she retorted, nettled. "I was merely wondering if there were some other way."

"There is no other way," he said firmly. He switched on a table lamp and looked at her across the top of it, his face lit up with strange shadows under the brows and nose. "I must go down to the power-house to see that the watchboys are vigilant. Through this storm they may have troubles to report. Will you make some tea while I am gone?"

"I'd love to. Don't be long, will you? I mean—" in some confusion—"I'm likely to get anxious and come slithering after you."

With a taut smile he said, "Thank you for the warning. I will lock the door."

He got into an oilskin and thigh-boots, pulled a hat well over his brow and went out. From the window Lesley watched his dark figure slide into the car, and she saw the vehicle go bouncing down over the grass at a speed which brought her heart to her throat. She drew a deep breath and turned towards the kitchen.

She found everything without trouble, except the tray cloth. There was nothing of that kind in the kitchen, and a brainwave took her into the dining-room to search in the linen-drawer of the cabinet. There she found a tray cloth—and also something that set her heart jumping. It was a photograph which slid sideways from between the folds of a supper-cloth; a photograph of Virginia. Lesley pushed in the drawer, clutched the tray cloth and went back to the kitchen.

By the time she had carried the tray to the lounge, Fernando was back and had shed his dripping outer garments. "The rain is not so bad as it looks," he said. "We will waste no time."

By now Lesley was in no mood to linger. She poured his _tea and drank her own much too hot. She couldn't speak to Fernando, even to answer his questions. When he dropped one of his own raincoats about her shoulders and buttoned it she couldn't bear the feel of his knuckles at her neck. She desired nothing so much as to get away from him, yet she had to have him close, shielding her from the rain as she got into the car, and then sitting beside her as they drove on to the stony, slippery red river of the road.

On higher ground the going was slightly better, and he was able to put on speed. It was a quarter to six when they reached Amanzi, and quite dark. Here he was unable to drive right up to the steps, so he pulled the raincoat she had discarded up and over her head, flung an arm about her and hurried her along the path and up into the porch. He turned the handle of the door and pushed her into the living-room. Both straightened and looked first at Virginia, secondly at the brown-haired young man who stood facing her across the room. In the light of the single lamp he appeared hazily familiar to Lesley, yet she knew she had never seen him before. For the first moment after their entry, Virginia looked pale and glittering, but swiftly her expression changed. She gave Fernando a delighted smile, and then looked at Lesley, her expression sharp with suspicion and warning.

"Father and I were wondering what had happened to you, Lesley. Your bag came over from the Pemberton hours ago." And then, very sweetly, "Good evening, Fernando. How very thoughtful of you to bring my little sister home. May I introduce Mr. Boland? He arrived here only half-an hour ago."

"From England?" Fernando's smile was perfunctory as he greeted the other man.

"Yes," again from Virginia. She held Lesley's glance as if daring contradiction as she added, "He was a friend of ours in England, so when he set foot on African soil one of his first thoughts was to look us up. Lesley, darling, don't stand there staring. You might say hello to Martin. After all, it was really you he came to see."

Lesley was staggered. She gave the stranger the ghost of a smile, felt Fernando's keen glance upon her, and did her best to convey to Mr. Boland, by means of her own blue eyes, a pleading bewilderment. His aquiline features had the closed look of a man who is bearing up under shock. This was some game of Virginia's, and Lesley half-guessed, even in that moment of stress, what her sister hoped to gain by it. But Fernando was quickly dragging his coat from her shoulders and throwing it over his arm, and the atmosphere in his vicinity positively crackled. He bowed stiffly to Mr. Boland and addressed Virginia. "Please explain to your father that Lesley has been in my care today. I am sorry if he was anxious; it was the rain. I must get back to the Falls now."

"Oh, but Fernando! Surely you'll stay for some supper before driving back?"

"It is impossible," he said politely but with curtness. "I wish you all good night."

HIS going left a comparative quietude which was eventually ended by the young man, Martin Boland. "So he's the reason, and you don't care who knows," he said quietly. Virginia narrowed her eyes at him. "What I do isn't your business, Martin. I didn't ask you to come to Africa, and I'm certainly not inviting you to stay in this house. If you were fool enough to come here without first booking at the hotel, that's your spot of bother, not mine."

"You forget that it was your father who let me in. It was he who suggested I might camp here for the night and move into the hotel tomorrow. However, if I might borrow your car?"

"You can't. It's at the garage, having some adjustments made." "Buenda must be all of ten miles. Do you suggest I walk it?"

Lesley found her voice. "Of course you can't go on to Buenda. Virginia doesn't mean it." She summoned a small smile. "Your arrival here was unexpected, but if you've already met Father you know you're welcome. Do sit down."

Virginia stood between them, straight and lovely, and her eyes were hard as emeralds. If she had spoken, her words would undoubtedly have been unforgivable; but apparently she decided to say nothing she could not retract. With a superb, cold-blooded diplomacy she walked gracefully from the room.

Lesley let out a breath which had been imprisoned too long. She became aware that the short walk up the path had soaked her shoes, and that her head felt as if it were clamped within a steel band. She saw Martin Boland standing there with his lips tightly shut with worry and she thought, dully, that here was a problem they would have to solve together; Virginia intended to have no part in it. She sat down, a little woodenly.

"Is it serious, this affair between Virginia and that Spaniard?" Martin asked in his quiet tones.

"It looks as though it might be. It's very hard for you to have to hear this after coming so far."

He lifted his shoulders. "That's the way things happen, isn't it? I didn't come to Africa merely to see Virginia, though I'll admit that she's the reason I took the steps which brought me. You see, I'm a vet."

"Yes, she told me."

"She did?" He brightened momentarily, but went on without much expression, "I had a good practice in the North of England, and among my clients was a racehorse owner. He has connections with a racing club in South Africa, and he knew they were needing a vet. I pulled strings, and here I am."

"Have you given up your practice?" she demanded in horror.

"No, I put in a locum. The practice will suffer a bit, but if I have to go home I'll pull it round."

"Wouldn't you rather keep a general practice than specialise in horses?"

His expression warmed slightly. "Naturally. How nice of you to think

of that. Virginia thinks nothing of doctoring animals as a way to earn a living."

"You're trained. You can't alter your profession."

"I might have a shot at it if I thought it would do any good. My present plans are sketchy. I've taken on this job for three months, with the option of a permanency afterwards."

He talked all the while in muted, even tones, so that it was difficult to know how he really felt. If he hadn't been in love with Virginia he wouldn't have travelled so far to take a post which meant giving up the sort of work he liked best. Lesley had the impression that this was a final throw, that he just wouldn't know what to do if the trip to Africa were abortive. "When do you go south?" she asked.

"I'm due to start on the first of next month, but I shall have to report a few days before that. I have about ten free days." He smiled as if the act of smiling hurt somewhere inside. "I shan't get far in that time."

"I'm afraid you won't, particularly if Virginia insists that you're more my friend than hers."

He nodded, and sighed. "That was a bit thick, wasn't it? Did she do it for the big, handsome chap's benefit?"

The description of Fernando gave Lesley an hysterical desire to giggle, though actually she was nearer ordinary tears. What a hopeless muddle it all was, and merely because Virginia liked to hang on to all the eggs in her basket. Had she been fair to Martin she would have written him as soon as she had met Fernando and discovered it was Fernando she meant to marry. But uncertainty had made her careful. She couldn't be sure of Fernando and neither could she depend on being rich enough to choose a husband wherever she pleased. Lesley contrived an encouraging smile. "It was inconvenient, your being here when Fernando walked in. She said the first thing she thought of, just as any of us would in a tight corner."

"She's lucky in you," he said honestly. "But if you're wise you won't go on letting her do as she likes with you, or you'll have no life of your own at all. I understand Virginia, and she's the only woman I've ever really cared for; that's probably why I let her kick me around."

Lesley's father came in then, and Lesley escaped. In her bedroom she unpacked her case and hung away her dresses. The lamp-glow was fitful, as if the bowl needed filling, and when she mechanically slipped a hand between the sheets of her bed they felt damp to the touch. She opened the window and saw, as she turned back to the table, that a huge, hairy spider had constructed a cord-like web between the corner cupboard and the wall. Solomon, it seemed, had been kept too busy to give daily attention to Lesley's room; he had not even been told to clean it up today.

Dispirited, she changed her shoes, and pulled the blanket and sheds from her bed, then stood back and ran her fingers through her fair curls. Her headache had begun with the photograph of Virginia. There were a dozen explanations for the existence of that portrait in Fernando's dining-room, but the fact remained that it was there, and he must have accepted

it from her. And a man didn't accept a photograph from a woman unless they had reached a degree of intimacy.

Lesley took a despondent look at the hideous great spider in the corner. It hung there like a black threat. Fernando as a brother-in-law. She had never genuinely thought it possible, till now.

CHAPTER V

VIRGINIA went out in the car nearly every day. She often lunched out, but was careful to accept no bachelor invitations to dinner. She attended the polo and cricket matches, though, and no woman was better turned out. She was seen everywhere that was fashionable, and the other women admired her for her aloofness from the men who obviously wished for closer acquaintance. None of them knew, of course, that the car was as much Lesley's as Virginia's. About Lesley they thought, maternally, she was such a slip of a thing to have taken on Amanzi, and how odd that, having a sister so brilliant and the epitome of feminine good taste, she should prefer to wear the same old jeans and dresses, and to potter about the house.

Martin had slept that stormy night on the Nortons' divan. Next morning he had risen very early, written a brief note of thanks to Mr. Norton and walked out of the house into the dripping, sparkling world of Central Africa. Presumably he had walked to Buenda, for Lesley, on a shopping tour a couple of days later, had met him at the Post Office and learned that he would be at the hotel for a week or so. Lesley couldn't help but regard it as a dreadful pity that Martin should be so shabbily treated by the woman he loved. She had gone her way wondering what it was about Virginia that caught at the emotions of such different men as Fernando del Cuero and Martin Boland.

That Saturday, Virginia went once more to Fernando's house at the Falls. Off-handedly, at the last moment, she murmured that Lesley had been invited too. "When Father and I were there last weekend, Fernando thought it a good idea if all three of us went this week to choose the house. It's unnecessary though. I shall naturally pick the largest."

"I'd like to go with you," Lesley said, in tones gone hard to disguise the hurt. "I can be ready in ten minutes."

"I can't wait as long as that." Virginia took her wrap from a chair and pulled it over the shoulders of her black brocade suit. "You and Fernando don't agree. When he brought you home the other night you were miserable, and he, poor darling, looked utterly bored. Besides, Father won't want to go out at such short notice, and someone has to stay with him."

Still in that forced voice Lesley said, "How do you know Fernando will approve of your going alone to dine with him?"

"Lesley, my sweet, you know nothing whatever about Fernando's habits. Any one of his friends can go to his house on Saturday and be sure of an excellent dinner. In any case, I'm not undiplomatic. You can safely leave me to look after my own affairs."

Which was so true that Lesley said nothing more. She scarcely tasted the dinner she shared with her father that evening, and she was lying wide awake when Virginia came home at midnight. She listened, heard another car give a low hoot, and guessed that Fernando had followed her in his own car, as an escort.

On Sunday Lesley learned that they were moving house the very next day. In her sophisticated fashion Virginia was pleased and excited. "Fernando is going to send us two trucks and some men to handle the furniture. The house is spotless, and so cosy

inside. You wouldn't think it was constructed of wood. It's right at the end of the settlement, and ten minutes' walk from -Fernando's house, but I think on the whole that's as well. A little distance will continue to lend enchantment." This needing no elucidation, she went on, "It's going to be fun living there for a few weeks. We'll give a house-warming on Thursday or Friday. You might go up into Buenda tomorrow morning and order all the necessaries."

By the end of the day Lesley had acquired a detached attitude; the mixture of uneasiness and pleasure; of hope and trepidation, had had to make room for practical considerations. There were china and glass to be wrapped, house linen and clothes to be packed, carpets to be brushed and rolled, books to be tied into bundles, and a host of other details which crowded everything else into the back of her mind.

There was little time on Monday for regrets. Lesley did spare a few moments to walk among the old fruit trees and down to the log but which had been a curing-shed, but she was curiously without feeling. Once the lorries were loaded, Solomon was instructed to clean through the house and then proceed to the Falls by easy stages with the two horses. The lorries trundled away down the road, Mr. Norton took his seat beside Virginia in the car, and Lesley squashed into the back with the overflow of coats and hats. They moved away, gathered speed, and overtook the two laden vehicles. Lesley did not look back. She was too dry of feeling to care that Amanzi was behind them forever.

Apart from Fernando's house, which was brick and stucco and not really part of the settlement at the Falls, only three had more than the two essential rooms and bathroom and kitchen. These three were available to any man who wished to have his family with him for a spell. The fact that there wasn't a flower in sight proved that no woman had lived for any length of time at the Falls. The house Virginia had chosen was half a mile from the power-house. In the still darkness they could hear the Falls, but at any time it was possible to catch the gurgle of the river, which coursed on its way not so very far from Lesley's bedroom window.

There was plenty to do, of course. The windows were fewer than at the farm, but they were also larger, which necessitated the joining together of some of the curtains. The rooms had to be arranged and rearranged, in order to disguise the inadequacy of their furniture, and at the end of the following day Virginia expressed herself satisfied.

Lesley was still sleeping on Neville's camp bed, still making do with odd bits of furniture; her little room was monastic in its lack of comfort. If it had not been for the amazing natural beauty of the view from the window, Lesley would have gone there only to sleep. However, after lunch each day, when the house was quiet, she would lean out of that window and watch and listen to the river. Sometimes she caught movements over on the other bank, and once she saw a great sable buck dash away among the growth as if a lion were after him. Even on days when no breeze stirred the trees to change the reflections in the river, there was balm in that scene. It was quite difficult to detach herself from it at four o'clock to make tea.

From the Falls, of course, Virginia went less often to Buenda, but on the afternoon of their house-warming party she decided there were one or two things she needed, and set off sharp at two. Lesley was in the kitchen dropping tiny fish-balls into a pan of sizzling oil when she left, and she had just drained the last few when Martin Boland drove up in a car even more aged than Neville Madison's. Lesley saw the young man through the open side door, and at once she withdrew the pan of fat from the stove and went round to meet him on the path. He gave her a worn-looking smile. "Hallo!" he said. "Sorry I'm late. The bus isn't as good as I thought she was."

"Late?" she echoed. "Are you . . . did Virginia invite you?"

"No. I invited myself. I sent her a note to say I'd be coming this afternoon. Didn't she tell you?"

"I don't think she could have got your message. I've heard nothing about it."

"She got it all right; the boy came back and reported that he gave the note to Virginia, personally." His voice went suddenly harsh. "Do you mean she isn't here?"

"I'm afraid she had to go out." Martin looked like a man who has had the ground sliced from under his feet, and to excuse Virginia to him would only make the matter worse.

"Come in and have some tea."

He followed her heavily. "No tea, thanks." He sank down into a chair. "I don't quite know what to do. I shouldn't burden you with all this."

"I'd rather you did, if it helps."

"Well, I've seen Virginia a few times in town, and on each occasion I asked her to have dinner with me, so that we could talk. She refused. I mean nothing at all to her. I'm beginning to realise that. I have to leave tomorrow morning, and I was determined to see her alone before I go. This seemed the only way. I'd decided that if she turned me down flat I'd get back to England as soon as I could."

"That's best, really." She spoke carefully, trying not to sound as if she were urging him. Hesitantly she added, "You could wait here till she

comes back, but I rather think she'll be late, and we have people coming for cocktails at six. Would you . . . will you come to our party tonight? A buffet supper at eight."

"What's the good?" he shrugged hopelessly. "She doesn't want me." He heaved himself upright and let out a sigh. "I won't hang around begging for sympathy. I may meet Virginia coming back. If I don't . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. Lesley knew, with a frightened certainty, that he was living through a kind of death—the death of every hope. She went with him to the car and gave him her hand, but neither spoke a word. The engine wheezed, he swung the wheel and was off down the rutted road.

LESLEY returned straightaway to the kitchen to continue preparing the snacks, but her mind went winging after Martin Boland, and her heart was wrung with the futility of his love for Virginia. It was desolating, the knowledge that a man could love a woman so much that he was willing to throw up everything on the slender chance that she would marry him. But Virginia had right on her side, too, if she was not in love with him. She ought to have treated Martin more fairly though.

It was after five when Virginia came back.. She dropped a packet on to her father's knee and a kiss on the top of his head. "A new tie for you, darling. Wear it tonight with the dark grey lounge suit."

"Won't they come in dinner-jackets?"

"Some will and some won't." She turned to her sister. "What are you wearing, Lesley?"

"Does it matter?"

Virginia's chin took a sharp tilt and she said coolly, "I don't care for that tone. This is supposed to be a happy occasion, and I don't want anything to spoil it. What's the matter with you—self-righteous because I didn't stay and help you with the snacks?" Mr. Norton got to his feet. "Lesley's tired, and so am I. I'm going to take a bath and rest till your friends arrive."

Virginia did not move. She stayed near the table, the fingers of one hand resting lightly upon it. Her head was still thrown back, and the green eyes glinted with vexation.

When her father had gone she looked across at Lesley and said, "All right. I know all about it. I met him as I was leaving Buenda."

Lesley answered quietly, "I hope you were honest with him at last."

"Yes, I was honest! The nerve of him, coming here in that rattling tin-can!

England he did have a decent station wagon to make his rounds in."

"That's probably the reason he can't afford anything better here. Practically every penny he's got is tied up in England, and you should have seen to it that he stayed there. If you'd been truthful with him from the beginning . . ."

"When I need your opinion I'll ask for it!"

Lesley was suddenly hotly furious. She sprang up from the chair and

faced her sister across the table. "You knew when you went out that I'd have to deal with Martin this afternoon, and you didn't even throw out a hint—just left everything to take its course. You're selfish and a coward, Virginia. You evade situations you can't handle, and thrust other people into unpleasant positions rather than face up to something which you yourself have manufactured."

Temper flared in two spots in Virginia's cheeks. "When you're through with being a fishwife you can go and change. One of us has to be ready."

"I'm not through. You've treated Martin abominably. If you couldn't keep him in England, you should at least have had a long talk with him as soon as he got here, instead of which you've just laughed him off, as if he were a casual acquaintance you'd picked up in Buena. He came six thousand miles to see you, and you've ignored him."

"He took that risk. I made him no promises. If you've fallen for him, why don't you go south with him and console him?"

"Oh, stop it! You've done enough damage, without putting a cheap interpretation upon anything I might say. Martin's decent and you've treated him shabbily, that's the whole point. If I'm sorry for him, it's because I happen to be human."

Virginia had regained her cool composure. She knew, none better, the value of a clear head in an argument. She surveyed Lesley's pale face, the distress in the soft blue eyes, and her smile became tinged with contempt. "It was a pity you didn't attempt to console Martin," she said. "He was in a mood to fall for a sympathetic sister. You won't see him again—he said he was setting out at once."

"Was he upset?"

"I don't know." Virginia gave a regal shrug. "I explained that I'd avoided him because I wanted to save him pain. He said he'd guessed I was in love with someone else. That was all."

Lesley said huskily, "You're not in love, Virginia. You want Fernando because he's different, because he's rich and good-looking. You've never before met a man as handsome and strong as Fernando, and it gives a fillip to your vanity to be admired by such a man. You think that being married to him would set you apart from other women, that they'd envy you."

"It's true, isn't it? You yourself envy me, don't you, Lesley? You have a sneaking regard for him, a pure schoolgirl adoration which, by the way, Fernando wouldn't be able to find a scrap of use for."

Lesley turned away, her mouth dry. "It's Martin we're concerned with. Are you going to let him depart like this?"

"What in the world do you expect me to do?"

"Expect?" For the first time Lesley's tones were bitter. "I don't expect anything—from you. I hate saying this, Virginia, but you're the most callously cold-hearted creature I've ever known. I doubt if there's a woman anywhere who'd treat a man as you've treated Martin, and I only hope that Fernando finds out in time."

SHE was unprepared for what came next. Virginia had moved swiftly round the table, grabbed her arm and swung her about. The emerald eyes were sparkling and narrowed. "Look here, Lesley! If you breathe a word of this to Fernando or anyone else I'll make you sorrier than you've ever been in your life. I've tried to get along with you here, but you won't have it. You hate me for coming between you and Father. You hoped to get your little claws on his money without my knowing, but I was thinking one jump ahead of you all the time. You'll have what's due to you and no more."

Lesley blazed, "Money! That's all you think of. Do you suppose I don't- see what's at the back of every move you make? The pair of slippers you bought Father last week, the tie today—and dozens of other trifles. You're trying to buy his goodwill with his own money. For my part you can have the lot. I loved Amanzi when we lived there and were trying to farm, but the minerals discovered there are tainting everything. I'll never enjoy that kind of money!"

"Very well. Leave it for others who will And for heaven's sake keep your -thoughts about it to yourself. And don't flatter yourself that you have Father on your side. Even a moron could see which one of us he prefers!"

It was the final sentence that shattered Lesley. Before she had been appalled by the fact of two sisters quarrelling with such bitter earnestness, but those last few words were like sharp knives thrown with an exact aim. They were so true. Her father was bewitched by Virginia's mature beauty, deceived by her carefully calculated acts of affection. With apparent good-humour, Virginia occasionally picked a hole in Lesley's housekeeping but Edward Norton never bothered to defend his younger daughter except with a smile; he wasn't to blame, because he probably thought that was all that was necessary when dealing with sisters. No, Lesley didn't blame him in the least. He had a perfect right to love Virginia better. All the same, the knowledge, made stark in words, stripped part of her life of its meaning. He and Virginia were all she had, and if he didn't want her love, either . . . She squared her shoulders as if easing a burden.

"I'm going for a walk," she said.

"You can't. They'll all be here in less than an hour."

"I'll be back." She heard Virginia call something after her, noticed without it registering, that the light, clipped voice was a little less peremptory than before. But she went on down the path and round to the other side of the wild banana which formed a ragged screen, to take the footpath which led down to the river. When she had walked along the bank for about ten minutes she sat on a round rock and watched the reflections of the gold and blue sky in the fast-running water. The choking sensation in her throat had eased, but tears lay like lead weights behind her eyes. Yet she did not feel like weeping. It all went too deep for that. She thought of Martin starting out in that old vehicle of his with an empty heart, driving towards a new job that he didn't want but was bound to take because he had signed a three months' agreement. Poor Martin.

Unexpectedly the water lapped up and over her feet and ran into her sandals, cool and startling. Involuntarily she stood up, and it came to her that it would be lovely to bathe, to lie on the water and feel the sun on her closed eyelids while the evening breeze fanned over the river. The next best thing was a canoe trip. She had seen canoes tied up at several points, and she knew that she must have a quiet half-hour on the river if she was to recover from the scene with Virginia. Yes, it was the only thing which would help her through the evening's party. She turned almost blindly and half-ran round a bend in the river, to fetch up sharply at a moored canoe. It took only a few minutes to untie the rope, to jump in and push off with a paddle. The river glided underneath. She

shot out into midstream where the water was placid, and watched the withdrawal of the sunset and the quick magic of nightfall in the tropics. And with darkness came thoughts of Fernando. He would be there at the house tonight, charming and suave towards Virginia, but merely kind to Lesley. Why in the world did she have to fall in love with Fernando del Cuero, she wondered desolately. She hadn't consciously thought about Fernando in any personal connection till it was too late. His smile had tightened her heart, his voice had plucked a chord within her, his integrity had made her foolishly proud. And at last she had looked at him and known he was the only man in the world to whom she could ever belong. The image of Virginia rose between her vision and the trees at which she was staring. Virginia could have any man who interested her, because she was wheaten-haired and green-eyed, and possessed the sort of face and figure that roused passions, though she had none herself.

Lesley came out of her bitter dreaming to find herself clutching the paddle in both hands with a fierce intensity, her teeth clamped so hard that her jaw ached, and her eyes closed fast against pain. "Fernando," she said aloud hoarsely, and the small echo of her voice along the river snapped the bad spell.

She couldn't see the face of her watch, but she knew it must be six-thirty or more; Virginia would be furious at being left to deal with Solomon and the guests. But Lesley couldn't hurry. Her will felt drugged, and her wrists were stiff and awkward as she dipped the paddle and made for the bank. The worst of it was that she could not be sure which part of the river she had drifted into. She could hear the monotonous roar of the Falls mingling with the insect chorus, but she could see no lights, and surely there should be some from the other bungalows. The trees were thick here, though, and .. . She gave a gasp, then cried out. The canoe, as though pushed by some giant hand, had sped forward in a zigzag course, and now, without any apparent help, was hurrying towards the Falls. She had been drawn into one of those treacherous currents. What an utter idiot! Now what could she do? Her eyes, accustomed to the darkness, discovered one relieving fact. The current was sweeping her diagonally across the river. Presumably at some point it would change, but if, before it did, she could catch at an

overhanging branch, she stood a chance of pulling herself to the bank. It was the wrong bank, of course, but that had little significance compared with her present predicament. There was no room for fear in her; she had somehow to stand up and hold herself ready.

Miraculously she was on her feet, keeping her balance. Arms upraised, she caught at the first branch which came within reach, and felt thorns sink deep into the flesh of her palms. She clung for a moment, then with a mighty wrench the canoe was dragged from under her and she was left dangling from a bending bough, her feet in the speeding water. After that there was only one thing to do. Unable to bother about the spears which pressed into her hands at every move, she manoeuvred herself along the branch till her feet found the mud of the river bed. Stumbling and gasping, she reached out with blood-covered hands for the great, arching roots of the tree which had saved her, and clung. For a while she ceased to think; all her effort was in regaining her breath. But gradually those gasping breaths became shallower and more even, and she was able to look about her in the darkness. The river was high from the rains. Water ran inland among the tree roots and rubber plants; the growth was impenetrable. Even the strongest swimmer would have difficulty in crossing the river just here, and the only bridge she knew of was Fernando's pontoon below the Falls: to get to that she would have to penetrate this jungle and make her way round the end of

the gorge. A frightening task in daylight, and impossible at night. Weakly she climbed up to where those buttressed roots curved out from the tree-trunk, and lay back against the smooth bark.

VIRGINIA wore sea-green that evening and a diamond clip in her hair. At ten minutes to six the house was lit up, and on the whole the living-room and veranda looked cosy and pretty. Gigantic poinsettia flowers drooped in an exotic red mass from a gourd on the veranda, and inside the room smaller jars held big orange and yellow daisies.

Virginia went to the door of the small bedroom and pushed it open. "Lesley, I can hear a car . . ."

But her sister wasn't in there. The bare room was dark. Virginia drew back into the corridor, her mouth pulled in. But her annoyance was tinged with a faint worry. Would Lesley have gone to Fernando? Surely not. Lesley was not the type to spill family troubles outside. No, she had taken a walk, and doubtless gone too far before turning back. She would be here soon.

The guests' cars came one after the other, some from Buenda and others from the local settlement. Neville Madison came up with Fernando, and Virginia, when she saw the two men enter from the porch, thought what a contrast they formed, the one thin and jaded, his whole being as slack as if he were weary to the bone, and the other taller, immaculately turned out, and so much more interesting-looking. He had the instantaneous

effect of making one feel a woman, whereas Neville was definitely and solely an opponent.

Mr. Norton poured the drinks and answered Fernando's query: "Lesley was a little tired. I expect she slept late. She won't be long."

The French doors were wide open, the guests flowed between the living-room and the veranda, and one of the electrical engineers took charge of the gramophone. There were talk and laughter and music. Then a woman said, "What's happened to your sister, Virginia? I don't believe I've seen her at all."

Evenly Virginia replied, "She's about somewhere."

Inwardly she seethed. A second glance into Lesley's bedroom had shown it as tenantless as it had been an hour ago. What wretched behaviour, to sheer off when she was most needed. She wouldn't have believed it of Lesley. Sharp at eight, Virginia opened the door on the laden dining-table and trolley. The guests ate standing, sitting, and lounging against walls, and as soon as one dish was emptied a heaped one took its place.

Fernando saw that Virginia had enough to eat, and it was he who carried out their cups of coffee and found a bench near the wild banana hedge. With a smile he said, "Your party is admirably organised, Virginia. You and Lesley must have lavished much thought upon it."

She let him take her empty cup. "You're enjoying it?"

"Very much. I have never seen so many people gathered happily together in one small house." Casually he added: "I always thought your sister, robust. Your father tells me she has such a bad head she must stay in her room. Is that so?"

Virginia nodded, thankful her father had passed on the information she herself had given him. It looked better that way. "I'm sorry, but these things happen, you know."

"Has she had aspirin?"

To her credit, Virginia got no pleasure at all from lying to Fernando in this particular instance. "Aspirin doesn't always work," she said. "She just has to relax and get over it. She wouldn't want to spoil the evening for others."

"But it is certainly spoiling the evening for Lesley! Our doctor is here. At a word from me he will go in and see her. He is bound to have something that will help."

"No, please!" She glossed the panicky sharpness of the exclamation with a hurried smile. "You mustn't worry about her, Fernando. She'd rather we forgot all about her."

"She would," he agreed, "but her wishes make no difference. It is a great pity she should be missing the food and fun, and if a little tablet from the doctor's pocket will put her right, I will see that she gets it. In any case, the poor child cannot have much rest with this noise in the house. Come. Let us find Dr. Ransome."

He stood up, and she stood with him precipitately. Her hand went urgently

to his sleeve. "Fernando, please leave her alone. She'd be frightfully unhappy if you sent in the doctor. As you say, it's bad enough that she has to miss the party, but she'd feel a thousand times worse if everyone knew you called the doctor to her for a bad head. Do think of it from her viewpoint!"

"I am doing that exactly," he told her soothingly, charmingly. "We will tell no one but the doctor, and you can, of course, trust him. She has already suffered too long!"

He was moving away, and her pulses were beating the swift rhythm of fright. She saw a hue and cry after Lesley, who had no doubt fallen asleep somewhere; the party ruined; herself made to look a cheat. It was infuriating that Lesley should have plunged her into such a situation. "Wait," she said desperately. "I haven't told you everything."

He stopped and looked down at her, saw her eyes pleading with him in the darkness. Quite gently he said, "You are distressed, Virginia." Then incisively, "What is it? Has some accident befallen your sister? This headache is a cover for something more serious?"

"Not anything physical, I assure you." Her hand slipped naturally into his. "Sit down again and I'll tell you about it."

He dropped back on to the bench at her side. "What is this mystery?" he demanded impatiently. "What is it that has so disturbed Lesley she will not face her friends? I would have said she had the courage to do nearly everything."

"There are some things that leave one entirely defenceless," said Virginia in low tones.

"Love, for instance."

"Love?" he echoed sharply. "Explain."

Virginia did it well. Her voice was steady and without expression until the last sentence, when it shook slightly with a hint of hopelessness. "This afternoon Lesley had a visitor. You've met him—Martin Boland. He came to tell her that he intended travelling south this evening and that he's going back to England as soon as he can. I don't know how long they were together or just what passed between them, but apparently she couldn't dissuade him. She told me about it when I got back from Buenda. She was terribly upset, poor darling."

"I see." He sounded crisp and cool. "You think she has feelings for that young man?"

"It would appear so."

There was a silence. Virginia stared down at her red-tipped fingers and waited. A burst of merriment came from the house, and Fernando said, very coldly, "One would have said that if she loves him she should have gone, with him."

"I rather gathered that he didn't ask her to go with him," Virginia commented clearly and slowly.

The second silence was shorter than the first. Fernando ended it abruptly by decisively getting once more to his feet. "So it is a shaken heart from which she suffers—not a bad head. I am afraid our good doctor has no remedy for love-sickness. She will have to fight her own way out of it."

He bestowed upon Virginia a tight smile. "Let us go in and join the dancers. You are so beautiful that I am sure you dance like an angel."

Demurely Virginia took his arm. By the time they reached the lighted veranda all trace of triumph had been banished from her eyes; she had made them soft and sorrowful. All she had to do now was to keep a look-out for Lesley's return, and that wouldn't be difficult.

THE party broke up at midnight, and Fernando and Neville drove away together.

Nothing was spoken between them till they neared the white house at the Falls, when Fernando turned to his cousin "I think you are playing too much and too late, my friend. I suggest you sleep tonight at my house."

Neville shrugged. "If you like. You don't look quite so disgustingly chipper as usual yourself. Have you been working every night?"

"No, but I have had enough of Kalindi."

"You!" Neville was surprised. "I thought you never saw anything on any of your jobs beyond the great powerhouse taming the waters. What's wrong with Kalindi?"

Fernando's gesture, as he swung the car round to the front of his house was economical and alien. "I was a fool to experiment with the rocks. It would have been better for everyone if I had not brought you here to confirm that there is beryl on the Amanzi land."

Neville gave a low, long whistle. "There must be something mighty wrong when you get round to calling yourself a fool, Fernando. And it certainly wouldn't have been better for me if you hadn't suspected the outcrops contained beryl. Do you know what I think?" His grin made him look more his old self. "Miss Norton is dangerous, and you can feel your independence slipping. That's bad in a man like you."

Fernando braked with unnecessary force. "You are wrong this time, Neville." He opened the door of the car. "I will leave the car here; there is not much fear of rain tonight."

They went into the lounge and mixed nightcaps. Neville sprawled in a chair and regarded his cousin from under lowered lids. Fernando did everything as though it were vitally important; each power project was the peak of his career, each holiday a break to be packed with all the joys of civilisation in that island of his. He would probably fall in love with the same thoroughness—if he ever did fall in love. Somehow, Neville could not picture his clever and vibrant cousin experiencing the sort of emotional pangs that slide a man into domesticity; still, there was considerable heat under that arrogant exterior, and Virginia could be depended on to put in some intensive charming. At the thought of Virginia his mouth twisted wryly. Had her heart been pure gold instead of plated brass he could have taken a hard tumble for her himself.

Fernando came away from the window through which he had been

gazing, and went to the bookshelves. "Will you need a bedside book?" he asked.

"No, thanks." Neville got up out of the chair. "Is it the usual room?"

Before Fernando could answer there came an agitated knocking at the main door. He straightened, paused a moment, then went into the adjoining hall, shot back the bolt

and pulled wide the door. For some reason Neville had followed him, and both men eyed the trembling man who stood in the porch with curiosity and concern.

"Bwana," he said, "there is a people in trouble on the river. Can see no one, but there is a voice which calls." He showed a flashlamp. "With my brother I go to the bank for fish which rest at night. We are just there when the voice comes . . ."

"What sort of voice?" queried Fernando.

"I do not know, bwana. It is like that of a child or a woman."

Fernando drew his car keys from his pocket. "I'll go and investigate. Go to bed, Neville."

"I'm not as tired as that. I'll go with you—you may need help "

"Very well. But stay in the car. You're too played out to be of much use."

The boy got into the back seat, and as they moved away over the grass he gave a jumbled description of the episode he had shared with his brother on the river bank. He indicated the footpath through the trees, and he and Fernando took it now, the boy loping ahead till he reached the river's edge.

"It was here, bwana. All we do is flash the lamp—so."

Immediately came a weak shout. "Hallo ! Hallo!" It echoed thinly across the water, and Fernando stood stockstill for a second, unbelieving. Then he cupped his hands and called. "Who is it?"

"Hallo!" came the faint response.

The next moment Fernando had shed his jacket and kicked off his shoes. • He flung an order at the gaping boy. "Tell the bwana in the car he must bring blankets and whisky." Then he was wading fast into the river and striking out for the opposite bank. His strength was superhuman, his fury a match even for that of the lethal current; he fought it till his knees touched mud and he was able to walk. Sharply, imperatively, he shouted, "Where are you?"

"Here! To your left!"

He saw her then, a small, light figure clinging to the great, exposed roots of a tree and feebly waving an arm, and he splashed towards her. He said something under his breath, and lifted her against him. For endless moments Lesley was rigid, her face hot against his cold, wet shirt; then suddenly she crumpled and quivered, murmured a cracked "Fernando!" and began to shake like an aspen.

He stood it for about thirty seconds, then he took a grip on her shoulders. "Enough!" he said harshly. "We have to get to the other bank. You are warm?"

"Fairly. But if I could have swum it . . . I . . . I'd have tried it before."

"You' do not have to swim. I will take you, and do not try to help, even when we are in the current. You understand?"

"Yes. Fernando, I I. ."

"No more. This is no time for explanations, and I think already I know all. You are ready?"

The swim back to the other side of the river was nightmarish. The fight with the current lasted much longer with Lesley about his neck, but that incredible physique of his won the battle, and in due course he lifted her into his arms and trudged up into the trees, where Neville waited with the blankets and whisky.

Neville took one look at her white face and streaming hair, muttered, "For the love of Mike!" and rolled a blanket round her. Fernando put the flask to her lips and compelled her to drink, bundled her into the back of the car and, wet as he was, got behind the wheel. Within a few minutes they were in his bedroom, and he was calmly and swiftly taking off her sandals and unfastening the back of her frock.

"Don't," she whispered. "I want to go home."

Through his teeth he said, "You are going to bed, little one, and the doctor is coming. Neville has gone to fetch him now."

"I'm . . . all right." Almost piteously she pleaded, "Do let me go home."

"You are staying here!" he said, not looking at her.

She raised her hands as if to press her face into them, and it was then that he saw the palms, red and swollen, with purple lacerations where the thorns had torn the flesh. He took one of them into his own hands, and at last looked into her colourless, ravaged face. His nostrils dilated, his eyes blazed, and his mouth became a thin, hard line. Without a word he ripped her frock right down the back and thrust it over her shoulders and on to the floor. A bath-towel enveloped her, a suit of pyjamas was taken from a drawer and tossed on to the bed. "I'll give you two minutes," he said curtly, and went out of the room.

Even in her state of stress Lesley knew that he meant it. Fumblingly she got out of the wet undergarments and into blue silk pyjamas which were so big that her feet could not find the floor. Stiffly she crawled between the sheets, but she couldn't attempt to dry her hair with such painful hands. In any case, Fernando was back in dry shorts and shirt, his own wet hair raked flat with his fingers. He took up the towel and sat beside her on the bed, and he seemed to put all the anger he couldn't speak into the savage rubbing of her hair and scalp. By the time he had finished the doctor had arrived. He gave her a couple of precautionary injections, and stated that she was young and tough enough to come through without harm. Those hands were bad, though, and it would be a miracle if she hadn't severed a tendon somewhere. Yes, it might be as well

for her to remain here. Two days in bed, and dressings twice daily on those palms. When the doctor had gone, Fernando brought her warm milk and some biscuits, and Neville lolled in the doorway, shaking his head in fraternal reproof. "Nothing can be worth all that, my child," he said. "Didn't anyone ever tell you the other bank is anything but friendly?"

Fernando said brusquely, "You had better go up and let her father and sister know she is safe, Neville."

"Why disturb them? The morning will do:"

"They may be worrying."

"I don't think so. They think she is snug in her own little bed."

"It would be as well to leave a note there. After all, this is not a conventional situation, and it is best that Virginia should know we have no alternative to keeping Lesley here."

"It wouldn't do, of course, if Virginia misunderstood," Neville said with a half-wink at Lesley. "All right. I'll scribble a note and take it along."

He disappeared, and Fernando moved away from the bed towards the window. His hands were tight at his sides, and his jaw was set and without expression. He looked at Lesley's pale, despondent face against the pillows, at the bandaged hands lying loosely on the blanket. "How long were you there, across the river?" he demanded abruptly.

"It seemed like a . . . a whole night. I set out at first in a canoe." "Why did you do it—run away from the party?"

"I didn't, really." She looked his way, then averted her glance because there was something about him that unnerved her. Her reluctant brain tried to encompass the sort of evening he must have had. Seemingly Virginia had said nothing about Lesley's absence from the house, so that it was more than likely, in view of Neville's remark, that her father thought her snug in her own bed, that the guests had been led to think

her indisposed. It was the commonsense way to deal with her disappearance. Maybe Fernando thought she had been unwell, that she had not gone out till the party was well under way. It was better to say nothing than to incriminate Virginia.

"You went out because you were unhappy?"

"I was a bit down, yes."

"Why did you take out a canoe in the dark?"

She paused. "I . . . I wasn't thinking very clearly, and I didn't intend to stay out long. The canoe drifted, and the current caught it. My only hope was to hang on to a branch. I couldn't bother whether it was thorny or not."

"You were very silly in the first place. No one goes out in canoes after dark. I can only suppose you were in a mood not to care whether you lived or died. I am sorry for you." His coolness plucked at her nerves. She got the impression that he didn't really care what might have happened to her, that he had only saved her because a human being couldn't be left to suffer from exposure, or drown.

She was so weary from the hours over there in the teeming darkness, so full of the throbbing pain in her hands, that she would have wept unres- trainedly. Weeping probably would touch that masculine heart of his, but she didn't want to touch it in that way. The very last thing she wished for from Fernando was the cold kindness which comes from pity. This complete withdrawal, much though it hurt, was better than that. He came beside her, took away the under pillow and switched off the main light. "You must sleep," he said. "Good night."

He was at the door when she whispered, "Fernando, I'll never be able to thank you for bringing me across the river. If you hadn't, I'd have had to spend the rest of the night there."

"Do not dwell on it. You are secure now." And he went out.

NEXT morning it was not much better. Neville came in to wish her a brief goodbye. "I saw Virginia when I went back there last night," he said, and added cryptically, "You had a bad head, and cleared out around ten for a breath of air. Virginia thought you were still in bed, and didn't like to waken you when the party was over. Got it?"

"No," she said dazedly.

"That's your sister's story, and she's sticking to it. When I challenged her with knowing you weren't there at night, she said she thought you'd somehow got a lift to the Pembertons' and would stay with them for a while. If you deny anything, she'll smile pityingly and say you've lost your memory, poor thing. I'm asking no questions, Lesley. I just thought I'd warn you." He blew her a kiss. "So long. See you at the weekend."

While she was struggling to eat toast and a boiled egg, Fernando came in, heralded by the merest tap of fingernails on the door panel. Desolately she thought that there was nothing about her to embarrass Fernando. To him she was a child.

He came to sit on the cane chair beside the bed. "You must eat all the toast," he said.

"You had no dinner last night."

"I'm still not hungry."

"The emotions leave no room for hunger—is that it?"

"If you like. Have you seen my father?"

"No. He went late to bed and could not sleep. Virginia has given him sleeping tablets, so he is now quiet for a few hours."

"You saw Virginia?"

He nodded. "She has been terribly anxious about you, and will be coming here later this morning. I think, Lesley—" his inflection was metallic—"that your action last night

was entirely inconsiderate. For Virginia, and perhaps for others, you spoilt an evening which was meant to be full of fun." He gave her no time to speak before continuing, "I understand how it was with you, but I would have believed you capable, even in an extremity, of placing the pleasure of your father and sister, and the guests, above your own feelings."

"Believe me," she said quietly, "I had no intention of upsetting anyone."

As if she had not spoken he went on, "To complete the ghastly picture, we find you at one of the most perilous parts of the river, near collapse and with your hands so torn that you may have scars for life. What might have happened had that boy not heard your cries I dare not think!"

"I'd have hung on somehow till dawn. The worst part of it all, to me, is the fact that it had to be you who rescued me. I know that sounds ungrateful, but it'll serve to remind you that I'm not just an appendage of Virginia's to be protected for her sake but treated like a tiresome adolescent. I told you last night I wanted to go home. This morning I want it a thousand times more. There's nothing wrong with me."

"You are going home," he said unexpectedly, his expression stern and withdrawn. "I have spoken to Dr. Ransome, and he agrees it cannot hurt you so long as you go to bed and stay there till all danger of a chill or shock is past." His tone altered but did not soften. "Come, eat this piece of toast, and I will take the tray. Virginia will bring your things. Till she comes you must tolerate wearing my pyjamas in my room."

CHAPTER VI

THREE days later Lesley was up and going about her duties more or less as usual. It was a hindrance not to be able to use her hands normally, but her fingers were fairly free from injury. and there was nothing except pain to prevent cake-making, dusting and sewing. Virginia showed a watchful affection for her sister. They had had no discussion. Fernando, in his imperious fashion, had carried Lesley to his car and driven her home, with Virginia at his side, and later, in the tiny bedroom, Virginia had made a typical statement in honeyed accents. "Quarrels are so silly, don't you think? We didn't get anywhere at all. I'm sure you didn't mean to leave me to run the whole party last night, darling. I forgive you."

No mention was made of the cause of the quarrel. Virginia had been angry that Fernando was Lesley's rescuer, but his subsequent off-handedness with her sister was satisfactory. No doubt at all that Lesley had looked a scarecrow when he found her, and she was hardly in better shape now, particularly as she found it difficult to do her hair. And Lesley's little escapade had yielded one good result. Fernando called in each day to make a routine inquiry, and while Lesley remained in bed it was Virginia to whom he talked.

It was, towards the end of the week that Lesley saw Fernando alone. Virginia had gone into Buenda for tea with several people, and Lesley was darning holes in her father's socks, when Fernando walked into the living-room. Inside the door he stood still and looked round. Lesley raised her head, and pricked her finger. "Virginia's out," she said.

"I thought she would be. That is why I came now. Your father, too, is away?"

"He'll rest till four, but I can call him if you like," she answered.

"No, it was you I came to see." He still paused just inside the doorway, and seemed to be speaking almost against his will. "Your little hands are still painful?"

"A bit but the swelling has gone down. I'll be glad when I can do without bandages."

"They are a good protection." He came nearer and looked down at them. "They could be less cumbersome than that. Virginia is not an expert nurse."

"My father does the dressings. They're quite comfortable."

"But very much in the way, no?" He drew the sock from her fingers. "I will make a neater job of them. Where is your first-aid box?"

A week ago she would have demurred at such intimacy, but during the days in bed she had sunk into a frame of mind in which nothing had much importance. She nodded at a cupboard. "Temporarily, it's in there."

He got the box and pulled up a chair Lesley sat sideways, her right hand resting upwards on the table while he snipped away the unwieldy bandage and laid bare the palm. His long brown fingers were gentle and cool as he painted those purple indentations and redressed them with the minimum of lint and bandage. The left hand had a jagged tear over the thick base of the thumb. "This might have caused tetanus," he said gravely, with a tight look about his mouth. "Even now I cannot believe that you have escaped with mere flesh wounds." His glance rose, and he studied her face.

"Don't stare!" she said sharply.

"No? But I feel I have a right to stare. Also, I have to judge whether you are sufficiently recovered to bear some bad news."

"Bad news?" Her brain jerked alive. "About Amanzi? Is it a flop, after all?"

His shoulders lifted, and he permitted his mouth the ghost of a smile. "You would not consider that a misfortune. No, the news from Amanzi is good. This which I have to tell you concerns a friend of yours."

"Neville?" she asked at once.

"So his is the first name which comes to you. This is interesting." He was putting away the scissors and lint into their compartments, closing the kit, moving deliberately to replace the box where he had found it, as if to gain time. When he straightened he was standing behind her chair, his hand over the fine bone of her shoulder. "You are strong, Lesley, so I will not try to soften the blow. That young man, Martin Boland, is dead."

She sat utterly still absorbing the fact. Martin dead! It was incredible; he had been sad when he left, but not by any means ill. She had hoped he would grow happier as the miles widened between him and Buenda. "Fever?" she queried unsteadily.

"Not fever—a road accident. I was in Buenda for lunch, and the news came through by telephone to the local newspaper correspondent. Boland was driving in heavy rain on a mountainside; possibly he skidded. All they

know is that his car was located in a ravine two days ago, and that his death was instantaneous."

Lesley made a small sound of anguish and pressed her eyes against her forearm. After a minute she became aware that Fernando's fingers had tightened on her shoulder before abruptly letting go. She dropped her arm and got up; turned to look up into the dark, narrowed eyes.

"I appreciate your grief," he said with a frozen sort of irony. "But it is not as if you were engaged. You had parted for ever, I believe."

She twisted from him, and shook her head bleakly. "It's such a waste. He was happy in his job, a good vet, but something drove him out here, and now everything is lost. I only wish . . ."

She hesitated, and he demanded curtly, "Yes? What do you wish?" "It doesn't matter. It's too late."

"You are defeatist. It is never too late." An unmistakable anger pointed the words.

"These tragedies occur in everyone's life, and they have to be lived down. Now, we are going for a drive, you and I."

On the point of refusing, she gave in. She knew that her nose was shiny, and that her hair was lank and lifeless, but Fernando appeared not to notice, and she didn't much care if he did. It seemed that he was determined to go on acting the big brother and she just hadn't the energy to defy him. She went out with him and let him put her into his car. And when they had passed all the other houses, and were driving through bush, she knew a tenuous sort of peace. She felt horribly depressed about Martin, but it was foolish to collapse with grief over a man one hardly knew.

In his half-angry way, Fernando was kind. He told her that the Amanzi Mineral Holdings were going to make a steady profit, that there would be a post as financial director for her father if he wanted it, and that the capital was there, waiting for the new manager's list of necessary equipment. For the time being the registered office would be in the little bank building in Buenda, but presently they would have to build a block of their own. He had already contacted an agency which would send an engineer and a maintenance man, and the rest of the staff could be added gradually, as it became necessary. "By the time my contract at the Falls is completed, the Amanzi Holdings will be in full operation."

"Are you going to be a director of the Company?"

"I think not. Your father and I will sell out the farm to the Company, but he will remain to take an active or a sleeping part, whichever he wishes. I have no time for it, and no desire for ties with Amanzi."

"You speak as though in your heart you regret having discovered the beryl, and the Nortons."

With a sigh of exasperation he said, "Regrets are for the spiritless. The beryl is valuable, and it had to be found some time. As for the Nortons," he gave her a faint, sardonic smile, "I will admit that knowing you all is not an unmitigated pleasure. I have no grumble against your father, of course."

"Nor against Virginia, surely?"

After a brief silence he replied, "Virginia troubles me. She is so beautiful, so conscious of her beauty, that one wonders if she is sincere."

Lesley did not probe. With the clairvoyance that is part of love and pain, she knew how he felt. He wanted Virginia and doubtless knew he could have her, but he hesitated to speak the final word which would bind him to a woman who might be without depth and sincerity. Even had she wished, she had no time to come to Virginia's defence before he added, "And you, Lesley, are not so beautiful in the purely physical sense, but you are undoubtedly sincere. You are also the most aggravating person I have ever met!"

After that he kept away from personal topics. Their drive lasted exactly an hour, and when he brought her back to the house he would not come in. "I have done what I set out to do," he said. "I gave you ill news, and did my best to get you over the first impact."

On an impulse she said, "You're good to me, Fernando, better than I deserve. Why do I always feel I have to fight with you?"

"It started before you knew me," he told her with a hint of cool whimsicality. "I wrote offering to buy Amanzi, and you saw my name at the end of the letter. Also, you disliked me at sight."

"But I've liked you sometimes, too."

"I know," he said. "But not recently." They were standing between the steps and the car, and he appraised her. "I will call again tomorrow, and I hope you will come with your father and sister to dinner on Saturday. Perhaps by then these poor hands can be left free of the dressings." He bent and touched a cynical mouth to her knuckles.

In spite of a lingering ache of sadness, a faint colour glowed in Lesley's cheeks as she went into the living-room. Her father was there, and he gave her his warm smile and waved to a chair. "I've told Solomon to bring tea, so you don't have to do anything.

Was that Fernando?"

Conscious of a tingling where Fernando's lips had touched, she said, "Yes. He took me out for an hour."

"You look brighter for it, my dear. Fernando's a remarkable chap, isn't he? Did he tell you about the beryls?"

"Do you mean the syndicate?"

"No, the loose beryls that have been collected. He talks of having them cut and set into a necklace." The tea came, and he poured and gave her a cup. "It's a change for me to wait upon you—a welcome change, though I'm sorry you had to have sore hands before I thought of doing it."

"Is Fernando going to give the beryl necklace to Virginia?" she asked quietly.

"I've no idea. Virginia did say she'd like to have it, and he just shrugged and laughed."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday, at his house. Virginia and I were passing in the car, and he called us in to show us the beryls. I must say they didn't look much,

but Fernando said that cutting and polishing would transform them. Virginia was very excited."

Lesley had nothing to add to this, so she made an effort and turned his attention to the parcel of books which had arrived from England.

VIRGINIA did not come home till nearly seven, and there was no chance at all of a private word with her that evening. Next morning she slept

late, and before she came from her room, Neville Madison arrived. He was leaving the district in a fortnight, and thought he should warn Lesley that he would be wanting his camp bed. "You look a bit more normal than you did the other night," he grinned, as he sprawled in one of the veranda chairs. "You need someone to take care of you, my infant."

She smiled a little. "Is this a proposal?"

His glance was uncharacteristically oblique. "Would you like it to be? Could you forget I was once engaged, and let the girl down?"

"I could if I were in love with you."

He winced theatrically. "You're devastating, Lesley. I wouldn't like to be the fellow who really does fall for you. You'll tear him apart before you say yes." He examined the tip of his cigarette. "Have you decided what you're going to do with your life? What I mean is, now that Amanzi is more or less launched, you'll probably have a small income, all your own. What will you do with it?"

"Maybe they'll need a typist."

"I suppose they will, in time, but what will your father do without his housekeeper? You're so much part of the house to him that he hardly knows you're there."

"Don't be an idiot. We're going to live in Buenda, and I shall still be able to keep house. And there's Virginia."

"Ah, Virginia." His mouth quirked sarcastically. "How long is she going to stick it here, I wonder? She's deep and dark, is fair Virginia. I dare say—" again a sideways glance at Lesley—"you're already finding out that I wasn't far wrong when I warned you against putting her back up. She needs firm and clever handling, and I venture to bet there's hardly a soul capable of it."

"You could do it," Lesley said, on a note of surprise. "I really believe you could."

He grinned at her sardonically. "She has no respect for me. I wouldn't try!",

"What wouldn't you try?" inquired a soft, languid voice, and Virginia came out onto the veranda.

Neville heaved himself upright, saw her seated, and fell back once more into his chair.

"We were talking about you, angel," he said lazily. "I was informing your sister that I wouldn't care to be the man who marries you."

"You're so direct, Neville dear, And so conceited," she answered him negligently.

"What makes you think I might be within your reach?"

"I have a few rich relatives," he said succinctly. "One of them might die and leave me a load."

"If you're insinuating . . ." she began swiftly.

His laugh broke in. "Flicked you that time, didn't I? It was time I had a turn; but don't worry, sweetheart: I'm in the bad books of the whole family. There's not one of them who wouldn't rather bequeath his money to a cats' home. Well, I must be off." He got out of the chair, gave Lesley's hair a tweak, and deliberately avoided brushing against Virginia as he passed her. "I'll get along," he said. "Take care of yourself, Junior." Presumably he thought Virginia needed no advice on this score. He swung down the path and drove away.

It was Virginia who spoke first. "What did Neville come for?"

Lesley moistened her lips. "He wants his camp bed. We shall have to buy a steel divan and mattress to take its place."

"You should have done it before. It's ridiculous that we should be under that sort of obligation to him."

Lesley said starkly, haltingly, "Virginia . . . Martin Boland is dead."

Had she striven for effect the result could not have been more startling. Virginia whitened, and then, very slowly, she sat forward in her chair. "What . . . what was that?"

In a frightened haste to soften the statement, Lesley gave all the details she knew. Virginia listened, her gaze so intent and horrified that Lesley stammered and had to repeat herself. When she had finished, a tense silence grew between them. The sunbirds trilled, the banana leaves rustled, and somewhere Solomon was singing, while Virginia sat there, paper-white and seemingly speechless. "It wasn't my fault," she whispered at last. "Do you . . . do you think he did it purposely?"

Lesley answered instantly, "No! No, you mustn't think that. He wasn't the kind to take his own life. When he left here he was miserable, but he did have something ahead."

"He told me there was nothing—if I couldn't share it with him." She leapt up, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. "Could I help it if I wasn't in love with him? It was just bad luck that I wasn't sure when I left England. I liked him better than any man I knew, but I could get along without being married to him. I was never in love till I met Fernando."

The familiar chill feathered across Lesley's skin. With commendable steadiness she said, "So you really do love Fernando for himself? It isn't his money and good looks that attract you?"

Virginia's shrug was almost querulous. "They're part of him, aren't they? You could never imagine him without them." Her shoulders squared. "I'm not bad-looking myself, and we're no longer poor. You think I'm hunting-the most eligible man in the district, but it's just as true that he's hunting the most eligible woman."

"Please, Virginia, don't hurt him as you hurt Martin. Fernando wouldn't take it the same way."

"I'm not to blame for Martin's death," her sister responded, her voice low. "It's the most ghastly thing that's ever happened to me, but I'm not to blame."

As if she knew she was protesting too much, Virginia sat down again and dropped her face into her hands. And in that moment all the old, girlish love for her sister flooded Lesley's heart. She had been wrong. Virginia did feel things. Added to the loss was remorse for the way she had treated Martin during the days he had spent in the Buenda district. Poor Virginia!

Yet Lesley did not touch her; Virginia had never been able to bear an open demonstration of affection. Instead she murmured, "I'll get some coffee," and went indoors to the kitchen.

For the rest of that day Virginia was quiet and pale. The car remained in its shed, and when Fernando called she made no attempt to monopolise him. He happened to be in rather a hurry, but he was pleasant and charming, and just before he left reminded them that they were dining with him tomorrow.

NEXT morning Lesley persuaded Virginia to drive the two of them into Buenda. She ordered the bed and mattress, and, at Virginia's suggestion, also acquired a length of ivory cord silk for a cocktail frock. Tacitly, a truce had been declared between them. No more, apparently, was to be said about Martin, but it was to be understood that recent happenings and confessions had drawn them together.

But that night, dining with Fernando, Lesley knew despair. She watched him speak with Virginia, noticed a small but definite change in him as he became aware of a new softness about her which enhanced every feature. It was odd that by his death Martin Boland had accomplished the very thing which he would have striven in life to avoid. During the following week, Lesley spent a couple of nights at Grey Ridge. From there she rode to Amanzi. The land, in the short time since they had left it, had changed considerably. The diggings were widespread, with great pink scars in the hillside. She did not call in on Neville, though she could see that he was using the log hut. The metal chimney of the outhouse was smoking as though his boy might be preparing lunch, and a horse grazed nearby, just as Bessie and her partner had grazed.

As soon as she got back to the house at the Falls, Lesley planned a small garden. A boy materialised from the bush, mentioned that he knew everything about gardening, and proceeded to demonstrate that he knew nothing but was willing to learn. Between them Lesley and the boy cleared the thick roots of lalang and flattened the fine, spring grass over the bare patches. They cut a couple of circular beds and planted flowers, thinned the banana hedge, and planted the thinnings elsewhere.

It was the only garden in the settlement, and as such came in for daily inspections and facetious comments. But at least two of the men, who had wives and homes

elsewhere, were inspired to create borders round their houses and plant them with hibiscus cuttings and portulaca.

The days passed with a strange smoothness. Virginia was still quiet, and she actually helped with the design and cutting-out of the ivory silk frock. She stayed in most of the time, and in the evenings the three of them played cards or passed the hour or two before bed listening to gramophone records while they read. It was strange, Lesley sometimes thought, how they all seemed to be suspended in time, awaiting the impact of reality. One thing was certain; this tenuous tranquillity could not last.

Then suddenly Fernando came to tell them he had to go away for a few days. He came in one evening after dinner to ask if there were anything he could get them down south. "I am called for consultation on a project with which they are having trouble, and they wish me to spare them a week. I hope it will not take as long, because I would like to be here to give a small party for Neville before he leaves." He looked almost teasingly at Lesley. "I am going to ask you for some little favours. In case I do not get back till the last moment, will you make the preparations with my houseboy for this dinner?"

Her heart low with the knowledge that he was going away, she said, "I may not arrange things exactly as you want them."

"No matter. It will do no harm to have a change in my house." Virginia said, "You may be sorry. Lesley's not very experienced."

"Then perhaps you will help her. I shall be pleased, whatever the result."

"When are you going?"

"Tomorrow, early. And I would like you to prepare for that dinner a week from today.

You are sure, both of you, that there is nothing I can bring you from the big city?"

It seemed to Lesley that he was glad to be going, glad to get away from the whole set-up at the Falls, if only for a short period. When he said good night something made her go out with him to his car. She stood awkwardly beside him and said hesitantly,

"Fernando, it feels like rain. You . . . you'll be terribly careful as you drive over the mountains, won't you?"

He looked down at her, his glance cool and shrewd, no teasing quality about him now.

"There is never much danger in travelling the road one knows: equally, there is never much excitement. Apart from the work I have got to do, I anticipate a quiet, uneventful week." He paused, and added in crisp, alien accents, "You are recovering well from your grief. I suppose it is easy for a child like you. You plant a few flowers, water them with your tears, and it is over; I doubt if you are even a little older or wiser. But who knows, your next experiment in love may be more shattering."

"You speak as though you're hoping that way. It wouldn't be any good my telling you I wasn't in love with Martin Boland, would it?"

Fernando gave a controlled shrug. "You do not have to make any confessions, little one. One does not need to be a connoisseur in the affections to realise that you have never felt deeply for any man."

Quickly, a little angrily, she answered, "This time you're wrong!" Then, scared he might get a glimpse of the truth, she tacked on shakily, "I'm twenty-one, remember."

"So I am wrong?" His voice was metallic, and in the darkness she saw the glitter of his eyes. "It seems that your heart is one which must always be occupied. If you are sliding back to Neville, you will be disappointed. I happen to know that he has committed the folly of falling in love with your sister." He inclined his head briefly.

"Good night, little one."

Lesley took her time before going up the steps and into the living-room. Fernando's final sentence had stunned like a physical blow. Neville and Virginia! Surely not. Surely they detested each other? The dislike was certainly genuine on Virginia's side, and Neville . . .

Yes, it was just possible. Lesley remembered his wryness and sarcasm, his uncanny ability to say the hurting word to Virginia. He had said he wouldn't care to be the man who married Virginia, and Lesley believed him. He had nothing that Virginia wanted, and he knew it.

THE next day it rained. A storm came up at about noon, and for an hour thunder crashed overhead, lightning flamed, and incessant rain hammered like a million devils upon the wooden house and its newly-made garden. When the worst of the storm was spent there was still rain and more rain tumbling out of a thick sky and obscuring the river and the settlement. To keep her thoughts from following Fernando over rough roads which had been converted into perilous red streams, Lesley made up the new bed in her room and had Neville's camp bed and mattress folded and neatly strapped. She also wrapped up some parcels of books for him.

It was later, after dinner was over and while they drank coffee on the dim veranda, that Virginia exploded her little bombshell. There were preliminaries to it, of course. "You must be getting awfully tired of having nothing to do, Lesley," she said.

"Yes, I am. It will be fun when we start building the new house in Buenda."

"Even then there won't be much to keep you busy. Nothing permanent, I mean. Don't you sometimes feel you're wasting your life?"

Lesley had had a healthily tiring day; normally such solicitude from Virginia would have been suspect, but tonight it caused no flutter of trepidation. "I've started a garden here for whoever comes after us, and as soon as we've chosen the land in Buenda we can plan what we're going to do with it. Daddy says . . ."

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"Father and I have been talking about you today, haven't we, darling?" interrupted Virginia, keeping her voice quite level. "We think it's very unfair that you should have to keep house and run a garden at your age. You must often have felt wretched about giving up that career you started in the advertising office. You were good at commercial art, and it's a pity to let one's talents rust."

"Virginia's right," put in her father earnestly. "I've always wished I could make up to you for the career you relinquished, and now is as good a time as any."

Lesley put down her cup. She was seated in the chair farthest from the door, and could plainly see her father and Virginia, though their expressions were obscured by shadows. She knew his was serious and persuasive. Virginia's she guessed to be enigmatic.

"I couldn't get that sort of post within a thousand miles of Buenda," she said.

"That's not the point," commented Virginia. "To follow a chosen path one has to give up some things, though one gains, others. Father thought—and I agree with him—that we should send you back to England. It'll be an expense, but you've earned it, and we want you to have your chance."

"I see, Lesley's brain was rocking a little from the suddenness of this generosity. "I'm not too sure that I want to get back to England. I've got used to it here, and the Amanzi Holdings will be needing staff."

"But you'd rather go in for something more original than clerking. Naturally, you're reluctant to leave us, but it will do you all the good in the world. Until you're earning a good salary you'll have a monthly allowance, and you don't have to go back to the North of England unless you wish to. I can give you a few introductions to London firms

who have big advertising departments, and I guarantee you'd have the time of your life. It's a wonderful idea, Lesley, and you should be very grateful that Father is so keen to send you there."

"Think it over," said Edward Norton. "If there's something else you'd rather do, we'll discuss it."

Solomon came through for the cups, and Lesley got up to gather them. As the boy went back into the house she stood for a moment in the porch, uncertain whether she needed the stimulant of fresh air or the balm of sleep. Ten minutes ago she had been really sleepy, but now she was wading through a mental morass which needed sifting. "I think I'll take a walk," she said, and went down the steps and round the house. She didn't have to ask herself whether she wanted to go to England. She would have liked a holiday there, but her heart was definitely here, in Central Africa. As for the career she had begun, it was so long since she had speculated about it that it had come to mean nothing at all.

As her mind began to clear she realised several things. Virginia had spoken as if her father had initiated the idea, but Lesley knew he had merely concurred. Virginia wanted her out of the way; she had never enjoyed being cluttered with a younger sister, and now she had strong

reasons for wishing to be the one and only Miss Norton. Lesley's breath drew in sharply and she quickened her pace. Was that the crux of the whole plan—Virginia's desire to marry Fernando del Cuero? She stopped and looked up at the softly brilliant stars. This same formation of stars was shining on Fernando down south, but it wasn't shining on England. Could she bear to live so remote from him? On the other hand, if he married Virginia, could she bear to live on the same continent with him?

She couldn't come to a decision yet. There was too much to weigh up, and it was difficult to do it alone. She might have a private word with her father. Virginia had driven a wedge between them, but he was thoughtful and kind, and he wouldn't want her to do anything which went against her inclination.

She had come back round the house. The light in her father's window showed that he had gone to bed, and she felt that perhaps it would be wise for her to do the same. Quietly she went into the living-room and bolted the door behind her. In the darkness she groped across to the other doorway, stepped into the short corridor and turned the handle of her own bedroom door, to find Virginia outlined in the lamplight.

"VIRGINIA came at once to the point. "Well, have you made any decisions?" "I've hardly had time. It's barely half an hour since you first mentioned it. Tomorrow I'll have a word with Father."

"I'm sorry, Lesley, but that's one thing I can't allow. He's absolutely in favour of your being given this trip to England, and it would be most unfair to embroil him in an argument about it. He says the whole thing is up to you, and he's right."

"That means he won't mind if I refuse to go."

"From his own angle he won't mind at all," answered Virginia. "But for my sake he'll be very sorry."

A cold hand closed round Lesley's heart. "For your sake?"

Virginia nodded. "I told him about Martin—that I hadn't liked to admit that I cared for him a great deal, and had pretended he was interested in you. He said I was foolish, but he understood my not wanting you around for a while."

Lesley stared, her face white. "Are you actually using Martin's death . . .?"

"It's true. I've come to loathe being in the same house with you," said Virginia sharply.

"The way you look at me, as if you know something about me that others don't. I was

much more upset about that news than you'll ever realise, and I can't bear to have you around, reminding me of it."

"Is that really the truth?"

"It is. One of us has to go, Lesley—and I'm staying!"

It was as simple as that. Lesley might have protested that she would get a job in Buenda and live in the hotel, that she would go south, to

Salisbury or Bulawayo. But she merely sat down rather suddenly on the end of the bed and shook her head as though to dislodge cobwebs. Fernando was somewhere at the back of it, of course, together with Edward Norton's money. But Martin—poor, misguided Martin—was to be used as the lever. She found herself saying, "When do you want me to go?"

Virginia let out a breath which mingled relief with satisfaction. "This kind of situation is painful, and the sooner we put an end to it the better. One of the technicians is going home on compassionate leave, and a plane is picking him up on Friday morning. You can go with him."

"Friday? This coming Friday?" Lesley's life was slipping away, and she was powerless to hold it. "It's the day Fernando gets back."

"What of it?"

"Nothing. Only I'd like to have said goodbye to him, and to Neville."

"I should have thought you would have had enough of Neville. He only paid you attention because he thought it would make me angry."

Lesley had had enough. In a tight voice she said, "Please go now, Virginia. You've got your way, and I don't have to sit here listening to your jealous cracks about my friends. You and I haven't a single thing more to say to each other."

Virginia shifted. With a conciliatory inflection she said, "We don't have to part rivals, darling. I'll always do the best I can for you." And then she was gone.

Lesley remained where she was. Her nerves were jumping, and that icy hand still enclosed her heart, while her brain tried to accept the knowledge that in four days she would be leaving Africa, that already she had seen the last of Fernando. There was no question of delaying her departure, and in a way she had no wish to.

Had she been able to think clearly, she might have been open with her father, and have demanded whether he really did believe it imperative that she and her sister should put five or six thousand miles between them. Through the haze of pain she became aware that Edward Norton was not altogether happy about her going off alone to England, but he did nothing to bridge the gap which had widened between them, and she could not bring herself to start a discussion. It was enough that he had acquiesced in Virginia's plan; nothing was left to be said. Subconsciously she knew it would hurt deeply to think about either them, or about anyone else.

Quietly she went about her preparations. A suitcase was all she could be allowed to take on the small plane, but Virginia promised to send the rest of her things by sea. Perhaps it was fortunate that several things kept both of them busy. There was Fernando's dinner-party, for instance, which necessitated a trip into Buenda to collect various foodstuffs and the drawing up of a menu. Lesley acted automatically, but she refused with finality to go into Fernando's house and instruct his servants. There are some things that even the dazed mind will shy away from.

Her sensitive face grew paler, and the gentle blue eyes were heavy with fatigue. Each day she tired herself to the point of exhaustion, but at night she lay wide-eyed, looking out at the softly-tossing trees against the pale radiance of the stars.

CHAPTER VII

In a way, it would be a relief to Lesley not to have to say goodbye to Fernando. He was always so managing and helpful that he would have been bound to insist on arranging the smoothest, swiftest passage for her, and a farewell party into the bargain. It was he who had ordered the plane to pick up his technician, Hathern. The plane was to touch down at about nine on Friday morning on a wide expanse of grass to the north of the town of Buenda. The three Nortons drove out with Lesley's suitcase in the luggage-carrier, and they arrived in good time. Lesley met Hathern, the young man who was going home to an ailing wife, and as soon as the small silver plane droned into view she felt she was already on her way. There were few formalities, and the pilot was in such a hurry that she had only time for a quick kiss on her father's cheek. Lesley mounted the steps into the plane, looked through a blurred window for a few seconds before being asked by the air hostess to take her seat, which happened to be on the other side of the aisle. They took off. She saw her father's waving hand, Virginia's slim figure in green linen, the flick of a white glove, and that was all. A week ago she had imagined Buenda would always be her home. Now she was flying for the first time in her life and getting no thrill from it, because she never would thrill to anything anymore. She was leaving Africa for good; leaving her heart there in the square white house which was Fernando del Cuero's. Virginia spoke gently as she drove her father back to the Falls. She knew he was sad, and she felt sorry for him, because she was a little sad herself. It was one thing to determine what should be done with Lesley, but quite another to carry out the decision. Still, Lesley was young, and the young are proverbially adaptable. Back at the house, Virginia asked Solomon to make coffee and butter some scones. She had the tray brought to the veranda, and for the first time since coming to Africa she wallowed in a sense of richness. She was in control now; there was no one to give her a quick, scared look whenever she bought a piece of jewellery, no one to practise economies in the household. The Amanzi Company might not yield fabulous wealth, but it constituted the difference between dashing around to earn her living and a life of leisure.

What a blessing that everything had turned out so conveniently this last week. The plane leaving this morning on the day Fernando was expected back, the dinner more or less prepared before Lesley left. It couldn't have

been better, really. Naturally, there was still plenty to do, but Lesley had written the courses down in detail.

However, it would be as well to spend a couple of hours at Fernando's house this morning, in case he arrived early. A message had come through that he would be driving through the night, and it was just possible that he would get here in time for lunch. She ought to make sure there would be something appetising for him. Fernando would be delighted with that kind of attention from a woman. She drove over to the house, went into its quiet dimness and pulled up the Venetian blinds. The rooms were swept and polished, and the flowers she had procured yesterday from a friend in Buenda had opened to show their magnolia hearts. Just the one bowl of flowers, she thought; they focused the attention. Who had put them there? Without asking, he would know whose choice they were. Lesley always liked to blend two colours and had never shown a preference for the waxen blossoms of tropical shrubs. Even with exotic

flowers she had an English, countryfied hand. Not so Virginia; she had long ago chosen her type, and it was no effort to stick to it.

Virginia turned from the flowers with a smile, and then paused, for Neville had appeared, tall and thin in khaki drill, leaning against the doorway, looking in at her.

"Hello, there," he said noncommittally. "Practising housewifery?"

She answered him with reserve. "What are you doing here so early in the day? Your party doesn't start till seven."

"I've finished all I can do at Amanzi, and thought I might as well spend my last day peacefully, near the Falls. I leave at dawn tomorrow." A pause. "You'll be glad to see me go, won't you?"

She shrugged. "To admit that would be to admit your importance."

"Which wouldn't do at all. The smile suits you. You should wear it more often. I suppose you're pleased that Fernando's due back." His nod indicated the flowers.

"You've done him proud; I hope he'll thank you in the way you want. You know, Virginia, I've once or twice promised myself a showdown with you before I leave the district, but I realise now that it wouldn't get either of us anywhere. You do know why we're so antagonistic to each other, don't you?"

"Of course. We're both after the same things, but my backbone happens to be much stiffer than yours."

"Being so wise, you probably also know that stiff things snap. I think your breaking-point will come if Fernando doesn't marry you."

"Don't be silly." She was very calm and disinterested.

"I'm naturally intrigued because, believe it or not, I've occasionally fancied myself in love with you."

She gave him a hasty glance, and for just a second or two seemed to be nonplussed. His attitude was so casual, though, that she was able to tilt her chin and reply without any particular shade of expression. "Good heavens, how touching!" Her tones had hardened slightly. "What have you to offer a woman?"

"That's just it," he said, his inflection very faintly metallic. "I haven't much to offer, but then, on the whole, neither have you. Oh, yes," as she drew a sharp breath, "you're very beautiful and worldly, but don't you think that's rather a bald statement of assets? There's no innate goodness in you, and you never aim to please anybody unless you're out for gain. Maybe you'll marry Fernando, but you'll never love him, because you'll never love anyone, but Virginia Norton."

His bid to rouse her succeeded. She took a pace towards him, her green eyes angry, her lips compressed. "Do you mind if I go now?"

"What, defeated?" He sounded derisive. "You can take me home with you. I want a word with Lesley."

She stood very still. He straightened, and for the first time came right into the room. Something in that stillness of hers made him stand facing her and stare into her eyes.

"You haven't heard?" she said jerkily.

"Haven't heard what?"

"She's gone back to England."

Neville was silent, and utterly incredulous. She averted her head. At last he let out a short breath. "I see." His anger was much greater than hers had been a moment ago.

"You didn't mean me to hear, did you, till now? You knew I wouldn't have let her go!

You turned her out, Virginia—took advantage of your position in your father's house to get rid of her before Fernando returned."

"Stop it! I won't have you speak to me like that."

"You won't?" He gave her a grating laugh. "You're asking for trouble, and I believe this time you're going to get it. You're jealous of her. I warned her about you but she was so entirely loyal that she wouldn't have me speak against you."

"I won't listen!"

"But if I'd imagined for a moment you'd go to such lengths—getting her out of the country and permanently away from your father—I'd have gone to Mr. Norton himself. I wonder what he'd say to anyone who told him that his eldest daughter's feeling for him could be exactly weighed against pounds sterling?"

She was dragging fiercely in his grip, her teeth clenched and a furious tear coursing down each cheek. "You'll be sorry for this !" she panted. "If you were so fond of Lesley, why didn't you marry her and take her away? I know you shy at that sort of responsibility but you wouldn't have had to worry. My father would have footed the bills .. ."

She broke off with a brief scream as his fingers tightened on her wrist. "That's about all it needed," he said grimly. "I'm exceedingly grateful to you, Virginia. As I mentioned before, I used, on occasion, to fancy myself in love with you. I shan't do it again."

He thrust her away from him, and she staggered. The next moment she was weeping, "Fernando! Oh, Fernando!" and had rushed into the arms of the man who stood in the porch. Fernando's face was tight, his expression

demanding. Automatically he had put a protective arm about Virginia, but he was staring over the top of the corn-coloured, silky head at his cousin. "By heavens!" he exclaimed. "What is this, Neville?"

By the time Neville was able to speak, Virginia was weeping uncontrollably against Fernando's chest, and it seemed pointless to defend himself. Fernando glared at him. "I think you had better go!"

They heard his car shudder over the loose stones and gain speed. And then Virginia pleaded a headache and said she would return home. She persuaded Fernando to come for lunch, and set off, well pleased with herself.

IT was around one o'clock when the small plane came down at Manassa, a deserted region east of the large airport where they were to catch the

English plane. It was not till the six passengers were getting ready to disembark that they were told it was more or less a forced landing. "Sorry, folks," the pilot told them.

"Technical trouble, and I daren't go farther with lives in my hands. I contacted the airport and gave them my bearings, so we should be picked up soon."

Except for the grilling heat, which he couldn't help, the pilot had chosen a perfect spot for a forced landing. There was a wide and apparently endless strip of grass, edged on one side by an equally endless belt of jungle, and sloping gradually on the other into a shallow valley where a river meandered.

Hathern, who during the trip had taken it upon himself to see that Lesley was provided with coffee and magazines, was now very quiet. He asked the air hostess only one question: "Will they hold up the English plane for us?" And the answer, "Bound to, for a few hours," seemed partially to satisfy him.

Lesley knew he was going home to a wife who had suddenly fallen seriously ill, and she wished with all her heart that there were something she could do for him.

At last a small plane was sighted and frantically signalled to. In due course it landed not two hundred yards away, and though the passengers by this time were excitable with relief, the pilots were very cool and businesslike. It was the air hostess who brought the news. "I'm sorry, but this plane can only take five, and I'm instructed to go as one of them."

"The women and children must go," said Hathern.

She nodded. "Very well, the two women and children."

"Will this plane make the connection for England?" asked Lesley. "Yes, we're leaving right away for that purpose."

"I'm staying and you're going," said Lesley firmly to Hathern. "But I can't possibly leave you here."

"They'll come back for us. It won't matter a bit if I have to spend two or three days waiting for the next English plane."

Time was too short for much argument, and he was almost thrust into the plane. It went off like a bird, sprinkled with gold dust from the setting sun. Before it had entirely disappeared, the pilot of the disabled plane had brewed tea, and given Lesley a steaming mug. It was later, after darkness

had fallen, that he informed her it was unlikely they would be picked up before dawn.

At the Falls, during Fernando's absence, some minor troubles had arisen at the power-house, and he had decided that before lunching with the

Nortons he would weigh up the difficulties which had to be dealt with. He gave a few instructions, made notes, and drove back home to change. In his lounge he found Neville helping himself to a whisky-and-soda. When his cousin filled a second glass he took it from him, tasted the drink, and leaned back on the table, his eyes shrewd. "I am glad you did not leave hurriedly. I realise very clearly how you were feeling when I found you with Virginia, but she was so upset that I was angry."

Neville lifted his shoulders. "That's all right; you had propriety and the law on your side. But I wasn't trying to make love to her, if that's what you thought."

"No?" A cool direct glance accompanied the monosyllable. "It looked uncommonly like it, my friend."

"You'd be wrong. What I felt for Virginia wasn't love as you know it, and at the moment when you came in it was already on its deathbed."

There was a silence. Fernando was looking out through the doorway and Neville's jaded glance rested upon him speculatively. Was it possible that this Kalindi job really was getting him down? It was unlike Fernando to show even a hint of strain, but there was certainly a difference in him just lately, and it was even more noticeable today since his return. Had Virginia anything to do with it? Did Fernando want the woman in spite of his better judgment?

Fernando swung round from the window. "I have promised to have lunch with Mr. Norton, so I must change. By the way, when did you last see Lesley?"

"Not for some time, unfortunately. I wish I had, then perhaps I could make head or tail of all this. It must have been a put-up job."

Fernando turned swiftly upon his cousin. "Please explain what you are talking about!"

Neville stared up for a moment at his cousin's dark face. "Virginia didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what? I demand to know at once!"

"It's Lesley. She's gone to England."

For a full minute Fernando was so still that Neville heard a fly smacking against the ceiling. Then the tall figure moved rapidly and almost automatically towards the door.

"When did this happen?"

"This morning. She left by plane with Hathern."

Two minutes after he had left his own house, Fernando leapt up into the Norton's veranda and was confronting Edward Norton himself. "Is this true—what Neville tells me—that Lesley was sent off this morning in the plane?" Fernando asked at once.

And, before any reply could be forthcoming, "Why did it happen—and with such suddenness?"

The older man's brows rose in faint astonishment. "When young people come to a decision they are always in a hurry to put it into effect. The plane was calling at Buenda. You see . . ."

"I do not see!" The atmosphere positively vibrated with Fernando's fury. "I will not believe for a moment that she wished to leave Africa."

Edward Norton had paled a little. "What's the matter with you, Fernando? Lesley has gone to England to take up the career she abandoned a couple of years ago."

"Did she beg for this opportunity?" snapped Fernando.

"No. We—Virginia and I—talked it over and put it to her. It seemed a pity to waste her talent for commercial art. Once she had decided to return to England, she was glad to be going so soon."

"And I will tell you why she was glad!" said Fernando, grimly. "All her life she has loved you above everyone else, and you do not need me to tell you that since you were first taken ill, nearly three years ago, she has put you first in her life. Yet now because you have another daughter to minister to your needs, you show her you do not want her here; you can do without her. Can you imagine how she has felt since realising that? That is the reason she was glad to be going to England!"

Edward Norton did not defend himself; indeed, he could not have done so. Thinly, he said, "How does it become your business, Fernando?"

"That does not matter. The child was grieved over the death of the young man Boland; she needed sympathy and understanding, not to be sent away to fight her way through alone. You have failed her!"

Very slowly the other said, "I know, but I had no choice. Lesley's hurt is not really deep, but Virginia . . ."

As if there were a magic in the name to summon her, Virginia stepped out into the veranda. Obviously she had heard much of their conversation, for her face was pale and her lips tight, but she spoke with a determined lightness. "You came early, Fernando. All the better; we can have a leisurely drink."

"I am afraid there is no time for that," he said brusquely. "I will have some food at my own house while I change."

She whitened. "What on earth do you mean?"

"You must pardon me, I really have no time to discuss it further."

He was moving away when she cried, "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to England—by plane if I can. Perhaps you will write on a slip of paper the names of a few likely hotels she might choose; I will send a boy for it." Looking straight at Edward Norton he said, "I am going to bring Lesley back."

IN normal circumstances a large African city is a revelation to anyone visiting the country for the first time. The wide thoroughfares and elegant buildings, the proud displays in the stores, and the number of good hotels, combine to make the cities of that huge continent the equal of any in the world. Almost anyone could be happy in such a place. The fact that

Lesley wasn't cast no reflection on the town. She toured the streets detachedly. At the end of her first day she wondered how she was going to live through the next three days. She went to bed within her mosquito-net, and lay listening to the city sounds which were different from others she had heard in Africa.

Mid-morning she had a telephone call from the travel agent. "Some good news for you, Miss Norton," he said. "If you wish, you may leave for England this afternoon. Unexpectedly there is a plane calling here. It is not one of ours, but as you have been so inconvenienced we will make the arrangements."

When she reached the airport she found the officials stretching as they came from siesta. The one to whom she spoke regarded her with some curiosity. "You are not afraid of going in the small plane, Miss Norton?"

"I did not know it was to be a small one, but I'm not afraid."

"It is very fast, and he is a devil in the air, this Paul Petout."

"That should make the trip interesting."

A plane became audible, and cruised over the grass, dangerously close to the hangars. A brilliant yellow thing with red wing-tips, it slid along to a halt no more than twenty yards from where she stood, and the engine cut out.

Then, in the brilliant sunshine, Lesley went cold and clammy, and her chest tightened so painfully that she could hardly breathe. Two men were clambering down over the yellow wings: the swarthy and merry Belgian, and a tall man with dark hair and an expression both grim and diabolically determined on his dear, familiar face.

Fernando saw Lesley. The shock of astonishment was so sudden that he paused in his stride, only to lengthen his pace the next moment and crush her arms with his hands. The dark eyes blazed questions, and at last he said, "Gran ciclo! It is really you. I can feel it is you!"

"Fernando," she whispered. And as if a spring had been released, she was feeling again—Fernando's nearness and the excruciating bite of his fingers into the soft flesh of her upper arms. Her heart began a wild song, half of elation and half of fear.

A sly, smiling voice said, "Come, Señor del Cuero! Do not tell me that already we have come to the end of our journey."

Fernando spared a glance for the other man. One of his hands dropped, and the other gripped Lesley's elbow. "You will not be the Riser, Paul, my friend," he said. "Is there perhaps a room here where we could have privacy?"

Paul Petout gave an apologetic lift of the shoulders, though a wicked glint shone in his dark eyes. "There is a guest-house. But over there is the car of one of my friends. I know he will be enchanted to lend it to you for half an hour, if you will surrender your passport for that time," came the debonair reply.

Fernando put Lesley into the front seat of the car, and drove out along the deserted road for about five minutes. Then he deliberately nosed the car between a couple of saplings and braked.

He turned and looked at her. "I have found you," he said, quite coolly but not very steadily. "You were not at the airport for the purpose of meeting me, were you? It was as much a shock to you as to me? I could hardly believe my own eyes! Tell me what happened—how you come to be here."

"Hadn't you heard we were forced to land at a place called Manassa?"

"No!" He had so far kept a foot or so of space between them, but now he shifted quickly and took one of her hands between his. "That was a dreadful experience," he said. "You were scared, carissima?"

Lesley's blood raced; it coloured her pale cheeks and put stars in her eyes. Would he have called her "dearest" like that, if . . .

"It . . . it wasn't that sort of forced landing," she managed. "I think one of the engines failed, and the pilot thought it safer to come down. There was no damage of any kind."

She paused, then said with a catch in her voice and a tremulous smile, "I let Mr. Hathern take my place in the other plane."

"You did not want to go?" he asked. She hesitated, and he added, "Answer me honestly! Were you unhappy at leaving Africa?"

Almost below her breath she said, "What do you want me to say?"

He did not reply to that one. His arm went round her and he pulled her to him. That long brown hand of his closed over the back of her head, pressing her face to his shoulder. With an odd, savage inflexion he said, "I am sorry. I did not mean to do this, but such a situation becomes easier to manage this way. For two days I have been distracted, so that at the moment I can only feel a tremendous gratitude that you are here, close to me and safe."

In a sort of delirium she felt his mouth at her temple, warm and urgent. She could hardly breathe against the linen jacket, but she did not care. These were Fernando's arms; it was his breath against her forehead. But presently his hold slackened. "Neville is right," he said. "It is the devil for one like me to be in love. I cannot play it as a game—it means too much. Some day, when you are in love with me, too, I shall begin to enjoy it."

"But Fernando," she pushed back and looked up at him, "I do love you. It's been so difficult . . ."

"Does a woman fly away from the man she loves?" he demanded. "No. You have liked me a little and hated me a great deal, but you do not yet know how love can ravage and pain, how it can turn a sane man into a thing of passions and needs. But love will come to you."

"I didn't know you loved me. I had to run away . . . for that reason, and others." She grasped his hand entreatingly. "Please believe that I love you as much as I can. It has hurt me, frightfully."

"Ah!" He flung open the car door and got out, strode round to haul her out of the other side. His hands flat behind her shoulders, he gazed at her as if to memorise every detail of her face. Then he pulled her close and kissed her as she had thought she never would be kissed by any man.

At last, his lips at her ear, he asked, "Do you doubt my love now?" She was smiling. "When did you first love me, Fernando?"

"I do not know. At the start you jabbed a little in my mind like a small thorn in the finger. The next phase was more like the beginning of a fever. Oh, you may laugh, but you have seen Neville with fever—and for him you had only pity! Then I found I could not endure the thought of your being alone with that cousin of mine. The torment was unbearable."

Standing there in the shade of a black mahogany, his arm about her, he described his home-coming to the Falls.

"Didn't Virginia tell you at once that I'd gone?" she asked incredulously.

"I am afraid not. What she hoped to gain I am unable to guess, but she postponed the explanation, and I heard it from Neville instead." He gave a lift of his shoulders and shook his head. "I cannot put into words how I felt; I was out of my mind. At once I tackled your father . . ." He broke off, and added, "I was abominably rude to him, but later he came over to my house and forgave me and wished me to give you his love and bring you back."

"Did he really say that?" she demanded in delight.

"He did," sternly. "And do not sparkle with excitement because your father does his duty. From now on, the light in your eyes is for me."

"Of course, my darling. Now and always. But I'm glad he wants me back. You can't imagine how desolating it is to feel unwanted."

"Can I not?" he rejoined with a hint of acid. "You do not remember the other times you have run away from me? You have much for which to atone, Lesley!"

"It will be such a pleasure," she said on a sigh. "We've wasted so much time, Fernando."

"The time was not wasted, my dear one—perhaps misused by your sister, but not wasted."

She shot him a quick glance and gently drew away from him. "What . how did you leave Virginia?" she queried carefully.

"Are you inquiring about her health, or do you wonder how I came to tear myself away from her?" His regard was quizzical and tender. "I confess I do not understand such a woman as Virginia. Thinking about it all in the plane, it seemed to me she is mistress of the implied falsehood. When it suits her, she is not above an unvarnished lie. Such as the one about Boland."

"Martin?" Lesley paused. "Did she come out into the open about him?"

"No, your father did when he came to the house." With just a suggestion of harshness in his tone, he said, "Were you fair to me, Lesley? What sort of code was it that permitted you to be silent when Virginia told her untruths? Did it not hurt in any way to know I was being deceived?"

She swung towards him. "Of course it did. If I'd known you cared about me even a little bit, I couldn't have gone through with it. You see that day—when you took me home to the farm, and Martin was there with

Virginia—I felt we'd got to the verge of friendship and somehow slipped away from it again."

"There is always a reason for these things. The night of Mrs. Pemberton's camp-fire party we were friendly and close—you remember?" She nodded wordlessly, and he checked himself. "But why did you permit your sister to call Martin Boland your friend and not hers?"

"Well, that day, at your house, I saw Virginia's photograph in a drawer of the dining-room cabinet."

He shrugged. "What did you expect me to do with it? Frame it and place it on my bedside table?"

She gave a small, helpless laugh. "It seemed awfully sinister to me, it being in your house at all. When did she give it to you?"

"It was one night while you were staying at Grey Ridge. I drove over to Amanzi to get the latest news about you. Virginia showed me several pictures of the North of England, where you used to live, and among them was the photograph of herself. Only a boor would not have complimented her on it or refused to take it when she offered it. So you were jealous?"

"It wasn't really jealousy; just rank unhappiness!"

At that point came an interval in the conversation, and when finally he released her, he guided her back to the car and got in with her. "They will be thinking at the airfield that I have absconded with the car," he said regretfully. "But Paul Petout will be ready to fly us back."

"You haven't yet told me how you contacted him."

"I met Paul when I was working on my last contract. As soon as I heard you had left for England I tried to reach him by telephone, but it was impossible. So I sent him a wire to

meet me at Broken Hill. Paul did not receive the telegram till Saturday afternoon. I was fuming at the delay, but there was no action I could take till he picked me up."

"What about your contract at the Falls?"

"I was certainly of no use there till I had found you. It was torture! Your father could not even state with certainty which hotel you would choose in London. I never knew of anything so casual, so utterly infuriating. I was in no condition to make decisions about turbines and transmission lines, and my only hope was to get after you as soon as possible."

"It was mad," she said huskily. "Especially from you. You're so clever and calm."

"Neither clever nor calm about you, dearest," he said softly. "I have had panic about you many times, and sometimes I have thought only of the future—our future. I would pace around the power-house at night, and I would think of the waterfalls I must show you in San Feliz, and those mountains which are covered with orchids like a lilac mist." He took a sharp breath. "After the dreams, I would go back to my house, and my arms would ache with the emptiness."

"Darling," she whispered, her hand on his.

"You will marry me soon—very soon?"

"Yes," she breathed. "But what will Virginia say?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? It is possible she will already have gathered that a man would follow a woman half-way across the world only for one reason. It is my opinion that she will not remain for much longer in Africa. And now we must really go back to the airfield."

Lesley watched his hands on the wheel and loved them. Happiness was a positive pain about her heart and a pulsing in her veins. An hour ago she had been at the end of the world, and now she faced a shining future, shared with Fernando. She had so much more to ask him, so much more she wanted to explain, but the achingly wonderful nearness of him, the knowledge that they were inextricably bound together, now and forever, overlaid everything else.

"When will we get to the Falls?"

"Tomorrow morning. My car is at Broken Hill, and we must drive from there." A pause. Then, "Here we are. They are watching for us." "Am I untidy?" she asked anxiously.

He glanced at her for a long moment and smiled teasingly. "You look kissed, dear heart, and it becomes you. From today you will always look kissed. I love you, Lesley."

"And I love you, Fernando," she said. As he brought the car to a halt she thought how strong and vital the three old words sounded. As strong and vital as Fernando himself.

THE END

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