



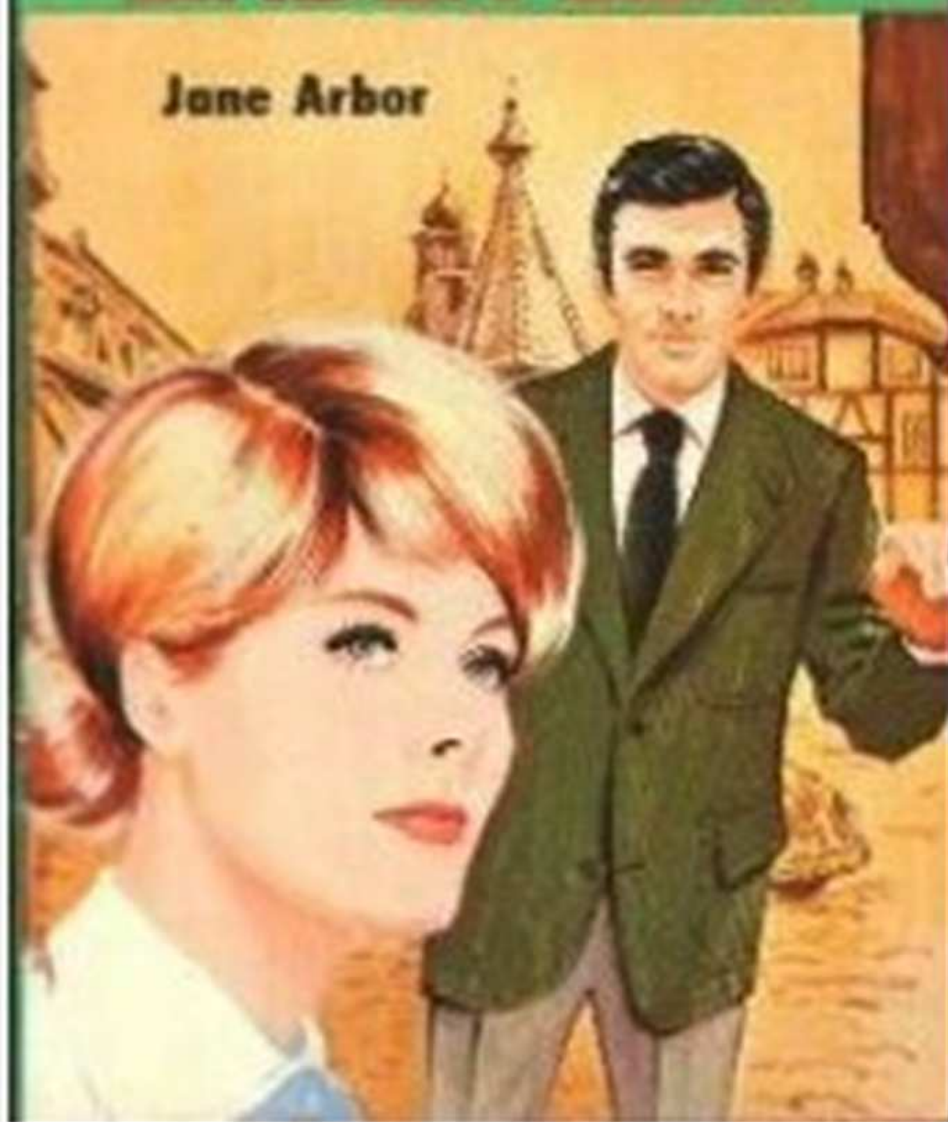
1480

A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

50¢

# THE LINDEN LEAF

Jane Arbor



# THE LINDEN LEAF

**Jane Arbor**

Virginia had never expected to inherit the prosperous wine business in The Rhineland -- but the manager, Ingram Ashe, refused to believe that her motives were anything but mercenary. She could only hope that in time she could make him change his mind about her. But was time on Virginia's side?

## CHAPTER ONE

THE dank mists of early morning had turned to a relentless downpour by noon. No breath of wind stirred. Beyond the curtain of rain the fog-sirens of the river traffic came muffled, and the bareheaded cortege of mourners for Ernst Raus, a sizeable group about his grave, became a thin straggle of vague figures moving self-consciously away towards the cemetery gates; quickening their pace a little as they reached them, then disappearing into the murk, leaving Ernst Raus to his last resting-place under the bare limes and dark yews in the early dusk of the winter afternoon.

Virginia lingered on, letting them go. Strangers ... all of them. As alien to her as she to them. None of them thought of or sighted a week ago and most of them still without recognizable faces or names in her mind. As Ernst himself had been little more than a stranger ... and would be forever now. As the man at her side, silent, immobile, waiting for her move to leave the graveside, was hardly less a stranger than them all.

She caught back a swift breath of panic. *What had she done?* Why was she here at all - hemmed in by the weeping trees of this Rhineside graveyard, mourning a man she had barely known, heiress to such heritage as he had to leave - why? It was a question she had read in the looks, variously shy, furtive or curious, which she felt turned on her wherever she went; a question, implicit and accusing, which she sensed in the mind of the outwardly patient figure beside her; a question for which she felt ashamed to have no answer herself.

She stirred at last and turned away. Her companion, turning too, left her in order to speak to the knot of grave-diggers wanting to finish their task before dark. Virginia waited, watching him - tall, sinewy, spare of flesh; black-haired in contrast to these blond Rhinelanders; as English as she was; an outdoor man and very much his own man as to decision or action, she judged from less than a week's acquaintance

with him since he had met her at the airport off the flight which she and Ernst Raus had boarded together but from which she had landed alone...

Ingram Ashe. She had heard about him from Ernst, of course. Ingram. A raven, according to a list of name- meanings she had once read. It suited him, she thought.

He came back to her. 'They will arrange the flowers and I will bring you down again tomorrow if you want to come,' he told her, and then, before falling into step beside her, he flicked from the left breast of her coat a sere, yellowing leaf which, fluttering down from the lime-tree under which she stood, had clung to the nubble of the cloth.

He crushed the leaf to pulp under his foot. 'A linden leaf over the heart - that won't do,' he said, and then explained to her look of inquiry, 'But you wouldn't know, of course. Just the lore of the region, that's all. That a linden leaf lighting anywhere on your person acts as a kind of Achilles' heel, makes you vulnerable to hurt wherever it falls. From the Siegfried legend, you know? Or not?'

'The Ring of the Gods saga?' Virginia murmured. 'No, I don't remember the details.'

'Not about Siegfried's having been stabbed to death between the shoulders - the one spot that had been covered by a fallen leaf while he was bathing in the dragon's blood that was to make him weapon-proof? Just the Norse version, you see, of Achilles and his famous heel—' Dismissing the subject, Ingram Ashe asked next, 'Where shall I take you now? Do you want to go again to see Ernst's lawyers?'

'No, thank you. The partner I saw - Herr Brandt, wasn't it? - said he would come up to the Landhaus tomorrow to see me.'

'Then we'll go straight up ourselves. Hannchen and Albrecht have the start of us and Hannchen should have laid on some tea for you by the time we arrive.'

'Thank you.' Virginia hesitated as they reached the parked car. 'That is, unless you would rather I didn't stay at the Landhaus while— What I mean is, perhaps I should go to a hotel instead?'

She met her companion's hard stare. 'Leave the Landhaus? Why should you?' he demanded. 'You've been there until now.'

'That was different. Everything was so confused, and it seemed the best arrangement for me until - until after the funeral. But now—'

'And what' has changed now? Except that now you own the place and so have all the more right to stay put.' When Virginia made no reply to that he almost thrust her into the car and took his own seat at the wheel.

The road took its way steeply uphill from the level of the cemetery which itself was on a shelf of land above the little town of Königsgrat and the river. For almost the whole of its climb the road was a tunnel, walled in and almost roofed over by towering larches and pines and hornbeams which must keep it in darkness on the brightest day and made a midnight of it in the wintry dusk. Yet only the road itself was this dark gorge. As Virginia had already seen, looking up from below, only a hundred or so metres on either side of it, the hillsides gentled out, facing sunnily south, dressed over-all in stubby vines, terrace upon terrace stepping down to the river. ... Her vines, her land, her woods, her *Landhaus Im Baumen* - her villa in the trees, all bequeathed to her by the eccentric whim of a stranger - no! It wasn't true. It couldn't be. It had to be all a mistake ...

The gradient lessened ; the tunnel opened on to a platform of larch-cone strewn ground leading to a crescent of springy turf in front

of a typical country villa of the region, half-timbered in a crazy patterning of plaster and rough-hewn beams, with its face to the downward drop from its platform and its back guarded by the continuing slopes behind it.

Its blinds and shutters were closely drawn, but it could be seen to be lighted from within and the car had evidently been heard, for the door was opened to admit Virginia as soon as she reached the step, leaving Ingram Ashe to put away his car.

Gaunt and unsmiling, Albrecht, Ernst Raus's man, said in the slow, clear German which Virginia just understood, 'Hannchen will bring tea to the salon, Fraulein Somers. But we have only just returned ourselves from the funeral and it is not quite ready. Will you be going to your room?'

'Yes, please. I'll be down to join Herr Ashe for tea.'

'Very good, Fraulein.' As Virginia crossed the hall she was aware that beneath the man's deference there was the same question in his mind as was in all his neighbours'. What was she doing here? What had his dead master been thinking of - bringing her, English and a stranger, back with him from a business trip and in one of his last conscious acts, naming her as his fiancée, sole heir to all he had to leave?

For she was in no doubt that the word had gone round. And why not? Who was she to blame Hannchen and Albrecht or anyone else for reacting to her with curiosity and gossip and speculation? Even, she felt, in the case of Ingram Ashe, with an added chill of suspicion, as yet unvoiced, but *there*, putting her on the defensive against him making her over-eager, for some reason, to plead her case and to have it heard...

The guest room to which she had been shown five nights ago was heavy with old furniture and thick dark hangings, the lighting far

from kindly to a woman. As Virginia sat at the dressing-table and looked at herself, it cast unbecoming shadows across her reflected face, emphasizing the hollows beneath her high cheek-bones and draining colour from her hair. Let down, it was shoulder-length, as fair and full of highlights as any of these Saxon girls', but worn in its nape chignon, it suddenly looked old-fashioned, governessy, prim.

On a sudden impulse she pulled the pins from the knot, shook it loose and looked again. That was better. But she had grown used or indifferent to the look of the chignon for a long time now. When she had first taken to it she had thought it balanced her profile. But now she wasn't so sure that her face needed balance as much as it needed the youth it gained by the soft framing of loose hair. For what was she? Just twenty-eight, with no romance to speak of behind her and none in front. She heard again the echo of a cruel phrase once spoken of her and overheard - '*Virginia? Oh, my dear, born to be a universal aunt, no less!*' the light, dismissing voice had said of her. So what, she asked of her reflection, could Ernst Raus have seen in her to make him woo her with such determined urgency that the consequence of it had brought her here?

Had he seen anything at all? Or had he just—? But no, she had to believe him sincere. She knew he was. For all the difference in their ages, during their brief acquaintance they had been two people meeting on the common ground of liking and some shared experiences.

Both of them alone, without family; each the only child of only children; both single. Both meeting in the restaurant of the same French hotel where Ernst was staying temporarily and where she took the meals which her bed-and-breakfast *pension* did not serve. The hotel was doing practically no winter business; often they were the only people in the dining-room and they had naturally fallen into talk - in a mixture of French and German and English. Ernst had been interesting about his work and sympathetic to her circumstances.

Just friends ... passing ships - no more, she supposed, until Ernst told her he was prolonging his stay in order to have some more time in which to get to know her better. And then, very soon after that, his astonishing proposal of marriage - which, completely unprepared for it, she had refused.

He understood, he said. She was young (*young?*) and desirable, and he was some fifteen years her senior. But he would not take No for his answer yet, and though he must return now to Königsgrat and his vineyards on the banks of the Rhine, he was going to ask her to go back with him on a visit. His villa was served by a man-and-wife couple and shared by his manager, an Englishman, Ingram Ashe. She would be very welcome; she could make her stay as short or long as she pleased, but at the end of it, perhaps he might hope—?

At first she had said No to that too. She didn't love him. She hardly knew him. To go would be doing so under false pretences. But when he had said that it would be less than fair to turn him down until she had seen his home and all that his work entailed, she had reluctantly agreed and they had flown together on the journey which he was destined not to complete. He had died of a heart-attack on the flight.

Virginia looked down at her ringless hands, idle in her lap. There had been no proffered ring; no engagement. And yet, by that informally written but properly witnessed document which Ernst had carried in his pocket, he claimed her by name as his 'fiancee' and had left her everything of which he was possessed.

His fiancée! But she wasn't. She hadn't—At the knock on her door, she started and turned. How long had she been sitting, staring and thinking? She called, "Yes? Come in," to the knock, and when silence followed, went to open the door.

Ingram Ashe stood there. 'Hannchen wondered if Albrecht hadn't made you understand that she had prepared tea,' he said.

'Oh. Yes, he did. I'd been - idling, but I'll be down in a minute or two now.' She saw the questioning glance that went to her loosened hair when she hadn't even taken off her coat, and self-consciously bunching it, she began to twist it into its knot.

Ingram Ashe stood watching her as she held it in place, minus its pins. Then, 'No hurry,' he said indifferently, and turned away.

She poured tea for them both from the low table set before a pine-log fire. Neither ate anything and Ingram Ashe refused a second cup. There ensued an uneasy silence until he went to press a bell and Hannchen Frank answered it.

Hannchen, in her fifties, was pinch-faced, a study in brown - brown shin-length overall, brown shoes, russet apple hair in a cottage-loaf topknot, brown hands which she smoothed over her hips before taking up the tray.

'What about dinner?' she asked.

Ingram Ashe shook his head. 'Not for me. I have business to see to and I shan't be in.'

Hannchen continued to stare at him, 'And the *gnadige* Fraulein will have—?'

'I don't know. Ask her what she would like.'

But when by not so much as the flicker of an eyelid did Hannchen comply Virginia said awkwardly, 'It doesn't matter. Anything—Perhaps a bowl of soup?' - only to find she had wasted her breath.

Still ignoring her, Hannchen told Ingram Ashe stolidly, 'There is some fillet of pork which could be grilled with apple-rings and spiced tomatoes. Or I have—' But at that point, he reacted with a sharp, 'You

heard Fraulein Somers, Hannchen. She will take soup,' and with a curt nod of assent, Hannchen took up the tray and went out.

Ingram Ashe returned to his chair. 'That was rude. I'm sorry,' he said.

Virginia moistened her lips. 'It doesn't matter. I understand.'

'I doubt if you do, fully. It stems from the Franks having been with Ernst for all their working lives. He had allowed them rights over all his comings and goings, and romance and marriage for him in middle age was the very last thing they'd expected.'

'But it wasn't—!' Virginia broke off, flushing.

'Wasn't what?'

'L-like that. We knew so little of each other. There hadn't been time for—' She broke off again as the thought struck her that to deny Ernst Raus's feeling for her amounted to a betrayal of him. What right had she to claim that he didn't love her? She stumbled on, 'That is, there was no romance on my side. Just interest and ... liking.-No more.'

Ingram Ashe lifted an eyebrow. 'You are very frank. But you engaged yourself to him all the same?'

'I didn't. I hadn't given him an answer.'

'From the will he left behind he evidently thought you had.'

'He could only have been hoping I would accept him. We were *not* engaged when I agreed to visit him here, to see his home.'

'Which - forgive me? - you consider was entirely fair to Ernst in the circumstances? Of mere - "interest" on your side, I mean?'

Virginia bit her lip. 'I didn't think in terms of "fair" or "unfair". In that Nimes hotel we were two people - *lonely* people - without background. I had none of my own any longer to offer to him. I was free for a while until my old job was ready for me, so what was so wrong about my accepting Ernst's suggestion that I should see him against his background before we discussed marriage again? Or would you call that improper?'

Ingram Ashe shrugged. 'Nothing immoral to it. I was only questioning its fairness to Ernst. He must have assumed your answer would be Yes, or he wouldn't have— However, I daresay you were right. He did owe you the privilege of being shown the goods before you came to a firm decision to buy—'

At that - at the scarcely veiled insult of it - Virginia's temper flared. 'How dare you?' she blazed at him. 'You apologize for Hannchen's not accepting me. But are you being any more fair? Accusing me of being no better than a - a gold-digger. Which you meant to imply by what you've just said, didn't you?'

He met the hostility of her stare without flinching. The possibility was in my mind. On your own showing that you had no very warm feelings for Ernst, I risked the suggestion, yes.'

'And what *should* I have felt before I accepted his invitation here? We had known each other a fortnight - three weeks, at most! I'm no teenager - I don't go moon- sick over the first man who pays me attention. Anyway, I've had no time for - for that sort of thing. I've been nursing two sick parents for years. Working too, until the last six months. Ernst Raus was kind and I liked him. But if I had had any idea that he had assumed we were engaged or that he meant to make me his heir, I'd never have encouraged him - never!' Virginia claimed with vehemence.

'Not even though he merited your sympathy as a sick man with, at best, only a year or two to live? As without doubt he told you when he asked you to marry him?' her companion invited quietly.

She stared. Her hand flew to her throat. 'He wasn't! He didn't! I had no idea. If I had agreed to marry him, I'd have expected—' As comprehension dawned, her eyes widened in horror. 'But you, the Franks, all Konigsgrat have decided that I did know, and that was why— I *am* a gold-digger in your eyes! I was on the shelf and I snatched at the chance that marriage to Ernst - with only short obligations - offered me? It isn't only that I'm not accepted as his heir. Knowing what you all believe I knew, I'm not *accepted* - full stop. Well? That's so, isn't it? Deny it if you can!'

For a long moment Ingram Ashe did not reply. Then he said, '// you knew, as we had every reason to suppose you did, then I don't deny that you would be less than acceptable. But since you convince me that you didn't know, I'm sorry. The whole town knew, and when Ernst rang me to say he was bringing home his affianced bride, naturally I concluded he would have confided the truth about himself to you.'

'You "concluded" - and disapproved of me in consequence?'

'Merely as Ernst's manager of the Weinberg Raus I was in no position to judge his personal affairs. I was surprised. He claimed to be a confirmed bachelor. No, it's only your own admission that you didn't care for him that I find - let's say, unworthy. But if, as you say, you hadn't accepted him and knew nothing of his heart condition, then I'm deeply sorry, and I promise you won't be off gnded by the same suggestion again.'

'Answering as well for Hannchen Frank and all those people at the funeral - *judging* me, every one?' Virginia retorted.

Ingram Ashe shook his head slowly. 'Ah, there you have a point, and it's something I'm afraid you must face - for other reasons than mine you aren't going to be accepted easily, and you have a hard row to hoe until you are. Most of those people at the funeral were Ernst's workers as well as his friends, and they aren't going to take at all kindly to the idea of a mistress instead of a master to the Weinberg Raus. I may say,' he added dryly, 'that I hardly warm to the notion myself.'

Virginia's chin shot up. 'Then you needn't. And *they* needn't. I can repudiate the will and I shall. I want no part of it. I—'

'Now you are talking nonsense.' His tone was one he might use to a mutinous child.

'I am not. I can't be forced to accept its terms, and there must be someone closer to Ernst to whom the estate could go instead.'

'From my knowledge of him - none. And didn't the wording of the will confirm it - "There being no one with a prior claim, I hereby bequeath ... etc., etc." No. True, as you say, you can't be "forced". But doesn't it weigh at all with you that, since he made you heir to the place, he wanted it that way?'

Virginia looked down at her hands. 'You are judging me again,' she said.

'Yes.'

'And this time, you think, with cause?'

'This time,' he echoed, 'I'm sure with cause. On any of several levels you haven't the right to reject Ernst's trust to you and in you, however little response to him you may have felt.'

She looked up, her eyes bewildered. 'But I can't! How can I live here, for one thing, though according to his will' he seemed to think I could? The language too - I have hardly any German. I know nothing about wine-growing or managing staff or anything. No, it's out of the question, and I shall tell Herr Brundt so tomorrow.'

With a hand on either arm of his chair, Ingram Ashe levered himself to his feet. 'I should sleep on that decision if I were you,' he advised.

'I don't need to sleep on it.'

'Nevertheless you should. Tonight you are shocked; you've been at the receiving end of Hannchen's dumb insolence and a target for my plain speaking and you are in no fit mood for determining your future and that of a lot of people out of hand.' He paused and glanced at his watch. 'I have to go out now.'

Virginia rose too. '—And I shall go to my room and to bed very soon,' she cut in. 'So perhaps, as she doesn't wish to communicate with me, you'll be good enough to tell Hannchen that I don't want to be disturbed and I shan't need even her soup?'

'If you say so, though in my view that is ceding her a Round One victory, and is unwise.'

'Does that matter, since after tomorrow there needn't be any more rounds to fight?'

'I shouldn't be too sure of the outcome of tomorrow. You just could agree to give the thing a trial.' On his way to open the door for her, he looked down. 'A boon? Permission to ask it?' he said.

'Of course. What is it?'

'That you should invite me to sit in on your interview with Karl Brundt.'

'You may if you wish. Though why should you want to?'

'Just an idea that, at best, I ought to be allowed to put my views on the outcome and, at worst, that I could play interpreter.'

Virginia met his eyes steadily. 'I'll be glad of your - being there - as my interpreter,' she said.

As on the previous mornings of her stay at the villa, coffee and rolls were brought to her room by Albrecht, not by Hannchen. She took the meal in bed and then dressed, feeling now the wearing effect of the sleepless hours behind her - hours of restless tossing, of churning brain and, increasingly until after midnight, of gnawing and undignified hunger.

She had had nothing but a cup of tea since the snack she hardly remembered eating before Ingram Ashe had driven her to the funeral. Pride had rejected Hannchen's soup, and as the hours passed, pride had been a poor substitute for calories. But then, just as she faced the fact that she would never sleep this side of her next meal, there had been the faintest scrabble of a knock at her door, a chink of crockery on metal - and then nothing more.

For some minutes she resisted the impulse to investigate, then had yielded. Outside the door was a tin kitchen tray, innocent of cloth, holding a tumbler of milk, a kitchen knife and an apple on a plate. Anchored by the apple was a slip of paper which had read—

'In case a severed nose isn't palatable diet for a hungry face, herewith vitamins A, B, G, D or whatever,' and was signed with the initials 'I.A.'

She had taken in the tray, longing to rage aloud at the gibe. But the apple had been tempting and the milk had been food. She had fallen on both greedily and later had managed to get a little sleep though only to wake again to dread of the monstrous situation which confronted her.

As she dressed she rehearsed the coming exchange with Herr Brundt, Ernst Raus's man of business and now by proxy, hers. She intended to be heard. The lawyer was going to understand the initially casual circumstances of her meeting with Ernst in Nimes; that she had a job in prospect to return to; that she had emphatically not engaged herself to him, and all this being so, his willing of his estate to her should be at least in question as a hideous mistake. Let the legal pundits sort all that out as they saw fit.

She delayed leaving her room until shortly before Herr Brandt was due, and Ingram Ashe was in the salon before her. She thanked him stiffly for the tray and admitted that it had been welcome.

He nodded. 'Good. I was hungry myself when I came in, so I raided the larder and, knowing when you had last eaten, I thought you might be glad of a modest snack too.'

She wondered where he might have been until the small hours, but he did not tell her, and a minute or two later Herr Brandt was shown in.

Ingram Ashe said, 'You will lunch, Karl?' (Virginia had noticed that everyone here seemed on first name terms.)

'Thanks, Ingram, I should like to.' A bow acknowledged Virginia. 'That is, if I am welcome, Fraulein Somers?' Herr Brandt asked.

She bowed her head, '*Natürlich*,' Ingram Ashe said, 'it's all right. Hannchen expects you,' - at which both men laughed and Karl Brandt said, 'Ah, as always - Hannchen the Dictator! As you may find, Fraulein, while you—' he paused as if in search of a phrase, and with a glance at Virginia Ingram Ashe offered, first in German and then in English— 'take your bearings'.

It was Virginia's cue. Addressing the lawyer in English, of which she knew he had a fair grasp, she said, 'This is something I ought to make clear, I think. That my relations with Hannchen or with Albrecht Frank or—' her glance went briefly to Ingram Ashe - 'with anyone else here are not of real or lasting importance, as I shall not be staying, and I do not accept the terms of Herr Raus's wilh'

Karl Brandt's jaw dropped and his blank look sought the other man's help. 'You don't *accept* the estate, Fraulein? But—?'

'No! Listen, please. I was not engaged to Ernst Raus. He had asked me to marry him, but I scarcely knew him at all. You could say we - picked each other up. My circumstances were that, though I am English, my home was in Nimes, where my father had been sent on health grounds some years ago. My mother, also an invalid, had died earlier. While I nursed my father, I also had a job in the local Tourist Information Office - the *Syndicat d' Initiative* - where I perfected my French and gained a smattering of other languages in dealing with the tourists to Nimes and Aries and Avignon.

'Latterly I had left the job, when my father needed my full care until he died. But I was - am - returning to it when the spring season opens, and I was waiting to do so when I met Herr Raus on what he said was an annual trip to buy vine-stocks - *vignes-meres*, they are called in the Nimes region - for his own vineyards here.'

Ingram Ashe nodded. 'A regular chore. We work to rotation; renew a proportion of stocks annually and one of us visits the yards in the

Nimes region to buy, every winter. Last year, next year, it might be me. This year, Ernst chose to go himself.'

Virginia continued, 'Yes, well - we were both very much alone and we talked sympathetically and exchanged backgrounds - no more. And though I shouldn't have accepted his invitation here, I did so, feeling only friendship for him - which is why I have no right to - trade on his hope that I would marry him and why I can't believe he could ever have meant to bequeath to me all that his will seems to imply. He couldn't possibly have thought that, as his fiancée, I could pick up the threads of the estate and - and carry on!'

Herr Brandt said gently, 'I doubt if he did, Fraulein. He had capable deputies and loyal servants - Ingram here and the Franks and many others - whom he could trust to help you. And another thing - his improvised will was probably only a wise precaution. He couldn't have known he was going to die on the flight home; he must have hoped he would be granted time in which to make you his wife, after which he would make a fresh will, providing for you as he must have wanted to, and should. *This* will, then—' tapping a paper on his knee - 'was only a stopgap, you may say. But in its intention, surely to be honoured, don't you think?'

Virginia said nothing. After a minute or two it was Ingram Ashe who broke the silence.

He said, 'I'm afraid, Karl, that this is something the lady is reluctant to allow. She makes a virtue of her indifference to Ernst's courtship, and in consequence she doesn't feel she owes him any "honouring" of his last wishes and his care for her.'

Virginia gasped and sent him a glance of outrage he could hardly misunderstand. 'That's *not* so!' she claimed. 'I *am* touched - more deeply than I can say. But I haven't the right to accept the benefits; I'm

not equal to shouldering the responsibility and I know I'm not accepted by any of the "loyal servants" Ernst may have had. I—'

Karl Brundt broke in again in mild protest. 'Fraulein, you should remember - they, we, are all shocked, at a loss; quite naturally, perhaps resenting you as a stranger—' But it was a different voice that she listened to; Ingram Ashe's voice saying,

'In other words, you haven't the courage, have you, to grasp the nettle and risk whether it stings you or not?'

She stared back at him. This was showdown. She flung at him, 'I've no doubt you meant something stronger and a good deal more vulgar than "courage". So why didn't you say-it, I wonder?'

'If you were a man, I should have done.'

'And supposing I tell you I've changed my mind? That I've decided I'm going to grasp the nettle, after all, what then?;!.

If she expected surprise or acclaim, she did not get it, He said, 'I'd give myself full marks for a mission accomplished. Go ahead. What have you got to lose?' He looked past her at the lawyer and rose. 'Well, I daresay you won't be needing me for the legal bit. But take time out for a drink with me before luncheon, won't you, Karl?' he asked, and left them.

## CHAPTER TWO

THERE followed for Virginia many bewildering hours, entailing long sessions with Herr Brundt, a return alone to Nimes to finalize her own affairs, a never-absent awe at the size of the task she had taken on and a nerve-sapping awareness that she was the target of all the watchful criticism which the Weinburg Raus and Konigsgrat could muster.

She shrank from admitting that her change of heart and will had been at the spur of Ingram Ashe's taunt. If she had been moved by anything, she told herself, it was at Karl Brundt's gentle suggestion that Ernst, confident he could make her his wife, had been thinking of her, and for her, so. He had believed he would be spared long enough for her to be established in the Weinberg Raus before he died. So his hasty will had only been a precaution; he could have had no idea he was to abandon her, unmarried and unequipped, to the hazards of an inheritance he had meant only for her protection.

She would have preferred even more to think that her first reaction of rejection had sprung from her shock and that, subconsciously, she had known all along that she must accept the challenge. But her honesty did not know the truth of this. She only knew that, having taken up the gage, she was committed.

And it was a gage. The Weinberg was no goldmine. It was jealously individual, owned, until Ernst's time, by generations of the same Rhenish family, and depending on shrewd, skilled management for such success as it had. It grew and fostered its vines and harvested its grapes almost entirely by hand-culture and had no commercial interests in the actual making of wine. Instead, in common with the neighbouring vineyards of the Siebengebirge region, its harvests were shipped to the press-houses of the great cellars of international fame at Cologne and Diisseldorf and Bonn.

A good vintage year, Virginia learned, might have to carry two or three bad ones on its financial back. Even an excellent one had to plough in its profits in the shape of new gear and new vinestocks or repairs to the roofs of the weighing-sheds. On the Rhine, seasons were shorter and less warm than those of the Midi or of Italy, and the Rhinelanders were realists who rarely allowed themselves the hope of an outstanding vintage. They only admitted to the possibility of a moderate season when the local ivy had flowered well - a portent in which they placed some faith. And though there was a livelihood for everyone, there were no beyond-the-dreams-of-avarice riches for anyone. Virginia gained a picture of a family, self-dependent, close-knit for better or worse, and about as tolerant of change as a brontosaurus foreseeing extinction.

When she said as much to Ingram Ashe he was not sympathetic.

'Ernst should have warned you. Hereabouts any change is suspect. No good can be intended by it. No good can come of it. It's as simple as that. It's a problem I had myself in my time, but I couldn't afford to be thin-skinned and neither can you,' he advised dryly.

That reminded Virginia of how little she knew of his background. 'How did you meet Ernst yourself?' she asked.

'In much the same conditions as you did,' he told her. 'I'm English-born, but I was brought up in Cyprus. I learned my viticulture there and I was on a vinestock buying trip to Quissac, near Nimes, five seasons ago when Ernst was on the same ploy. He was needing a manager; I was ripe for a change of scene and work; we made a deal and the thing worked out. It could for you too with a bit of give-and-take. But if you can't cope or can't trouble to, I daresay you have your own remedy.'

'Such as?'

'Surely? You could take your drawings as owner, shake the dust of the Seven Mountains off your feet and rule us from the resort of your choice as an absentee landlord. Why not?'

'Surely?' She could not resist the echo. 'Because that isn't at all what Ernst intended, as I'm sure you know. And if I haven't accepted that, why do you suppose I'm still here, up against all your prejudice as I am?'

'I couldn't say. Though if I flattered myself, I might let myself believe you had accepted my dare with commendable grace.'

Deliberately obstructive, Virginia retorted, 'What dare? I suppose you mean our plain speaking in front of Herr Brundt and your - your gloat about "Mission accomplished" when I told you I meant to stay? But perhaps you will tell me what it mattered to you whether I accepted the terms of the will or not?'

He evaded the question with another. 'It had mattered to Ernst, hadn't it?' he said.

She told herself she hadn't expected to hear he had welcomed her decision for any reasons likely to please her. 'And so?' she invited.

'And so to that extent it mattered to me. I didn't claim Ernst Raus as a close friend, and about all I ever learned of his private life was that, years ago, he had been badly let down by a woman and in consequence had never married." He was very much the lone wolf who trusted no one easily or very far. Which made his trust and faith in you - well, unique, out of character, but to be none the less respected. And if that was how he wanted to show it - by making quite certain that all he had to leave should go to you, then if I had any say in the matter, *you* weren't to be allowed to turn him down.'

'However little you yourself must have wanted to see me in possession? Wasn't that taking your charity rather far?' Virginia queried.

He disagreed. 'Not too far, I judged, considering all I owed to Ernst's know-how about vine-growing over the years. But perhaps you would be more with the argument if I denied any conscience towards him and confessed I was moved purely by self-interest instead?'

Virginia reminded him quietly, 'You haven't a monopoly of loyalty to Ernst, you know. But yes, I think I'd expect you to have some motives of your own too.'

'As I supposed. Though I daresay you wouldn't accept that your latent ability to take on the estate got through to me at first sight of you? No? Then try this for size— On a little closer acquaintance, supposing I decided- "Better the devil one knows" - how about that? After all, on Ernst's death the estate had to be inherited by someone.'

'And I was the inheriting devil on the spot? Well, thank you—!'

He ignored the irony. 'Or perhaps I saw the advantage to myself of a new boss who hadn't a clue to the business of vine-growing for profit?'

Virginia bit her lip. 'I suppose that could occur to a manager in full control, though I should hate to think it influenced you.'

He shrugged. 'You are hard to convince.. I offer you three plausible reasons for welcoming you, and you reject the lot!'

'Because I know the first couldn't be true, and I find the other two unpalatable. I'd much rather believe that you made the best of a bad job for Ernst's sake. I'm sorry I doubted you on that,' she conceded.

'That's all right. Agreed then that for better or worse, we're stuck with each other, and leave it at that?'

'Yes— Though that's something I don't know. As manager, you're under a contract which still runs, I suppose?'

Later she was to remember the moment of pause before he said easily, 'Oh yes. Ernst believed in backing his hunches and gave me a contract for a ten-year stint. So with the prospect before us of five more years in double harness, the sooner I put you into the working picture, the better - h'm?'

'Yes,' she agreed again, adding diffidently, 'But there's something else. About this house—'

'You're worried about the proprieties of sharing it with me?' he cut in. 'Have you sounded Karl Brundt on that?'

'He seemed to see nothing in it.'

'And what is there in it? As you've seen, I have my own quarters, shut off by my stout pine door. I admit I've been trespassing on your side of it lately, using the office for which there's no suitable place elsewhere. Ernst and I sometimes foregathered for meals, though not always as, latterly, I spent more time out in the yards than he did. And if you were prepared to take over some of the paper work, I needn't trouble even the office too much. How's that for silencing imaginary Mrs. Grundys?'

Virginia nodded. 'If you agree it's all right— I'd been thinking I might move into the Drachenhof, if not—' naming a pretty guesthouse in a clearing of the woods off the Königsgrat road. -

He shook his head. 'You wouldn't be welcomed at the Drachenhof as a permanent lodger. Colonel Mey and his lady make their living from

the tourists in the summer and relax or go away on the proceeds in the winter.'

'They are away now, aren't they?' Virginia asked.

*'They* are. Their young daughter, Lisel, is holding the fort.-\*You haven't met her yet, but she was at Ernst's funeral.'

'Oh - a rather chubby girl with her hair tied in wings?

I think I've seen her in the town since, with an Alsatian on a leash.'

'A "German shepherd", you mean. Not an "Alsatian" in these parts. Yes, that would be Lisel. Nineteen. A poppet. Sorely put-upon by her family.'

'How - put-upon?'

'Reference - Cinderella, more or less.'

'Ugly sisters and all?'

'One sister, far from ugly, currently not at home. And "put-upon", because the Colonel and Frau Mey tend to despise their bread-and-butter, and Lisel runs the place more or less singlehanded. She is hardly to be seen for dust in the summer; it's only in the winter that she spends a fair amount of her time up here. At the moment she is intent on learning English from me.'

*'You* are giving her English lessons?' Virginia asked, surprised.

'Good heavens, no. Only by way of conversation, though she's learning fast. How did we get talking about her, anyway?'

'My idea about moving down to the Drachenhof, wasn't it?'

'Which I hope you see is neither necessary nor practical.' He added carelessly, 'And you know, if you still feel Hannchen, Albrecht and my pine door aren't effective chaperons, you could always make me a mere tenant and charge me a peppercorn rent for my quarters, couldn't you?'

Not at all sure that he wasn't laughing at her, Virginia said stiffly, 'Thanks, though I don't see what difference that would make.'

'Don't you? Now I'd have said that a nice cash-lined rent book would be the height of seemliness! Just a thought, that's all,' he said. And it was only after they had parted that Virginia had a belated thought of her own on the matter. Not for one moment, it was clear, had he had any scruples himself on the subject of their sharing the house. Which underlined his complete unawareness of her as a woman, didn't it? And made her own misgivings lode slightly absurd?

It was on a morning as dankly depressing as that of Ernst's funeral that Lisel Mey put in her first appearance. In the office - a starkly furnished room at the end of the hall of the villa - Virginia was making what she could of business papers in a foreign language and a filing system she did not understand when a knock at the door was the signal, she supposed, for a frosty exchange with Hannchen. But the girl she knew for Lisel came in.

She was hatless and very wet. In knee-high boots and a raincoat belted so tightly that its brief skirts stood out as little more than a flounce, she looked absurdly young. Her - rounded forehead, blue eyes, tip-tilted nose and dimples were doll-like, and her hair, tied at each ear, lent her the appearance of a child made ready for bath or bed.

Her opening was a stamping of boots, a spattering of rainwater from arms and head and an '*Ach!*' which she followed up with the statement, 'You are Fraulein Somers. I am Lisel Mey,' in as distinctly mouthed German as if Virginia needed to lip-read the words.

Virginia said in her own careful German, 'Yes, I have heard about you. How are you? You were at Herr Raus's funeral, were you not, and I have seen you in Konigsgrat . with your dog.' Upon which Lisel giggled, said, 'You sound just like the phrase-book which Ingram bought for me in Bonn! But I speak English quite well now and I should like to, if *you* would,' and by the peculiar chemistry of instant attraction which sometimes operates between two strangers, their friendship was on its way.

Lisel took off her coat, wrung water from the tails of her hair and indicated the papers on the table which acted as desk.

'What are you doing with those?' she inquired. 'Nothing useful, I'm afraid. My business German doesn't exist,' Virginia told her.

'Let me look—' Lisel riffled through the pile. 'See, these are letters to be answered. If you will ask Ingram what he wishes to be said, I will do them. Or no, I shall help *you* to write them - in German. And these are lists—' she sought for a word - 'invoices, yes? - for goods from the suppliers. See, this one—' her finger pointed to items. 'That means hardwood stakes; that, wire; that, graft-boxes. And this—' she proffered another sheet for Virginia's inspection, then snatched it back. 'No, not that one,' she said awkwardly. 'This—'

'Why not the other?' Virginia asked. Lisel looked away. 'It is for the vinestocks that Herr Raus went to France to order, and I thought it might make you sad.'

Virginia was touched by this first sign of recognition from anyone that her memories of Ernst might be poignant. She said, 'That was kind. But I can't escape being reminded of him quite a lot, can I ?'

'I suppose not,' Lisel agreed. 'But it was all so sad and so unfair, when you had so little time, Ingram said. Was it love at first sight for you both?'

How to answer the directness of that with the grey truth? Virginia said, 'Not really. I think love at first sight is only for the very young. We had talked and made friends, but I was quite unprepared for his proposal and for his leaving me everything in his will even before I had agreed to marry him. In fact, I—'

Lisel looked puzzled. 'You *weren't* actually engaged? We all thought—! And of course we were all glad for Herr Raus, however surprised we were. And then, at the funeral, *you* were a surprise. At least you were to me. I had pictured you rather cosy, and quite as middle-aged as he was, and it was quite a shock that you were - well, more Ingram's age. He is thirty-four,' she concluded on a note of hint which Virginia could not ignore.

'And I am twenty-eight,' she said.

Lisel's scrutiny was candid. 'Oh, I'd have said you were—' She bit off the tactlessness of that and changed the subject to ask, 'Doesn't Hannchen bring you coffee about now?'

'No, I don't have anything during the morning.'

'Well, I'd like some.' With which Lisel went to the door and yelled 'Hannchen!' followed by a gabble, the harsh sound of which only an uplifted German voice could achieve.

Silence. No discernible reply. Lisel cocked a listening ear, then dived away, to return some time later with a tray of coffee and three beakers.

'I made it myself,' she explained. 'Hannchen said how could she know you wanted coffee if you didn't ask for it. She is a dragon, is she not? Though I wish we had anyone half as reliable at the Drachenhof.'

'Is it hard to get staff, then?' Virginia asked.

'Of a sort, no. But they only come to us for the summer, so they grow no loyalty before they move on. Sometimes they stay only a week or two and I am always having to engage others to take their place.'

Virginia smiled, 'You do sound a capable person! Herr Ashe says of you that—' She broke off at Lisel's dismayed stare.

Lisel echoed, '*Herr Ashe? Is that what you call Ingram?* Did he ask you to?'

'Not that I remember, but—'

'And you have to be "Fraulein Somers" to him?'

'I suppose so.' Thinking back, Virginia realized that to each other's faces she and Ingram Ashe were merely 'you'.

'And to me too?' Lisel wrinkled her bud of a nose. 'Oh dear. I am Lisel, as you know, and I hoped that when I knew you, I could call you Virginia in return.'

Virginia assured her, 'Which you certainly may. Though how did you know it was my name?'

'Why, from Ingrain - who else? When we are speaking English he calls you "Virginia Somers", and in German - sometimes - "*der meister*" - though only in fun, of course,' Lisel finished placatingly.

'The master!' Fun or no fun, Ingram Ashe might have spared her the sarcastic tartness of that, Virginia was thinking when the door opened and he came in. He shrugged out of a heavy trench-coat, eased off thigh-length boots and, to Virginia's surprise, dropped a kiss on Lisel's cheek on his way to the tray to pour coffee for himself into the third beaker.

Lisel wiped away the kiss with a childish gesture. '*Ach*, you are wet!' she complained.

'Rain *is* wet.' He looked from her to Virginia. 'We are speaking English, I gather?'

'Yes. Virginia preferred it.'

'She should be practising her German.'

Lisel ruled firmly, 'There is time enough before her. And a word to you, my friend — what do you mean by leaving her to a heap of papers she can't hope to understand?'

'What of it? She must learn, and says she wants to. Besides, it was no weather for taking her out to the yards for any practical lessons.' He crossed to the desk and spoke back over his shoulder to Lisel. 'The French stuff has arrived. Have you seen the invoice among this lot?'

'The vinestocks? Yes, it is there.' Glancing at Virginia she found it for him, and he looked through it, then address.<sup>^</sup> Virginia.

'If the rain clears later, would you care to see the consignment unpacked?'

'Yes, please.'

'Then meet me down at the stores after you have had your lunch and bring whatever Hannchen has handy for mine - some sausage or cheese and fruit - and a bottle. I can't spare the time to come back again before evening.' He turned again to Lisel. 'You didn't bring Esa with you?'

'No. She is being rather wicked about feeding the pups, so I shut her in with them and hoped for the best. Is that good English - "hope for the best"?' Lisel appealed.

'Couldn't have put it better myself,' he told her. 'Are they all healthy?'

'Yes, she has only lost one out of seven. The one that was born dead that night, you remember, Ingram?'

He nodded. 'And no further news from Irma, I suppose?'

Lisel's bright face clouded. 'Nothing at all, though I have written—'

He made no comment. Finishing his coffee, he re-donned his outdoor things, lifted a hand to them both and went out. Virginia asked, 'Is Esa your German shepherd bitch ? How old are her puppies now ?'

Lisel calculated. 'How old? Oh - about three weeks. Yes, three weeks and three days. They were born the night of Herr Raus's funeral. During the evening Ingram came in and had a *lagerbier* and he stayed to help me deliver them. Esa took a long time and it got rather late, and by the time they had all arrived and I was making Esa comfortable, Irma - she is my sister, you know; she is an actress - well, she rang up and wanted me to meet her at Cologne Airport! At that time of night! But then—" Lieelsh ragged, 'that is Irma.'

'What time was it?' Virginia asked.

'Late enough. She was flying in from Hanover and her plane was due in at midnight. I didn't want to leave Esa, and anyway Irma had not given me time to get to the airport. I told her I could not go; if I did not, she said, she would be stranded all night, and she was not very kind about Esa. But then Ingram took the receiver from me and told her he would go, and I heard her say, "Now that is good - in fact, *much* better, my friend!" and laugh before she rang off. And then,' concluded Lisel, wide-eyed, 'when he met the plane, and it was late coming in, she was not on it. She had not come after all.'

For a minute Virginia did not reply. She was thinking back, remembering Ingram's return to the villa in the small hours of that night. Dropping in on Lisel for an evening beer; staying to help to deliver a litter of pups; willingly playing midnight chauffeur to an elusive Irma Mey. And Lisel - as at home in his affairs as he seemed to be in theirs... How 'in' all these people were with each other! And how outside, how alien she was herself! Her brief stab of envy was mean-spirited, she knew. But it stung.

Aloud she asked Lisel, 'And you don't know why your sister didn't arrive?'

'Oh yes. She telephoned the next day to say she was in the departure lounge when a producer she knew offered her an audition for a television play, so she changed her mind and did not travel. I told her that Ingram had gone to meet her, but she only laughed and said it would not hurt him. Since then, as you heard me tell him, I have heard nothing more. I am afraid,' Lisel added as she tidied the tray and began to put on her coat, 'that Irma is not very thoughtful. But perhaps the really beautiful people need not be; they know there is always someone ready to serve them for love.'

Virginia supposed that it was her manager's weather-lore which told him that a morning of pelting rain in the mountains might well turn fine after noon. For it was so. When, carrying a covered basket containing his packed lunch, she set out across the forest rides below the villa, a pale sun was shining and a few winter-singing thrushes and robins were practising their notes.

Her way took her along the contour of the hills and a little downward. She came out into the open at the roof level of the long ranch-style building of the vineyard stores and weighing sheds, below which and as far as the eye could see, terrace upon terrace of naked, dormant vines made a stark, uniformly metre-high regiment of soldiery. A steep flight of rustic wooden steps led down to the back door of the stores, where Ingram Ashe came to meet her.

He approved her garb - Wellington boots and a belted frieze coat. 'Sensible,' he said. 'It gets pretty rough underfoot when we unpack. Give me a break for eats and then I'll put you in the picture as to what it's all about.'

When the unloading began a small army of dark-aproned women dragged bundle after bundle of elongated vineshoots from the floors of the delivery lorries at the open front doors of the storehouse. Looking like witches coping with outsize broomsticks, they hauled them to the ministrations of another army, whose secateurs cut each shoot into roughly metre-lengths for bundling into hundreds tied with leather straps.

Ernst's harvest of new life for his vineyards, selected with skill from the best of the disease-free, hybrid mother-vines of sunny southern France. Virginia wished he could see them, hoped he knew she was grateful ... 'What happens to them now?' she asked Ingram Ashe.

'They are thirsty after the journey, so they get a good soaking before they're stored in the cellars, draught-proof and sun-proof, and covered with fine sand to keep in the moisture,' he told her.

'And then? When do you graft them on to your own cuttings?'

He looked down at her. ' "Our" cuttings,' he corrected dryly. 'Not until April. Meanwhile, next month, before the sap rises, we'll have taken the necessary shoots from our fruiting vines, and when both lots are ready for the ceremony, the marriage of our convenience will take place.'

'And will show results - when?'

'This lot? They'll be fruiting about five years hence. In April they go into graft-boxes by the thousand; when they have sprouted, into the nurseries - anyone's and everyone's back gardens or on any level, well-watered ground we have - in June; uprooted and sorted for failures at leaf-fall in November; bundled again and heeled- in to light soil, ready for planting out in the new vineyard next spring. Sixteen months from leaving their mothers to achieving permanent homes of their own, by which time half of them may not have made the grade, and the rest will take three to four years to pay off.'

'And Ernst said, I remember, you can't just layer or take cuttings from the best of the home vines. You must graft, mustn't you?'

A nod. 'Essential. The phylloxera bug - throwbacks. We'd be out of business in a season if we risked either, by not grafting into hybrids which throw true root-systems every time. Not the longest cycle in horticulture, but equal to a good many.' Ingram Ashe paused. 'Could be, you know, there's a lesson to be learned from that.'

From the look he sent her way Virginia guessed at his meaning. 'You're suggesting that I might take as long to adapt?'

'Only if the cap fits.'

'I think you intended it should. You were warning me against expecting too much too soon.'

'Maybe. Though let's hope we shan't take five years to get you acclimatized— Yes, Manfred?' He broke off as a boy came up behind him.

'The telephone, Herr Ashe.'

'Excuse me.' He went away with the boy and presently came back. 'That was Lisel - in trouble,' he said. 'Her sister Irma wants to be met at the airport and the jalopy of a Volkswagen that Lisel gets around in is in dock. She wants me to go over and collect Irma, and I'll have to— That is, *with* your permission, naturally?'

'Of course.' (*Must* he emphasize her authority so crudely? Virginia wondered.)

'Then will you stay on here, or shall I drop you at the Landhaus on my way?' But before Virginia could reply he went on, 'Alternatively, you could do something for me. In a drawer here I've come on some business papers of Ernst's that Karl Brandt should have as soon as possible. If I drove you down into the town, would you deliver them to him? I daresay he'd be willing enough to bring you back.'

Virginia said, 'I wouldn't trouble him. I'll come up on the cable-train from the station.'

'As you please. Then shall we go?'

He dropped her at Herr Brandt's office between a sausage-shop and a beer-garden on Königsgrat's narrow main street. She rang the

inquiries bell in the lobby, was asked to wait and then was shown in to the lawyer's room.

The papers were handed over. She accepted a cup-of tea. Herr Brandt brought up one or two other small matters and then, stirring his own tea, was asking,

'By the way, Fraulein, has Ingram - you understand, we are friends, and so "Ingram" and "Karl" to each other? - has he discussed with you yet whether or not he wishes to renew his management contract with you?'

Virginia looked her surprise at the question. 'To *renew* it? I don't think I understand. He has told me he is bound by a ten-year contract which still has five years to run.'

Karl Brandt shook his head. 'Oh no, Fraulein, you are mistaken.'

'But I am *not*? she insisted. 'I asked him, naturally wanting *to* know how we stood. So why should he have said it was so, if it was not?'

'He told you in so many words that there was an existing ten-year agreement which he could not break?'

'In so many words—' But suddenly Virginia had remembered the small hesitation which had preceded the words. 'That is, he said Herr Raus had given him a firm contract for ten years. Isn't that the same thing as his being bound by one?'

The lawyer's smile showed that light had broken for him. 'In this case, no, Fraulein. It was, you may say, another instance of your late fiance's foresight for anyone by whom he wished to do well. He *gave* Ingram a firm contract as his manager five years ago, but, suspecting even then that his life might be short and he could die suddenly, he did not *extract* the same agreement in return. And so Ingram has

always had only a yearly term at a time to honour - renewable or not at the first of next month, which is the anniversary of the date of his joining the Weinberg Raus.'

'I see. Then I must have misunderstood him.'

'I think so, Fraulein.'

'But if he were intending to leave, I suppose he would have to give me some notice?'

'But of course. That is why, though I am sure he has no intention of going, I wondered whether anything had been said between you on the matter.'

'Only as much as I have told you, and I seem to have got that wrong.' But as Virginia went to catch the little open mountain train which stuttered its noisy way up and down the hills by winched cable-power at hourly intervals, privately she was convinced that for some reason, Ingram Ashe had deliberately allowed her to think that they were both bound by the same terms of agreement.

Why?

She was reluctant to believe that his freedom to leave was a weapon he had decided to hold in reserve, should their rather uneasy relationship come to a flashpoint of conflict at some time in the future. On the other hand she could hardly hope - could she? - that he was so eager for five years of 'double harness' with her that his own ability to opt out sooner had no particular weight for him? No, as things were between them so far, tolerance of working with her and for her was the most she could expect, and he must need that freedom in reserve.

Then why had he denied by omission that he had it? The puzzle remained until she could ask him to solve it for her. As she meant to, the next time they met... tonight.

But he had not returned before she went to bed, very late. Either the unpredictable Irma Mey had not travelled from Hamburg again. Or she had arrived and was now at the receiving end of Lisel's attention and his.

It was no business of Virginia's. None at all. But she took a stray, inconsequential phrase with her into her dreams.

... 'One sister, far from ugly....' *Irma Mey*.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE chance to put her question came for Virginia the next morning. Ingram Ashe explained that Irma Mey's flight, delayed on take-off by engine trouble, had arrived so late that by the time he had driven her back to the Drachenhof, he had accepted Lisel's invitation to a belated meal, rather than trouble Hannchen to get one for him.

"You saw Karl, and arrived back yourself all right?" he asked Virginia.

"Yes." Overnight the frustration of waiting to confront him had tempted her to accuse him of having lied to her. But this morning wiser tactics prevailed and it was with more restraint that she asked, "Tell me, when we were on the subject of contracts, why did you let me suppose that your agreement with me was as inflexible and long-term as mine with you? Because it's not, is it?"

His look was frank, bland. "No. Who told you?"

"Herr Brundt, of course."

He allowed himself a wry grin. "Serves me right for letting you get to him first!"

Virginia stared. "First? You must have known it had to come out!"

"Not necessarily, if I had had the sense to warn Karl to let it go by default, unless you made a straight question which he had to answer with the truth."

"You'd have made a conspiracy of keeping it from me? Why? I don't understand—!"

"But you mean to worry at it until you do?"

'Well, naturally. What did it do for you to pretend we're on the same terms with each other, when we aren't? For goodness' sake, what did it *do*?' Virginia repeated bewilderedly.

He shook his head as if in despair of her. 'You aren't prepared to trust your own shadow, are you?' he inquired. 'I'd have thought you might begin to, by now. The thing wasn't intended to do anything for me. If it had worked, it was supposed to help you. The idea being to allow you to suppose we were both starting fair. In other words, that for the next five years I'm as stuck with you as you are with me.'

Virginia frowned, working it out. You mean you thought it would disturb me to know that you had the advantage of me in your being able to leave the Weinberg at any year's end - even in a week or two at the moment — whereas I'm not free to part with you on the same terms?'

'Roughly, yes. Muddled thinking perhaps, but it seemed to me that one headache you needn't face was that I might suddenly decide to call it a day and leave you flat.'

*Thought for her!* Muddled and mishandled — yes, all that. But concern for her. Consideration. *Kindness*— It showed him in a new light, this damp squib of a ruse to; save her from anxiety. It cut the distance between them; made her overnight doubts of him seem petty. But shy of showing the relief she felt, all she said was, 'That was generous of you. And I suppose it means I can take it you won't be walking out on me at shorter notice than I could give you?'

'I can't see myself doing it. I've put down roots here and the place can't afford to lose me now.'

Virginia smiled faintly. 'Which I'm sure is true, though to an outsider it might sound a bit — arrogant.'

'I'm not convincing an outsider. I'm merely rubbing it in to you that though the Weinberg Raus is yours, *I'm* running it, and to that end I'm opting for the same bondage to you as you have to me. On those terms, five years on either side - is it a deal ?'

She nodded. 'It's a deal - and thank you.'

'Good.' On his way out of the room he paused. 'Of course one could put it another way. For all practical purposes, good stout vinestock and well-found graft - that's us, with the usual five years before us to show the stuff we're made of—' he threw back over his shoulder.

He was gone before she could reply. But he left her reassured ... on safer ground than she had felt beneath her yet.

A day or two later Lisel kept her promise to help with the vineyard's correspondence. She listed the stereotyped openings and closings of business letters, dictated several model inquiries and replies which Virginia could use for guidance, and this time made Virginia speak German throughout, praising her extravagantly whenever she achieved a correct sentence, however short. Only shortly before Lisel left did she relent, saying, 'There, that is enough for today. Ingram must not expect miracles,' and switched to English to ask Virginia where he was.

'Out in the yards somewhere. They are at it from dawn to dark, carting ton upon ton of fresh soil and putting it round the vines,' Virginia told her.

'Ah yes, the New Earth Laying,' Lisel agreed knowledgeably. 'That would be on the High Terrace and perhaps the Shelf. It has to be done somewhere every year, and they take the yards by turn.' She paused to laugh. 'It's such hard work that there's a saying around here that the

men only marry in order that their wives can feed them the soil from their back-packs while they spread it out! But when you do see Ingram, ask him, will you, to bring you down to the Drachenhof - say, this evening? — to meet Irma? She wants very much to meet you.'

'Thank you. I'll ask him,' Virginia said. 'Is your sister staying with you for a while?'

'Staying - though I don't know for how long. She has been on tour, and then there was this television part which delayed her before, but which she did not get in the end. She is very tired, she says, and can't make plans. It all depends on whether she is offered another part which she thinks worth taking. But of course, when she does come home, we are used to her being so vague and then, perhaps, leaving again at no notice at all. For that *is* stage-life, as everyone knows,' Lisel declared loyally, blissfully unaware of having evoked in Virginia a reaction which was one part curiosity to nine parts unreasonable sales-resistance to an as yet unsampled Irma Mey.

The Meys' private quarters were in an annexe to the half-timbered guesthouse, the public rooms of which at present were shrouded furniture and closely-curtained windows. The rooms would be opened in time for the Easter season, before which, Lisel said, they must have a *blitzkrieg* of cleaning and preparation by such house-staff as she had managed to engage by then. In the meanwhile, with her parents away in the Canary Islands, she was making-do with a daily houseboy and a woman who came up from the town, and she had promised to give Irma good warning of the spring-cleaning ahead, as Irma hated the upheaval of it and wouldn't want to be there when it happened ...

This Lisel was saying as she introduced her sister to Virginia that evening, and it was confirmed by Irma with 'And there is nothing more certain than that I shall hope not to be here!' as she nodded familiarly to Ingram Ashe and gave Virginia her hand.

'Far from ugly ...' Nor lovely either in any classic sense, was Virginia's appraisal of her. Her hair, unnaturally silvered, made even Lisel's fairness mousy by contrast; her eyes were heavy-lidded, her skin a golden bronze, fashionably shiny. Her upper lip was a hard line; the lower over-full and pouting. Her figure, broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, was that of a boy, lithe and spare beneath the clinging silk of her culotte suit.

Nothing at all about Irma Mey which added up to real beauty. Only a head-turning animal magnetism in every sensuous movement and in every inflection of the deep drawl of her voice, and of which Virginia was thinking, 'How did I guess she would be just like this - not even pretty; simply loaded with sex-appeal?' - and wondered why she cared that Irma should be so different from Lisel that they might have been of no kin at all.

When Ingram Ashe kissed Lisel and mussed her hair in his usual greeting to her, Irma teased him,

'And no kiss for me, my friend? Why not?'

'*Not* that sort. I doubt if it would be up to your standard,' he said.

'And how do you know what my standard is?'

'I can guess.'

'Not good enough. You should find out some time - if I allow it.' As he turned to answer Lisel's question as to his choice of drink, Irma gave her attention to Virginia.

'So you are the new vineyard master? Do you know, I believe that in the whole region there has never been a woman owner before? Such courage you must have, to face all the criticism there is bound to be! I doubt if I could brazen it out, myself. And you—' she looked beyond

Virginia to address Ingram Ashe again— 'how do you view the new tyranny? Have you got yourself a despot? Or is the lady so much putty in your hands? Or ah enthusiastic pupil? Come, which?'

He ignored the question. 'As if,' he countered, 'you think Virginia can't guess that you have asked me all that already, and have had my answer before now!'

Irma wrinkled her nose at him. 'Traitor! I only wanted to see if you would be brave enough to say to her face all that you have told me behind her back!'

'Well, you'll go unsatisfied, I'm afraid, as I've no intention of giving her the chance to retaliate by making public her opinion of *me*.'

'Which makes you not only a traitor but a coward!' Irma taunted him playfully.

'Perhaps—' As he turned again to Lisel, Virginia realized that, in front of her, it was his first use of her name without a handle, and hard upon that came the knowledge that her thoughts gave him no handle either. Virginia. Ingram. Very small milestones in a tricky relationship. But milestones, all the same, she hoped.

He was asking Lisel when Esa's pups would be ready to leave their mother, as Albrecht Frank would like one.

Lisel said, 'Oh, good!' And then, 'But what about Hannchen? Is she willing too?'

Ingram laughed shortly. 'Far from it. A pup under everyone's feet, chewing everything in sight and needing to be fed six times a day? And growing into a great hulk of a dog, bringing its dirty paw marks all over her clean kitchen and its hairs on to every rug in the house? No, indeed! But of course Hannchen isn't the only obstacle between

Albrecht and his pup. There's another one—' and Ingram's glance went questioningly to Virginia.: She flushed. 'You mean I have to say whether Albrecht may have a dog or not?'

'Surely? You're the head of the house, aren't you? Wouldn't you expect him to want your permission?'

'But of course he may have one if he wants it, and if Hannchen—'

Ingram cut in, 'Leave Hannchen to me. I'll deal with the opposition.'

'She won't be mean to the puppy, will she?' Lisel asked anxiously.

'I give you my word her behaviour to it shall be correct, if not cordial,' he promised her. 'When can Albrecht take delivery of the goods?'

Lisel calculated. 'Not for another three weeks at least—' She stopped with a finger to her lips. '*Three weeks?* That reminds me— The Fools' Masque!' She explained to Virginia, 'It's the masked carnival that is held in the town just before Lent. We always go.' She turned to her sister. 'Irma darling, you will stay on for it, won't you?'

'And prance about in a bunch of females, with a piece of black cardboard balanced on my nose, telling myself I'm having a ball?' Irma shook her head. 'No, thank you, Lisel *liebchen*. Count me out. Besides, what do you propose to do for men?'

Lisel's eager face fell. 'But one doesn't need men. Or at least, not to go partnered with one. That's the fun - being picked up for the evening and not knowing whom you've got, because he is masked, and you are yourself of course.'

'And find, at the unmasking, that you have settled for the potboy from Fersen's *biergarten* or the sausage maker at Herr Brauen's. No indeed. If I am still here and do decide to go, I shall take along my own man.'

Ingram, you will escort me, will you not? Or—' Irma's glance slanted Virginia's way— 'am I too late in claiming you? Must I take my place in the queue?'

Ingram said, 'There's no queue. I'd forgotten all about the Masque until Lisel mentioned it.' He turned to Virginia. 'You'll need a bigger diary to keep track of all the seasonal frolics the region can think up. A very carnival- minded people, the Germans. They don false noses and fancy dress and dash out into the streets for revelry at the drop of a hat.'

"Do you wear fancy dress for the Masque?" Virginia asked Lisel.

'No, only half-masks to cover our eyes. It is no disguise really, but it is fun to pretend it is. And you shouldn't mock at us,' Lisel scolded Ingram. 'You English don't know how to enjoy yourselves half so well.' "You must blame the English weather. It tends to con-geal the blood. That is a date, then?" he asked Irma. 'You'll allow me to escort you for the evening?'

'Always supposing I have forgiven you for your lack of gallantry in not inviting me first. And also if I decide to stay on for it.'

'If you promise Lisel to stay, you will stay,' he told her calmly.

'We shall see.' Her eyes met his provocatively, then she turned to Virginia.

'You know, if you go, I doubt if you will enjoy it very much,' she said. 'It is only a townees' romp, mainly for the young. And on scenes like this they can make one feel so unwelcome when one is — well, just a *shade* more mature, haven't you found?'

For all the impersonal 'one', both the words and her measurement of Virginia's looks were a veiled slur which the latter did not miss. She

was thankful when Lisel, seeing no evil, sprang at once, not to her defence, but to that of the Masque.

'Oh, Irma, that's not true! All sorts of people, of all ages, join in. I even saw Hannchen last year. You will come, won't you?' she appealed to Virginia.

It was a question which, on their way home, Ingram asked Virginia again, adding, 'Though you don't have to, if it would embarrass you.'

'You think people might question my going so soon after Ernst's death?' she queried.

'On the contrary, I think they would welcome it as a gesture from you. But for all Lisel's enthusiasm for it, the thing is rather an infantile rowdiness of the "Ring-a-ring- o'-roses" and "Kiss-in-the-middle" type which you might not enjoy.'

'Do *you* enjoy it?'

He threw her a glance. '*Touche!* Both of us from stock that doesn't take too easily to street-party bonhomie, eh? Still, it's surprising what a pleasant drink or two and an attractive companion will do for the repressions, you know.'

'And in Irma Mey you have the attractive companion.'

'As you say— Always providing that, by the fortunes of the game, she isn't filched from me by - to quote her - the local sausage king.'

'Would you allow that?' Virginia asked.

'Probably not, though it might depend on what the Reigning Fool was prepared to offer me in her place.'

'The Reigning Fool?'

'Oh, the Master of Ceremonies; roisterer-in-chief, whatever he is called. You must ask Lisel for the details of his function. However, as Bonn lays on a Masque of its own which is rather more civilized, I wonder whether you " would prefer I rustle up a couple of men for you and Lisel, and we go over there for dinner and the evening instead?'

Captive across a dinner table to an Irma Mey with no fewer than three men acting as sounding-boards for her self-conceit! 'No, I think I'll settle for the local affair,' Virginia said.

'As you please. Don't say I didn't warn you.' They had reached the villa by now and Virginia got out of the car, glad he had not asked even her casual opinion of Irma. For what could she have said on the spur of the moment which would not sound like the proverbial damnation with faint praise? Before Irma's name came up again, she must think of something generous to say of her. For not for worlds would she have either Irma or Lisel - both Irma's willing satellites - suspect that Irma's ill-concealed disdain of herself was matched by her own aversion to Irma.

It was as instant and unbidden as her sudden liking for Lisel had been. But on her side at least, Virginia knew, it owed less to instinct than to her recognition of Irma as an enemy. As - though with what cause? - Irma seemed to have recognized her.

Already the dark rays of winter had begun to lengthen, lifting and lightening, if too slowly, towards spring.

There were lambtail catkins hanging in the woods around the villa; on the clearings blackbirds were stalking each other in their fight for territory, and in the week of the carnival the pruning of the vines began.

Their natural growth of long trailing shoots at ground level had to be curbed with skill and experience - every vine of thousands cut back to just so few swelling threesomes of leaf, dormant leaf and grape-cluster bud, at just the right height from the ground to allow the year's work of tending to be done, and for the grapes to ripen, not only by benefit of direct sun heat but also from the radiation of warmth reflected back from the rich earth.

The great luxuriant vines of the far south, grown so gnarled and heavy with fruit that they must be crutched on apple-trees to take their weight, were not for the Rhine slopes, Virginia learned from Ingram. Even at full maturity their own vines would stand only breast-high, each staked for support, and its maximum four or five branches secured to the horizontal wires which joined it to its neighbours.

As the days warmed Virginia spent a lot of time in the vineyards, watching the swift skilled secateurs at work and sometimes being allowed to wield a pair herself; to look for the telltale thickenings which marked each potentially fertile leaf and bud trinity; to count how many of them were to be allowed, and then to cut cleanly and finally, ensuring their future strength.

Time was all-important. February's frosts made pruning hazardous. The rising sap of April made it too late. It must be completed in March, which meant that the pruners' work went on from first light to last of every day, and all day every available woman and child went scurrying and stooping in the pruner's path, collecting the discarded shoots and burning them on bonfires, the ash of which would in turn go back to enrich the soil.

The day of the Masque was still and clear; the smoke from the bonfires spiralled gently upward, grey against a blue sky which promised an evening reasonably gentle enough for outdoor carousing. Virginia left the vineyards in late afternoon and took time

for a leisurely bath and change before Ingram was ready to drive down to the Drachenhof to pick up Irma and Lisel.

Lisel had warned her to dress for both the possibly stuffy indoors of beerhalls and the night air of the streets. A difficult choice. She compromised with a sleeveless midnight-blue jersey dress and a short angora cloak. For her head? A hair-hiding scarf worn turban wise, she thought. But after selecting one and beginning to twist it into shape, she paused, laid it aside and unpinned her hair. She combed its length down and about her shoulders, turning its naturally curving ends underneath and coaxing them to stay so by deft use of her comb.

So, as she knew very well, she looked years younger than her age, and the very difference from the severity of her daytime chignon was tempting. But then an echo stabbed her memory - Irma Mey's smooth, 'When one is just a shade more mature—' and she reached again for hairpins and turban. For she would *not*, she resolved savagely, appear to have known for whom the gibe was meant. She would not *pander* to Irma's opinion of her! So - twist, turn under and pin went the knot of hair, and on went the turban over ears, chignon and the errant wisps of hair on her brow in a starkness of line which might have spelled beauty for a Queen Nefertiti, but for a lesser mortal like herself did - what?

Ingram had expected to drive them all into the town. But Lisel was ready with her own Volkswagen, claiming Virginia as her passenger.

'What is the sense of our taking two cars?' Ingram objected.

'In case we get separated. You know what Masques are,' Lisel said.

'We could arrange an hour at which to meet for coming home.'

'And supposing we're not ready to come home? Or *you* aren't? No, Virginia and I are going to be independent of you, thank you, Ingram dear. See you later - *much* later ... perhaps!'

In the car, with Virginia beside her, Lisel chuckled, though a shade nervously. 'Did you see Ingram scowl? I hope Irma didn't. Because it was really her suggestion that we should break up. You see, she knew I would rather that you and I were on our own, and naturally she preferred to have Ingram to herself, so she said that if I had my car out and ready, he would have to agree. Though I think he almost didn't. I wonder why? Oh well—' Lisel shrugged off the problem— 'at least Irma can't say I gave in to him, and that is what really matters.'

And so much for Lisel's loving blindness to the fact that Irma was probably far less concerned for anyone else's preferences than for her own monopoly of the only male in their party! was a thought which Virginia naturally kept to herself.

The narrow streets of the town and the wide square of the central Marktplatz were gay with lights and bunting, and^ the pollarded linden trees on the river front were festooned with a myriad of coloured lamps. The opening ceremony, Virginia gathered, would be a miniature Lord Mayor's Show, with most of the town's trades represented in procession around the streets, headed by half a dozen prancing, cavorting Fools, all masked, all in traditional red-and-yellow breeches and jerkin and cap-and-bells, and all brandishing whippy wands surmounted by balloons in place of the old-time bladders of lard.

'I don't remember the bladders,' Lisel confided to Virginia as they watched the procession from the vantage- point they had chosen to see it pass. 'I think they were forbidden by the Burgermeister a long time ago after complaints that the Reigning Fool was too rough with them when he chose people to hit in the *Gross Tanz*.'

'Why should he hit anyone with them?' Virginia asked.

'You'll see,' promised Lisel mysteriously. 'Just be thankful that a balloon doesn't *hurt!*'

After the procession had done a double tour of the town and had broken up, everyone repaired to the beer gardens of their choice for wine or beer, hot frankfurters or coffee and eclairs, as fortification for the revels to come.

There was noisy singing and waving aloft of beer-steins and the makings of flirtations until the later gradual drift into the streets and down to the river front and, later still, an almost concerted move of the crowds towards the open spaces of the Marktplatz. Here, after a good deal of cajoling and pushing and good-natured abuse by the Fools on duty, everyone for whom room could be found formed two concentric circles to move slowly, hands linked, in opposite directions facing the authoritative figure of the Reigning Fool, dominating the scene from the plinth of the central obelisk.

There was music, scarcely to be heard above the shuffle of hundreds of feet and the din of catcalls, and Virginia had begun to wonder what there was about all this to be described as a 'Big Dance' when suddenly, at what must have been a well understood signal from the Reigning Fool, the circles broke up; people plunged and struggled to claim individual partners and, having succeeded, began to dance to whatever convention they chose.

That was Virginia's first glimpse of Ingram and Irma since they had left the Drachenhof. Partnered with a stranger, having lost Lisel in the melee, she saw Irma, unperturbed by the hordes, turn confidently to Ingram and dance away with him as smoothly as if they had an empty ballroom floor to themselves.

Virginia applied herself to the antics and gyrations of her own partner, glad that he was intent enough on his own steps as to be uncritical of hers. Their nearest neighbours were doing a kind of 'My Mother Said ...' hand-clapping confrontation; nearby, a square dance, complete with caller, was in progress; another couple were doing a slow minuet. And then something happened for which Virginia was unprepared.

The Reigning Fool was leaping among the dancers, choosing men to beat about the head with his balloon, girls to touch on the shoulder. Those so cut-in upon at once broke free of their partners to take up with the one indicated to them by the Fool, and there was one moment for Virginia when she was jiving with her stranger, and the next when she found herself swept into Ingram's masterful grasp.

Over her shoulder she saw Irma standing abandoned and alone for a moment before she thrust away through the crowd, without waiting for a new partner to claim her. Ingram's own dance-style was a long, purposeful stride which guided Virginia swiftly away in the opposite direction.

Above the din he said, 'You see what I mean? By the rules of the game you can't help yourself. You get your summons from the Fool, and that's that.'

'In other words, you take pot-luck - and like it?'

'You *trust* you'll like it,' he corrected. -

'But I thought you said you would only obey the Fool if you liked what you were offered?'

'Well—?' He made of the monosyllable a question which Virginia did not answer, and they danced on. A few minutes more and then - 'Can you hear the music we're supposed to be dancing to?' he asked.

"Only, now and then, a kind of beat. Can you?"

But before Ingram could reply he was ducking under another blow from the Fool's balloon and she was being tapped on the shoulder. He released her. The Fool's wand pointed to new partners for them both, and after giving the man who was claiming Virginia an appraising stare, Ingram handed her over and turned away.

This time her luck of the draw was a man not much taller than herself, thickset, broad-shouldered, his mask sitting on a strong bony nose, his voice, when he spoke, unmistakably English.

'You are English too aren't you?' he asked.

Virginia nodded yes. 'How did you know?'

'You were pointed out to me. What penalty should we collect, do you suppose, if we exchanged names?'

She laughed. 'We'd probably be cast into a dungeon of the nearest *Schloss*.'

'Oh dear. Still, will you risk it? Mine is Padl Bell.'

'Mine is Virginia Somers.'

'Thank you. And what if we dared to break ranks, took off our masks and adjourned for a drink or some coffee, would you say?'

'I expect - a dungeon that gets flooded and has rats. But I can't leave, I'm afraid. I'm with a young friend and I've lost touch with her since the dancing began,' Virginia said.

'Then we're in the same boat. I've also lost trace of Christopher - Chris for short - my son.' As he spoke and at Virginia's quick glance his way, Paul Bell removed his mask to show a brow from which brown

hair, lightly touched with grey, was receding, and pleasant brown eyes which wore a fan of wrinkles at their outer corners. Not really middle-aged. Younger than Ernst had been, but older than Ingram Ashe. Forty perhaps, Virginia judged him mentally, and flushed as she saw he had read her thoughts.

"You're wondering what a greybeard like me is doing at this kind of caper? But when we heard it was afoot, Chris wanted to try his luck with the local girls, and he made me come along—" He broke off to point through the crowd of dancers. 'Ah, there he is now - doing something complicated, facing a chubby blonde. There - the big ginger lad - do you see?'

Virginia looked along the line of the pointing finger. 'Yes. And the girl he's dancing with happens to be *my* friend, Lisel Mey,' she said.

'Really? Then shall we break up the fun and call them over to be introduced?'

Beckoned and signalled-to, at first the youngsters continued intently to match their steps. Then the boy lifted a hand of acknowledgement to his father and they came over, hand-in-hand.

The introductions were made, the adjournment to a cafe suggested, and the four of them, two by two on the narrow pavements, made their way to the covered courtyard of a nearby restaurant where, being early deserters of the *Gross Tanz*, they found they had a choice of tables.

Over the drinks they got acquainted. Virginia had already removed her mask, but the boy and Lisel did not discard theirs until they were seated, when, as if driven by a common impulse, they turned to each other, eager, it seemed to Virginia, for the extra sensation afforded by the full sight of the other's face.

Their approach was alternately shy and brash; a couple of puppies stalking each other for fun. They were very much of an age. Chris Bell was a few months short of twenty-one he said, which must make his father rather more than the age Virginia had guessed at for him. But he didn't look it, and the easy relationship between him and Chris was rather more that of elder and younger brother than of father and son.

They were not on a spring holiday, they said. They were both mycologists - did the girls know what that meant?

Understandably the word was beyond Lisel's knowledge of English, but Virginia thought she knew. 'Isn't mycology the science of tree and plant disease?' she asked.

She was right. By profession Paul Bell was a mycologist of long standing; Chris had just qualified. For some years Paul had specialized in the disease of conifers; Chris meant to make his range wider. The forests of the Seengebirge region were rich in both deciduous trees and evergreens, and both men were currently engaged in a freelance survey of the threat and spread of tree-disease before Chris took up his first post as adviser to an English Forestry department in the autumn. Paul's plans were more passive. He was hoping to collect the final data he needed for the exhaustive book on conifer disease which he had had in the writing for some years.

They were camping in a log hut in the mountains about ten kilometres up from Konigsgrat. They had a secondhand Land-rover for their fieldwork and a Volkswagen for transport down to the town for their shopping or for evening drinks. From such gossip in the beer gardens as they had understood, they had already heard of the 'English *Fraulein*' who, suddenly and surprisingly, had inherited the Weinberg Raus. So Virginia was that same *Fraulein*, was she? And Lisel? Where did she live? And what did she do?

Lisel offered her own thumbnail sketch. Congratulated on her English, she blushed happily, made modest noises, and was so openly sunning herself in Chris Bell's company that Virginia wondered how starved of boyfriends her role of Cinderella had kept her until then. Quite evidently, for all their chipping and teasing, something had sparked between these two - gingertop English and wheat-fair German - and Virginia had an idea that Chris would not be looking much further than Lisel among 'the local girls' that night.

Presently they were restless to be off on their own once more and went, after arranging to meet again on the Marktplatz for the climax to the evening - the release of a rain of coloured balloons by the light of torches, and to the chink of collecting-boxes begging alms for the region's charities.

When they had gone, Paul Bell said, 'They seem to assume you are willing to put up with me until then. Do you mind?'

'Not a bit, if you'll put up with me,' Virginia told him.

They stayed where they were for a while, strolled down to the river to watch the other strollers there,- and then kept their rendezvous with Chris and Lisel. All through the final ceremony Virginia was on the watch for Ingram and Irma. But they were nowhere to be seen. Nor, said Lisel, had she seen them either.

On their way to the car park Paul asked Virginia, 'I wonder if I may drive you home?' And when she declined, saying that she had come down with Lisel, who would drive her back, he said, 'Then it is No, even though it might be a charity to accept?'

She frowned, puzzled. 'A charity?'

'To my lad and your young Lisel, I meant,' he smiled.

'Oh— Oh, I see.' Virginia pondered the transport problem, then said, 'But if you and Chris came down together, and vow drive me, how will he get home? If he sees Lisel back to the Drachenhof in her car, then he'll be stranded there, won't he?'

'True, he would be. But my idea was that we leave them here to have a little time together; I come back after seeing you home, act as escort to them both to see Lisel safe, and then take Chris on with me to camp. How's that?'

Virginia murmured, 'It sounds rather complicated - and unnecessary.' But in face of Lisel's eagerness to agree with the plan, she gave in to it herself.

Her companion needed no directions to the Landhaus Im Baumen. Since their arrival a month earlier, he said, he and Chris had systematically surveyed their area of operations, and by now he knew most of the mountain roads and tracks well, in addition to the extent and ownership of the various vineyards of the lower slopes.

He knew Ingram's name as her manager, but seemed surprised that he shared the villa with her.

'He has his own separate quarters, of course,' she explained.

'But the house is yours?'

'Oh yes. But the office is in my part of it, and it's convenient for us both to have it there,' she said, on the defensive for the arrangement against the faint criticism she sensed in Paul Bell's tone.

'I see.' A minute or two later he drew up at the villa, alighted with her and saw her to the door. Momentarily she debated asking him in, but when she did so, he declined.

'No, I'll be on my way, I think. Your couple will still be up?' he said.

'Probably not, but I shall be all right. Thank you— When she gave him her hand, his clasp was firm and prolonged.

'Perhaps I may see you again?' he asked.

'Yes ... Yes, I should like that,' she said formally.

'Good.'

She watched him return to his car, take it in a widesweep towards the road where, at the edge of the gravelled crescent, he slowed and almost halted in the headlights of the other car coming in.

The little Volkswagen went on. Ingram's car circled the apron of gravel and drew up with a savage slam of brakes. Ingram got out.

'Where is Lisel? I thought she was to drive you home? And who the devil was that fellow?' he demanded - as forcibly as if he had every right to know.

## CHAPTER FOUR

INSIDE the house they faced each other. 'Wasn't he the same chap who took over from me in the *Gross Tanz*?' Ingram asked. 'Have you been together ever since?'

Virginia nodded. "Yes, the same. He is English. His name is Bell. He is here with his son Christopher, who rather fell for Lisel, and when we joined up with them we made a foursome for most of the rest of the evening.'

'After which you abandoned Lisel and allowed the Bell man to bring you home?'

Virginia said patiently, 'There was no question of abandoning Lisel. She was quite safe with the boy, and they were clearly so pleased with themselves that the idea was to give them a little longer together.'

'But what do you know of them? Who are they? Are they tourists - or what?'

'They are both mycologists. Paul Bell is a widower; he is doing research on conifers for a book. His son has just qualified, and they're living in camp on the *Siegkreis*.'

'How long are they here for?'

'For as long as they need for their research, I suppose. The son is taking a forestry job in England in the autumn.'

'And the father - this Paul Bell? That chap didn't look old enough to have a son of college age.'

"You only saw him in his mask and in his car. He could be - well, Ernst's age, I'd say.'

'In his forties, then. H'm. And are you seeing him again?'

'Just before you arrived, he had suggested it.'

'And you had agreed?'

'I was polite. I told him I would like to - some time.'

'Which no doubt sent him away well satisfied with his evening's work. The Fool picked you up for him, but after that he doesn't seem to have wasted his time. You spend the evening with him. You swap Christian names and personal details. You allow him to bring you home in the small hours, when you had perfectly adequate transport with Lisel, and you are complaisant, to say the least, about future dates - big deal!' Ingram paused to shrug. 'Ah well, wolves come in all ages. But you've only yourself to blame if he turns into a nuisance later, and you can't brush him off. Your problem, after all. Over to you.'

That was too much for Virginia. The impertinent arrogance of the man! Not to mention the prudery of - of a Victorian grandfather! 'Wolves! My problem!' she mimicked, beside herself. 'Just because I meet a man without being properly introduced, like him, accept his offer to bring me home, mainly for the reasons I've told you, and don't completely turn him down when he says he would like to see me again—!'

But she broke off there, as a darker, more sinister thought struck, turning her surface irritation to something deeper - anger.

She saw Ingram waiting, evidently surprised by her sudden check.

'Or are you,' she said slowly, choosing her words, 'implying that I let Ernst pick me up in Nimes; that I allowed Paul Bell virtually to do the same tonight and that therefore I need warning against becoming fair

game for men , of their type and age? Well? Is that it? Please - I've a right \*fo know.'

He studied her face for a long moment. 'I didn't say so,' he said at last.

'But you thought it?' she urged. 'I - I'm old enough to know "better, but I'm a pushover for the forties' age- bracket, and so I have to be protected from myself and them? I suppose that was how your thinking went?'

He shook his head. 'How wrong can you get? The comparison hadn't entered my head. Ernst was no wolf - I doubt if he ever picked up a girl in the ordinary sense in his life. Leave him out of it, please.'

'Willingly. Then I'm only being criticized for encouraging Paul Bell after an hour or two's acquaintance - is that it?'

'You are intent on picking a quarrel, aren't you?' Ingram's tone was mildly detached. 'All right, then, I do think you fell pretty easily for that one about giving Lisel and the boy more time together. Obviously the man wanted to get you to himself - and meant to.'

Feeling driven to it, Virginia retorted, 'And supposing he did, and I was willing? What of it? And if he does want to see me again, and I agree, I daresay you wouldn't call that a date, but an - an assignation?'

If she intended to rouse Ingram with the taunt, she failed. He said evenly, 'What I would call it would depend on the time, the place and the condition. Perhaps you should ads him to dinner and invite me to sit in as gooseberry to preserve the proprieties.'

'And let you run the rule over him as a suitable claimant for my favours? Thank you. But if ... when ... I see Paul Bell again, I think we might both prefer to keep it tete-a-tete,' Virginia returned loftily,

adding in flaring exasperation, 'Really! You couldn't be putting on a more censorious act if you were a—'

'A jealous lover?' he prompted.

She had needed to fumble for her earlier thought and now had found it. 'Nothing of the sort,' she snapped. 'As if you were a Victorian grandfather, no less.'

He nodded equable agreement with that. 'Better still. A jealous lover wouldn't waste words on you; he'd have the right to use stronger methods of persuasion. Grandfathers can only cavil.' He turned away. 'The whole thing is an empty argument, anyway. We aren't on the same beam.' And then, 'I'm going to put away the car,' he said, and went, leaving Virginia to wonder why a fight with an opponent who refused to be goaded should be so much more exhausting than one where no holds were barred.

And deeper still in her consciousness, to question a rather shamefaced gratification that, for all his throw-away nonchalance once he had roused her, Ingram had initially been concerned enough to take her to task.

Overnight her chagrin had time to evaporate and the next morning, to her relief, they were on the even keel of their everyday contacts. During the morning Lisel rang up, ostensibly to gossip about the Masque but really, Virginia suspected, to talk about Chris Bell.

'He was nice. Did you think he was nice?' she inquired anxiously.

'Very,' Virginia agreed.

'When we came back here he fell in love with Esa and her puppies, and I promised she should keep one for him to take back to England when he goes.'

'Quarantine and all?' asked Virginia.

'Yes, he knows. But he wants one badly enough in spite of that. So he chose Midas - you know, the one with the funny ear - and he asked if he could come now and then to see how he is getting on.'

(Cunning Chris Bell!) '*Just* to see Midas?' Virginia teased.

'Well—' It was easy to picture Lisel's pleased flush. 'Well, perhaps not only to see Midas, though I had to tell him that once we were busy, I might not have any time to spare. But I think he will come. He met Irma too, of course, and thought she was very glamorous. But Irma was not in a good mood; I think, because Ingram didn't come in when he brought her home. I suppose he told you they didn't stay long at the Masque themselves? No? Haven't you seen him then?'

'Not to hear that they didn't stay.'

'Oh - well, Irma was bored and wanted to go over to Bonn. But they would have missed the last return ferry, so instead they drove along the river to Bad Hoesel and had dinner in a hotel there. Chris Bell's father, Virginia - did Ingram meet him at the Landhaus?'

'Not to speak to. Their cars met on the drive.' Virginia changed the subject. 'By the way, Albrecht wants to know when he can have his pup now?'

'Oh yes, Thrush. The one with the voice,' Lisel identified the particular item of puppyhood who would out-whimper all the others. 'Tell Albrecht, will you, a few days more - at most a week? What about Hannchen? Does she mind?'

Virginia laughed ruefully. 'She is mutinous, and we are all in disgrace. But Ingram has ruled that we need a dog up here, and I'm sure the worst she will do. will be to ignore him.'

Lisel chuckled. 'She hasn't met Thrush! With lungs like his, he won't *be* ignored!' They rang off, both laughing.

That week the weather turned harsh again. Between intervals of weak sunshine, sleet drove cruelly in horizontal lines along the hills, not allowed to stop the final prunings, but delaying them and holding up the next vital operation of inspection and renewal of stakes and wires and the skilled tying-in of the bearing branches. As every task took longer, every hand had to be busier, including Ingram's - all the daylight hours.

For all the weather, and partly because Irma had gone to Dusseldorf for a fortnight, Lisel had launched on her spring-cleaning and was too busy for more than an occasional phone-chat with Virginia. Virginia herself, imprisoned indoors, organized a *blitzkrieg* of her own - on her written German which by now was her weakest point. By hearing the language going on all about her, she was finding that already her ear was attuned to it; her mind understood it and her tongue was getting round it. She was even beginning to think in German when she wanted to, and that, Ingram said, congratulating her, was the mark of success. At such meals as they shared and often in the office, he spoke German to her as often as he spoke English, and she needed rescuing less often from Hannchen's hauteur, now that she had more command of Hannchen's own language.

The only sign from Paul Bell was a bouquet — freesias and spring iris - delivered from a Konigsgrat shop with a card which said simply: 'Thank you for a pleasant evening.' Virginia removed the card, debated whether or not to take the flowers to her room, then arranged them ostentatiously in the hall instead. It would do Ingram good to

notice them, she told herself - and was perversely frustrated when, so far as he appeared concerned, they might not have been there.

At the end of the week Lisel, dashing up to deliver the puppy, said she had heard nothing of Chris Bell either.

'I suppose it was just one of those things,' she sighed, but cheered up a little at Virginia's suggestion that life in a log hut on the *Sieckreis* in such diabolical conditions must be a full time job.

'You think - if they were on the telephone?' Lisel ventured hopefully.

'I'm *sure* - if they were on the telephone,' Virginia consoled, pretty confident that she was right. Somehow she knew that for Chris Bell the happening that was Lisel Mey Hatdn't been 'just one of those things'.

Hannchen pointedly absented herself from Lisel's briefing of Virginia and Albrecht when she delivered the puppy.

At first, five small meals a day to his formula, dropping to three and finally to two; cod-liver oil; a raw egg once a week. He must be kept warm; he had brought his toy - a mangled dishrag - and he must be 'put out' regularly after every meal. 'His stomach is still very small, you see,' Lisel explained delicately to her mixed audience. She stayed half an hour, hovering anxiously over Albrecht's arrangements for bedding and feeding, and then left, her eyes suspiciously\* bright as she said good-bye to the pepper-and-salt bundle. After that Albrecht was out on his own, his task of acclimatizing the newcomer made none the easier by Hannchen's ominous mutterings on the subject of unnecessary hounds in hitherto spotless households. His last problem of a difficult day Albrecht brought anxiously to Virginia.

'Hannchen will not allow the little Thrush to sleep in our living kitchen. She says there is too much there for him to destroy, and he must stay in the scullery instead,' Albrecht confided.

Virginia thought it wise to strike a neutral note. 'Well, perhaps the scullery would be best,' she said.

'But Fraulein Mey said he must be warm, and there is no stove in the scullery.'

'Never mind. You have made him a warn! bed, and once he is asleep, he will probably stay so till morning,' Virginia counselled, unwilling to do battle with Hannchen in a matter in which the latter had prudence on her side.

That night Ingram was still out when Virginia went to bed. She read for a while, then slept, to be awakened by an at first unidentifiable sound, a high-pitched 'Ee ... Ee ... Ee,' not unlike the squeak of a screech-owl. 'Ee ... Ee .. Ee,' followed by a despairing cadence of a wail which furnished a clue.

The puppy! Virginia sat up, listening. 'Ee ... Ee ... Eel' There it was again. Albrecht couldn't have heard it. She had better go and see what was wrong. But by the time she had slipped into mules and a dressing-gown the S.O.S. had" ceased - the reason being apparent when, summoned by a line of light beneath the kitchen door, she opened it to face Hannchen coming through from the scullery, bearing the puppy's crescent basket in her arms. She also was in night-attire, with her hair in a thin plait.

They both halted. Then Hannchen, defiant and as if caught red-handed in a crime, growled, 'That husband of mine! When he sleeps, he sleeps like one dead. Are we others then to be kept awake by the cries of this little one who should-not yet have left his mother? Ee... Ee... Ee, like a machine without oil!' with which she marched on

towards her pride and joy - the big brass and cast-iron central stove - and opened its fire-doors after setting down the basket and puppy before it.

'I heard him too, poor little thing,' Virginia ventured.

'And who could not - except Albrecht, the great log?' scorned Hannchen, stoking the fire noisily. 'The little one was cold and, like a baby, can only cry to say so. But who heeds him? You and I, Fraulein. Not those two great men who wanted him here. Not Albrecht, nor Herr Ingram - oh no!'

Virginia defended Ingram, 'I don't think he is in.' She knelt to pat the puppy's silken head. 'Perhaps he is hungry too. Some warm milk, perhaps?'

But— 'He had his supper. One must not overload the stomach,' Hannchen ruled. 'No, he is cold and lonely. Yes, come, *liebchen*,' she added surprisingly as the puppy scrabbled at her knees, forcing her to sit back on to the rocking-chair by the stove and to take him on to her lap.

Virginia continued to kneel holding out her hands to the glow of the stove and thinking, Of all the unexpected topsy-turvys - she and Hannchen in sympathetic alliance for the very first time! It was an accord that she felt should be harnessed and used. But how? And if it were not, would they be at domestic war again tomorrow as usual?

She stole a glance at Hannchen, gently rocking. Her knees were wide, the checked flannel dressing-gown spread. The puppy was a ball in her nursing lap; one over-large forepaw was limp and relaxed under her stroking thumb. Virginia watched them for a moment and then hazarded, 'If he was cold in the scullery, do you think you might let him stay in here now till morning?'

But that was going too far. Hannchen shook her head. 'No, I cannot have him here. I told Albrecht so. He must be made warm and content beyond.' She nodded in thought, then with a guttural '*Ach!*' she plumped her burden back into the basket and left the room, muttering to herself, '*Die kleine Warmflasche - ja, ja!*' as she went.

She came back, bearing a baby's hot-water bottle in a rabbit-eared blue plush cover. The bottle she filled with hot water, tested it against her cheek and knelt creakily to thrust it under a layer of blanket in the puppy's bed. Satisfied, 'So, it cannot scald him and will keep him warm,' she claimed.

Virginia nodded approval. 'How fortunate you remembered you happened to have a small bottle' like that!'

Hannchen sat back on her heels, a hand spread wide on each thigh. 'And why should I not have such a thing? I - who once had a baby who had use for it - h'm?' she demanded.

'A baby?' Virginia echoed, surprised. 'Herr Ingram hadn't told me you had children, Hannchen. How old is this one now? And a boy or a girl?'

Hannchen's hard brown eyes clouded. 'He was a boy. But he is dead - at two years old. I think Herr Ingram may not know. We lost him soon after we came to Herr Raus's household; we have had no other children and he — our little Klaus - sleeps below there, not far from Herr Raus himself, where for many years now he has had no need for hotwater bottles. Only—' her bony chin quivering, 'only for the flowers I take to his grave each feast-day and every Sunday. And it all happened a very long time ago.'

Touched by the bleak resignation of that, Virginia was at a loss to express the sympathy she felt. Faced by a confidence Hannchen needn't have given her, the conventional, 'I'm sorry' sounded empty

and inadequate. But hitherto on no terms with Hannchen which permitted anything warmer, she said it, and it was acknowledged with a nod and a flicker of gratitude from the brown eyes.

*So far - if not far - so good*, thought Virginia. Little enough ice broken. But perhaps some, she hoped.

Now Hannchen was rearranging the blanket, making a fussy busyness of the task, almost as if she wanted to prolong it. Amused, Virginia knelt by, watching, and it was so, kneeling side by side, their faces a-glow by the light of the stove, that Ingram, unheard by either, came- in and found them.

Their first sign of him was his question. 'What's all this? What's going on?' it asked of their backs and, startled, they both stood, Hannchen clutching the puppy's basket, Virginia all too conscious of her homely dressing-gown, her loose hair and the errant slipper for which one bare foot needed to grope.

Their voices came in chorus. Hannchen's - 'This nuisance of a hound - keeping Christian people awake!' Virginia's - 'He was cold and was whimpering, and we both came to see what we could do.'

'And you've done it? He seems pretty torpid now.' Ingram had come over to inspect the sleeping pup, but when he made to tickle the half-buried nose, Hannchen snatched the basket aside.

'That is enough, Herr Ingram,' she ordered sternly. 'I get him to sleep; you wake him up, to keep all of us from our beds with his foolish yelping!' With which she marched off towards the scullery, making a tuneless crooning in her throat.

The other two stared at each other, listening. Ingram said in awed wonder, 'That practically amounts to a cradle-song! How come?'

Virginia smiled. 'Instinct. Latent mother-love, I think. Did you know she and Albrecht had lost their only child when he was only two?'

Ingram shook his head. 'It must have been well before my time here. D'you mean that, for all she had to say against him, she may make the little fellow a kind of substitute?'

'I don't know. But when he whimpered she came to him before I did. She looked fierce enough to be about to throw him out, but in fact she nursed him back to sleep and provided him with a hot-water bottle. I imagine it's Albrecht who will get the edge of her tongue for not hearing him.'

'Then that's all right. Albrecht's shoulders are broad. Anyway, you and Hannchen seem to have forged a common bond. When I came in you looked like a couple of sister fire-worshippers at your devotions.'

Self-consciously Virginia shook back her hair and closed the wrap of her dressing-gown. 'Or more like two of the witches in Macbeth?'

Ingram said coolly^ 'The argument is the same - two females in cahoots. But no - surely a witch doesn't qualify until she is pretty grizzled? They don't come blonde or even as brown as Hannchen.' He moved a step nearer to lift a strand of her hair on a careless finger. 'You ought to take this down literally sometimes,' he remarked. 'Isn't it rather wasted in a bun?'

'I—' she jerked her head nervously and his hand dropped. 'It gets in the way.'

'Of what?'

'Just - in the way,' she repeated lamely. 'I always wear it in a knot. This length, it's only a - a teenage thing to wear it loose.'

'Why not a Lorelei thing? Though for that I suppose you would argue you need a rock-fastness, an iridescent comb and a lover who is a strong swimmer?' He turned to Hannchen who had bustled back. 'All quiet on the scullery front?' he asked her. 'May we go to our beds in peace?'

She slammed shut the fire-doors of the stove. '*You* may. The Fraulein may. Me, I must tend this thing. Blazing away so, it will burn itself out before morning.'

'And who opened it up? And why?' Ingram disengaged her grasp of the poker and bent to the stove. 'Leave it. I'll see to it. So good night to you both.'

'Good night, *mein Herr*.' Hannchen stood aside for Virginia to precede her into the hall. Upstairs, at their own doors, they both paused to listen.

Hannchen nodded her satisfaction. 'He is quiet now, the little, one. That is good.'

'Yes. Thank you for going down to him, Hannchen. It was kind.'

Hannchen managed a frosty smile. 'Pff! What else to do? Good night, Fraulein - and sleep well.'

Virginia smiled back. 'You too, I hope. Good night.'

In her room, in the act of taking off her dressing-gown she paused to put a hand under her hair, lifting it from the nape of her neck and letting it drop in vain recall of the sensation she had known at Ingram's light touch.

Why had it moved her to a *frisson* of pleasure as such a familiarity from any other man had ever done? Though she was not cold, she

shivered slightly, irritated with herself for dwelling on a whimsy which had meant nothing between him and her. Awareness of Ingram in ... that way would not do. Lately their relationship had reached firm ground; she couldn't afford to jeopardize it with empty curiosities, fanciful hungers. For Ingram, of all people, wouldn't want to know ... Irma— But no, she would *not* connect Irma and Ingram in the same breath of thought. She had nothing to go on as to what they were to each other. Nothing at all - except that Irma had only to wish or command, and he obeyed. Which said—? But what it said, Virginia's moment of truth told her, was something *she* did not want to know, though only, she hoped, because of the antipathy which had sparked between herself and Irma, seemingly at sight.

In the morning Albrecht, driven, no doubt, by a curtain-lecture from Hannchen, came to apologize for the night's disturbance.

'That's all right,' Virginia consoled him. 'After all, everyone who has ever had one knows that a new puppy or a new kitten in a house is practically a round-the-clock job for a while.'

'Yes indeed,'

'Albrecht agreed bleakly. 'But that, Fraulein, is the trouble. How am I to attend properly to my own work, Hannchen asks, if I am to be nurse and waiter and playmate and door-porter to a dog as well. And if I think *she* has either the time or the patience, then—'

'—Then why,' Virginia cut in, inspired, 'don't you prove her wrong in that?'

Albrecht shook a defeated head. 'Wrong, Fraulein? Was ever a wife with a grievance *wrong*?'

'Maybe not. But try Hannchen, all the same,' Virginia advised. 'Admit that she is right first - that you haven't enough time. But then suggest

that she might like to take over some of the nicer jobs for the puppy - the play perhaps, the walks he'll want - and see what she says to that.'

'I know what she will say to that. She didn't want him to come. She doesn't want him now,' mourned Albrecht.

'I'm not so sure. Try her and see.'

Albrecht shook his head again. 'No good will come of it,' he said.

And yet hadn't it? Virginia was to wonder when, that afternoon, during a briefly sunny spell, Hannchen strode out into the courtyard behind the house, armed with a ball and the dishrag as alternative toys for the puppy to leap at. Watching at a window, Virginia did not hear Ingram approach until he spoke over her shoulder.

'Operation Thrush on its successful way, do you think?' he asked.

'I don't know. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.'

'And from the evidence of last night - the same goes for Operation Peace - between you and Hannchen?'

Virginia looked round and up at him and smiled. She showed him her forefinger crooked over its neighbour. 'Remains to be seen. But I'm hoping so.'

'Good. Tell me, why don't you do that more often?'

'Do what?'

'Smile - without any reservations behind it,' Ingram said.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THAT week of storm had been the winter's last despairing kick. After it, spring began to happen in earnest. There were carpets of primroses in the woods; the buds of the town's ornamental cherry trees were fat and brown, and the ranks of the vines were showing a cloud of green instead of a soldierly grey. Now they had been firmly staked and cunningly tied in to ensure that on every horizontally-stretched branch every bunch of grapes should have its maximum share of sun. As soon as each shoot had put out its first four or five tiny leaves, the vines were ready for their first policeing of the summer - the season-long battle against pests and disease which, undetected, could spell ruin to a vineyard almost overnight.

Easter had happened. On the river the drabness and the despairing sirens of the plying coal-barges were relieved by the sharp colour and noisy launching from riverside boatyards of a mass of craft for the entertainment of the first holidaymakers and the use of the patient fishermen.

For a while all that happened for Lisel was increased busyness. Irma came back from Diisseldorf; Colonel and Fray Mey returned from their winter holiday. There was talk of a short pre-season holiday for Lisel - which didn't happen. But Chris Bell did, several times. As also did Paul Bell for Virginia, the first time on a day when Ingram had invited her to sit-in on the grafting of the vines into Ernsf s selection of French-grown shoots which she had seen cut and stored away in January.

Sent down by Hannchen from the villa to the vineyard stores, Paul came upon her as, intent and fascinated, she was watching the incredibly skilled surgery which was marrying each Weinberg Raus cutting to each French shoot at the rate, Ingram estimated for her, of not less than a thousand grafts per skilled grafter per day.

Twin piles of each before each man. His choice of a shoot from one pile of exactly the same thickness as that from the other. The swift flash of a curved blade. An angle cut from the ends of each; a shallow incision; a perfect dovetail, and the result was ready for the dark warmth and moisture of graftbox and hothouse to complete the marriage of vein and fibre and sap.

As Paul approached, Ingram stood beside Virginia, watching too. The two men exchanged a glance. Paul said to Virginia, 'Your domestic told me where I might find you. I hope I'm not intruding, am I?'

'Of course not.' She introduced Ingram to him. They exchanged commonplaces, then Paul said of the grafting, 'This I've never seen. What goes on?'

Virginia looked at Ingram. 'May I try to explain - to see if I've got it right?' When she had done so, Paul asked Ingram, 'What are your worst threats in these parts? *Rosellinea* - do you suffer from that?'

Ingram stiffened. 'Root rot? We don't buy infected stock!'

Paul said mildly, 'It doesn't have to come in the stock. It can be in the soil.'

'And we weren't born yesterday. We keep our soil clean.'

'Good for you. What else then? I daresay you need to spray, don't you?'

'All summer long. Against *oidium* mainly, and mildew. Mostly by copper sulphate.'

'By tractor, helicopter or hand power?'

'We're too steeply set for tractors to be practical. We can't afford helicopters; anyway, they don't vaporize finely enough for vines. No,

we go through the yards about seven times a season, all by hand with motorized sprayers.' Ingram's glance at the other man was hard. 'I thought Virginia said that conifers were your headache? What is your interest in vines?'

'Only in a general way. The deciduous things, including vines, are really my son's department. Which is - partly - what brought me today.' He turned to Virginia. 'This is only town hearsay, but Christopher understood from some talk that at some time your late fiance had published a paper on the study he had made of the diseases of vines, and as it might be of value to Christopher, he wondered if he could borrow a copy. I promised to ask you.'

Virginia shook her head. 'I don't know anything about it.' She looked at Ingram. 'Do you?'

Ingram agreed. 'He wrote, one, yes, about three years ago, and it was printed. But whether there is a copy around still, I don't know. I haven't seen one since.'

Virginia mused, 'Perhaps Karl Brundt has one? He has all Ernst's legal papers. Or—' she turned to Paul Bell — 'there is a desk at the villa where it might be, and if I can find it, Christopher is only too welcome to borrow it.'

Paul said easily, 'No hurry. It just might cut a few corners for him, that's all. May he or I look in on you later in the week to see if you've had any success?'

'Yes, do. I'll ransack the house, and failing that, I'll contact Ernst's lawyer.'

'Thank you. Meanwhile, I confess to a second errand,' said Paul. 'Chris and I have taken the day off. He has gone down to the Drachenhof to ask Lisel Mey to go to a film with him tonight, and we

had a half-made plan for them to collect you afterwards and for Chris to bring you both up to camp for a barbecue supper, which is about all the *luxé* we are able to lay on. What do you say?"

Virginia hesitated. 'Won't it be very late? Where are they going for their film?'

'Only to Bad Hosel. They should be collecting you by ten, and with luck I should have the cooking in hand by the time you come up; You will come? Fine. I shall look forward to it, all the time I'm doing the shopping.' Paul lifted his hand in salute to her. Ingram had already moved away.

As Paul had said Chris was in no hurry for Ernst's thesis, Virginia postponed her search for it until she had more time. When she returned from watching the grafting she had several things to do, and late in the afternoon she telephoned Lisel to confirm their jaunt.

Lisel sounded worried. 'I told Chris I would go, and when I said so, I thought I could be free. But an hour ago Ingram rang Irma and they are going over to Bonn for the dinner they didn't have on the night of the Masque, and Father always expects his game of chess with one of us, and Mother goes to bed early with hot milk—'

Virginia protested, 'Oh surely, Lisel?" Just one evening out for you? They can't mind that. Or couldn't Irma—?'

'Not go out with Ingram?' Lisel supplied. 'I shouldn't like to ask her. She has gone into Königsgrat now, to get her hair done and a manicure. No.'

'And you,' Virginia reminded her quickly, 'have promised Chris, who isn't on the telephone and can't be warned. So you will have to go, won't you? You can't help yourself!'

Lisel's silence seemed to ponder that, but after a moment she agreed reluctantly and they rang off.

Evidently Ingram had told Hannchen that he would be out for the evening, for he didn't tell Virginia, and he had been gone for two hours or so before she was called for by Chris and Lisel, well pleased with the film, with themselves and the prospect of the little more time together which the evening promised them.

The camp hut was one of several set at focal points in the mountains for the general use of foresters and timber- cutters arid possibly benighted climbers. It was warmed by a wood-burning stove, lighted by oil and took its water from a mountain spring a few metres from its door. When the three arrived there was already an appetizing sizzle and smell from the pork chops on the outdoor barbecue - cooking which Paul handed over to Chris while he took Virginia indoors to lay the table.

It was a cosy, friendly evening - to Virginia's imagination, straight out of Grimm, with the ceaseless stir of the pines outside, the warmth and shadows within, and the contrasting cold of the midnight air to be faced when it was time to leave. Lisel, wrapped and ready first, went out to the car with Chris. Paul helped Virginia into her coat.

'I rather gather my intrusion wasn't too popular this afternoon. I wonder why?' he remarked.

She looked away. 'You mean with Ingram Ashe? I'm sorry. But he isn't - a very easy man to know.'

'You find him difficult too?'

'Sometimes none too easy, though we are coming to terms. After all, he has had to accept, in me, a rather bizarre situation, hasn't he?'

'Not so bizarre, I'd say, that a good many men wouldn't be willing to take it in their stride and enjoy their work.' As Paul spoke his reaching for his own sheepskin car-coat was a sign which Virginia did not welcome.

'There's no need for you to turn out too. Chris can see us both home,' she said quickly.

'Nonsense. Of course I'm coming.'

'No, *please!*'

Paul paused, one shoulder still free of his coat, his glance at her a puzzled question. 'You'd really rather I didn't?'

'Yes, really. Chris can drop me first, and then take Lisel home.'

'If you say so.' Paul discarded the coat, hesitated for amoment, then put his lips very lightly to her cheek. 'Thank you for coming. Good night,' he said.

From the unspoken comment of that and from his tone she sensed he was aware he had been rebuffed, however slightly; that he knew she hadn't been merely concerned to save him a needless journey.

Which, in truth, she hadn't. For by an outside chance, Ingram might be there when they reached the Landhaus, and since her impulse to flaunt Paul's gift of flowers to him, something had changed. Now she was equally reluctant to advertise Paul's attentions to her. Ingram read so much into them that wasn't there, that she didn't want to be there ... from Paul.

As it happened, she need not have worried. For during the long time before she slept that night,. Ingram had still not returned from his dinner date with Irma Mey.

Overnight she had given Paul a second promise to search for Ernst's paper on vine diseases, and the next day she did so. Either the journal in which it had appeared or Ernst's original manuscript, if he had kept it, would serve Chris's purpose, and she hoped to find one or the other.

She opened the massive bureau-desk, the contents of which had daunted her when first she had been handed its key, among others, by Karl Brundt. Somehow, a riffling through the abandoned papers of someone who was dead seemed like an intrusion on the privacies of a lifetime, and she hadn't known Ernst well enough to feel sure he wouldn't mind. She was almost as equally loth now, but it had to be done.

In fact it was mainly a prosaic task; Ernst seemed to have had no intimacies to hide. There were some personal letters which might have been read by anyone, a diary or two of past years, containing only times and dates of appointments, some pamphlets, writing materials, some carbon copies of several typed articles of about a thousand words each, and three or four issues of an agricultural journal, all of identical date.

This was what she must be looking for. She took up one copy, glanced through it for Ernst's article, knew enough German by now to identify it, and was about to tidy away the other copies when a paper protruding from the pages of one of them caught her eye.

She drew out the sheet - plain foolscap, folded in three, its wording a typed short paragraph, its date that of only a few days before Ernst would have left for Nimes that winter ... to meet Virginia .. . and not to return. It was signed by Ernst's own hand. It began formally - *'This Is The Last Will And Testament ...Of Me, The Undersigned,* and the wording which followed, simple and direct, might have been the

duplicate of the will by which Ernst had left all he had to Virginia herself. Except for two differences. This one left everything to Ingram Ashe, and this one, though signed, had not been witnessed, which made it invalid, she knew.

And yet—! She sat back from the desk, her heart hammering.

This one had as much firm intention for Ingram as Ernst's later one had for her. This one's intention, the fruit of the trust and partnership between the two men. That one's — what? A whim which, back on his own ground and if he had lived a little longer, Ernst might have regretted and disowned? How could she know? Even if she did know, what could she do? She had given Ingram her word she would not reject Ernst's trust. But by anyone's moral code, surely this was the valid will, and that other an injustice which Ingram shouldn't have to take?

And did Ingram himself know that within a" week or two. of his being made Ernst's heir, he had been supplanted? Had anyone else known? Herr Brundt, for instance? Any of the people who had looked their distrust of her at Ernst's funeral and later? Hannchen ... Virginia was conscious of less hostility now. But how much might still be simmering? And why, if Ingram did suspect the injustice Ernst had done him, had he wrung from her the promise that she would accept the provisions of that second will?

At that early point he must have realized that, even after she had agreed to accept it, how easily she might have been swayed the other way. And if Ernst had ever discussed his intention with him, Ingram must surely have felt some bitterness; could *not* have wanted her as a working partner and still less as a figurehead owner, with rights and dominance over him which she might misuse.

Then why?

Perhaps Ingram didn't know. But if he did, could he have had a baser reason for persuading her to stay than that she should keep faith with Ernst? Supposing he had counted on the courage-sapping power of failure? Supposing he had hoped that, of her own inability to cope, she might tire after a while and give in; be only too ready then to sell or lease the vineyard to him, leaving him in *command*, and he had been willing to wait until that happened?

She thought back, remembering that he had mockingly suggested she might be debating something of the sort and that she had rejected it as being unworthy of him. But could that have been a double bluff? Supposing it had been true?

Yet against that there was the quixotry of his concealment from her of his freedom to leave? What *was* she to think? What dared she believe of his motives? Perplexed and shaken, she relocked the desk, taking the copy of the journal and the foolscap sheet away with her.

In her room she unfolded and re-read the latter. It had no validity. Unwitnessed, it had never had any power to benefit Ingram and since Ernst's later will, it had none now. If she destroyed it, no one need ever know it had existed and she would be doing Ingram no more harm than Ernst had done him already. But she knew she couldn't destroy it; that she had to show it to Ingram, and if he had known of it, had to ask him again that Why.

Because, dread his answer or his evasion of it as she might, she needed - as she had never yet craved to probe any man - to know the truth about Ingram ... all she still didn't know about him, whatever it was.

Paul had first said that if she found Ernst's thesis, he would call in for it. But the latest plan made overnight had been that she would deliver

it to the Drachenhof for Chris to collect. Today Virginia was glad of this. In the present turmoil of her thoughts, she was not anxious to see Paul, and she hoped that a walk down to the Drachenhof in a warm, soft rain might act as a kind of balm.

Unfortunately Lisel was out, so after explaining her errand to Frau Mey, Virginia was prepared to leave again when Frau Mey halted her with a peremptory, 'No, Fraulein Somers, please stay. I have wished to speak to you for some time. So sit down if you will. Yes, there, please, while I call my husband in. For this, you understand, is as much his affair as it is mine.'

*Not to mention that it is even more Lisel's affair - or ought to be!* was Virginia's private, outraged thought during her next quarter of an hour's argumentative bludgeoning on the subject of the Bells, father and son, of Chris's innocent courtship of Lisel and of her parents' flat edict that it could not be allowed to go on.

They took it in turns to put their case.

The Colonel - 'Not to be thought of. She is far too young.'

Frau Mey - 'She has no spare time for such nonsense. She knows she owes us duties here, and that I am far from strong.'

The Colonel - 'What do we know of these men? Striking up acquaintance with decent girls—'

Frau Mey - 'You, Fraulein, are far from blameless, we feel. *You* may wish to encourage the older man, but in doing so, you put his son in Lisel's way, and it is that of \* which we complain. Irma, our other daughter, has her career to further, and Lisel must do her part towards that by helping us, which she cannot do properly while her mind is being filled with foolish, romantic thoughts. Is it not so, *mein Mann*?

We cannot allow our little Lisel to neglect work she has always done gladly until now?'

This appeal brought from the Colonel an emphatic, 'No indeed!' But before he could draw breath for more argument, Virginia opened her own by asking, 'But surely Lisel is *nineteen*?' and at Frau Mey's blank, 'What of it?', launched her attack as tellingly as she could.

'What of it? With due respect to you both, *this*?' she flared. 'At nineteen ... or earlier, a girl *should* have romantic thoughts, and if Lisel has managed not to annoy you long before this by being gay and carefree with more than one boy-friend, it can only be because she has been too considerate of you and has cared about her sister's career a great deal too much—!'

At that point Virginia herself needed more breath, but after taking it she went on, 'After all, don't you *want* Lisel to fall in love and marry and have a happy home with children? Surely you do?'

Frau Mey's head dipped in cold agreement. 'Of course. In time. Later there will be some good man for her, we must hope. But a man whom we, her parents, know and can trust - certainly not this - this *gipsy* of an English youth, arrived from who-knows-where, and returning there, no doubt, when he has tired of amusing himself at her expense, leaving us to prove her foolishness to her when he has gone, as best we may.'

This was too much. Virginia countered, 'And supposing I could assure you that neither Paul Bell nor his son are gipsy-types, but qualified men? And that I'm pretty certain that Christopher Bell isn't merely amusing himself, as you call it.'

'You surely cannot claim to know this as a fact, Fraulein?'

'Well, of course not, but—'

Frau Mey nodded her satisfaction. 'True. You cannot, can you? Whatever intimacy you may have achieved with the father, you can hardly predict what the son may feel or do about Lisel. Therefore you must allow us to know what is best for her and also to ask that you do nothing to encourage her otherwise. We can look for your promise on this, Fraulein?'

Until now, at her hostess's invitation, Virginia had been sitting, but now she stood. 'I'm not at all sure that you can,' she said tautly.

'Even though you risk forcing on Lisel a conflict between her friendship for you and her duty to us? Perhaps you should consider the wisdom of that?' was Frau Mey's parthian shot, before her gesture to her husband indicated that as Virginia appeared ready to leave, he should show her out.

He did so, they parted with cool politeness, and Virginia stepped out into the rain.

But so much for its balm and for her hoped-for gossip with Lisel that might have taken her mind off other things! Instead she was left irked and dismayed by the Meys' attack, and taking a short cut across a lawn to reach the mountain road, she was in small mood for cordiality when she heard her name called in Irma Mey's voice.

Virginia halted and looked across to the log summerhouse where Irma lay on a sunlounger under a mulling coloured woollen rug.

'If you wanted Lisel, she is out. Anything I can do?' Irma called again.

'No, thank you. I did have something to give to Lisel, but I saw Frau Mey instead.' Halted again outside the summerhouse, Virginia shook her head as Irma swept a pile of glossy magazines from the chair beside her and patted its seat. 'No, I must get back,' she said.

'Nonsense. Come in out of the rain.' As Virginia reluctantly obeyed, Irma added, 'You saw the parent? Oh dear—! Not *both* of them, I hope?' and at Virginia's puzzled nod, 'Yes? And yet you have come out alive?'

'Alive? What do you mean?' Virginia echoed sharply, though she could guess.

Irma tilted her head and examined the perfect manicure of her left hand. 'Only that I happen to know they are on the warpath for you, and with cause. About Lisel, of course. For instance, she knew I was going out with Ingram last night, but she chose to go out too. What's more, she didn't arrive back until well after midnight, which isn't like her at all.'

'Then it is high time it was,' Virginia/ snapped. 'What had Lisel done? She had been to a film at Bad Hosen; she and Chris Bell had spent the rest of the evening with his father and me up at their camp, and she was escorted home, wasn't she?'

'Oh yes. But as *they* see it - the parents - by an undesirable, I'm afraid.'

'And they have to be right, I suppose?'

'Lisel has always allowed them to be, so far.'

'And now that she is rebelling a little - trying her wings, they want to blame me?'

'Well, shouldn't they, perhaps? After all, on your own showing, don't the four of you hunt together?'

'Hunt together!' Virginia scoffed. 'I think Chris and Lisel may have met not more than a dozen times and I have seen his father on just two days.'

'—And nights,' Irma insinuated smoothly. 'However, that is your business. Lisel's silliness is ours.'

'Silliness!' Virginia exploded. 'Doesn't it occur to you that she - both of them - could be in love?'

'Of course it does of Lisel.' Irma's agreement was bland. 'She goes about with stars in her eyes. But you can't blame the parents for wanting to shield her early from the fairly obvious consequences of this particular affair - that it's only a summer diversion for this boy for just as long as he happens to be here. Why, the two of them - *your* conquest as well as his son - haven't even a proper address. They could strike camp any time they like without trace. And where might Lisel find herself then?'

*If* that happened, which is far from likely, she might find herself still in love - which I hope and believe she is now.' Favouring attack as the best form of defence, Virginia added, 'And I wonder if Colonel and Frau Mey can be quite sure that they are not as worried for Lisel's happiness as they are about her taking time out to meet Chris?'

Irma frowned. "You have no right to suggest such a thing!"

Virginia said, 'I think you must know it's true. Perhaps not of the Colonel, but your mother's argument to me practically admitted as much - that they can't afford to lose Lisel's services. No, as I see it, they are much more afraid that it *is* serious - which might mean marriage and England for Lisel - than they are that Chris Bell is merely amusing himself and means to ride away. Besides, if it were only that she is needing time to go out with Chris and sometimes staying out late, why have they never grudged her the time she spends with Ingram at the Landhaus and about the yards?'

'Why?' Irma echoed sharply. 'Because they know she is safe with Ingram, of course! It's only a brother-and-sister thing between him

and Lisel. Ingram is no more of a cradle-snatcher than he is an—' She broke off. 'Anyway, I should have thought it obvious that where his choice in women is concerned, he has a good deal more sophisticated tastes! He tolerates Lisel and makes time for her, but he has certainly never caused the parents a moment's qualm.'

Virginia murmured, 'And of course he has taught her English - which must be invaluable for her dealings with the Drachenhof's guests!'

Irma's eyes sparked. 'Meaning by that—?'

'Something I probably shouldn't have said,' Virginia admitted. 'I'm sorry. But your argument does prove my point - that your people don't see Ingram as a threat, but they do see danger ahead in the shape of Chris Bell. Not danger to Lisel either. Danger to *their* way of life. And they are not being fair to her. She isn't too young to fall really and deeply in love. There - there's no age limit for it— And she has every right to leave home and marry when the time comes. What's more, I'd hate to believe your people could really want her to forgo the chance of it, but if they do—'

'If you decide they do, you'll do all you know to persuade Lisel that they are wrong?' Irma hinted.

Virginia stood up, digging her fists deep into the pockets of her raincoat. 'I don't know. I might. I told Frau Mey she couldn't rely on my promise to discourage Lisel's and Chris's affair.' She turned away, stepped out of the summerhouse, then looked back, her curiosity stirred by a cut-off phrase of Irma's.

'About Ingram,' she began. 'You said he was no more of a cradle-snatcher than a - What? You didn't say.'

Irma's shaded eyelids dropped and lifted again - wide. 'Perhaps because, having more discretion than you, my dear, I realized in time that it was something I shouldn't say... to you,' she countered.

Virginia flushed at the memory of her own uncalled- for rudeness. 'I've apologized for that. But why couldn't you say this - about Ingram - to me in particular? What was it?' she said.

'If you understand it, you won't like it,' Irma warned.

'Never mind.'

Irma shrugged. 'As you wish. When I said it, I meant the whole sentence to go - "Ingram is no more of a cradle- snatcher than he is an opportunist." Well?'

Virginia caught her breath. 'An - opportunist? I'm afraid I don't-understand.'

'Then take my advice and don't lose any sleep over trying to work it out. For if anyone is in a position to know it isn't true of Ingram, then I certainly am.' Irma's puckered brows feigned perplexity. 'Something in the Bible about a mess of pottage, isn't there?' she murmured. 'But it doesn't apply to Ingram, believe me. He would never trade his freedom for anything so ... utterly dreary - *whatever* the gossips may choose to say—'

She lay back, closing her eyes. For a long moment Virginia stood watching the blind mask of her face, then turned away again, walking deliberately and slowly, head high, though every nerve she possessed seemed to be urging her to ran... to *run*.

On her way back, at a point where she could strike off the road and come out on the vineyard slopes, she paused, then went straight on. With only Lisel's problem on which to seek Ingram's advice, she could have sought him out there. But tempted as she was - and even more so after Irma's confirming hint - to confront him with the paper in her bag, she knew she must wait to do so until they were alone.

Back at the villa, she forced herself to concentrate on some office work until he came in. For if she relaxed for more than a moment the beat of her thoughts was all with what Irma had implied.

If Irma knew it was common gossip that Ingram had hoped to inherit from Ernst and now was simply biding his time against her own discouragement and failure, then the gossips must know what Ingram knew for certain - that at the last moment she had supplanted him. And she had believed him when he had persuaded her to stay, on the score of the faith she owed to Ernst! What *was* true about him? What could she believe?

She was at the filing cabinet when he came in an hour later. They had met and talked earlier in the day, and his greeting was a mere nod as he passed her on his way to his J desk. Behind his back she moved over to where her bag lay, took out the paper and said, 'There is something I - have to ask you. Can you spare me time now?'

Bending over the desk, not- looking up, 'No,' he said flatly.

'I'm sorry. It's important. I'm afraid you must make time - please.'

He straightened and turned. 'O.K. If you say so. You're the boss.' His smile took all offence out of the reluctant agreement and seemed to turn a knife in her heart. 'Well?' he invited unsuspectingly. 'Go ahead. I'm all ears.'

'It's this.' She fingered the paper without passing it to him. 'I found it in Ernst's desk when I was looking for his thesis to lend to Christopher Bell. It was there, between the pages of a journal, and you'll see—' she handed it over 'it explains itself.'

He read, met her glance and said, 'So it does.'

'And did you know - if not that Ernst had got to the point of putting it in black and white - that until I - happened to him - he meant to leave the estate to you?'

'He had told me as much, yes. Why?'

'And other people knew too? The vineyard workers? The Francks ? Most of Konigsgrat, in fact ?'

'I daresay. Not that it was any of their business, any more than it's yours, it seems to me. At the final count, Ernst didn't leave it to me; he left it to you. So what's your problem? Are you out for my blood because I didn't warn you that you were seen, not merely as a hopeless amateur, but as the monstrous usurper of my rights? You claim you should have been told exactly where you stood? Is that it?'

Virginia bit her lip. 'Not altogether.'

'What then?'

'It's—' she hesitated - 'It's more that when, you persuaded me to stay, on the grounds that you owed it to Ernst and so did I, I - I believed you. Whereas now, in the light of all this; of learning that, within less than a week of his meeting me, Ernst had drafted a will in favour of you, I'm badly doubting that you could have been sincere.'

He considered that. 'I see. It doesn't occur to you that if I hadn't been sincere, I ought to have been only too eager to wave you good-bye?'

'But not if— Well, not if, as you suggested, as I thought at the time in joke, you saw some advantage to yourself in persuading me to stay.'

'Advantage to me?' His echo was sharp. 'Advantage - in what shape?'

'Well, perhaps in the shape of your being satisfied to wait until I got so discouraged that I'd be willing to call it a day and contract out, either by selling the estate or leasing it to you and going away.'

'In other words, perverse pleasure for me in letting you be your own executioner?'

'Something like that. Or no—' remembering Irma's hint - 'more that you were content to be a time-server until I gladly left you in full control.'

'H'm. Pretty ghoulish of me on either count,' Ingram commented dryly. 'But not guilty, m'lud. Anyway, didn't I warn you that, as manager, I meant to retain full control?'

'Yes.' Somehow, Virginia felt, they had switched roles. It was he in attack and she in defence now.

'So what had I to gain? I had years more of my contract to protect me; I had the right to manage, which it gave me and which you couldn't dispute. So what could it matter to me on that score whether you stayed or went swanning off to the Riviera or wherever?' He paused, subjecting her to a long calculating gaze. Then he shook - his head, as at an unreasonable child, and hooked a chair towards her. 'Look,' he said patiently, 'suppose you drop the avenging angel bit; sit down instead while I recap., and this time *try* to believe me?'

She took the chair. He bestrode another, resting his , arms on its high back. 'I'll try,' she said - quite humbly.

'Then listen. When you took my dare without question I gave you full marks for courage. I knew of course that 1 later you would ask the whys and the wherefores, and when you did, I told you that because of all we both owed to Ernst, I meant to do all in my power to see that his ; will was carried out to the letter. That was the truth and fair enough, you allowed. If I remember, we called Pax, and I took it we understood each other. So who has been feeding you suspicions of my motives, since, may I know?'

Virginia drew a long breath. 'No one really,' she lied. 'It was only my finding that—' she indicated the paper he ; still held - 'and then wondering and believing the worst of why, when you had only just been robbed of the estate yourself, you could possibly have wanted to urge me to stay. I'm — sorry,' she finished hesitantly.

'As long as it has cleared some air?'

(For her, more than he knew!) 'It has. Thank you,' she said.

'Good. Meanwhile—' his finger and thumb flicked the paper - 'no more value to this than it ever had, so permission to destroy it - h'm?'

Virginia nodded, and he tore it to pieces which he dropped into an ashtray. As he touched the flame of his lighter to them, she asked, 'Supposing I hadn't accepted your argument about our debt to Ernst - what then?'

He prodded the last of the paper to frail ash. 'Hypothetical question, but I'd have had to look for something more telling in the way of persuasion, I suppose.' >

Sheer relief made it easy for her to joke now. 'Such as? Short of a ball-and-chain for me, what could you have done?' she parried.

He had turned back to the desk and was searching through the correspondence trays there. Over his shoulder he said, 'You'd be surprised - And now, where, for pity's sake, is that last invoice from Erckmann?'

'It's not there. I filed it.' She found it and gave it to him.

'Thanks.' He took it from her and went out, scanning it absorbedly as he went, his attention switched off from her; the everyday climate of their business partnership switched on.

Left behind, Virginia tipped cold ash into the waste- paper basket and wiped down the tray, making of the task a kind of brushing-off of the cobweb of her doubts of him.

## CHAPTER SIX

INGRAM was to prove guarded in his sympathy for Lisel's affair with Chris Bell. Virginia had hoped he would react as forcibly as she had herself, but when she discussed it with him he disappointed her.

'If you want my advice, you won't interfere nor take sides too obviously,' he said.

'I'm afraid I've already made it clear to the Meys that I'm taking sides.'

'Which, if I may say so, was indiscreet.'

'I can't help that. And even before I met Lisel, you told me she was no better than a Cinderella,' Virginia reminded him.

'But a happy one - carefree. And if the Bell youth shouldn't turn out to be her potential Prince, you aren't going to be too popular with either side, are you?'

Virginia ignored the question. 'Well, except that it must suit the Meys - and Irma Mey too,' she asked tartly. 'I can't think why you all conclude that Chris Bell can't be serious about Lisel. He isn't playing the field; he has a job to go to in England and prospects. So why should they be discouraged?'

'Perhaps on the known statistics of the average holiday romance?' Ingram offered.

'Rubbish. They don't all fizzle out,' Virginia retorted.

'And against all odds, you mean to play matchmaker to this one?' Ingram paused, then added, 'However, before you decide it's your duty to antagonize Lisel's people any further, I think you'd better let me take you on a peace- sortie to the Drachenhof one evening. What about it? Will you come?'

She shook her head. 'I can't very well. I mustn't involve you. And after all I said the other day, I've no right to expect to be made welcome.'

Ingram said patiently, 'You *have* involved me. And there's no question of your trading on the Meys' private hospitality on this jaunt. The Drachenhof is a hotel open to non-residents, and you'd be there as my dinner guest. How's that?'

Though Virginia felt that put her on the level of a child being apologized for by a kindly grown-up, she agreed reluctantly. Ingram said he couldn't just then suggest a particular evening, but would ask her again in a day or two. And then, before he did, Paul Bell telephoned to ask her to dine with him in Bonn.

With no valid reason for refusing, she accepted. Paul, sounding pleased, said, 'I'll hire a car decent enough to do you credit. What about tonight? Is that too soon for you? If it is, when?'

'Tonight would be fine. I'll look forward to it,' she told him. As they rang off, she realized that was true. His calling her showed he hadn't been offended by her rebuff on the night of his camp party, and it would be her first visit to Bonn at night, though she had been over once or twice by day for shopping.

She spent the morning in pleasurable decision as to what she should wear. She also saw her chance of sounding Paul's attitude to something more serious than a boy- and-girl flirtation for Chris and Lisel. And then, when Ingram came in to the luncheon they were to take together, he announced,

'By the way, that date of ours. I've booked a table at the Drachenhof for tonight. Is that all right by you?'

'Tonight?' Virginia echoed. 'I'm sorry, not tonight. I'm going out - to dinner in Bonn, with Paul Bell.'

Ingram frowned. 'You knew we had this other thing coming up.'

'But not which night. And with nothing else on, I couldn't refuse.'

Ingram said nothing and continued to eat. Then - 'Making it a party this time with the boy and Lisel?'

'Paul Bell didn't say. I think it's just the two of us.'

*'Tete-a-tete? Cosy. I hope it keeps fine for you.'*

Though that was not meant literally, Virginia thought it prudent to take it so. 'I think it will. If it's anything like last evening, it'll be lovely,' she said. 'I'm sorry about it, of course. But if you really think I ought to placate the Meys, couldn't we go another night?'

'Oh yes, any time. Just an idea, that was all—' But though Ingram's throwaway tone implied that as an idea it had already dissolved and been forgotten, his ensuing silence was broody with accusation which - for breaking a date which hadn't been firmly made! - Virginia rightly felt she had not earned.

It was indeed a beautiful evening. Now dusk did not fall until about eight o'clock, but the river front lit itself early and gaily, tempting out the holidaymakers to stroll and sit under the linden trees; there was singing in the *Biergartens* and the pleasure craft on the river contributed their own quota of transistorized music and light and happy communal noise. At the car-ferry point Bonn, across the river, was a spread of dark lawns to the water's edge, a mass bulk of diplomatic mansions and municipal courthouses and a glow of white light against a navy-blue sky.

The car-ferry churned and paddle-wheeled its way over, disembarked its cargo, took on another for the return trip, leaving the first to edge its way into the nose- to-tail motorcade of a city determinedly intent on pursuing its evening enjoyment. The shops of the luxury streets, ablaze with neons, were veritable Aladdin's caves of treasures - furs, flowers, antiques, cars at fabulous prices, and the hotels were cosmopolitan palaces, no less.

Paul's choice of one of these for their meal was as flamboyant as the rest. But Virginia was touched by the thought which had ordered a posy of sweet-scented violets to await her, nestled in moss, at her place at table.

'Oh, they're lovely!' She buried her face in their fragrance.

Paul looked pleased. 'You like them? Of course orchids presented themselves as an idea, but I thought you might prefer something quieter to offset the rather garish *luxe*'

'Oh, I do.' The waiter was ready with a pin and she fastened them to the deep V of her dress. When Paul had ordered for them he went on, 'Do you think you could take all this kind of thing as an everyday diet?'

'Top luxury all the time?' Virginia laughed. 'Good heavens, no. How many people do - or can ?'

'Lots, I'd imagine, to judge by the supply available. The demand must create it. But you wouldn't regard it as your right?'

'As my right? I couldn't even want it. As an occasional treat it's—' she wrinkled her nose with pleasure - 'it's luscious. But who wants a treat every day?'

Paul smiled. 'Evidently *your* nursery logic doesn't,' he said. A few minutes later, not quite on the same beam, he asked,

'You are pretty content now? You like what you're doing?'

She looked down at her plate. 'Very much,' she said.

'You think you can take Germany ... Konigsgrat ... the Weinberg Raus as a permanency?'

'I've *got* it as a permanency, haven't I?' she parried.

'Not necessarily, surely, unless you marry here? And you are English. Don't you ever picture circumstances in which you would want - or at least be willing - to go back?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. It's my country, and sometimes I'm homesick for what I can remember of it. But as you know, I came here after a long time in France, and though you could say I had the estate wished on me, I want to do the best job by it that I can.'

'If they'll let you,' Paul put in quietly.

She reacted sharply to that. 'Let me?' she echoed. 'Who?'

'Well, the diehards for whom you must have been quite a shock. And Ashe, your manager. I'd judge he isn't exactly a Yes-man in his own field, is he?'

'In his own field, I don't expect him to be. He knows the job from A to Z; I'm the tenderfoot who's just learning it,' she claimed.

'And when you've learnt it—?'

She smiled and shrugged. 'That's a very long way off .. . entirely another day,' she said.

They talked of other things then, their surroundings, the food. Later they took their coffee on a covered terrace beyond a lounge where a few people were dancing, and it was not until then that Virginia brought up the subject of Lisel and Chris.

'I suppose you know Lisel's people frown on their seeing each other?' she asked Paul.

- 'I'd gathered from Chris that he isn't too popular, though I don't know what they have against him.'

Virginia said, 'With reason - nothing much. They claim to think Lisel may wake up one morning to find herself deserted, but I'm sure it's more that they are jealous of the wholehearted duty they have had from her so far. And it isn't fair. Lisel has a right to first love, and to dream a bit, and to neglect quite a lot of other things while she does. And when the Meys took me to task for encouraging the affair, I told them so without mincing too many words.'

"You took it upon yourself to plead Lisel's case?"

'They thrust it on me, and it all needed saying!'

Paul's nod was slow and doubtful. 'Yes, maybe. Though I wonder whether in crossing them you did Lisel, or Chris either, very much service.'

Virginia admitted reluctantly, 'That's what they said. Ingram too—'

'Ingram Ashe? You enlisted him as an ally?' Paul put in sharply.

'I tried. He wasn't playing. But I did hope I could count on you/

Paul smiled, 'As you can - but only as a kind of elder statesman on the sidelines. No, all sympathy as I am, my advice to you is - Let the thing

ride. It'll probably work out, and young love thrives on parental opposition. Look, for instance, at Romeo and Juliet!' he claimed.

'And look what *happened* to Romeo and Juliet!' Virginia countered darkly. But she joined in Paul's laughter and let the argument go.

When they left the hotel and returned to the car, Paul showed her the luminous dial of his watch. 'The last ferry will have gone. We'll be crossing by the next bridge downstream,' he said.

That's at Carlinsbad, about ten kilometres down, isn't it?

'And a corresponding ten kilometres back down the - other side,' he agreed. 'But does it matter? Isn't our time our own?'

On the outward journey they had driven with the hood of the hired convertible down, and the night air was still so gentle that they left it down. They turned their backs on Königsgrat, crossed the river by the Carlinsbad bridge and keeping to the river road, headed upstream again on the final stage of their journey home.

A late moon had risen, and at one point where it emerged, riding high from behind a cloud, Virginia exclaimed with pleasure at the silver path its reflection cast on the water.

Paul halted the car and backed it off the road under a group of the ubiquitous pollarded limes, the scent of their flowers sweetly pungent. The moon sailed serenely; fussy clouds chased it, and the two watchers sat in companionable silence until Paul, glancing above his head, idly reached to pluck a young green leaf from the nearest truncated branch.

It was almost straight from the bud, still wrinkled, and as Paul smoothed it carefully on his knee, he said, 'Far be it for a good mycologist to wax sentimental about a fallen leaf, but have you heard

yet the local warning to avoid the attentions of fallen linden leaves at all costs?'

Virginia drew her breath sharply ... at a memory. 'You mean about now, if one drops on you anywhere and stays, it makes you - vulnerable?'

'That's it - to any weapon your enemies choose to use on you,' Paul supplied.

'Yes. It derives from the Siegfried story, you know.'

'Then it has survived a good many centuries,' said Paul, brushing the leaf from his knee. When next he spoke it was to ask,

'Tell me, why are you so passionately anxious that Lisel shouldn't miss the delights of first love?'

Virginia continued to look out over the river. 'Well, no one should be cheated of it if it offers, do you think?' she said.

'But from what you've told me, weren't you in the same position of duty to your parents as Lisel is to hers?'

'Not really. They were older and more infirm than either of the Meys, and I was older than Lisel when I took responsibility for them. And I hadn't the same conflict as she might face if she and Chris are really serious.'

Paul half-turned in his seat and smiled in disbelief. His glance was eloquent. 'Oh, come!' he urged. 'No love affairs for you in all that time? There must have been!'

'None that forced any difficult choice on me.'

'But since?' Paul pressed.

She evaded the directness of that. 'My father only died six or seven months ago,' she said.

'And Ernst Raus? Not even then?'

She shook her head. 'I wasn't in love with Ernst. I didn't mean to marry him. That's what made his leaving me the estate so questionable, and I'd have refused it if Ingram Ashe hadn't convinced me I owed it to Ernst to take it/

Paul agreed, 'I think you did. He obviously wanted you to have it, and I don't think you should suffer guilt at not loving him, any more than you should have too many regrets for Lisel if this thing between her and Chris doesn't work out. Like you, I hope it may. She is a charming child. But supposing it doesn't for any reason, there's a lot of time before them and they each could find that second love - or late first love - is just as sweet and valuable, don't you think?'

'I - don't know.'

'But I do.' Now Paul turned fully round, and his hands going to her shoulders turned her to face him. His voice low and intense, he repeated, 'I do, Virginia - about second love, at least. And you - about late love - dare I hope?'

She knew he must sense the recoil of her shoulders under the pressure of his hands and she was ashamed. She forced herself to look up at him. 'For you, Paul - no. I'm - sorry. But we hardly know each other. Just these one or two evenings, and the odd meeting in the town—'

'Which for me have been red-letter - the chance that, collecting our mail or calling at the garage, I just might see you!' he claimed. 'Besides, recognizable love doesn't go like that - by numbers of meetings or opportunities. It - happens. As it has happened to me. Though not to you? *Not to you?*

She shook her head dumbly.

'It's not,' he hazarded, 'that I'm only offering you second love? That I'm frank with you that I loved my wife and would have loved her for ever if she had lived — it's not that?'

'No. *No*' Virginia assured him. 'Don't even begin to think so, please. If I - I did love you, I'd be honoured and proud that, after her, you could want me. But I don't, Paul, I'm afraid. Anyway it's too soon after - Ernst,' she added lamely, knowing it wasn't true.

Paul's gently shaken head showed that he knew the same. 'You say you didn't love Ernst Raus,' he reminded her. 'So how could your loving another man, soon or late after him, be any disloyalty to him?' Without waiting for her reply to that, he moved closer and studied her face. 'But the spark isn't there for me,' he said, though not as a question, simply as a quiet acceptance of fact.

Soon afterwards he moved off and presently put her at ease with talk about his work. At the villa she thanked him for the evening and begged him not to get out of the car. But though he did so, he shook his head at her hesitant, 'Will you?' of invitation to go in with her.

'I think not,' he said. 'You'll understand?'

She was relieved. 'Of course,' she said.'

'But I haven't spoilt everything entirely? We can do this - or something else - again some time?'

'If you'll ask me.'

'I shall ask you,' he said, and let her go.

Indoors all was quiet. Virginia had told the Franks not to wait up for her, and they had taken her at her word. There was light to be seen

from the glass-panelled door of the office, and as she watched, Ingram's shadow passed across it. She had expected he would go down to the Drachenhof without her; certainly not that he would be working so late. But when he made no sign that he had heard her come in, she did not join him. She looked in briefly on pup Thrush, a ball of undisturbed sleep in his basket, then went to bed herself. But not to sleep for a long time, her thoughts all of the evening and of Paul.

He was kind, companionable, ready to love her; eager for the response she could not give to his gentle homage. As he had said himself, there was no spark there; no more than Ernst's assiduous courtship had fired in her.

No tinder for her. spirit from either Ernst or Paul; the 'late love' both had wanted of her, not there for them. Yet it was latent there within her, she knew, craving to prove itself, hungry to respond to the magic of a man's need and worship and desire. But not to Paul's. Nor did he touch in her any raw nerve of pride or reluctant curiosity or self-defence as even Ingram Ashe did.

Ingram ... Against the will of her thoughts of Paul, he intruded, forcing comparisons. She had nothing to prove to Paul but friendship and gratitude for friendship, and she doubted if any word of his could ever rouse her as a mere breath of praise or blame from Ingram could. For she 'rose' to the challenge of Ingram as a fish to the mayfly; clashed with him, forced issues with him, allowed him to force them with her, cared about the outcome; cared.

Close to sleep at last - There's a word for that, she thought drowsily. A love-hate stimulus, they call it. Not late love. Love-hate. Not the same thing. Not the same thing at all...

That careless 'any time' of Ingram's proved to mean 'no time'. He did not repeat his suggestion that he should act as a mediator between

Virginia and the Meys, and meanwhile Lisel, without open defiance, contrived to meet Chris quite often and as she allowed Virginia to suspect, very seldom by pure chance.

Chris had to call for his mail in Konigsgrat; Lisel had shopping to do there. Esa and Midas, her one remaining puppy, had to be walked; it was surprising how frequently Chris's research took him to woods within a kilometre of the Drachenhof, and the lengthening nights of early summer made it a crime against nature to stay indoors with television after the hotel's guests had been served with dinner, the kitchen chores had been supervised, the next morning's calls and breakfast orders taken and Frau Mey, if not the Colonel, had gone early to bed. Amused, Virginia realized she might indeed have saved her ammunition. As far as Lisel and Chris were concerned, the proverbial locksmith could be said to have been handed his cards.

Irma left on a three weeks' touring engagement, chauffeured to the airport by Ingram, whose tight schedule of work usually seemed elastic enough, Virginia noticed, to oblige Irma whenever her theatrical drawl over the telephone begged such attentions of him.

June came in. Every flowering cherry in the district, and there were hundreds, was a cascade of white or blush- pink blossoms; the shades of green in the woods were uncountable; swallows and martins and swifts dipped and wheeled above the river; milking herds were turned out to graze on the rich water meadows, and the hardened-off French hybrid grafts were ready for their bedding out.

Some of them went to be nursed in the back gardens of the vineyard workers, but the bulk of them was destined for the Weinbergs' own nurseries on as flat and enriched and water-fed ground as it could command.

As would happen at the harvest, every available hand - aijd a quota of temporary hands - was deployed to the work. Virginia was there.

Hannchen and Albrecht turned out. Ingram and his foremen directed operations, and when the laden lorries had discharged their cargoes, the workers knelt on wooden planks beside the long peat- filled damp trenches and pressed the grafts into the soil at little more than a finger's width apart.

It was hard on the hands and on unaccustomed backs. But when it was done, the little seedlings stood ramrod- straight as a rank of guardsmen, each cocky and behatted by its sprouting couple of tiny seed-leaves.

The summer lay before them. In the dead time they would suffer an uprooting for the destruction of the weaklings; the hardy would be shielded from the rigours of their first winter, and after another screening in the spring, the survivors would be ready to claim permanent home ground of their own.

Meanwhile all over the vineyards of the region the flowering of the established vines had begun. Late April had seen the emergence of the first tiny grapes; during May each vine shoot achieved its full complement of leaves and tendrils, and now the buds were opening in the warm humidity of early June.

Last winter, Virginia was assured by everyone, the ivy had flowered in abundance. The April 'showing' (of embryo grapes) had been good. Now all - for the moment - to be hoped for was a swift pollination - no cruel late frosts, no hail, not too much heat in the sun, enough wind to disperse the pollen widespread, and rain to follow to loosen and wash away the shrivelled, spent petals of the flowers.

The region held its breath and waited.

The nights continued warm. The skies were lightly overcast by day. For the period of pollination - ideally a week or less - there was wind, neither a mere zephyr nor a gale, and after a following twenty-four

hours of downpour the grapes, set, though still minute as pellets of shot, were there for the counting. The vintage, it was reluctantly allowed, just might be a good one, and meanwhile there was always the Vine Blossom Feast to celebrate now. Good vintage or bad ahead, Konigsgrat intended to enjoy that to the full.

Virginia asked Ingram about it. Do they still hold a Feast even if the blossom has been scoured by frost and the pollination's been disastrous?'

'Why not? It's a perennial excuse for a bit of wassail and goings-on. If everything has gone well with the flowering, it's a kind of giving-of-thanks, and if it hasn't, the Feast is a talisman against things being perhaps not as bad as they seem. And anyway,' he added, 'it's not "they" who lay it on. This time it's us.'

*We do? The Weinberg Raus? I thought-?'*

'That it was another Fools' Masque? No, not really. It's you are sponsoring it.'

*'I am?'*

'For your own workers. It's more of an English Harvest Home than a Fools' Masque, for instance. No false noses; best bibs-and-tuckers; free sit-down supper in the storehouse, at which you'll have to make a speech.'

Virginia gasped. 'Oh no! What could I say? Anyway, I'm not nearly fluent enough in German.'

'I'm afraid you can't duck it. But with plenty of the local wine inside them, they'll be a receptive audience, and if you'll draft something in English, I'll translate it for you, and your German is quite good enough for you to put it across.'

'Oh dear. But I'll try,' Virginia sighed. 'When is it to be, and do I have to do the catering too?'

'With the Franks' help. Hannchen will know what to order and I'll see to the drinks. It should be one day next week, but it's a concerted affair. All the owners hold their Feasts on the same night, and after the suppers, when the guests finish off on the town, we foregather at the Rathaus for our own party.'

'The owners, you mean?'

'And their managers, and the Mayor and Corporation and a leaven of wives and sweethearts - apart from whom, outside guests aren't encouraged. Rather a closed shop of a party, in fact. But it'll be your debut with our competitors, And you should enjoy it.'

'Once that speech-making is behind me, I may be able to,' Virginia agreed wanly. 'Do you make one too?'

'Only as toast-master to you and as monger of jokes everyone has heard before. No, that night the star billing will be all yours. So do Ernst as proud as you can, won't you? He'll be looking to you,' Ingram said.

Once the various owners had agreed on a suitable evening, the preparations had gone into gear.

At the Weinberg Raus the ground floor of the storehouse had been cleared; Albrecht, with some voluntary helpers, had seen to its festive decoration and its seating for the meal, and after a haughty show of reluctance to usurp Virginia's authority, Hannchen had agreed to organize the catering, with Virginia merely her lieutenant.

It seemed the menu was time-honoured - the Rhineland's speciality, cucumber salad, as a starter, followed by soused river trout and cold spiced pork with sauerkraut; the last course, assorted pastries and a selection of regional cheeses, and the drink, beer and Ingram's choice in red and white Rhenish wines.

Virginia had given a lot of anxious thought to the speech expected of her, but when Ingram had asked how the 'unaccustomed as I am to public speaking bit' was coming along, she told him she thought she could manage enough German to express the few things she would say.

'You don't want it edited, then?' he asked.

'I don't think so, thank you,' she said, and they had left it at that.

She had chosen to wear a pale grey long-sleeved dress of silk jersey, banded deeply at the waist by appliqued silver braid. This had been on Lisel's advice, and while she was dressing Lisel looked in on a flying visit.

'Wear your hair down for tonight,' Lisel begged.

Already bunching it, ready to twist it into its chignon, Virginia paused. 'No, I can't,' she said.

'Why not?'

Virginia pulled a face at her reflection. 'Mutton dressed as lamb - that's why not.'

She had to explain the phrase to Lisel who, however, retorted, 'Nonsense! Whose grandmother are you?' and reaching for the hairbrush, began to spread Virginia's hair about her shoulders. Satisfied, she stood back, then uttered a little yelp after glancing at

her watch. 'I must go! We've got a Touring Club due in for dinner. But just you dare to touch those hairpins after I've gone!' she threatened on her way out.

For a few minutes Virginia sat very still, staring into the mirror. (*The Lorelei thing*. Ingram's careless question as to why she didn't wear her hair so more often - *Isn't it waste in a bun? ...*) Instead of reaching for her hairpins, she looped her loose hair behind her ears, in which she fastened little silver studs which took up the motif of the embroidery of her waist. Then she finished her dressing and went down to find Ingram awaiting her in the hall.

He watched her as she came down the stairs. With pleasure she saw the approval in his eyes, admitting that from him she wanted it, basked in it; whatever that was beat in her drawn out by it to an extent he could not guess.

Ingram her pivot, not Paul. Ingram's being here or there; his voice, his look, his intrusion on her thoughts becoming importances which she ought to deny in the name of her own peace.

For no one should matter as much as that unless— But she baulked at consciously finishing that thought and with a little squaring of her shoulders against his magnetism, went out with him to meet the evening.

With the prospect of her speech before her, she ate very sparingly at the meal. 'I may be ravenous later, but I just can't get it down,' she confessed to Ingram, sitting beside her at the centre point of the T-arrangement of the tables. After the last course, when the wine was circulating freely, he said his own piece which evoked loud applause and catcalls. Then it was Virginia's turn and she got to her feet in a silence which by contrast was frightening.

At first her voice came out in a nervous croak, but then she found that from the sea of upturned, expectant faces, she had picked out one or two - grizzled Lois Bauer, who walked six kilometres to work every morning, Heinrich Spens, the oldest grafter, teenager Willi Schmidt, a fourth-generation Schmidt to serve the Weinberg Raus - and was talking just to them, thanking them, asking their indulgence of her shortcomings, managing a joke about the flowering of the ivy, and recalling Ernst to them as a good memory which she and they shared.

And then, somehow, she was conscious that she had the rest of her audience with her, and when she sat down flushed and relieved and at ease, the stir, and murmur down the tables was a friendly sound, sympathetic, welcoming her in.

She turned for a moment to Ingram, her smile tremulous. 'Was I all right?' she asked.

'All *right*?' His very emphasis was his answer, but for good measure he added, 'My dear, you were great!' and suddenly, surprisingly, under cover of the tablecloth, his hand sought hers and gripped it - hard.

That was the first of the heady experiences in store for her. The next was heralded by a signal from Ingram down the tables; a scuffle in the region of Willi Schmidt's seat, and then Willi was marching importantly towards her, carrying before him, chest-high, an open florists' box, displaying on a cushion of moss a circlet of real vine leaves and flowers fastened to a silver bandeau. Ingram stood, reached for it, held it high above her head - the gesture questioning the audience's approval - and then to an appreciative roar of '*Ja! Ja! Von Jetzt an sie ist eine Rhinlanderin!*' he set it, diadem-wise, on Virginia's hair.

She touched it with nervous pleasure and looked up at him.

'It's lovely! And for me?'

He nodded. 'In the same tradition, Ernst used to get cigars.'

'Oh! And they ... you - mean it? That I belong to the Rhineland now?'

'I imagine so. They're saying it loud enough.'

'Then thank them, please. No, let me. I will!' .And she did — to the renewed thumping of beer-steins on the tables and a cacophony of cheers.

Presently after that there was a concerted move from the tables, and a little later a further drift out to cars and scooters and a communal bus for the adjournment to the town and for serious drinking or dancing or dalliance to taste.

On the way out to Ingram's car Virginia hesitated, touched the wreath of vineleaves. 'What about this?' she asked.

'What about it? You wear it, of course,' Ingram said.

'I don't look - silly?' She broke off, her sudden laugh almost a giggle. 'By any chance, did Lisel know about it?'

'Lisel? Yes. My suggestion, her design. Why?'

Virginia ran a hand under her hair. 'Because she persuaded me to wear my hair down for this evening. I suppose she knew that with this thing perched above my chignon, I'd look like a dowager in a tiara, no less.'

'Whereas now you're a Rhine-Maiden in a chaplet, no less. Good for Lisel,' said Ingram.

The Town Hall was floodlit for the occasion; the Mayor and his lady and his town councillors were in full evening dress, but the gathering of vineyard owners was pleasantly informal - a kind of club party for people with interests in common and in reasonably friendly rivalry.

Virginia had already met some of them and she was introduced and circulated to others. She found them kinder than she had dared hope. They practised their English on her and she her German on them; in a state of happy euphoria they promised her an extravagantly good vintage for her first as owner of the Weinberg Raus, and she was in such demand, if only as a curio, that after Ingram's first introductions of her she was not in touch with him again until the party broke up at the end of the evening.

On the drive home, a little heady with her unexpected personal success, she wanted to talk about it, hearing her voice come bubbling with pleasure, oddly high-pitched and gay. That must be the wine— She broke off. 'You're letting me babble,' she accused Ingram's profile.

He agreed gravely, 'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Perhaps because I didn't know you could. It's refreshing. Garry on babbling,' he said.

At the villa he did not go to put away the car, but left it at the door and went in with her. She crossed the hall, debating whether to invite him to a last drink, and did so.

He shook his head. 'No, I've had enough.'

'Me too,' she agreed. 'I'll go up—' Reaching the newel post of the stairs only a pace or two ahead of him, she knew herself stirred by his

closeness, was aware that to linger held danger for her - and yet could not let the temptation of the moment go.

She turned. She ought to bid him good night and make it the end of the evening. But he forestalled her, and she allowed him to when, now almost breast to breast with her, he tweaked a vine-floret from her wreath and offered it with a wafting motion, first to her nostrils and then to his own.

'Has anyone told you that their scent is supposed to be an aphrodisiac? Or that, deep in the mountains around here, there are hoary ancients who'll still claim that love- philtres distilled from them actually worked?' he asked.

'Oh no?' Virginia smiled her disbelief. 'As if they could, outside a fairytale!'

'A fact, I assure you,' Ingram nodded. 'These oldies will swear, evidence of, for instance, love-starved spinsters who partook, and then got their man and lived happily ever after. And faintheart males who became successful Don Juans almost overnight. Which, come to think of it, makes it a pity we haven't a recipe for the mixture among our archives. Then we might run a love-philtre supply as a sideline enterprise, why not?'

Enjoying herself, Virginia laughed, 'On the whole, I think we'd be wise to concentrate on growing grapes for wine.'

Ingram shook his head in mock despair of her. 'Obviously you lack business faith. However - no future for the love-potion proper, you consider?'

'None at all, I'd say.'

'Not even with the backing of a masterly TV commercial?'

'Guaranteeing success in every case? We'd find ourselves up against the Trades Descriptions Act!' Virginia paused, grateful for the silly banter of the exchange, wanting it to go on. Because once it stopped she would have to say good night and go on up the stairs ... alone, knowing with an honesty she had so far denied herself, that she left love behind her ... all she had ever wanted in a man... Ingram—

And then, with his lack of riposte to her last quip, with his sudden silence, the word-sparring *had* stopped, and, one hand imprisoning hers on the newel post, the other at her back, drawing her to him, he kissed her; the pressure on her mouth at first light and exploratory as a boy's, and then experienced and insistent enough to drain all her resistance to it.

Her lips quivered and responded - to a question he wasn't asking, couldn't possibly want to ask of her. Nothing between them had led up to this; from him to her it was merely experiment, born of the easy intimacy of the evening. Perhaps he thought she had expected it and he had detained her idly while he tested her mood and her likely reception of a kiss as empty of meaning or endearment as it was arrogantly expert.

She thrust back from him, ashamed that her need had shown itself so willing, so hungry. ... The back of her hand went childishly to guard her mouth. 'Don't,' she said breathlessly. 'That was - cheap.'

'*Cheap?*' To judge by the swift blaze in his eyes, she might have struck him.

'—and embarrassing to have to forget.'

'And you want to forget it?'

'Of course.' Uttering the lie was almost a physical pain.

'Because it wasn't pure homage? Because it asked something more of you than - condescension? Because it didn't measure up to the standard of devotion you're used to from men? You had Ernst at your feet. Now apparently you've got Bell. Well, like it or not, my Lorelei woman, you haven't got *me*. in at all the same way. I kissed you because I wanted to - just then. When I knew I meant to, I wasn't over-concerned as to whether you took offence or not. And what's more, if all you found it was "cheap", then try *this* for another bit of trivia on my part... and this ... and this—!' he raged, using as punctuation to each last savage word, a hard, deliberate assault on her mouth.

They stood apart. Virginia stared across his shoulder, studiously looking at nothing. He turned on his heel, strode away; turned again at the door to his quarters.

'Whether it helps the situation or not, it could be that you've only yourself to blame,' he flung back at her. 'Perhaps you should have kept me in my place by accepting my offer to take a rent-book after all!'

The door slammed to behind him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

AND she had actually admitted to loving him! Hadn't wanted to part from him, but knowing she must, could still have brought away with her the small delight of thinking about him ... dreaming a little, promising herself even the ordinariness of seeing him tomorrow, and remembering with a glow of pleasure that sincere grip of her hand, as to a friend and partner he valued.

But now what had she? Shame and humiliation and rejection of the love he didn't even know she had for him! He had warned her off even fruitless dreams.

... *I wanted to kiss you - just then.*' The first time, on sheer empty impulse, not caring about what it did to her; the second, no doubt, in revenge for her reaction to the first.

... *'Like it or not, you haven't got me in at all the same way.'* Staking a cool claim to her lips ('because I wanted to') and in almost the same breath, underlining his indifference to her. Oh—! Sleepless, dry-eyed, turning and beating at her pillow, venting the slow burn of her pain on its flaccid shape. Virginia re-lived and re-thought every mortifying moment and word, over and over, until at last she had to face the new morning and having to meet Ingram again.

What would they say to each other? What *could* they say? Where could their relationship go on to, after last night's outrageous scene? She breakfasted alone, dreading the encounter, rehearsing a control of it which, she told herself, she couldn't afford to yield to him. While she waited for him to join her in the office, she conjured pictures of the point of no return to which their conflict might force them; the point at which they might agree to part - with all the consequences of that to the Weinberg Raus and its dependants. And to her. *And to her—*

He came in, his 'good morning' to her a cool formality. Silence followed hers to him. *She* mustn't lose the initiative - *must* not! She watched him go over to the desk, do nothing there and turn. 'Well?'

'Well?' she said, the initiative lost in her limp echo of the word.

The jerk of his head was irritable. 'Well—' this time he made a mimicry of it - 'since you can hardly be filled with bonhomie toward^ me this morning, perhaps I should hear what you are filled with, don't you think?'

(Resentment. Bewilderment. Panic. Love against my will.) Aloud Virginia said, 'I'd have thought I could ask the same of you - with more cause.'

He shook his head. 'You picked the quarrel, I didn't.'

'And you flung the insults!'

'And now we're starting all over again. So what do you want of me? My apology for kissing you without, due notice and permission? Because I'm afraid you won't get it. I've never yet kissed a woman except in tribute to something I liked in her, and if you weren't able to take it in that spirit, then that's too bad, and all I'm prepared to promise you is that it certainly won't happen again like that.'

Virginia swallowed hard. 'You are frank, at least. Though isn't it pretty arrogant - deciding you have the right to kiss any woman who happens to please?'

He shrugged. 'I don't make a habit of it, though I might, if I knew enough women who qualified at any give it moment.' He paused, his glance insolent. 'Previously it has never led to ill-will, and if I'm tactful about it, it shouldn't in the future. What's more, I'll wager you'd

give a great deal to know what moved me to chance my arm last night?'

He waited, questioning her silence. When she said nothing, he persisted, 'But you would rather cut out your tongue than ask?'

She had to answer the taunt of that. "You are wrong. I'm not interested in your - lightning impulses. I only suffered their result - that you kissed me as, say, you might kiss Lisel, and with a good deal less warmth of feeling between us than there is between you and her.'

He shook his head. 'Very little comparison there. I kiss Lisel for various reasons. Because she is used to it. Because if I didn't she'd suffer no false shame about kissing *me*. Sometimes in the same spirit as I'd salute a kitten on its silly nose - because she is young and wholesome and smells nice. Whereas you, last night—' he frowned quickly - 'Oh hell, if you won't ask, I'd better tell you. For one thing, I was applauding your courage. Will you accept that?'

(Perversely - if only she could have heard him say, 'For love'!)'My-courage?'

'In handling the evening. Standing up and saying your piece, for all the fear I know you must have had of the reception you might get. And your flair for keeping it simple, saying it all from your~ heart. And managing to look the part so thoroughly that if they hadn't acclaimed you with one voice as a real Rhine-maiden, then they couldn't have been trying. Well - fair enough? To explain my - tribute, I mean?'

Glowing with reluctant pleasure— 'I suppose so,' Virginia allowed. 'And - thank you. Though wouldn't it have been a shade less ambiguous if you had congratulated me - always granted I deserved it - in a more ordinary way?'

'Patting you on the head, with an appreciative "Well done!"? Would that have been any better in order, from employee to employer, than what I did, would you say?' Ingram retorted.

Yielding because she wanted to, she said less tartly, 'I'd think it could hardly have been *less* "in order", as you call it. And anyway, why stress the employer and employee thing, as you did with that exit line about my keeping you in your place?'

'Because it was written all over your outraged indignation, of course. I had "presumed" on my privileges; I had stepped over the forbidden chalk line between the "not done" thing and the "done". I'd had a pleasant relaxed evening. You had enjoyed a personal triumph. I was glad for you, but when I tried to say so in the warmest, most sincere way I knew - what happened? I suppose I should be grateful I didn't get a slapped face and the classic "How dare you, sir?"! But you achieved the next best thing, I will say. *Cheap!*' His scorn of the word almost flung it back at her.

'You shouldn't forget that you chose to insult me about both Ernst and Paul Bell,' she reminded him.

'I didn't insult you. I only pointed out that I'm not at all in the same category of humble fealty to you as at least Bell is, I suspect. And, I reason, if my shot about him hadn't gone home, you wouldn't have waxed quite as haughtily irate as you did. And I'm right, I think, aren't I? You have got Bell just about where you want him, and have managed it in practically no time at all?'

Virginia flushed. 'Wherever Paul Bell is in relation to me, I think you should take it that that's where he wants to be,' she said.

Ingram nodded. 'As I thought. He's wise enough to tread softly. So no "Down, Rover, down!" necessary for him. However, if this showdown of plain speaking has cleared any air, what happens now?'

Now that I've assured you that you won't be - troubled again? Are we free to go on from here? Or not?'

She stared at him. 'What do you mean - that we shouldn't go on?'

'If you would agree to waive notice, I could be off and away tomorrow.'

That's impossible. You know the place can't be run without you?"

He said coolly, 'Ah, I know it. I wasn't sure you did, and if your outraged pride demanded it, I had to give you the chance to boot me out. So we carry on as heretofore, do we?'

'Of course.' Realizing she had almost been manoeuvred into apologizing to *him*, she added distantly, 'You know perfectly well that, business-wise, I'd be very much to blame if I parted from you on a mere—'

—nonsense like last night's?' he cut in.

She corrected firmly, 'A mere personal misunderstanding. And since that was all it was, it seems, the sooner we both forget it, the better, don't you think?'

He made a mocking gesture of crossing his heart. 'It never happened. You take the very words out of my mouth,' he said. And not until some time after he had done what he had to do in the office and had left, did it occur to her that, for all his frankness, he had not tried to justify the rain of bruising kisses which had followed the friendly impulse of the first. And it was those which she knew she was going to remember all her life.

The June days rolled on, became July, a month of 'mad work, needing four arms', as the local grumble had it. The grapes, set and almost the size they would be at the gathering, were still bullet-hard and opaque, innocent as yet of either 'bloom' or sugar, and the target of the occasional vicious hailstorm of the region. Meanwhile their increasing weight called for support and tying in; the fourth or fifth sprayings of the summer had to be done, and the soil, by ceaseless, dogged hoeing, kept open to air and sun.

Now the tourist traffic was nearing its summer peak. As an alternative to the cable railway there were gaily decked carriages drawn by sleek, heavy horses to carry passengers up the mountains. While the sun shone literally the shopkeepers of Königsgrat made figurative hay with their sales in costume jewellery, carved cheeseboards, musical boxes and peasant-dressed dolls, and all the beer gardens were in greedy rivalry for popularity. From now until the first of the plane and linden leaves fell to the onset of autumn, the river strand would be *en fete*.

Irma Mey, back from her weeks on tour, was staying again at the Drachenhof while she had no other professional engagement in view. Virginia did not know how many of Ingram's evenings away from the villa were spent with Irma, and she was too proud to put the casual question to Lisel. She hadn't a *stake* in Ingram's comings and goings, just because he had become the all-in-all of her day, she told herself fiercely. With no cause at all, he seemed to think he had the right to police her association with Paul Bell. But that was only a sign of the arrogance in him which she half resented, half admired. Without it he wouldn't be himself - Ingram the blunt, the positive, no man's fool...

The puppy Thrush at the Landhaus and his brother Midas at the Drachenhof were growing fast, both in size and in mischief. They met now and then, fought, stole each other's toys, shared the delight of bones, and were apt to fall into pole-axed, exhausted sleep in each other's arms. Thrush was the first to learn house-manners, Midas the

first to hold an ear as erect as his mother's for a full praiseworthy minute. And Hannchen, though she scolded, and always referred to Thrush as 'that hound', became unashamedly his slave.

Virginia could not have said just when she began to think of the villa as 'home'. She only knew that the realization of her ownership dawned some time during the summer, and she found herself looking at it with the critical eye of its mistress, with the right to do this or that for it as she chose.

Her bedroom, for instance. All its oppressive weight of dark furniture, dun-coloured paintwork and thick maroon curtains! It would be folly to dispense with the solid worth of the furniture, but with the foil of cream paint and curtaining no darker than oyster, it would be acceptable and even perhaps attractive.

Lisel, caught on the wing, as it were, for consultation, thought so too, and offered to make time to drive Virginia over to Bonn to choose materials.

Albrecht claimed to be able to do the painting, and Hannchen, torn between her stiff disapproval of the change and her prejudice against the work of professional soft-furnishers, actually offered to make up the curtains herself, once the material was bought.

Virginia availed herself eagerly. And then, when she was expecting Lisel, it was Irma who called for her in the Volkswagen, explaining that Lisel had an unexpected coach-load to cope with and couldn't come.

'It didn't matter. We could go another day,' Virginia said.

Irma crooked an arm over the steering-wheel with an air of bored patience. 'Look, I've taken the trouble to ten out instead. So are you coming or not?'

'Of course. Thank you.' Though she didn't relish the trip in Irma's company, Virginia had no choice. They made commonplace conversation on the way.

'I wonder you don't start a car yourself, instead of having to rely on Ingram or Lisel to take you around,' Irma remarked.

'I had thought of it, but I had decided to wait at least until we see how good a vintage it is,' Virginia said.

Irma laughed shortly. 'I see you're already bitten by the local caution. I sometimes wonder whether anyone here can decide to be born or to die or to get married or even dare to buy a new hat this side of any given vintage!' Virginia agreed, 'I suppose it is a habit that's catching. But I daresay that for most of us it is geared to the idea that if there is a good vintage we can afford to spoil ourselves a bit; if there's a bad one, we can't.' Which seemed obvious enough reasoning to her, but which Irma chose to scorn.

'And who ever achieved very much merely by waiting until they could afford it? I say - Make sure of what you want by shopping for it at once. You may have to haggle terms, but it's a policy that will produce most things - including men.' She threw Virginia a glance. 'We.' 'Us.' 'Ourselves', she quoted back. 'You sound as if you have settled for staying here for good?'

'I think I have.'

'Whether or not you marry? What then?'

Virginia shook her head. 'I married, how can I say? It would depend on where my husband's own work was, wouldn't it?' Abruptly she changed the subject to ask - which of Bonn's department stores would be best for curtain materials.

Irma suggested one or two. 'It is just your own room you are doing over? Nothing to that rather dated salon of yours? Now if that room were mine - In fact, only the other evening I described to Ingram just how I would make it over. Not that I supposed he would pass on my ideas to you. After all, he has to share the place with you, and where the tastes of two women differ, even man-sized men like Ingram have a wary streak to them, I've found.'

'Have you?' Perversely and on the instant Virginia resolved that the salon should remain as it was, and said so, though in milder terms.

' "After the vintage" for that too?' Irma taunted lightly...

Virginia managed a thin, polite smile. 'If then—'

Though her waking of every morning brought a now familiar little shiver of anticipation of the..day's contacts with Ingram, Virginia found a quiet satisfaction in seeing to it that over every gesture or word she exchanged with him, her mind and will were in control; her tacit denial of her secret a small pride to guard.

Thought still ranged; questioned, probed, remembered; knew the truth and denied nothing. But no one was going to guess at the thought which lay beneath the surface of her everyday commonplaces with Ingram - no one at all. And gradually^ as time put distance between the present and *that evening*, the discipline became easier, though the memory stung no less.

First love. Late love. She had found both, it seemed, in one experience. How long, she wondered, before she could look back on it *as* mere experience; profit by having lived through it; be able to say with truth, 'I'm not sorry I suffered it'; put another in its place? Would it take years? For ever? How could she tell? Meanwhile, today ,and tomorrow and as far ahead as she could see, she had to show Ingram

what she was made of; had to keep faith with Ernst, who had trusted her ... who had loved late too.

It was about then that it occurred to her that she owed Paul Bell some return hospitality for the few dinners and cinema visits and morning drinks they had shared, without his ever asking again any more than the friendship she was only too willing to give him. But as Ingram's offer to chaperon an intimate dinner invitation to Paul still rankled, it had to be a party.

The pairing - Paul as her partner; Chris Bell for Lisel, of course; Irma for Ingram, she supposed, and to complete the eight she planned, a married couple, Herr and Frau Kleinhert, whom she had met and liked at the Wine-Blossom Feast.

She foresaw obstruction from Hannchen and got it.

Yes, indeed, Hannchen allowed, Herr Raus had entertained. But always at a restaurant of his choice, thus giving his staff no extra trouble. And was there not enough work already in a house of this size and awkwardness? Stairs, attics, room arrangements which had served Herr Raus well, but which now did not seem to please - Had she, Hannchen Frank, more than two hands? Had Albrecht—?

But when Virginia, dismayed, enlisted Ingram's advice in the deadlock, Hannchen bristled visibly at his suggestion that after years of no practice, she had forgotten her connoisseur cooking and Albrecht his table service, and the situation was saved. Rusty she might be, but good cooks did not forget their art, nor trained butlers their expertise, as Herr Ingram should see for himself. As the Fraulein should see! The result of which was that, between them, she and Virginia agreed amicably on a menu; keys clanked; Ernst's fine collection of silver and china and linen was turned to account; the wines were chosen; the invitations issued and to Virginia's relief, the party was under way.

Then, at almost the last minute, Lisel inexplicably backed out on so thin an excuse that over the telephone Virginia claimed not to believe it, and in fact could not.

'But I've asked Chris for you, Lisel!' she protested.

'Yes, well—' There was a tiny pause. 'Yes, well, I'm sorry,' Lisel repeated. 'That - that's too bad. But Irma will be coming, and it is Father's night for his club in Bonn, and I don't feel I ought to leave Mother alone.'

'But you'd have known which was the Colonel's Club night when you said you would come!'

'I - forgot about it.'

'Even so, *why* can't you leave Frau Mey? It isn't as if she need be alone, with the place full of guests and staff, and your housekeeper at the other end of her bell. Lisel dear, you *must* come! Chris—' Virginia checked. 'I suppose you do realize how disappointed Chris will be, if you don't? You do *care*?'

Another pause. Then - 'Yes ... Yes, of course,' Lisel said quickly. 'And I'm sorry. About disappointing you too. But I really mustn't come. I - can't.' With which, cutting short Virginia's protest of disbelief, she rang off. And though Virginia was tempted to ring straight back in search of the true explanation, she did not, and it was left to Ingram to voice her own suspicions.

'Little nuisance! She and the Bell youth have had a row and she hasn't the poise to meet him and look pleasant when she is feeling daggers,' was Ingram's dry comment.

Virginia agreed, 'That was my guess too. But what do I do now? I *wanted* Lisel for Chris, and it'll leave the table one short!'

'Frustrated matchmaker or frustrated hostess in the ascendant - which?' Ingram mocked. 'However, what do you do? You - a., make Lisel come clean; b., you make her come to the party—'

'She won't.'

'Then c., you call it a day where she is concerned and d., you invite some other girl for young Bell. Always supposing he doesn't give you the thumbs-down too,' Ingram added.

'He'd better try!' Virginia threatened darkly. 'And what other girl could I ask, without appearing rude, at this stage - the very morning of the do?'

'Well, as it so happens, the Kleinherts have a very comely daughter, around eighteen or so. Not much English to her tongue, but enough other assets to make our little Lisel jealous if, as we have reason to think, it's her love-life that is giving trouble. Very salutary exercise for the young — jealousy. Anyway — answers prettily to the name of Greta, this other charmer, and I know the Kleinherts well enough to go bail that they wouldn't be offended in the least by your making a late call for her.'

'Really? Wouldn't they?'

'I'll ring them and explain for you, if you like?' Ingram offered, and did so, to Virginia's relief.

Perplexed though she was, she did not ring Lisel again. If in the evening, Chris showed no surprise nor dismay at Lisel's absence, she would know they had quarrelled and were avoiding each other. Why, was another question, and if Lisel would not confide in her she doubted if Chris would, though possibly Paul Bell might have a clue.

The Kleinherts, with shy, pretty Greta, were the first to arrive. Irma drove up alone; Paul and Chris came, and Chris gave no sign at all of disappointment that Lisel was not there. He was charming to Greta and made her laugh, and in the general conversation Lisel's name did not come up.

They had drinks in the salon before Albrecht announced to Virginia that dinner was served, when they moved to the candlelit table in the dining-room, agleam with Ernst's silver and glass, its centrepiece a low bowl of yellow roses which Virginia had arranged.

It was a good party. Hannchen had excelled herself over the food and Albrecht's table service was faultless. The Kleinherts were a pleasant couple, Paul and Chris easy and relaxed, Ingram an urbane host and Irma a scintillating guest. The round table was small and intimate enough for the talk to be almost wholly general and Virginia had only a brief chance for a private word with Paul about the Chris and Lisel friction - which he confirmed, though without knowing its cause. He was only able to tell her that the youngsters hadn't met for several days and that, Chris, questioned as to the reason, had only replied with a shrug and a non-committal 'Just one of those things.'

At the end of the evening the Kleinherts were the first to leave. The others stayed on for a while and then made their own move more or less in concert.

Virginia and Ingram went out with them into the hall. Irma's fur stole was brought and the intimacy of their meeting hands as Ingram slipped it across her shoulders did not escape Virginia's jealous eye. Paul and Chris said their thanks and congratulations on the evening and went out to their car, and then as Ingram was about to take Irma to hers, there was a diversion in the shape of a scuffle at the kitchen end of the hall, sundry scoldings of '*Böse Hund!*' and '*Eigensinnig!*', and the wicked, wilful dog so addressed broke from Hannchen's grasp, shot between Albrecht's legs, skidded across the polished floor on a

mat and came to a halt on its back, all four paws paddling the air in ecstatic, puppyish delight.

Albrecht followed, apologetic; Hannchen, breathless, continuing to scold. But Thrush, sensing recapture and playing to the gallery, next took refuge under a gatelegged table and chose Irma for the appeal of his liquid brown eyes.

For once Irma, notoriously short of rapport with Lisel's pets, responded. She stooped to tickle Thrush under the jaw, then straightened and addressed Ingram. 'He says he knows it is bedtime, but he doesn't want to go. He wants a walk instead, and suggests that you and I take him. So shall we? It would be fun.'

Hannchen's reaction to that was shocked protest. 'A walk - at this time of night, Fraulein? In the dark? In the woods? No! No! Come, bad dog! Albrecht, bend your bones a litde, and bring him out from under there!'

But Ingram had already stooped for the pup. Dandling him, he glanced down at Irma's evening sandals of narrow-strapped kid. 'You aren't serious - suggesting tramping the woods in those ?' he queried.

Irma followed his glance. 'Of course not. I didn't drive in them - I've some low heels in the car. Yes, I demand that you escort us both for a little way. It's a lovely night, and you can see how badly *he* wants to go!'

Hannchen bridled, as at a slur. 'He *cannot* want to go! He has been out. Every night before his bedtime either Albrecht or I myself—!'

Irma's impatiently snapped fingers cut her short. 'Well, tonight he shall have extra time out - a special treat which I ask for him. He has a lead? Yes? Then fetch it, please, Ingram. On our way—!'

She had already thanked Virginia for the evening and now, with a cool parting smile, she swept out of the front door, telling Ingram over her shoulder that she was going to change her shoes and would wait for him to bring Thrush and his lead.

Grumbling, Hannchen brought it and retired, defeated, to the kitchen quarters. Ingram fastened the check-chain round the wriggling pup's neck and straightening, shrugged his tolerance as he glanced at Virginia.

'The lady is your guest, and the pooch isn't even my dog! However, I suppose hospitality is all—' he said, and followed Irma out, leaving Virginia to wonder just how feigned his show of resignation was.

He and Irma and the pup were not long away. Less than half an hour later Virginia heard them come in and deliver Thrush to the kitchen. After that, silence for some time; no sound at all of the Volkswagen departing. Then at last, movement from below; Irma's husky laugh, the crunch of footsteps on gravel, and Virginia, about to draw back her bedroom curtains, was made free of a tableau she told herself afterwards she should have expected.

It served her right! If tonight, breaking a habit of a lifetime, she had kept her curtains close, she would have been spared the cruel moonlight that showed Irma's hands JO first to Ingram's shoulders and then move behind his head as it bent above hers and as their lips met.

Or had she been waiting to see just that? Expecting it, dreading it, but still waiting to see it - *spying!* There was an answer to that which she did not want to face.

\* \* \*

Two days later there was a note from Paul, and flowers for Virginia on behalf of himself and Chris. Frau Kleinhert rang up to say how much they had enjoyed themselves, what a charming English boy Christopher Bell was, and how much Greta was looking forward to meeting him again. Perhaps he could be persuaded to join them for a week-end's 'camping' up-river in their motor launch? - which had the effect of determining Virginia to find out just what nonsense was afoot between Chris and Lisel and to scotch it if she could. Greta Kleinhert was admittedly a sweetie and her mother innocently kind and well-meaning. But Virginia's own loyalty was owed first to Lisel, *however* obstructive the silly young thing chose to be!

And obstructive to a point of mulishness Lisel was. Taxed that she had ducked Virginia's party only because she and Chris had quarrelled, she admitted it, declaring, 'I'd told him I wouldn't see him again unless he took back something he said.'

Virginia protested, "Oh, Lisel, at some time or other everyone says thoughtless or hurtful things and then are too proud, perhaps, to take them back! You have to make allowances, you know.'

"Not for this kind of thing.'

'What kind of thing? Something unkind to you?'

"Not to me.'

"What, then?'

'Something that Chris had no right either to believe or to repeat, as I told him. Something that has to be a lie. *Scandal*. About — Ingram, if you must know,' Lisel grudgingly conceded.

'Scandal - to do with Ingram?' Virginia's blood seemed to chill. 'What?'

But Lisel had gone as far as she would, claiming with some logic that if she repeated what Chris had said about Ingram, then she would be as guilty as he. It was nonsense. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. But until Chris freely took it back and apologized, then she wasn't speaking to him again. Which left Virginia almost as much in the dark as before, and, for Ingram's sake, considerably more disturbed. Lisel, pressed, refused flatly to enlighten her ('You have no right to ask me. I have told you too much as it is') - and it was not until she herself met Chris in the town that she was to realize why.

She saw Chris before he saw her. As she turned into a side street, he was coming towards her, mooching along with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, pausing once to stare with absent distaste at a souvenir shop's display of cowbells and gaudy Siebengebirge pennants, and again at a pavement cafe, where he slumped down at a table.

Virginia slowed, doubtful whether she wanted to see him, to question him, or not. But she was too late to decide. He had seen her and was standing, inviting her to join him. She went over and took the flimsy chair he had ready for her.

He ordered soft drinks for them both, and when next they spoke it was in chorus.

'I wanted to see—'

'I'm glad you—'<sup>1</sup>

They broke off, their smiles nervous and diffident, and it was Virginia, committed to a showdown, who continued.

'You weren't expecting to see Lisel at my party, were you?'

'No. She told me she wouldn't be there.'

Virginia nodded. 'So I've learned from her since. Also that you had quarrelled over something that you had said - or heard and repeated - about Ingram Ashe. What was it?'

'Lisel didn't tell you?'

'No.'

'And I don't have to.'

'No, though I think you should, if only because for two people in love to quarrel about a third person is pretty silly, and also because, as Lisel says this bit about Ingram can't possibly be true, I might be in a position to clear up the whole thing.'

Chris shook his head. "Not this, you can't."

'Why not?'

'Because—' he moved a spoon from here to there and back again - 'oh, devil take it, it involves you!'

Virginia blanched. 'Involves - *me*? Me and *Ingram* - in the same breath?'

A nod. 'That's right,' he confirmed wretchedly. 'Though you have to know I didn't say it. I'd only heard it in a bar and told Lisel, and she went up the wall, accusing me of believing it just because I had repeated it - and, well - that was that.'

'I see.' Virginia paused. 'And now, for just one more good reason, you'll have to tell me what it was, won't you?'

'You'll hate and despise me for passing it on—'

'Nevertheless, tell me.' Chris told her.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

As Chris finished speaking it began to rain in big coin- sized drops. Waitresses ran to furl the sun-awnings and to carry the patrons' ices and drinks into the cafe, and Virginia was almost thankful for the diversion which gave her that much more time to face the enormity of what Chris had said.

They sat down again at an inside table. There was a long sales-counter beyond Chris's shoulder and avoiding his anxious glances at her, she stared with unfocused eyes at a stand of assorted pastries as she said tonelessly,

'Do you mind? I want to recap on this. These men - none of whom you knew - in this bar - were talking and joking in German, until they noticed you looked out of things and roped you in, and one of them who spoke good English translated for you, and what they were saying was that - that in their opinion Ingram Ashe was playing a very skilful card, patiently biding his time as manager to me while he edged me towards the idea of a marriage of convenience between us, which would virtually give him the ownership which it was pretty *common* knowledge that Ernst Raus had meant him to have? You are quite sure this is what they said? Your German isn't very good.'

'It didn't need to be. I've told you - this bi-lingual chap spelled it out, inviting me to relish it as a piece of news.'

'Which you did, to the point of retailing it later to Lisel.'

Chris protested, 'Oh, come! You've got to be fair. I was shocked. I didn't believe a word of it, and I only took it to Lisel in - well, in good faith.'

'Good *faith*? Scurrilous gossip like that?'

'Good faith,' Chris insisted. 'To see if she knew what was being said about you and Ingram Ashe; to ask her advice as to how it could be stopped and whether or not you should be told. And what do I collect for my pains? The loss of my girl - that's what!'

Virginia's pain snapped back, 'Oh, don't over-dramatize, for goodness' sake! You bought it from Lisel because you didn't reckon with her loyalty to Ingram and to me that had to find a scapegoat - and you were handy. But letting her make a permanent deadlock of an outside issue like this is about as idiotic as her accusing you of malice aforethought in the -first place. No, you're going to sink your pride, force a chance to see Lisel and make it up with her. This - this other thing is my headache now, so please leave it to me.'

Chris looked at her doubtfully. 'But as there can't be a word of truth to it, you aren't going to brood about it? You're going to forget it?'

"Not easy - in the matter of gossip about oneself.' Despise the need as she would, Virginia knew there was a question she must ask. She said carefully, 'When you were telling me the story, you said these bar-pals of yours were emphatic that Ingram had only a - a business arrangement in view because— And you stopped there. Why?'

Chris looked his embarrassment. 'Must you make me tell you? For pity's sake, is there any limit to the caning you're determined to take?'

'I have to know why they were so sure - or claimed they could be.'

'Well, because of Irma Mey. Because Irma wouldn't be likely to stand for Ashe's making more than a business deal of it with you, *but* that, for the sake of what Ashe would gain, she mightn't be above coming to terms with him over it — *her* terms, naturally. So there you have it - the lot. And you've only yourself to blame for making metell you,' Chris concluded on a spurt of defiance.

Virginia agreed, 'So I have. But I had to know the lot.' She stood up, pushing back her chair, and Chris stood too.

'How are you going back? If you'll settle for the Land- Rover, I'll drive you up,' he offered.

'Thanks.' But as they turned towards the shop door it opened and Lisel came in. She stopped at sight of them, her face turned to a frozen mask.

Virginia glanced at her watch. 'Skip the idea of driving me. I'll go up by the next train. I've just time,' she whispered to Chris. 'Go to it now, and for the love of Mike, man, *make sense*?' she begged, and left them together, Lisel making a show of selecting cream pastries and Chris nervously hovering. But looking back through the shop window from outside, Virginia saw him take Lisel by the shoulder, turn her about and march her over to one of the cafe tables.

Strong-arm stuff. That was good. Virginia envied "them their making-up with all her heart.

For herself - what was there? Such deep anger as she had rarely known, and humiliation which she must learn to live down, since there was no way open to her of dispelling it. Such other doubts as she had had of Ingram she had been able to take him, and each time he had quashed them. Fleetinglly she recalled how, sweeping up the ashes of Ernst's abortive will in his favour, she had thought herself free of the last of them. But this one! There weren't any words with which to face a man with the question as to whether or not he was planning a marriage of convenience to oneself, and even if there were, imagination quailed at the answer. No, this suspicion had to be lived through, forgotten - even forgiven in the man one loved if it were true. And was it true? How was it possible to know? How right were the bar gossips as to Ingram's hopes, and on what grounds - if

any? And how much of the rumour had Irma heard and had claimed could be discounted when she-

Virginia's mind darted. What exactly had Irma said? That Ingram was no opportunist; that he would never trade his freedom for a mess of pottage— Of what nature? The trammels of the business marriage which the gossips foresaw for him, but which Irma felt empowered to state flatly he would never make? Yes ...

So if Irma were so sure Ingram would never entertain the idea of any step so 'utterly dreary' - (the exact words stung) - as a loveless marriage to Virginia, that made the gossips hideously wrong.

But it only overlaid one pain by another. If Irma were so confident that she knew better than the rumours, that could stem only from her own sure prospects of marriage with Ingram, and there was less than no comfort in that. A choice between the gossips' view of Ingram and Irma Mey's intimate knowledge of him - either left Virginia out in the cold of doubts which, this time, couldn't be voiced and jealousies which bit deep.

Her first defensive instinct was to run to the refuge of Paul; to brandish his courtship of her a little for Ingram's benefit; to show him that for Paul at least she had romantic value. But she knew she would not deliberately seek out Paul. For one thing, Ingram claimed to need no convincing of what she and Paul were to each other, and for another, she knew she must not exploit Paul's feeling for her as a protection against Ingram's non-feeling. That was un-adult, beneath her pride. No, she had to see this thing through alone and wait for time and the commonplaces of life to blur the edges of this new dismay. Meanwhile there was a degree of irony, wasn't there, to the fact that, with yet another sword between them, Ingram wouldn't know and couldn't be told that it was there?

She was to find that her envy of Chris and Lisel had been premature; that Chris, having successfully convinced Lisel that she had misjudged him, had pressed his advantage by demanding that she marry him and, according to Lisel, refusing to take no for an answer.

She brought her distress to Virginia, replying to the latter's obvious question, 'But *of course* I love him enough, and I'm sure he loves me, though I don't know why. But if we married, he would want to take me to England, and I'd want to go. But I can't. How can I? My people—! They can't run the Drachenhof without me and they have no one else. But will Chris listen? No. He says that there have to be ways round that kind of obligation to parents and - and we began to quarrel again when he suggested I should marry him first and then let him help to sort out the problems afterwards. But I couldn't do that and I told him so,' she concluded bleakly.

Virginia counselled, 'No, I agree, though Chris could be right that, given a bit of goodwill on both sides, there ought to be some way out for you. But he mustn't ask you to marry him secretly unless your people refuse without good reason to let you be engaged.'

Lisel's pretty lips quivered. '*They* claim they have the best of reasons - that Chris isn't serious about me!'

'Then it's up to him to show them he is,' Virginia ruled crisply. 'Has he seen them? Talked to them? Tried to persuade them?'

'They won't see him.' Lisel hesitated. 'I suppose, Virginia, you wouldn't see them? Tell them—? That between Chris and them I am being torn in two? That I can't desert them and yet I daren't risk losing him? Would they listen to you, do you think? Please!'

Virginia shook her head. 'I'm afraid they wouldn't. I doubt if they've forgotten me for once crossing swords with them over you and Chris, and I could do more harm than good if I tried again. No, as I see it, it

must be left to Chris now. And to you, of course - not picking quarrels with him, and backing him up.'

'And if they still won't listen?'

'You must face that when it has happened,' Virginia advised and, at a thought, 'You know, if anyone ought to help you in all this, Irma should. After all, what are sisters for?'

'Irma? Oh, I couldn't bother Irma!' Lisel sounded shocked. 'For one thing, she has never understood about Chris, and for another, she is having bad trouble with her agents just now. They are not getting her enough auditions, which is a lot of worry for her, and she says she would certainly change them if she thought it worth while.'

'If she is dissatisfied with them, why shouldn't a change be worth while?' But as soon as the question was out, Virginia guessed she knew the answer. As Ingram's fiancée and wife, mightn't Irma allow her professional career to take second place? What would dilatory agents matter to her then?

'Well—' Lisel broke off to take up another line of thought. 'Virginia, that story of Chris's that we quarrelled about - you must have thought how stupid and cruel to him I was? But I was so angry for Ingram and for you. I refused to believe Chris would have troubled to pass it on if he hadn't thought it was true. So I told him he could take back every word of it before I would speak to him again, and when he wouldn't, that was how it all blew up. Such insults to you both! Such lies! And just as if Ingram could possibly have planned anything so coldblooded, when he and Irma— Well, they *are*, aren't they, don't you think? On the point of being engaged?'

Virginia said carefully, 'I've wondered myself. But I don't know.'

'Neither do I, for certain. I think Irma could be hoping to marry Ingram, but perhaps that is why she is a good actress - she knows how to keep everyone guessing. Possibly even Ingram too— And though I did try to tease Ingram by asking him when the wedding was to be, all he said was, "When do you think? After the vintage, of course." ' Lisel threw a glance of query at Virginia. You know what he meant by that - "after the vintage"? You know it is something we all say here when we want to put people off?'

Virginia shook her head. 'I know you are always saying it, but I thought it meant literally "after the vintage" - just that.'

'Ah, sometimes it does,' Lisel allowed, "but more often, as you would say in English, "Mind your own business" or "Wait and see." But supposing Irma were to marry Ingram, would you mind very much?'

'Mind? What do you mean?'

'Well, I think you don't like Irma, do you?'

'No more perhaps than she likes me.'

Lisel nodded. 'That's what I thought, and it would make things rather difficult for you both, not getting on with each other. Everything would be different too, because Ingram wouldn't go on sharing the Landhaus, would he? And what about Hannchen and Albrecht? Would Ingram expect them to go with him to wherever he was living with Irma, or would they stay with you? Oh dear—' Lisel sighed as she rose to go - 'you know, it would be so much more *tidy* if you married Ingram and Irma married, say, an influential producer or a famous actor, wouldn't it?'

Virginia smiled at the whimsy of that. 'As you say, a lot "tidier!", though whoever expects or even wants life to be all that tidy?' she countered lightly.

Lisel smiled back in doubtful agreement. 'M'm, perhaps it would be dull. Though I could wish mine weren't^ quite so - frayed at the edges as it is just now,' she said.

Meanwhile in the vineyards the inevitable cycle of growth and ripening was nearing its season of harvest.

The last hand-weedings were done and the seventh and last sprayings completed to a timing which Virginia's inexperience challenged.

'How can you know you'll have done it just a month before the vintage?' she asked Ingram. 'It sounds to me like the directions on a packet of weedkiller— "Apply *before* rain." As if it were possible to tell - in England anyway - when is "before rain"!'

Ingram laughed. 'I admit you have a point there, and of course you can't know to the day when it will be possible to gather.'

'To the day! With the seasons varying as they do, how can you estimate even to, say, the week?'

'Ah, from now to the week is easier - quite possible. You rely on science, flair or old wives' tales; for safety, a combination of all three. Scientifically, you send a grape sample to a research lab and accept the analysis as to when its sugar and acid content will be just right. Flair- wise, you judge by colour, taste, pip size and texture - you get to learn. And folklore-Wise, you start counting—'

'Counting?'

'Uh-huh. Ninety days on from when the first lilies flowered, that'll give the date of the vintage.'

Virginia puzzled, 'Seriously? I'd like to test that. But I don't remember when the lilies did flower.'

'Then try this one for size - a hundred days from when the vines themselves were in full bloom. Equally reliable, they say.'

'But from here I can't calculate that either.'

'No? The date of the Blossom Feast not on record in your diary?'

Virginia blushed furiously. 'Oh, that!'

'Oh, that!' Ingram mimicked. 'Ah, well, who would expect the embarrassments of that night to be written on your heart? However, it happened to be June the tenth, so all you have to do is to read on from there to - at a guess, somewhere in the third week of September. Want me to lend you a pocket calendar?' With which, laughing at a discomfiture which showed, he left her to a deeper ache which did not.

There remained then the last two operations before the gathering. The first - the meticulous removal of any leaves which might be shading the grapes from the sun of the shortening days. And the second, which this year Ingram deputed to Virginia - the recruitment by local advertising in newspapers and shop windows of the army of casual labour which must converge on the vineyards for the gathering.

He warned her that there would be no formal applications for the work, no actual answers to the advertisements. But once the expected date was made public - and it scarcely varied from vineyard to vineyard in the region — the army would move in by river, by road, by rail, by caravan (the gypsies), and by scooter (the students).

The locals would go home each night; those from farther afield would camp in the tents they brought with them or doss down in the stores on the palliasses provided by the vineyard. There would be singing and drinking and pairings-off well into the night, but every morning at dawn the gathering would begin and continue inexorably until

dusk. For speed was all-important - the ideal, a week or ten days for the clearing of a vineyard from first bunch, Jo last; longer than that, the chance of hail or bad weather increased the risk of the dreaded 'grey decay' which could ruin the ungathered crop.

And so September came in, gentle and golden; the grapes hung on the vines in great triangular swags, and Ingram, advising Virginia on the wording of the advertisements for labour, quipped, 'Let's propitiate the old wives, shall we? September the eighteenth - that's our hundred days from we-both-know-when, and it had better prove accurate, that's all!'

Discouraged by his earlier counsel against interfering between Lisel and her parents, Virginia had not appealed again to Ingram for help, and Paul Bell, who might have acted as a kind of special pleader, had gone for a while to Hanover to negotiate with some publishers the translation into German of his forthcoming book. Virginia did not know exactly when he would be back, and meanwhile, Lisel had last reported, she and Chris were having no joy in their problem. Colonel and Frau Mey had consented to interview Chris, but without favourable result. They stood firm to their claim that Lisel was too young for the step of marriage and that Chris was not 'suitable', and there, so far as Virginia knew on a day when the halcyon September calm broke suddenly into storm, their quandary rested.

The gale which had raged since dawn died away towards evening. The setting sun peeped out from behind storm-clouds and Virginia, who had been cooped up all day, watching the rain lash the windows, decided to ask for the charge of Thrush and to take him for a before-bedtime walk.

Thrush, however, had gone down to the vineyards with Ingram, said Hannchen, adding with a critical glance at Virginia's raincoat and headscarf and Wellingtons, 'The woods will be very wet, and it will soon be dark.'

Virginia agreed, 'Yes, I know. But I shan't go far and not into the woods. I thought I would go downhill as far as the Bad Hosel road and make a round of it by the river.' But once outside she changed her mind, and what did that matter to anyone but herself?

The road which led across the hillside to Bad Hosel would be full of traffic and the rides which climbed the slopes behind the villa seemed more inviting. Higher still there were paths which she had never yet explored, though she might not get so far tonight. The summit of these heights was the peak known as the Siegkreis, on a lower shoulder of which the Bells had their camp.

She had been walking for about half an hour, climbing gradually on a zigzag course, when her attention was caught by the sound of vigorous scuffling shortly to her right. She had stopped to listen, wondering what wood creature would be so indiscreet as to make all that noise, when out from the undergrowth bounded a dog, whom at first she greeted with a blank, 'Why, *Thrush!*' though he was not in fact Thrush, but Midas from the Drachenhof. That meant he was even farther from home than Thrush would have been. Innocent of either collar or lead, he was clearly a truant who must be taken into custody and returned.

Easier thought than done, however. At Virginia's invitation he came plunging, but, eyes bright with roguery, ears pricked, he was cunning enough to sense her purpose and lunge for him as she would, he continually managed to curvet and duck just out of her reach. When, breathless with effort, she gave up and tried commanding instead, he either did not understand her stern, 'Heel!' or he had no intention of obeying it. He simply ran on ahead, and she had no choice but to follow while she laid plans for tricking him into capture.

It was he, however, who tricked her. As they came at a climbing angle out on a level and more open terrain leading to a fenced plantation of young conifer saplings, Midas suddenly took scent of something and

raced away, his big- feet scuffing divots of turf high behind him, heading straight for the plantation-wiring which, to her utter dismay, did not give him pause.

It was <sup>six</sup> or seven feet high, close-meshed and strongly staked at intervals. But by ill-luck Midas had come upon it at the point of probably the only chink in its armour — a hole at ground level, just large enough for a half-grown pup's penetration, and penetrate it Midas did, to go weaving away through the thicket of young trees in pursuit of his real or imaginary quarry.

What to do now? Virginia, who had been this way before, estimated the area of the plantation to be about two or three acres - a long perimeter to follow in the faint hope of finding another hole in the fencing big enough for her to get through! But she did circle it for a little way and then came back, deciding her wisest course was to camp near the original hole, calling Midas continually to remind him where it was whenever it happened to be his pleasure to come out.

She called. Sometimes she could hear Midas quartering the area, sometimes not. Now and then he answered her with a preoccupied yelp, more often he ignored her. Dusk fell, all the darker for the hovering storm-clouds, and then, breaking a silence which had strung out for too long, there came a different reply to Virginia's call - a yelp with a note of appeal, a cry for help.

She called again and he answered again, from not far off. But she could not see him and he did not come. Nothing for it then but to get to him — somehow.

She surveyed the hole in the fencing, then set to work with hands and a stone tool to burrow away the light forest loam below it. Presently, fearing the touch of an outraged forester on her shoulder every minute, she had scooped out a small pit and had managed to push the jagged mesh above it far enough inward to enable her to crawl

through the pit and under the wire, face downwards. Another call to the pup; another whimper from him and she traced him quickly, to exclaim with pity as she saw what had kept him from doing more than appeal for help. The pads of both front paws were deeply gashed across, the right one more than the left, but both bleeding badly.

Virginia sank to her knees to soothe him, puzzled at first at the double injury until she realized that there probably had been a rabbit for him and that in pouncing for it he had come down with all the weight of his fore-paws on the jaggedness of some broken glass or shard. And so - as he patently couldn't walk - she must somehow get him and herself out of the plantation and to the nearest help they could find.

Crooning to him, knowing she must hurt him, she thrust back under the wire and straightened, with him ' cradled in her arms.

She calculated. He was a heavy burden to carry all the way back and he had brought her so far that they were now less than a kilometre from the Bells' camp. Paul would not be there, she thought, but Chris might be, and if he were not, he would be returning for the night and could drive her and Midas home.

She cleaned the cut pads as well as she could with her handkerchief and set out, wishing the pup could tell her how he had managed to escape Lisel's vigilance. Virginia had never known him allowed to run wild across the hills or vineyards before. At last she was crunching through the loose scree which served as a drive-in to the camp and was peering ahead for signs that Chris was there.

But the Land-Rover was not standing out, nor was the Volkswagen. Oh dear, that meant that Chris— Suddenly she halted, staring. Something was different; the whole clearing lighter, more open; something which had been against the sky not there any more— Since she was up here l^jt a huge forest tree, a mature ash, she remembered, had been felled or had fallen. *Had fallen* ., / She saw

the great chasm in the soil, the freshly torn roots, the enormous bole brought low, and had just noted thankfully that it had just missed the log hut when she realized with a chill of horror that there was *something* it had not missed. Someone who was groaning was pinned underneath the upper part of the trunk. Chris? She ran, remembering to set the puppy down with care. No, not Chris. Paul, unconscious of his own groaning. *Paul—?*

She knelt beside him, flinching from the sight of the cruel weight upon his lower legs, peered down into his face, touched his hair gently. 'Paul?'

He opened his eyes, turned his head, recognized her and murmured something. What? Something silly, irrelevant ... 'Shoemakers' wives.' *Shoemakers' wives?* It couldn't have been that! Or could it? In a mental flash Virginia finished the adage - 'Shoemakers' wives go the worst shod.' Paul, barely conscious, had found some grim humour by which to tell her what had happened. He, the expert on trees - Chris too; neither had foreseen the looming menace of the great ash literally at their doorstep. Or, Virginia's thoughts amended as she noticed the big coil of foresters' rope which lay near Paul, had foreseen it too late. As he was to manage to tell her later, fearing the risk of the storm's bringing it down, he had been about to train a rope on it when it had suddenly crashed, a glancing blow from its branches knocking him flat, the bole itself imprisoning his legs before he could crawl from the danger.

She touched his hair again and he was conscious. 'What can I do?' she whispered. 'Where's Chris? And where is your transport? Is there any brandy in the hut? Can I get you some?'

'Please-'

When she came back with a couple of rugs and the brandy she supported his head while he drank. The fire of it rallied his strength and his senses and he noticed Midas.

"Your dog? Trouble?" he asked.

"No. Lisel's - the pup Chris is to have. I found him loose on the hills and I've been carrying him since he cut both forepaws. I came on here because I thought I should find Chris. I didn't know you had come back from Hanover.'

Paul nodded. 'Yesterday. I was going to let you know. Neither of the jalopies here, because the Land-Rover is in dock and Chris took the Volks. He should be back any time, but until he does, 'fraid there's no hope for me - I'm stuck fast.'

'Are you in much pain?'

His mouth twisted. "Not so much now. It's more of a numbness. Feet pretty cold. Circulation not so hot, I daresay.'

Virginia worried, 'Do you think we ought to wait for Chris? Oughtn't I to go for help?'

'No. Don't leave me, please, now you've come. Chris can't be long now; it's nearly fully dark. See to your other patient, why don't you? Settle him down in the hut; you'll find first-aid stuff in the cabinet, and then if you're going to stay here with me, bring yourself another blanket and the storm-lantern, and we'll sit it out together.'

When she came back she brought pillows for his head, a deck-chair for herself, more rugs, the lantern and the tea which she had made. He told her then the details of how the ash had fallen, blaming himself for failing to read its warning earlier. Its dangerous list had worsened while he had been away, and though he had known it must be secured

until the foresters could be notified, he had only been able to get to it after the day's storm had abated. While they waited for Chris, they both made an effort to talk of other things. Virginia confided the trouble which still dogged Chris and Lisel's affairs, and though Paul pointed out that the situation was tricky if the Meys' future were really in jeopardy, supposing Lisel left to be married, he agreed with Virginia that it was probably time someone else took a hand.

'They'd made up that quarrel of theirs before I went away,' he said. 'Did you ever learn what it had been about?'

Virginia almost lied. Then, 'Yes,' she said.

'Really? What?'

'Something - very silly. Not even to do with them.'

"Not to do with them? What do you mean?"

She began to wish she had lied. 'Oh, an absurd piece of gossip about Ingram Ashe and me which Lisel accused Chris of believing when he repeated it to her. He denied he believed it; she wouldn't listen. I can only think their quarrel flashpoint must have been only too ready to spark off,' Virginia finished rather lamely.

Paul pressed, 'Scandal about you and Ashe? What was it?'

'Nothing. Utterly no truth to it. And it wasn't scandal, just idle town gossip.'

Paul reached for her hand and held it fast 'And at that, the same as I've heard myself, I wonder?' he queried. 'That Ashe was only biding his time until he could manoeuvre you into marriage for the sake of consolidating his interests in the Weinberg Raus?'

Virginia drew a long shuddering breath. 'You heard it too?'

'And did my best to scotch it in a language not my own. And you? Am I right that you're able to scotch it yourself because you have a pretty shrewd guess that Ashe's plans for his future are something quite different?'

'I -suppose so.'

'And perhaps you not only guess but - fear that he wants to marry Irma Mey? Is that it - Virginia?' Paul's clasp tightened on the hand he held. 'You can tell me?'

There was a long silence. Then, 'How did you know?\*' Virginia whispered.

'Oh, my dear! I love you myself - I've told you so! D'you think I haven't known what it is to *learn* you too? To understand every look you send another man's way?

To listen for and almost always hear a special kind of note in your voice when you speak of him or to him? That vital spark we talked about once — remember? Not there for you in Ernst Raus, you said. Nor in me. But now, unhappily, for you in Ingram Ashe who doesn't care for you in return?'

Virginia's small gesture was despairing. 'I don't know how it happened.'

Paul expelled a sigh. 'Who ever does, or will, even if they get around to trying to computerize it? But what's ahead for you, my love? Isn't it going to make your position impossible?'

'Yes. I don't know. That is, I haven't really faced it yet. I— Don't let's talk about it any more now, need we?' She bent to adjust the blankets over Paul. 'Are you still comfortable? And oughtn't Chris to have been back before this?'

Paul agreed, 'Long since. He didn't say he was going to be late. Meanwhile I could do with some more tea, couldn't you? I wouldn't say no either to another dram of brandy.'

'I'll get it and make some fresh tea.' In the hut once more Virginia was grateful to see that the half of a sedative pill which she had found in the first aid cabinet had worked its soothing effect on Midas who was so lost in sleep that he didn't stir when she bent over him.

While she reboiled the kettle, she looked about her and noticed, as she had not done earlier, a paper which had been anchored under a pile of plates on a side shelf.

She drew it out. It was not folded; it was headed, 'Dad,' and she found herself reading its few scrawled lines in blank dismay. She re-read them. 'Oh no!' she breathed. The kettle began to talk; she withdrew it from the heat and ran back to Paul, taking only Chris's note.

Paul said, 'That was quick work.' And then with wry humour, 'You know, if Chris delays very much longer, you and I could be accused of compromising each other—!' He broke off. 'Why, what's that? What's the matter?'

Virginia knelt by him. 'A note for you from Chris. It was on that shelf you use as a dresser. I can't think why you hadn't seen it.'

'Neither can I, except that I wouldn't have been looking for it. We don't usually communicate by note. But anyway, what about it?' Paul asked.

'He - isn't coming back tonight. He and Lisel— She held the paper for Paul, lighting it for him by the electric torch from her mac pocket.

He mouthed the wording aloud. 'Sorry, Dad, but you've got to try to understand this. I shan't be back tonight, because Lisel and I are going

to be married this evening in Diisseldorf. I've had it laid on for some time and at last I've made her see that the fait *accompli* thing is the only way out for us. It'll work out. It must. Meanwhile, a hotel room for my lovely and me tonight, and we'll be looking for your blessing tomorrow. See you.'

Paul said slowly, 'So that's that. They've decided to jump the gun.'

'And they shouldn't have!' Virginia protested hotly. 'Lisel *promised* me - well, I took it that she had promised me they wouldn't do anything like this. She knew, and I thought she had convinced Chris that it was the very last thing her people would forgive!'

'And Chris appears to have overruled her.' Paul sighed. 'I blame myself. I should have talked it out with Chris before this. But knowing in my bones that he loved her and that she would come to no harm from him, I thought it safe to let it ride. Things must have come to a head for them while I've been away, I suppose.'

'I think they have,' Virginia agreed, 'and Lisel must have given in. Oh dear, why *did* they have to - without telling me or you or anyone?' She paused, wondering whether Paul had grasped the closer-home effect on their own immediate plight.

He had. He put her thought into words. 'No Chris tonight. And so - no tackle to be got on to this thing, which means I'm fastbound till morning.'

'Oh, you can't be! I can't let you bear it!' Virginia scrambled to her feet. 'I'll make you as comfortable as I can and then I'm going down for help.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind.' Paul's tone made it an order. 'You are not - repeat not - setting out through these woods alone at this time of night. However, you are right in one particular. You may make me

comfortable; I'll have that tea *and* that brandy *and* a whole pill of the kind you say you gave the pup a half. And then you're going to leave me and settle yourself in the cabin for the rest of the night. You can have your choice in beds - mine or Chris's. Take your pick.'

'I'm not leaving you.'

'You are.' He reached for her hand again. 'Because I ask it. And anyway, if you stay with me, how do you suppose either of us is going to get any sleep?'

'Sleep? I shan't sleep!'

'Never mind. Try.'

She gave in, and when she returned with his brandy and the tea into which she had dropped the sedative tablet, he said, 'Something we haven't reckoned on — *you* are going to be missed. When you left the villa, did you tell Ashe or anyone where you were making for?'

'Hannchen, yes,' she told him. 'But it was only Midas who brought me up here. I told Hannchen I definitely wasn't taking to the woods. So I'm afraid, even if they do lay on a search for me when I don't go back, it'll be in quite the other direction. Towards Bad Hosel, the river - that way.'

'But they'll search. They must in time.'

'I'm afraid not here. They wouldn't expect me to be here with you - until now.'

As she saw Paul flinch she longed to snatch back the raw tactlessness of that. He nodded and said wryly, 'Point taken. They wouldn't, would they? Even though—' he touched her cheek lightly as she bent to give

him the tea, 'even though I could hope it's the first place they would think of looking for you, knowing you'd be safe for ever with me.'

'Oh, Paul, you're good. I wish—' On an impulse of tenderness and gratitude to him she caught at his hand and kissed it. He turned it within her grasp and its fingers tightened momentarily on hers. But then he let her go and she left him, to return to the cabin alone.

## CHAPTER NINE

THOUGH she obeyed Paul in so far as she snuggled into his sleeping-bag and lay down on his bed, Virginia did not mean to try to sleep.

Lying there in the small light of an oil-lamp turned low, she felt more mentally exhausted than physically by the load of separate worries the hours had produced.

There was Midas, still comatose. She was able to guess now how he had probably played truant. Lisel, she knew, was ever on the watch against such attempts at vagrancy. But that evening Lisel hadn't been at home. Against all wisdom, she had eloped with Chris. They had been getting married, and what were going to be the consequences of that?

She supposed she should be grateful to Midas. If it had not been for him, Paul would have lain where he was all night and longer, untended until Chris had chosen to return tomorrow. And yet what had she been able to do for Paul so far? Little enough, except keep him company. And hurt his spirit— At the memory of her admission to him of loving Ingram she buried her face in his pillow, as if by doing so she could hide the thought from herself.

He had told her he had known; that she had only confirmed it. Was it so patent, then? Was Paul the only one to .guess? Other people too? But not - ah, not Ingram, *please—!*

She forced her thoughts back to Paul. Shock. Exposure. They could have worse results than even broken limbs. She wished she had asked him about the habits of the forest rangers - whether they patrolled by night as well as by day; what hope there might be of one of them looking in at the camp before dawn.

When *was* dawn, anyway? About half past six? But before that there would be light enough for her to set out to bring help to Paul. She must make him let her go—

Ah, *what was that*? She sat upright with a start, listening. Midas, his head lifted at last, had heard it too - the laboured beat of a car on the steep of the road below. Not Chris; it couldn't be. A strange motorist, trying the hazards of the mountain roads by night? Or someone - Ingram? - in search of her? In a flash she was free of the sleeping-bag and was running...

As he passed where Paul lay she flung at him, 'A car! You heard it too? Got to stop it. I'm taking this—'

'This' was the storm lantern which she snatched up to light her headlong scramble down the scree path. Out in the road she faced into the oncoming headlights, swung the lantern and stood her ground. ,

She need not have feared the car's passing her by. It was Ingram's, and he was out of it and standing over her in the split second after he had switched off.

'Virginia! What the *hell*—? What? You said - You told Hannchen—! For pity's sake, woman, you're not a child! D'you have to lie when you want to keep a date with your—? News to me, anyway, that the man was back from - oh, from wherever he took himself to this last fortnight. Not news to you, though? Or was this intended as a surprise Welcome Home party for him? And if it was, why on the run from it - to me? Turned sour on you, did it? Asked more than you bargained to give? Well, you can't say you weren't warned. I told you—'<sup>1</sup>

'*Shut up!* Shut up and *listen!*' Virginia broke into the furious explosion of words with a command which she hardly expected him to obey. But grudgingly he did, at least for long enough for her to explain.

'I *was* only going for a walk, though I changed my mind about going down to the river after I had spoken to Hannchen. How I got up here doesn't matter for now. I didn't mean to come. For all I knew, believe me or not, I thought Paul Bell was still away. But he wasn't. He isn't. I found him here, pinned under a tree that had fallen on him, and he's still there. He wouldn't let me try to go for help while it was still dark—'

Ingram stared down at her, working it out. 'But where's his son, for goodness' sake? Lisel's boy-friend? Why just you - at this hour?'

'Chris isn't coming home tonight, and you'll have to wait to hear about that too,' she told him crisply. 'I've done what I can for Paul. But I couldn't move him, of course, and all we could hope was that someone might come this way before morning.'

Ingram asked, 'They've got rope and tackle? Axes? Saws? That Land-Rover they run? I could use it as traction.'

'No. It's in dock, and Chris has the Volks. They've got all the other things, I daresay.'

'Then come along.' He took the lantern from her and let her lead the way up the scree. She told Paul, 'We're in luck. It was Ingram in search of me.' The two men looked at each other. Paul said, 'Fool thing. 'Fraid I asked for it.' Ingram said, 'Tough. Where can I find your gear?'

He and Paul debated the dynamics of the task, agreeing that as there was no room for manoeuvre, Ingram's car could not be used as haulier for the tree-trunk; it must be cut away by means of hatchet and saw.

Paul said, 'Could be a long job. Are you going to tackle it alone?'

'Me and my shadow,' said Ingram grimly, and set to work.

It was a fantastic scene. The axe swung again and again; the saw bit slowly. Pausing after a while, Ingrain told Virginia to prepare Paul's bed. Once he was freed they would carry him there to rest before attempting to get him to the car.

And then the totally unexpected thing. The sound of another car on the road; its engine cut, and then, on foot, his use of the Volkswagen barred by Ingram's car, came - of all people - Chris!

'What the? *Dad!*' But his effort to take in what was happening got short shrift from Ingram. 'Thought better of your night out, h'm?' he demanded. 'Well, we've got ourselves an emergency, as you see. So now you're here, you can pull your weight on the dual saw, and we'll cut the cackle until we're through, d'you mind?'

Chris obeyed without a word. Between him and Ingram the two-handed saw went to work on the trunk and, for all his, Paul's and Virginia's perplexities of which Ingram was ignorant, it was as if they were all willing to take their cue for action from Ingram.

At last it was over. Paul, wet through and exhausted, though seemingly with no broken bones, had been carried into the cabin by Ingram and Chris, and it was agreed that, with Chris to tend him, his move to hospital for precautionary observation and X-ray could well be postponed until the morning.

The action behind them, the as yet unspoken questions had to be answered. Midas proved a talking point. Virginia explained to Chris and to Ingram how he had brought her to the camp, and then Paul said a single, quiet word to Chris, 'Lisel?'

Chris did not meet his father's eyes. 'She's at home,' he said gruffly.

'At *home?*'

"You heard - at home. Delivered her there just now. So why? You may well ask! What's the German for "waiting at the church", does anyone know? Needed it tonight when I had to tell the hotel to lay off the ceremonial baked meats and the bridal suite. Honeymoon for one - that's a laugh! Could have had myself a real ball, couldn't I-oh, yeah!"

Virginia caught her breath in pity for the raw pain barely hidden by the crude flippancy of the words. Paul told Ingrain, 'Without my knowing, Chris and Lisel Mey had made a pact to elope and get married today. Seems it hasn't come off.' He turned back to Chris. 'What happened, then?' he asked.

'Lisel backed out. She didn't stand me up. She met me as we had arranged, but she couldn't go through with it, she said - not without telling her people. We argued it all the way to Diisseldorf, but she dug in her heels and I had no choice but to bring her back and dump her at the Drachenhof, just as if we'd been out on an ordinary date.'

'You didn't see her people to tell them what had happened?'

Chris shook his head. 'She wouldn't let me. Said it was too late and that she needed to think. All she would promise me was that she would tell them — some time.'

'Which she shouldn't be left to do alone,' ruled Paul. He turned to the other two. 'Seems to me that with this anti-climax they've got themselves a powerful argument in their favour, wouldn't you say?'

Virginia said slowly, 'You mean - Lisel's second thoughts about eloping and Chris's giving in to her ought to show Colonel and Frau Mey that when it came to the point they found they couldn't be as selfish and headstrong as all that?'

'And should get the credit for it, yes.' Paul looked beyond her at Ingram. 'Ashe, you know the Meys. Any comment at all? I'd value one.'

Ingram shrugged. 'It's their problem. But yes - if it were mine, I'd see that I made the backpedalling on the Young Lochinvar bit into a pretty strong case. As you say, it could - just - put over the message that, though they mean business, they aren't entirely deaf to reason from the other side.'

Chris said glumly, 'Well, thanks for not much, the lot of you. You're all talking in theories. Still, how right you are - that it's my headache—' He sighed and looked across at Paul. 'Time we both called it a day and a night, Dad. What d'you say?'

There was some debate about Midas. But as Lisel would probably have concluded that he was safely in his bed, it was agreed that he should be left at the camp, to be delivered at the Drachenhof by Chris in the morning before he was missed. Then Ingram and Virginia left.

In the car Virginia said, 'Tonight you were a lot less neutral about Lisel and Chris Bell than when I tried to get you on to their side. Has Lisel confided in you since?'

Ingram nodded. 'Here and there. Enough, anyway, to show that she's as head-over-ears for him as he seems to be for her.'

'And as he always was. She too. It was love at first sight for them, I think.'

'Huh! Love at first sight. Doesn't happen.' Ingram snapped a dismissing finger and thumb. 'A bit of a yen; a niggling question or two; the impulse to explore - that's about as far as any first meeting ever goes.'

Virginia conceded patiently, 'All right. It doesn't happen, and I didn't see it happening for those two. But since we're agreed that it has now, where do they go from here?'

'Wherever the strength of their case can take them, I suppose.'

'And how far will that be, with the Meys determined not to meet them half-way?'

Ingram threw her a swift half-smile. 'You never give up, do you? Harry, harry, harry; probe, probe, probe - if you'd taken to the law as a profession, you'd have made a fortune. All right, I'm not as obtuse as I may look. "When you've exhausted all the questions, you're going to suggest that I weigh in and persuade the Meys to compromise - right?'

'Well, you've known them long enough. They trust you with Lisel and they must know you have her interests at heart. Besides, it isn't as if they'd be left quite alone. They-'

'—have another daughter?' Ingram prompted. 'But Irma has a career and fully as much right to leave them to marry as Lisel has. In fact—'

'Yes, I know,' Virginia cut in, unable to bear to hear from him the 'fact' of Irma's plans for marriage. 'I know Irma Mey is no solution. I shouldn't have quoted her. It's just that I feel *someone* must do battle for Lisel, or she'll sacrifice Chris and herself for good on the same sort of scruple as she turned him down today.'

'A scruple which we all agreed ought to be used to impress her people,' Ingram reminded her. 'And it could. They're not monsters, you know. Just set in their ways, suspicious of change and affronted by the idea of Lisel's being anything other than the completely *willing* willing horse she has always been. However, if I promise to keep a watching brief on the situation, will you settle for that for now?'

'Of course. Thank you. I know you'll do what you can.'

There was silence then until they reached the villa, when Ingram said, 'You'll find Hannchen beside herself with worry for you. When I reported back after scouring the lower roads and the entire river front in search of you her imagination had you kidnapped, anonymously in hospital and drowned in turn, although when you show up all in one piece, she'll probably take out her relief in a fit of the sulks and a round scolding for us both.'

Virginia laughed. 'Which I'll deserve, even if you don't. I suppose I oughtn't to have changed my mind as to the way I went. Though how could I know it mattered ? And if I hadn't—'

'As you say - if you hadn't. And if the pooch hadn't. And if young Bell hadn't—' Ingram paused. 'Which is my cue for climbdown, I daresay. You know what I'm talking about?'

'I think so. You want to apologize for accusing me of having deliberately lied to Hannchen? Just as if I would need to, simply in order to be free to spend an evening at the camp with Paul Bell!'

"Quite so. But by the time I arrived it wasn't evening; it was night, and the kind of fear that had me by the throat wasn't prepared to mince its words when it thought it was confirmed.'

'Confirmed? By my being safely at the camp - not kidnapped, nor injured, nor drowned— What on earth could you have still been fearing at that stage?'

Ingram's glance flicked her over. 'D'you know, I thought I made that abundantly clear?' he said as he leaned to open the car door for her on her side.

She knew what he meant of course - except that he had chosen his words badly. For it couldn't have been fear which had sparked off his outburst at sight of her. Disapproval, yes. Contempt for the supposed assignation with Paul of which he accused her, yes, perhaps. But fear? Where did fear come into it? The pulse-stopping dread that was fear felt for another person - what had that to do with Ingram and her?

Paul, duly delivered to the local hospital for observation and overhaul, was detained for a day and a night and then discharged into Chris's care. Virginia, shy of the confidences he had drawn from her during their vigil, sent him her good wishes by Chris, and he sent back his thanks. He followed them up with a note. He would be driving again in a day or two. Might he hope she would spare him some time for him to take her out? Where and when, she had only to say. He was at her call.

But this she did not want. With her avowal of loving Ingram, she felt she had ceased to deserve Paul. She hoped she had never made use of him as a bulwark for her pride. But now he knew what she knew - that with no possibility of love growing out of friendship, there wasn't much future even for friendship. It wasn't fair to Paul...

So she did not answer his note with the Yes she would have given him earlier. Now it seemed important to free him of all obligations to her as soon as possible. So she wrote back briefly—

'Please - I'd rather come to see you, if I may? Expect me some time tomorrow afternoon. I'll walk up and perhaps Chris will be around to drive me back.'

On the long climb she tried to rehearse the scene ahead of her. Would Paul understand what she had come to say? Would he make it easy or

difficult for her to say it? Dreading it, she was not to know that, in his own way, Paul would say it for her.

For when she arrived she found him making preparations to strike camp. He had written to her, he said, hoping to give her dinner and an evening before he left for England in three days' time. He had a lecture session starting very shortly and he had students to interview before it did.

Perversely, though his going solved much for her, Virginia was taken aback. Her thoughts had made use of him even if her actions hadn't, and she was going to miss him, she knew.

She protested blankly, 'I had no idea you were leaving so soon. I thought you would be here until after the vintage. They plan to begin ours on Wednesday, and if the weather holds, it should be over in ten days. I'd hoped -

Do you mean Chris is leaving too?'

'That's in the balance. I hope not. It all depends on how things go for him and Lisel, opposition-wise. Anyway, he still has three weeks or more before he is due to report for his job.'

'But you must go?'

'Well—' Paul hesitated, 'I'm not saying I couldn't have twisted the arm of necessity a bit. But I didn't suppose you would want me to, and I think your reluctance to dine with me even once more showed that you don't — eh?'

'Oh, Paul—!' She couldn't deny it. And yet—

She might have known he would understand. 'I know,' he agreed. 'I'm not the man you want, but it has helped you to have me around. We've

achieved some friendship at least and I'm - well, almost content with that. But you do see, don't you, that at this point it's best that I remove myself from your scene?'

She nodded sad agreement. 'Yes, of course you're right.'

'Though perhaps only "at this point"?' he amended. 'By which I mean, when you've sorted things out and maybe reached some decisions that are hard to make, may I hope that you'll let me help again - if I can?'

'You mean supposing I'm torn between staying and going away myself ? No. If ... when I have to decide that, I must do it alone. I mustn't come running to you for advice about that. It wouldn't be fair.'

'Fair!' Paul scoffed. '*Fair* — between you and me? Couldn't you let me be the judge of that? And so — at least you're going to let me know the size and shape of the problem "if ... when" it arises? You'll promise me *so* much?'

Virginia stood firm. 'No. When the time comes, I must make the decision myself. Though I will promise to keep in touch and let you know what I've done - when I've done it.'

'And I can hope that later on you may come to England and let me see you again - even if it has to be much later on?'

She sighed. 'I don't think my particular crisis can be so very much later on from now.'

'No? Meaning—?' Paul prompted.

'I'm only guessing. As far as I know, there's no official engagement between Ingram and Irma Mey. But when Lisel asked him, partly in joke, when the wedding would be, he told her "After the vintage," and though Lisel claims that meant "Mind your own business", I think it

could be literally true. And if it is—' Virginia broke off, lifting her head to listen. 'A car. Would that be Chris coming back?'

Paul nodded. 'Yes, that's the Volks.' Upon which the little runabout came roaring and bucketing up the scree, slewed to a halt, and Chris, at the wheel, lifted two exultant thumbs aloft before leaping out.

'Done it!' he crowed. 'In the bag. Got me my girl at last! Only snag - after the last fiasco, she's got a thing against being married by licence. Now it's the whole works - white gear, wedding-cake, bridesmaids - the lot. Anyway, what the heck? It's going to get *done* - and with the in-laws' blessing. So what about that for a good day's work, huh?'

Paul and Virginia erupted in astonished chorus.

'They've given *in*?'

'Chris, you haven't antagonized them? They are happy about it?'

Chris grinned smugly. 'As Larry, apparently. All right, my patience *was* pretty well exhausted. I *was* prepared to read the riot act. And then - surprise, surprise — on being summoned to the Presence, I was graciously told they were now more convinced of my goodwill; in fact, they had had it in their mind to retire at the end of the season, and having now reached a firm decision, they saw no reason why Lisel, etc., etc. And as you may imagine, I proceeded to lay on the goodwill like crazy, and we parted - well, let's say, guarded good friends.'

Paul's comment to that was a dry, 'Well, well!' and Virginia queried eagerly, 'Did they say what had persuaded them? Why they had had this change of heart? Was it because—?'

'Because, as you and Dad and Ingram Ashe suggested, they rather warmed to me for agreeing not to go through with the elopement? Lisel too, for not letting them down?' Chris nodded. 'Yes, could be.

But the bit about selling up the Drachenhof and retiring to some Mediterranean sunspot - that, more than somewhat, had Ashe's doing behind it, I gather. The decision - all their own unaided work, they were careful to assure me, but he had given them "most valuable advice".'

Paul glanced at Virginia, his jerked head indicating Chris. 'Did you know Ashe meant to weigh in on this character's side?'

"Yes. That is, I asked him to. He didn't promise that he would,' she said. And then the question she couldn't resist asking Chris, 'Did Colonel or Frau Mey mention Irma - what she would do when they sell up and go away?'

Chris said carelessly, 'Not that I remember, though maybe I wasn't listening. Anyway the Drachenhof has never been more than a kind of bolthole for her between professional tours, has it? Never the be-all and end-all it had to be for Lisel until yours truly came along. No, I don't think even my sweet Lisel is going to lose much sleep lest Irma should be left high, dry and homeless. In fact, according to Lisel, there's something more than afoot between Irma and your manager.'

Virginia avoided Paul's eyes. 'Yes, Lisel wondered about that to me,' she told Chris, then changed the subject to ask him his immediate plans. 'You'll stay for the Konigsgrat Wine Festival on the third of October, won't you? It's timed for when the majority of the local crops are in, and as a get-together, Lisel says it's quite something.'

Chris grinned. 'If it's half as profitable for me as that other affair - the Fools' Masque, I'm not grumbling! Yes, I'll be here, though I'm due back in England a day or two later, leaving Lisel behind.' As they went on to discuss other things, among them the hoped-for date of the wedding, Virginia noticed that Chris did not try to dissuade Paul from his leaving as planned. She would rather have expected him to, but it

was not until Chris was driving her back to the villa that she was to learn why.

Paul's parting from her had been characteristic - as restrained and gentle as his courtship. With Chris looking on, he had merely gripped her hand very tightly, whispered, 'Remember - "if ... When" - won't you?' And at the promise of her grateful smile, he had let her go.

It was not until Chris had drawn up at the villa that he said abruptly, 'A pity about you and Dad.'

Virginia glanced at him shyly. 'You know?'

'Wasn't very difficult to guess from the start, and when I asked him, he didn't deny it. But it isn't on for you? When did you tell him so for certain?'

'I think he accepted it finally on the night he was injured. We had a lot of time for talk.'

'That's what I thought, because as soon as he came back to camp from hospital he told me he was off, and why. And though, I'd give a lot for him to stay and whoop it up with Lisel and me for a bit, it didn't seem fair to persuade him, once he had decided to cut loose and go. But it's still a pity. So why? He's in love with you; he's lonely; he's not all that old, and I'd back him to make you happy. Or is it that you can't yet forget that other chap ~ the orrfe who died, I mean? Did you have to refuse Dad because you are still in love with Aim?' Chris urged with a persistence which Virginia's own concern for Paul had to forgive. Chris cared. Newly happy himself, he was doing all he knew to save Paul from being left out. Feeling she owed him a part-truth of the whole she had told Paul, Virginia confessed, 'No, it wasn't because of Ernst Raus. But it was - something like that. Paul did accept and understand that I couldn't marry him because I - love someone else.'

Chris made a sympathetic noise. 'Tough. Someone who isn't for you?'

She achieved a thin smile. 'That's right - someone not for me.'

'And so neither you nor Dad would settle for second- best?' Chris nodded, almost with satisfaction. 'Yes, that figures, I'd say, though it still doesn't save it from being an awful pity, a wicked waste. But, thanks for putting me a bit more in the picture, even though I don't pretend to understand.'

Nor did he, thought Virginia as she lifted a hand to wave him away. For Chris, bless his youth and his present rapture, saw love as something only to be used, enjoyed, shared with Lisel. Less than that, however ungrudging, however disciplined, it was a dead thing; a waste of spirit; of no value at all.

## CHAPTER TEN

As Virginia entered the house Hannchen came through from the kitchen to say that Lisel had telephoned several times and now hoped that Virginia would ring back as soon as she came in .

Lisel, impatient to break her splendid news! It was going to be like snatching a toffee-apple from a child to have to admit that she had already heard it, thought Virginia. She thanked Hannchen for the message. 'I'll do that,' she promised, then noticed the smoothing of Hannchen's hands down her skirt which usually meant she had other subjects to broach.

Virginia met her eyes expectantly, waiting. Hannchen cleared her throat. 'Another thing, Fraulein. You have a few minutes to spare?' she asked.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then - the matter of the Vine Mistress for Wednesday's gathering. I spoke to Herr Ingram about it, to ask him what his wishes ... yours, rather, were this year, but he said it must be your decision; I must consult you myself.'

Virginia was nonplussed. 'The *Vine Mistress*? What's that? Or should it be "Who"?' she queried blankly. 'I don't understand.'

Hannchen's stare was equally perplexed; her '*Aeh!*' sounded displeased. 'You mean, Fraulein, that Herr Ingram hasn't explained the matter to you? And you have heard it from no one else?'

'Not a word. Tell me,' Virginia invited.

Hannchen's checked gingham hips were studiously smoothed again. 'He should not have left it to me. If he had told you himself, then

nothing necessary but your Yes or your No to this plan or that I should not have questioned your orders, I assure you. As it is, it makes an awkwardness for me. You could think I want to put myself forward!'

'Nonsense!' Virginia disclaimed, then tried appeal. 'Look, I really don't know what we are talking about. So won't you tell me, please?' .

Hannchen made a last ditch stand for the proprieties. 'It should not be my place,' she said. 'But it is this— An old custom of the region; an empty one, you may think, but one that has always been kept up in the Weinberg Raus at least - that for each year's vintage there should be a Mistress of the Vines, sometimes a senior woman of the vineyard owner's household, sometimes, if he has one, his wife. And as you know, Fraulein—' more hip smoothing - 'Herr Ernst Raus had no wife.'

Virginia began to see light, if dimly so far. 'But he still kept up the custom? And perhaps you—?' she probed gently.

Hannchen nodded. 'I, yes. For almost as many years as Albrecht and I were with him. Always I acted as Vine Mistress to his workers - every year without fail until he died. No one to question his choice of me, no one with the right to be jealous. For without me, who otherwise was to play the part? He had no one else to turn to, he would say to me. And that I knew for the truth. He had no one close to him at all until you—' She broke off. 'Herr Ingram should have told you this, Fraulein. To force me to say it to your face was not fair.'

Touched, Virginia said, 'Well, perhaps not, though does it matter so very much, so long as I understand? By which I mean that, since you have been the Vine Mistress for all these years, you surely can't think I would put someone else in your place ?'

Hannchen pursed her lips. 'It could be so. You might choose to play Vine Mistress yourself.'

'As if I should, especially when I have no idea of her duties or the part she plays!' Virginia scoffed. 'An old custom, you say? What a lot you seem to have: How does this one go? I ought to know, oughtn't I, in case I do or say the wrong thing?'

Hannchen shrugged. '*Ach*, this one nowadays - it is a nothing, though at one time it was an importance. Now it is only a special costume to be worn, a small honour to be prized. For this riff-raff of workers who will arrive for the vintage, vagabonds though many of them may be, nowadays they all know their rights - the pay they should get, the hours they should work and how much free wine they are allowed. But while it was not always so, then they had the Vine Mistress to turn to, to act between them and the vineyard managers. As, though not often, she sometimes does now, if anyone brings to her a grievance.'

Virginia registered mentally - In other words, for Vine Mistress read shop steward! Aloud she said, 'I see. And though she has few duties now, I suppose the Vine Mistress has to be there in the vineyard throughout the gathering?'

'Every day, like everyone else. As you yourself, Fraulein, no doubt?'

'Oh, yes, I shall be there. I wouldn't miss it for the world,' Virginia declared. 'But this special dress you mentioned - what is that?'

'Just the time-honoured costume of the region. You will know it from the dolls they sell in the town to the tourists - the full skirts - *so*, the bright apron, red or yellow ,or blue, the little jacket with lacings across the bosom, the puffed sleeves of the blouse. Very smart and meant for easy notice by all - the Mistress moves about the vineyard,

you understand?' Hannchen paused, then \_ added, 'Naturally I have such a costume by me, Fraulein. But if—'

Virginia cut in vigorously, 'If nothing! You have the dress. You've always played the part. Everyone knows you. So how could I possibly find anyone better than you as Vine Mistress for this year too?'

'If you say so, Fraulein.' But Hannchen had more to say on the subject herself. 'You will understand that, as Vine Mistress, I have certain rights too?'

'I'm sure you have. Such as?'

'Well, for example, though I am there in the vineyard all day, I am not expected to cut a single bunch of grapes.'

Though Virginia was tempted to retort, 'In that get- up? Who would ask you to?' Instead she said gravely, 'Of course not. And—?'

'And also it is my privilege to tie the wreath of vine- leaves to the last drayload of the vintage. And you, Fraulein, as owner of the Weinburg Raus, must present me to the Emperor Charlemagne for decoration on the night of the Wine Festival.'

Virginia blinked. (Which century was this, for goodness' sake?) Her faint echo, 'To the - *Emperor Charlemagne*?' brought a rare chuckle from Hannchen.

'When he crosses the golden bridge to give his blessing to this year's vintage and next season's ripening. *Ach*, just a man of the Festival in the image of the Emperor, no more, of course! But the old ways die hard, they say, and at the Konigsgrat Wine Festival there has always to be a Charlemagne.'

'And I shall be there to present you to him,' Virginia assured her.

'Then it is so? I am to be Vine Mistress after all?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you, Fraulein.' Virginia thought that momentarily Hannchen's firm thin lips had quivered with pleasure. But she had the last lofty word.

'All the same, it was Herr Ingram's place to remind you of the custom, not mine at all,' she said, leaving Virginia with the impression that though she had gained favour with Hannchen, Ingram's stock had gone down. Well, at least it made a change!

The telephone call to Lisel occupied the line for a very long time. Virginia's teasing 'Well, Fraulein Mey, what can I do for you?' brought such a torrent of happy babble from Lisel that if Virginia had not already had the facts of her news from Chris, she doubted amusedly if she could have sorted them out from Lisel's incoherence.

Lisel began sentences, didn't finish them. Switched from English to German and back again. She was so happy, it wasn't true. She thought she must be dreaming. But she wasn't, was she? She was so sorry for people who weren't in love; for anyone who wasn't going to marry Chris. *England!* And married - before *Christmas!* And yes, the parents, quite pleased and even rather glad to be retiring from the Drachenhof. *Bless Ingram! Dear Ingram!* If it hadn't been for him— The only cloud in Lisel's sky, the very short time left before Chris, as well as his father, had to go back to England. But he would be back, and meanwhile she had him for a few more days, and there was the Wine Festival to look forward to. They would all be at that, because everyone was - Ingram, Chris, Irma, Virginia, herself— And so on - a tide of happy anticipation that Virginia hadn't the heart to stem with mere mundane remarks or questions.

Ingram came in before Lisel rang off. With a hand over the mouthpiece Virginia mouthed 'Lisel', but when, in Lisel's next pause for breath, she offered him the receiver, he waved it aside and presently even Lisel ran out of vocal rapture, and rang off.

Virginia turned to Ingram. 'You worked some magic there,' she said.

He shrugged. 'Little enough. As I told you, the Meys aren't deaf to all reason, though I doubt if I could have done much with them if they hadn't already been halfway to a decision to retire. All I did was to applaud their good sense and oil a few other wheels—' He broke off abruptly. 'What's this about Bell senior's leaving at once? Did you know?'

'That he would be going back? Yes, of course. So did you - that he and Christopher were originally only here for the summer.'

"Yes, but *now*? Before the boy goes, I mean?"

Virginia said evenly, 'I didn't know until today. I walked up to the camp and he was packing. He leaves on Friday. I shan't be seeing him again.'

'And?'

'And what?'

"You know perfectly well what!" There was an edge to Ingram's tone. 'A man takes up with you; you go about with him all summer. Questioned, you're cagey as to what there is between you; he suddenly rides away at no notice at all. So why shouldn't your friends ask "And—?", meaning, naturally, "What happened?" Or, more to the point, "What comes next"?'"

'As long as you feel you have the right to ask - nothing comes next.'

'Nothing? He hadn't marriage in mind? Or he had, and you turned him down? Which? And why?'

'Because I didn't love him. I respected him; I liked him enormously. I'm grateful and proud that he wanted to marry me, but I'd have cheated him if I had said Yes without loving him enough.'

'You engaged yourself to Ernst. But you didn't love him either.'

'We were *not* engaged!'

Ingram shrugged again. 'All right, you weren't engaged, and of course Ernst didn't live long enough to persuade you otherwise. But this fellow Bell - he took his discharge just like that, without trying or promising another shot across your bows?'

'He didn't badger me, if that's what you mean. He accepted the reasons I gave him.'

'Reasons? You had a list of the things?'

But before Virginia could answer the impertinence of that the telephone at her elbow rang. She took up the receiver, listened, then handed it to Ingram.

'Irma Mey. For you.'

Before she left him she heard him say, 'Yes, guilty. Yes, I'll Explain All, as the saying goes. Tonight? Yes, eight. I'll collect you.'

He was to be so late returning from that rendezvous that Virginia, listening for his car until after midnight, did not hear it drive in.

All through the next day and well into the night the 'army' moved in. Whether Or not the latecomers got any sleep at all was anyone's guess, but by the time the mist was rising from the river in a cloudy dawn the combined clamour of dozens of transistor radios made a cacophony which penetrated to the villa from the vineyards - Hannchen, resplendent in her gown of office, equipped against the sun with a straw coolie hat and against possible rain with a coach umbrella, went to her duties a little later. Albrecht had already gone to help with the serving of the first of the many meals with which the gatherers would be wooed throughout every day of the vintage.

The dawn meal was black coffee, bread and a local cheese. At nine there would be soup, more cheese or sausage, washed down with wine. At noon, the same again with the addition of cold meats, a mid-afternoon snack, and at the day's end there would be a huge meal of soup, meat, cabbage, pudding and coffee, and a great deal more wine.

Only the midday meal was taken at the side of the vineyard; all the other food was carried to the workers in panniers and baskets to be eaten with scarcely a pause in the busy snip-snip of the secateurs.

The atmosphere was one of feverish but ordered urgency and infinite care. Time was all-important, but a bruised bunch of grapes was a bunch lost to the winepress, and a missed bunch was a moral disgrace not easily lived down. Each row of vines was cleared by two pickers on either side of it; their filled trugs carried away and emptied by porters into huge sixty-kilogram baskets at the end of the rows. The rhythm of selection; cut; empty basket; filled basket and exchange was almost perfect.

In the matter of dress for the job, anything went; the coolie hat almost a uniform; dungarees, T-shirts, overalls, bare torsos, a matter of personal choice. There was noise, backchat, the odd argument; the transistors cancelled out each other's programmes, and the singing,

encouraged by the foremen on the score that singing mouths weren't at the same time eating illicit grapes, would be tried out by a lone voice or two, taken up by the crowd and roared or bawled wordlessly all over the vineyard.

In the Weinberg Raus yards Hannchen, a kind of minister without portfolio, paraded her territory all day, and out on the open slopes the vintage flags, flown to show that gathering was in progress, fluttered out bravely or wrapped themselves round the flagpoles of almost every hillside vineyard of the region.

This was the pattern which Virginia was to wonder at, to learn and to share throughout days which stayed blessedly fine and through a yield of grapes about which even the local caution allowed, the good showing of last winter's ivy had not lied. ... And so to the last day, one day's gathering behind the neighbouring Weinberg Wassermann, but beating the Weinberg Treves by an estimated two.

The sun was low when everything stopped and everyone gathered for the departure of the last lorry-load for the communal despatch centre. The lorry's engine ticked over gently. Hannchen's moment had arrived. Someone brought her a wreath of vine-leaves which she fixed to the tailboard of the lorry, and as it moved off at walking pace only, she headed the procession, armed with buckets, shovels, trugs, secateurs, which lined up behind it for its ceremonial progress to the road.

Ingram - for ten days or so a figure glimpsed on its way here, there, but never present anywhere for long; a name in demand, the key-man of the enterprise - was actually at last at enough leisure to take Virginia casually by the hand and fall in with her behind Hannchen.

Inevitably she recalled another procession in which they had walked together - side by side in the cortege which had followed Ernst to his grave. And the wrinkled, winter-dry leaf which afterwards had clung

to her coat and which Ingram had brushed off with a cryptic word about the Siegfried story. 'A linden leaf over the heart.' Well, its threat had betrayed her too. ... Knowing Ingram was looking straight ahead, she glanced up and obliquely at him, remembering the strangers they had been then. But except for her own awareness of him, were they much more than strangers even now?

The lorry drew up at the exit to the road. The queue halted behind it. More ceremonial, evidently, Virginia supposed, as Hannchen stepped forward, unhooked the vine-wreath from the tailboard and after a moment's hesitant glance at Ingram, draped it round Virginia's neck.

The crowd cheered. Virginia coloured and stood, embarrassed. Hannchen looked doubtfully again at Ingram.

'The Fraulein does not know,' she said.

'Why not? You should have told her the whole drill.'

'No, *you* should have told her, Herr Ingram,' Hannchen came back at him with spirit. 'Besides, it is different now. She could think me bold to expect it.'

'Nonsense. She is the owner, and it is your right, isn't it?' But as Hannchen still hung back from whatever was supposed to come next, Ingram queried, 'No? Then, as it is rather different now, shall we bend the rules a little? Like this—?' And before Virginia could protest he had taken her face between his hands and had kissed her full upon the lips.

Over his shoulder Virginia glimpsed Hannchen beaming approval and the effect upon their audience was a chorus of catcalls, long-drawn wolf-whistles and encores. The lorry moved off, gathered speed and was lost in a cloud of dust, and Virginia whispered to

Ingram, 'Do you mean, at that point Hannchen was supposed to kiss me and was too shy?'

He shook his head. 'No. You, as owner of the vineyard, were supposed to kiss *her*. But as honour is satisfied and *somebody* got kissed to the evident approval of the assembled company, does it matter all that much who - or by whom?'

She raised her eyes to the mockery in his. *{Play it lightly. It's only a game.}* 'Since it's always been her privilege, I'd have thought it mattered to Hannchen quite a lot,' she said and, leaving him, went to kiss Hannchen firmly on either cheek. That done to more public applause, she lifted the vine-wreath from her own neck and hung it round Hannchen's instead.

Hannchen protested, 'No, no, Fraulein, it is yours. You keep it until the last leaf is dry!'

But Virginia would not take it back. "No. As you say, things are different now, and in future you will keep it until the last leaf is dry - *Mistress of the Vines!*"

Her reward was in the flush which turned the russet of Hannchen's cheeks to deep rose and in Ingram's mutter behind her of, 'Good for you! At a guess, you've got yourself an ally for life.' Even by the next day the stripped vines had an air of being tired, spent, the leaves they still carried already yellowing as their sap receded and the whole cycle of their life made ready for another winter's sleep.

Two days later there was rime frost on the ground, jewelling the spiders' webs and giving a bite to the air. That was the day before the Wine Festival and the day when Irma made a surprise visit to the villa, asking for Virginia.

Virginia, in the kitchen, learning from Hannchen how to make the perfect *Apfelstrudel*, queried, 'Fraulein Irma Mey? To see me, not Herr Ingram?' But assured by Hannchen that Irma had indeed asked for her, she washed her hands and went through to the salon, only realizing from Irma's ironic glance at her white cook's apron that she had forgotten to take it off when leaving the kitchen.

Self-consciously she untied the apron. 'I'm taking lessons from Hannchen in German cookery. You wanted to see me?' she asked.

'Before I leave, yes,' said Irma.

'Before you - leave?' Virginia's echo sounded stupid, even to herself.

'For my autumn tour with the Geigsberg Players.' Irma paused as if in invitation of Virginia's awe at the name of this internationally known group, and when Virginia said nothing she went on, 'I shall be away until our season closes at Munich in the New Year, and before I went I thought I'd like to know just how much responsibility you are prepared to take for this mad decision by my people to encourage Lisel to marry this youth of hers and to break up their home - and mine, incidentally, for as long as I may need one - against all sensible advice to the contrary?' Another pause. Then, 'Well, you had a hand in it, didn't you? You'll admit that, at least?'

Virginia denied indignantly, 'I'll admit nothing of the sort. Your people's decision was their own. They told Ingram so when he thought he would have to plead Lisel's case with them. But he hardly had to. They had been touched and impressed by Lisel's and Chris Bell's second thoughts about their elopement, and they had even been discussing retirement for some time. But I'd have expected them to have told you all this themselves.'

'And expected me to believe they weren't just saving their pride in face of Ingram's badgering and your complicity behind him? Oh,

come, you must think me simple!' Irma scoffed. 'Anyway, you won't deny you've encouraged and plotted for Lisel? You told me yourself you meant to do that!'

'If I remember, I only told you I wouldn't promise to discourage her,' Virginia corrected coldly.

'Pff! What's the difference? *Not* promising me made you free to run straight back to Ingram to enlist his help, didn't it?'

'Help which he refused to give at that time—'

'Which didn't deter you from keeping on at him until he did give in later, with the result we have now and which I wouldn't put it past you to have foreseen - my people pushed into agreeing to Lisel's marriage, the Drachenhof sold, and they, at their age, heading off, goodness knows where!'

'By their own choice. And even if I had been able to scheme for Lisel, how could I possibly have supposed that her leaving home would free the Colonel and Frau Mey to take steps they had had in mind for some time?' Virginia retorted with a logic she felt even Irma could not deny. But Irma had her reserves of fire. 'Possibly you couldn't - unaided,' she admitted. 'But Ingram could have told you - and very likely did - what might happen if Lisel went off, leaving the parents flat without her help. And if they were forced to give up, you'd have argued, that might well get rid of me too. Which would have suited you very well for quite some time now, wouldn't it? And now that it has happened your way, and the Drachenhof is to be sold as soon as it can find a buyer, you can feel you have disposed of me - of the fear of me - rather successfully. Right?'

Virginia shook her head. 'I'd be very naive if I thought that, the Drachenhof or no, you weren't free to come to Königsgrat exactly as

and when you please. As for any threat you have for me - what do you mean?'

'Must I spell it out? You've fallen for Ingram. He hasn't shown his hand, and you have been afraid for your very life that I might get him - for love - before you did. Well, let me set your mind at rest by admitting that I was wrong and the gossips who've said Ingram knows very well what he is about were right. And so, though I haven't got him for love, neither have you, my dear. But marriage-wise—' Irma paused cruelly - 'ah, that's different. There you *have* got him - if you're prepared to take him on his terms. About that naturally I wouldn't know.'

'I see.' Virginia steadied her voice with difficulty. 'When you hinted as much once before, I didn't know what you meant. But I've heard the gossip too now. You are saying that you know Ingram means to ask me to marry him? He has told you so, in fact?'

A nod. 'The last time I saw him - just before your vintage lark.'

'In cold *blood*? Without - without even pretending to love toe? Simply for his own advantage with regard to the property, as the gossips said? I - I don't believe it. Not Ingram! He - he *couldn't*.'

Irma's small gesture was pitiless. 'Please yourself what you believe. But if he does ask you - when he asks you, rather - whatever show of passion he puts on, you aren't going to know, then or ever, what to believe of him or what not - are you? Not a very comfortable climate for marriage - h'm?'

'Not — very.'

Irma stood and picked up her bag. 'Though that's assuming the unthinkable - that, knowing what you know of his motives, you

would -dream of accepting him. Because you aren't fool enough for that, are you?'

There was so long a silence that Irma, apparently sure that she had had the last triumphant word, had moved down the long room towards the door before Virginia spoke.

Then - reckless as she had never known herself before, heedless of folly, aware only that she would pay any price for Ingram's material value to Ernst's heritage; any price for his secret value to her heart - she said, 'Yes.' And then again, very distinctly, 'Yes. If Ingram does ask me to marry him, I *am* fool enough for that.'

In a daze, doubting the sound of her own voice as soon as the words were out, she hardly heard Irma go. She remained where she was, scarcely stirring, (*Did I say that? Could I have meant it?*) until, about at the time Irma could have been back at the Drachenhof, the telephone rang and, as if she were sleepwalking, she went to answer it.

Irma's voice again : 'Just to add that I am leaving by the evening plane from Cologne and in case I don't see Ingram again, to ask you to wish him happy hunting from me. Though really it is hardly sport at all, is it? Such a very, *very* willing quarry!'

Virginia said dully, 'You don't expect me to give him that message, do you?'

Irma laughed. 'Well, hardly! And on second thoughts, perhaps I'll ask him to see me off and give it to him myself. But if he asks me to expand it, what shall I say? I think ... yes ... "Go ahead, my friend. What have you to lose? The poor wench is crazily in love with you. She will take you on *any* terms." How about that—?'

Without deigning to reply, Virginia replaced the receiver. For how could it matter any longer what evil report of her Irma chose to concoct? The web in which she found herself was of her own making, and now, if Irma was right about Ingram's intentions, she had only to wait to hear his 'terms'.

To wait - and meanwhile to behave as if nothing had happened. Because tomorrow was the Wine Festival which she was pledged to enjoy with Lisel and Chris and Ingram; because Lisel, for whom Irma possessed no feet of clay, would expect her to be surprised and sorry that Irma had not stayed to enjoy it too; because Hannchen had to meet the Emperor Charlemagne by introduction ... because she owed it to all the happy people whom Ernst had made *her* people; because, until he showed his hand, Ingram must not guess. All this was the Why of the mask of normality which the owner of the Weinberg Raus had to wear.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOR days Konigsgrat had been putting out its flags again, looping its fairy lights, laying in its beer and sausage and cheese and wine, practising its band-parts, taking its fancy dress costumes out of mothballs and building the emperor's bridge of gold - a pontoon of small craft from a barge in mid-river to the shore. A few tourists still lingered, but they were not being specially wooed. This festival had been styled by centuries of custom, long before the foreigners had gathered on holiday by road and river and air and rail. It was Konigsgrat's own.

Darkness fell early now and when Ingram and Virginia drove down to meet Lisel and Chris, the town was a-glow with light, the river surface laddered by reflected paths of it-

Above Charlemagne's bridge a series of arches, each with its pendant gold lantern, had been erected. At nine o'clock precisely he would open the ceremonies by crossing the bridge on foot to bless the vintage, to review, salute and reward each of the Vine Mistresses with a gold trinket for her services, and to give the word to King Bacchus to set the wine fountain flowing and to encourage the junketing to begin. The crowds gathered on the river front were diverted by passing alarms. A few metres of the strung fairy lights short-circuited and caught fire. A small boy fell in the river, was fished out, dried-off and comforted with hot frankfurters by sympathetic bystanders. Word went round that the solo singer who was to greet the Emperor's landing with the Lorelei Song had developed tonsillitis, causing the bandmaster to have to transpose the key of the accompaniment, as the only available substitute was a mezzo, not a full soprano.

Then nine o'clock struck from the Rathaus clock tower and Charlemagne, purple and golden-robed and followed by his retinue, made his imperial progress across the pontoon to the shore. The Burgermeister with all the town council were there to greet him; the

bandmaster could have saved his trouble, for with the first notes of the Lorelei Song from the band, hundreds of voices took it up, drowning any solo effort whatsoever; the presentations were made to Charlemagne and the showpiece of the evening, the fountain tossing and flowing real wine, was switched on.

With the Emperor's retirement after blessing the vintage the interest began to shift from the river front to the town, where a small fair, with a miniature roundabout, booths of fruit machines, roast chestnut vendors and a shooting gallery was the main attraction and dancing in the town square the next. The beer gardens filled; parties, experienced over the years, had brought their own camp- stools and were doing their alfresco drinking all over the streets and pavements; groups, together at one minute, had separated the next, either drawn to different attractions or simply flung apart by the pressure of the crowds.

When this had happened to their party several times and Chris and Lisel had disappeared again, Ingram remarked, 'Well, I'm nearer to the sky than you are, but I could do with a bit more air, I know. What about you?'

Virginia said, 'I'm all right. It's all so fantastic. I'm enjoying myself.'

'Maybe. But it will go on for hours yet and when you've attended several more you'll realize that an entr'acte breather is a must. Besides—' he put a firm hand beneath her elbow, 'I want to talk to you.'

She looked up at him quickly, but he was looking ahead for a way through the crowd. *Oh, not tonight !*

*Don't spoil tonight* - she begged him silently, and aloud, 'To talk to me ? Why now ? What about ?'

His only reply was, 'Let's get to the car,' and when they reached it, parked in a side street, 'Ever been to the top of the Siegkreis yet?'

'You can't get up it by car.'

'Most of the way you can, and the rest on foot, if you know the paths, and I do. Like to try?'

'If you need air, it seems the answer,' she said drily, and took the seat beside him.

The lower, familiar part of the way took them past the Bells' late camp, silent and deserted now that Chris had moved down to the Drachenhof for the last few days of his stay. Leaving it behind, Ingram broke a silence to ask - as if the question were new - 'Why did you refuse Paul Bell?'

'I've told you once - I didn't love him.'

'You said you gave him reasons. *Reasons*. Plural. Point taken?'

'Yes.'

'Well then?'

She turned on him in sudden irritation, accusing, 'You say I never stop probing for what I want to know. What about you?'

'Just that, if you remember, we were interrupted at that point. I thought you might have been going to enumerate your other reasons and I'd have liked to hear them, that's all.'

'I wasn't.'

'My mistake.'

Silence again. The car climbed, tortuous roadway and trees picked up by its headlights and then relentlessly dropped back again into the darkness they left behind. At the elbow of a hairpin bend where there was a draw-in platform wide enough to take one car, Ingram braked and switched off.

'From here on we walk. It's rough going, but we needn't go far for a view of where we've come from, and there's shelter higher up. Are you game?'

Hannchen had warned Virginia to go strongly shod to the Wine Festival and her topcoat was warm. 'Yes, of course,' she said.

'Give me your hand.' Ingram's powerful torch showed the path just wide enough for them to go abreast. The sharp mountain air bit at first, catching at the breath, and when presently Virginia paused to rest and to look back at the way they had come, Ingram's arm went behind her shoulders, a support for her to lean against. His other hand pointed down at the lights of the river levels.

'Königsgrat directly below. Bad Hosel downstream. Bonn—' it was impossible to miss Bonn's great glow in the sky - 'There's tonight's last ferry coming over. See it? No shape, no paddle-churn, no following wake - just a line of lights, rather like a lighted centipede out for an evening amble.'

They turned and went on and when he kept his arm round her, she allowed herself the pleasure of it and did not shrug it off.

'No further now. In fact - here,' he said as they came out on a tiny clearing where there stood a little round open thatched hut, so like a miniature bandstand in a municipal park that Virginia broke into a laugh at sight of it.

'It's a joke!'

'No. Just the last point before the summit where the forest rangers might need shelter from storms. It's not meant'" for an overnight or half-permanent camp like the Bells'. There's a circular seat where we can sit decorously side by side, if you're willing. Here, give me your hand, and I'll show the way in. There are a couple of log-steps up — yes, there. Now straight ahead.'

Unless they had sat like a couple of puppets with their backs against the wall, the curve of the seat necessitated Ingram's half turning towards her at her side. As her eyes became used to the darkness she could see his expression, as no doubt he could watch hers.

After a short silence he said, 'That time we were speaking of - when we were interrupted - remember? It was Irma Mey on the phone.'

'Yes. I took the call.'

'She insisted on taking me to task for the Meys' decision about Lisel and the hotel. She seemed to think it was a dark laid plan to get rid of *her*.'

'Which you must have told her was absurd.'

'Naturally, though I had to plead guilty to applauding the move. Then she told me about this current tour, said she supposed I realized that her people would probably have left the district when it ended, and asked my advice as to whether she should accept or not.'

'And you said—?'

'That I had no right to advise her.'

'Which, in the circumstances, wasn't very helpful, was it?'

'In *what* circumstances? Her career is entirely her own affair, as she has never yet failed to point out.'

'Yes, but-'

Ingram went on, 'There could be no question that she must decide it for herself. Of course she had to. And did. I saw her again before she flew out last night.'

Virginia nodded. "Yes, I know.'

'You do?'

'Irma came to see me in the morning, wanting to blame me too for the Lisel affair and the consequence to herself, and on a later thought she had she said she meant to ask you to see her off.' Virginia paused, then plunged. 'That first time,' she said, 'wasn't there something else you discussed with her? Something - I ought to know?'

She could tell from his silence that he knew what she was talking about. He nodded. 'Something I should have told you first. That at the first chance I got now, I meant to ask you to marry me. Irma told you that?'

So it was out at last! Lest he should read the hurt in her eyes, Virginia looked away. 'And the rest,' she said.

'The rest? What rest?'

She turned on him then. That he *dared*, pretend innocence of the whole sordid plan! 'I'd have thought you would know just what Irma passed on. You must have allowed her to, or have guessed she would. Even if I hadn't heard it before - which I had. From Lisel, through Chris. Then from Irma, who had hinted a long time ago, before I understood what she meant, that it was common talk in the town, which was where Chris actually heard it - in a *bar!*' she finished in distaste.

'Heard what in a bar?'

She gestured emptily. 'What else - than that, whatever inconvenience or postponement it meant to your affair with Irma, you would be asking me to marry you for. all the classic reasons of convenience? Your convenience, it goes without saying. Not mine.'

Remembering Irma's 'Whatever show of passion he puts on,' she told herself she must be prepared for his denial. His short laugh was unexpected.

'Do you know, I thought you didn't evince any of the proper maidenly recoil when I put my proposal of marriage just now,' he said. 'You were ready for it? Anticlimax, h'm? More fool me, for confiding in Irma first. But that's all I told her - that you *shall* believe. This other nonsense - presumably that I needed the advantage of marrying Ernst's heiress, which you say you had from young Bell through Lisel - if Irma claimed I offered that as my reason for proposing to you, then she was lying. Did she?'

Virginia thought back. 'She had taunted me with it earlier, and she let me think you told her so.'

'And you believed her?'

'Since it seemed to be pretty common knowledge, it wasn't difficult to believe her. And she didn't leave it there. She pointed out that if you proposed marriage to me, claiming you—'

Yes? Claiming I loved you—?' Ingram invited.

'Ye—s. That, having been warned, I shouldn't know and never could know what I could believe of your real motives.'

He sat forward, hands between his knees, staring at the floor. 'And that's so? The doubt sown in your mind by Irma's malice towards you, you feel you *don't* know? Is that it?'

'Not only Irma's. I've had it implanted from all sides. And perhaps you shouldn't blame Irma too much, considering her - relationship with you,' Virginia murmured.

Ingram looked up and round. 'Our relationship? You mean her demand that I squire her here, there and everywhere, whenever she chooses to alight in these parts? Yes, well, perhaps that needs explanation. And so - at first sight of Irma a year or two back, I admit I was flattered; later I played lackey to her for Lisel's sake, to ease the child of at least some of her outrageous demands. And later still - yes, perhaps all through these last months - I've suffered Irma's romantic harassment of me deliberately, even played along with her for results which, I've let myself argue, just *could* sway you my way.'

Turning round fully then, he caught at both Virginia's hands. 'You know what I mean, my lovely? That I hoped you might be jealous?'

She let her hands stir within his, but did not withdraw them. Was this the false cunning of which Irma had warned her, or was it the eternal truth of a man pledging love to a woman, calling her 'My lovely' with his heart in his voice ... meaning it.... or not? She said hesitantly, 'If- if that was all you wanted of Irma, it wasn't very - " fair.'

His nod admitted the guilt of that, 'I know. It was petty of me, but all things considered, I think Irma and I have finished on level terms.'

'You've kissed her or allowed her to kiss you!'

'Necessary tactics for my dastardly purpose. No, not entirely true, that. She has had her moments of appeal to me, and on her side, she isn't interested in platonics.'

'And you told Lisel, when she asked you about it - "After the vintage" for your wedding.'

He laughed. 'Ask a silly question—! As I remember, the child got a silly answer for her pains. And if she, of all people, doesn't know that locally and among other things "After the vintage" can mean when the moon turns to blue cheese—!' He broke off, releasing one hand in order to trace with a gentle forefinger the outline of Virginia's jaw, chin and temple. 'Do you realize, my love, that you haven't answered *my* question, either of my *two* questions, yet?'

She turned her cheek against his cupped palm. 'You mean - your asking me to marry you?'

'That was one, yes. Will you?' When she did not reply, 'You told Irma that if I asked you, you would accept me,' he reminded her gently.

'Oh—!' She jerked away from him in dismay. 'Irma threatened she would tell you. And she did?'

'When she had finally accepted that I had no intention of playing permanent escort to her, she flung it at me as her parting shot. So over to you, my darling. Wouldn't you>say you owe it to me to accept me to my face?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'Because, against all likelihood or intention when we first met, you love me as I love you?'

Another nod. 'As I've loved you for a long time — longer than you know.'

'Even before the night of the Blossom Feast?' There was an edge of mischief in his tone.

'Before then—'

'Are you sure? You hid it very well.'

'Because I daren't let myself believe you were serious. You said you weren't.'

'Only after you had rejected me. I've got some pride too. But if you couldn't trust me then, can you now?' Serious again, he tilted her chin. 'Can you now? Because that's my other question - or rather Irma's question to you - can you be sure, now and in the future, that when I say I love you; make love to you; tell you that I want you, and only, *only* you, that I mean just that, without any strings at all? Can you?'

'I think so.'

He shook his head. 'Not good enough. You mustn't be less than sure. Or is that up to me - to convince you with all the evidence I know? That I bent over backwards to keep you here because, dimly even then, I dared not let you escape me. That I kept you in the Landhaus under my eye. That I lied to you about my contract and kept mum about Ernst's will. That I've been insanely jealous of Paul Bell and have shown it to anyone less deliberately blind than you. That with you as partner to the working of the estate, I've been completely content and could be for ever. That—! For pity's sake, Virginia, must I go on? Or do you know now that I've served time and an awful lot of agony for love of you? Are you *sure*?'

She stood up, deliberately curving the line of her body to his as he stood too. Hands at the nape of his neck, she drew his head down to hers and, provocative for the first time in her life, murmured mock-demurely, 'I think ... if you kissed me ... as only you know how, I could be quite sure, now and for ever.'

For a long time they stood, locked close; hands, lips and little broken phrases searching, assuring, satisfying a need which had been pent up for too long. They would know and share greater heights of ecstasy than this. But this was the Now of their discovery of each other when every touch, every shy endearment, the brush of every kiss, was new, electric with experiment, and the moment had a sweetness all its own.

'I'm going to remember this all my life,' thought Virginia when at last level thought took over from feeling and sensing and being at one with Ingram. And as if he knew what she was thinking, he said,

'This is our true beginning, my love. Was it worth waiting for? Worth all the sparring we've done, all the mistakes we've made, all the evil gossip we may still have to live down?'

She quivered a little at that. 'Why do you suppose you've been the butt of it already?'

'I don't know, though it's possible it could have been less evilly disposed than we think. Perhaps only the busybodies' itch to run other people's affairs, or even a kindly, muddled-thinking effort to predict a neat solution to the Weinberg Raus's dilemma of a woman owner with very little know-how and a manager with the lot.'

Virginia laughed. 'Modesty was never your longest suit! But that reminds me. "Neat". No - "tidy" - that was Lisel's word once for a bit of wishful thinking on a match between you and me. I hope she will be as pleased now it has happened.'

'She'd better be pleased. Other people are going to get a shock too. Hannchen, for one—'

'Oh dear, Hannchen! How will she react?'

'Not as sourly as she might have done nine months ago, and though "*eine passende Verabredung*" isn't exactly enthusiasm, from Hannchen "a suitable arrangement" is about as warm a comment as you can expect.' As Virginia laughed happily again, Ingram went on, 'There is - or was - someone else involved, isn't there? Bell. What is he going to think?'

'Paul? He'll be glad for me. He is good enough for that. And - he knows.'

'That all along, you've wanted me, not him?'

'And accepted it; and hoped for me, as soon as he knew.'

'I wish I hadn't misjudged him. But it seems I was on the right beam when I pressed you for your reasons for turning him down. You had told him you loved me?'

'Yes.'

As Virginia spoke there was a burst of sound from far below; a cheering from hundreds of throats, the measured boom of a gun marking the striking of midnight, and the added, sporadic flare in the sky of cascading fireworks and Catherine wheels.

'Climax of the evening. Shall we go back?' But as they turned to do so, Ingram deftly tweaked the anchoring comb from Virginia's chignon and as her hair tumbled, he spread it cloakwise across her shoulders. Appraising his work, he said,

'Do you know, you are quite, quite beautiful? And d'you know something else? That I'm more than half tempted to add a bit of original fairytale for this folklore- ridden region to hand down the ages along with their linden leaves and their love-philtres and the rest? For instance - Climb the Siegkreis with a mutinous fury of a

Rhine maiden; make love to her at the summit; steal the comb from her hair at midnight and lo! what have you? A ravishing Lorelei girl, tamed and bent to your will! How's that for matching the best the old wives' tales can do?'

Virginia pressed closer into the curve of the arm which held her. "Not as telling as the linden leaf bit, I'm afraid," she murmured. 'And how do you propose to persuade people to believe it hadn't been necessary to resort to a love-philtre to achieve the desired effect?'

'How? Why, on present evidence, of course! Anyway, who needs a love-philtre for - this?' Ingram retorted, and kissed her again.