



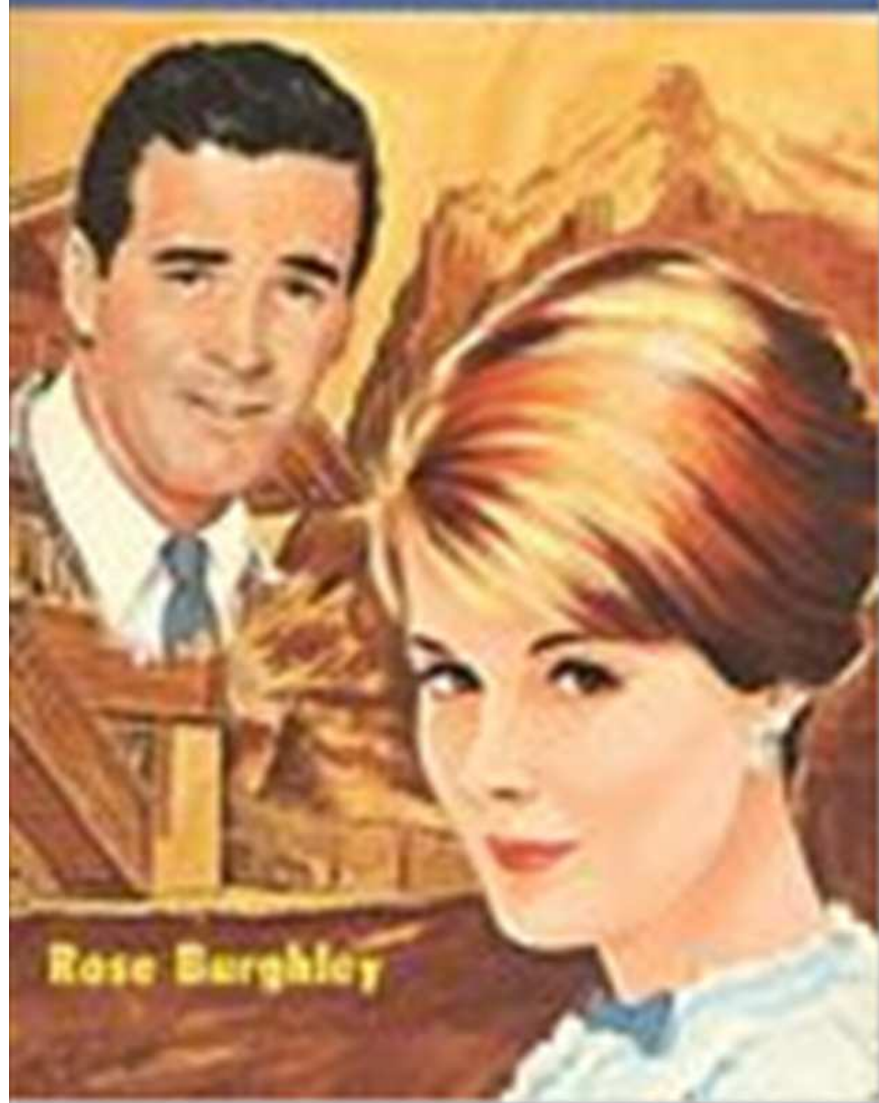
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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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# ALPINE DOCTOR

(Original with THE ATTACHE)



Rose Barghley

# ALPINE DOCTOR

**Rose Burghley**

*AKA "THE AFTERGLOW"*

It was hardly the place of an English teacher at an exclusive Swiss girls' finishing school to follow the example of her young charges and fall in love with the school doctor, Roger Soames, so Lacey Cavendish turned her feelings in another - and equally hopeless - direction....

## CHAPTER I

LACEY couldn't help but overhear what was said as the doctor emerged from the sickroom.

"Too much sun." He was quite firm. "And possibly also a little run down. How long before half-term?"

Half-term? They had only just returned after the long summer vacation! And although in the height of summer the effects of the sun on those lower slopes of the mountain that gazed at its reflection v in the lake could be quite harmful - especially to a delicate and sensitive skin - it was highly unlikely that they could prove injurious to a sun-soaked young woman like Fleur Berringer, who boasted that she had been born and brought up in the Bahamas, and whose people still lived there.

Why, she had actually returned to the Ecole d'Unite looking like a veritable Daughter of the Sun, with that naturally honey-blond skin of hers, and those melting pansy-dark eyes. And she talked of surf-riding and blistering temperatures that had absolutely nothing in common with the gentle heat on the mountain at this season of the year, when all the surrounding forests were turning rosily russet and mellowest amber because the fall of the year was upon them, and very soon now it would be winter.

And then, no doubt, if Dr. Roger Soames remained in his present position as locum for Dr. Felix Dupont during his absence from Ardena a fresh outbreak of complaints more in keeping with the lowered temperature would demand his attendance at the Ecole, and girls like Fleur, and Carla Minetti and Rose Bligh and a whole host of others who found him devastatingly attractive would take to their beds and turn their faces to the wall and moan a little for sympathy.

The sympathy of Dr. Soames, who had blue eyes and light hair and was practically everyone's preconceived image of what a typical Englishman in his early thirties ought to look like ... even to his mildly humorous smile and the note of humour in his voice.

And when, with a shapely tanned thumb on a leaping pulse, he asked in that humorous voice in a perfectly kindly way, "Now, what's wrong with you? Tell me all about it!" the highly impressionable seventeen-to-twenty-year-olds developed a new ailment, and that was centred in the region of their hearts.

Lacey, who felt rather tight-lipped and disapproving because a fellow countryman was allowing himself to be taken in, heard the matron - a Scotswoman, also with a sense of humour, but badly in need of her present highly-paid position - trying not to disagree with the doctor, but pointing out gently that girls sometimes fancied they were more ill than they actually were. And sometimes they even fancied they were ill when they were not ill at all.

"You know how it is, Doctor." She spread her hands in a gesture she had picked up as a result of spending years on the Continent. "They're at a difficult age, and by rights some of them should be married ... and if their parents had any sense they'd get them married instead of paying to send them to a school like this. There isn't enough to keep them occupied."

"You mean there isn't any hockey-playing or lacrosse here?"

"Only tennis and the inevitable sunbathing when they've nothing else to do. Some of the more energetic ones go riding, and a few of them are members of the local sailing club. And in the winter there's the winter sports. Fortunately it won't be long now before we go higher up the mountain to our winter chalets."

"And you find the girls are generally healthier in the winter?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Ah, well..." He smiled at her, and her somewhat dour Scottish heart melted. "Girls will be girls! And fortunately they're not really my problem. But I sympathise with you since they appear to be yours. You'll have to watch that little Rose Bligh. She really is delicate. Rather a fragile little piece."

"Her father manufactures pottery, I believe. Anyway, he's something to do with china . . . English bone china!"

"And watch Miss Berringer's temperature. It's liable to fluctuate."

"I'm not surprised."\* Miss Mackintosh's smile wasn't quite so kind. "She goes to bed with a hot- water bottle when the rest of us are thinking of taking the windows out. Her father," almost inconsequentially, "is an American exporter of canned beef."

Roger Soames smiled again, and Miss Mackintosh caught sight of Lacey - not actually lingering in a doorway at the opposite end of the corridor but wishing she could put Dr. Soames wise to a few more of the goings-on at the Ecole d'Unite - and called out to her to show the doctor out to the rear courtyard where his car was parked.

"I'm sure you won't mind doing that, will you, Miss Cavendish," she said, "I've got to get back to my patients, and I gather you're off duty."

Lacey admitted that she was. She allowed the doctor to fall into step at her side, and they descended the wide main staircase to the cool and echoing hall that so impressed parents when they arrived for the first time at the Ecole with their teenage daughters.

"You don't really need to show me out, you know," Dr. Soames murmured, as he looked down at Lacey with a mildly quizzical gleam in his eyes. "I've been coming here often enough now to find my own way out."

"The matron asked me to do so, so I don't mind," Lacey answered with a slight air of primness.

He smiled. His blue eyes actually looked like twin blue lakes with the sun on them when he did so; and although his hair was fair - or warmish brown - the eyelashes that shielded his eyes were thick and black.

"I don't think we've met before," he said. "Do you teach here?"

"English," she responded.

"Which means that you're English yourself."

"Of course."

She looked up at him with surprised eyes ... they were a sort of hazel-grey with golden lights in them, and to keep them company she had red-gold hair - very beautiful red-gold hair. Looking down on her appreciatively - and as she was only five feet two inches tall, and he was over six feet in height, it was very necessary for him to do this if he wanted, to take in any details about her, and she was moving close to his side - he noted the pretty shape of her heck on which the shining hair swayed softly, and the curious matt creaminess of her skin. In actual fact, she didn't look typically English, but it very rapidly transpired that she objected to anyone who didn't think that she did. "In this place there are so many young women gathered together from different corners of the globe that it's difficult to tell," he explained. "One has to wait for enlightenment."

"I should dislike anyone to think that I was not English," she said a little stiffly.

"Then I apologise for mistaking you for a pure Latin type."

"Now you're simply making fun of me!" The hair swung away from her neck, and her head went back again. It reminded him of a perfectly poised flower - not a particularly flamboyant flower, but an intriguing one nevertheless - on a slender stem, and as she was wearing a white dress with a green belt the effect was somehow heightened.

"I give you my word that I wouldn't dare!"

She flushed.

"I'm not really as formidable as I probably sound - you know, the hockey-playing teacher of English in a Continental school like this! I'm not really like that at all -"

"I'm sure you're not."

She flushed again.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter what you think about me, does it?" with unexpected logic. "But the real reason why I'm glad to show you out is because I want to warn you about those girls ..."

"You mean my patients?"

"Yes? You see, I know Miss Mackintosh suspects, but being responsible for the health and well-being of the girls she doesn't dare to say too much, not even to hint - not really! But I'm only the English teacher, and I haven't been here very long, and apart from the lake and all the marvellous scenery -" she waved a hand to indicate it; the glowing, piled-up woods, the far-away snows, the shimmering, dark blue surface of the lake. There were little boats bobbing about on it, and some of the trees crowded right down to the water and overhung it. In the whole of her life Lacey had never seen anything quite so beautiful, and if she was capable of enthusing about anything it was the scenery. "Apart from Ardena and everything about it - artistically,



I mean - I feel no compulsion to approve of this place, and I certainly don't approve of the way it's run. The girls have far too much freedom, far too much money to spend, far too much of everything - except common sense and discipline. But as they're pretty bored most of the time they like to think up their own forms of entertainment. One of them is pretending to be ill when they're not ill, and getting Matron to send for the new English doctor! The old doctor - the one you've temporarily replaced - is fat and bald and not in the least romantic. You'd be surprised how healthy everyone is when he's in residence down there in the village. But the moment you arrived-"

She broke off, realising how much she had given away by the word "romantic". Almost certainly he was now in a position to decide that she, too, thought him romantic, whereas she simply thought of him as an easily imposed-upon Englishman who had little acute perception as a doctor, and therefore was not a particularly good doctor. A good doctor should certainly be able to distinguish between a patient who was genuinely in need of his services, and one - albeit an entrancingly attractive and, because the school permitted it, beautifully made up one in a transparent nightdress - who did not require his services and was probably convulsed with inward amusement because he was so easily taken in.

"Yes?"

"Yes?" He waited for her to continue. "The moment I arrived, Miss - er -?"

"Cavendish." She flushed and bit her lip because of his arched eyebrows. "Lacey Cavendish," she elaborated.

"Well, Miss Lucy Cavendish, perhaps you will be so good as to let me know what it was that happened the moment I arrived ..."

"The name is Lacey, not Lucy," she corrected him because the mistake was frequently occurring.

He smiled.

"That's rather more unusual."

"And nothing actually happened as a *result* of your taking over. It's just that - just that ... you're young!"

"We all axe, at some time or other in our lives," he observed drily.

"And you're English, therefore a novelty to some of them."

"I see," he said softly.

"And you're a doctor. I don't know why it is," she admitted, pursing up her lips a little primly, as if she was an acknowledged spinster herself, and was not upset by the knowledge, "but to a lot of young and inexperienced girls a doctor is a fascinating figure."

"But only to young and inexperienced girls?" looking down at her with an odd gleam in his sea-blue eyes.

"Y-yes, of course." She glanced up at him quickly and then away. "Naturally older women — more mature women - wouldn't betray the way they feel in any case."

"And I gather that you include yourself amongst the more mature women?"

She realised that he was deliberately mocking her. And he quite refused to believe that she was issuing him a genuine warning. *She* knew what the girls at the Ecole d'Unite were like. He did not!

"Look here, Miss Cavendish." He stopped dead suddenly, and she stopped dead, too. They confronted one another on the sun-bathed drive. "It is possible, I appreciate, that you think you're performing a service. But I would like to remind you that I'm not quite an inexperienced medical-student. I do happen to be fully qualified, and it would take more than a parcel of empty-headed young women seeking to relieve their own boredom to deceive me about the state of their health. It will no doubt astonish you, since you plainly think me quite incompetent, but it isn't really difficult for me to decide whether a patient is swinging the lead or not. I do occasionally meet with that sort of thing, but it's more frequently found in men than in women. And when I do - whether it's a man or a woman - I know how to deal with that patient! Now, if you'll conduct me to the spot where I left my car I can happily dismiss you and you can give someone an English lesson!"

Lacey felt so taken aback, that she merely nodded when he sat in his driving-seat and called good-bye to her. She had suspected him of being gullible.. Now she thought him distinctly unpleasant, and, on the whole, really rather rude.

## CHAPTER II

LACEY had no English lesson to give that day, but as they were short of staff, she relieved Mademoiselle in the late afternoon with a class of junior French. And after that she offered assistance to Matron, who, for the past week or so, had been more or less run off her legs.

Miss Mackintosh had a very stout pair of sturdy Scottish legs, but she was growing tired of running up and down stairs with trays of orange juice and blood-cooling mixture for young women who spent the better part of every day - when they were not obliged to concentrate on their studies, that is - lying either on the flat roof top or down by the shore of the lake or on the open hillside inviting the kiss of the sun.

Ardena, when the weather was fine, was a positive sun-trap. It smelt of flowers and hot dust, and was full of the brilliance and sparkle from off the lake. At night the stars peered at their reflection in the lake, and when the moon rose the whispering snows that seldom melted completely on the summits of the high peaks that ringed the lake looked like diamond-bright sugar icing on a particularly lush and lavish birthday cake.

Lacey had been at the Ecole d'Unite for six months, and she was looking forward to the winter, when the school would move *en masse* to the chalet-style buildings higher up the mountainside. She had loved the summer in Ardena - and as she no longer had a home in England to go to she had remained with several other members of the teaching staff at the school throughout the long vacation, and had enjoyed sunbathing as much as most of them, but her curiously matt type of skin refused to tan readily, and the best she had acquired in the way of a tan was a certain honey-gold overlay that affected her arms and her long, slim, shapely legs. Her face and her shoulders - knowing what might happen to them - she had protected with an outsize sun-hat, except when she was actually bathing in the lake.

So she knew very well that Mesdames Berringer, Bligh, Minetti and a certain mysterious dusky beauty from a sun-drenched island in the South Pacific, called Aloa Takara, could not possibly be suffering from an overdose of sun at this late season, particularly as they had been berry-brown all summer.

But Aloa was the first to need Dr. Soames's ministrations, and then like corn going down before a strong" wind Rose Bligh, Fleur Berringer, and Carla Minetti followed suit. They all complained of high temperatures, feeling sick with stomach upsets, and badly inflamed skin. If Lacey hadn't caught them raiding the larder one night, and heard their stifled giggles as they made their way upstairs loaded with fruit, cold sausages, the better part of a rich chocolate gateau and a bottle of cocktail onions, she might still be inclined to believe they were genuine sufferers. And if she hadn't actually entered the sickbay at the very moment that one of them was anointing the shoulder of one of the others with a flushed-looking liquid from out of a bottle she would never have suspected they were capable of such tricks.

Not even when they were bored, when the exciting summer vacation was over, and one of them, at least, had just broken off an engagement. And although Dr. Roger Soames was good-looking enough she simply could not understand why his presence at the bedside should seem like a recompense to anyone ... a recompense for being sent away to school when they might have been doing far more diverting things.

Miss Mackintosh, who had a broad sense of humour as well as being broad-minded, was inclined to excuse them.

"Ah, well," she said to Lacey, who felt it her duty to report what she had both seen and overheard, "if the lassies feel the need to get up to tricks let them. After all, although I'm not a qualified nurse it's part of my duties to look after them when they take to their beds, and if they

haven't any real right to take their beds, well, it's all the same to me. If we'd a real epidemic on our hands it would be different... and believe me, I know the difference between a real epidemic and a faked one!" and she grinned.

Lacey, who had been brought up very correctly and was easily shocked by minor misdemeanours, gaped at her in astonishment.

"You mean you're not going to *report* them?" she demanded.

Miss Mackintosh shook her amiable head.

"Certainly not. After all, as Dr. Soames himself observed, girls will be girls." This was after the doctor's third visit, when Lacy was required to show him to his car. "And wihat's the harm to anyone in a bit of a lark sometimes? I was never a one to spoil sport, even if it does mean a certain amount of extra fetching and carrying, and pretending to be as blind as a bat. Do you think I didn't *know* that skin rash wasn't genuine?"

Lacey gasped.

"And Dr. Soames...?"

"Of course he knows, too. But little Rose Bligh is an engaging soul, and he thinks she needs care. And Fleur Berringer amuses him. He thinks she needs discipline. I more than suspect he'll have a word with Madame about her before very long."

Madame was the principal, and Lacey's eyes opened wider than ever.

"What about?" she asked. "Surely it isn't his duty to discipline any one of the pupils here ? "

"Of course not. But he can make suggestions, and I think he'll suggest that Fleur's too old for the Ecole d'Unite. After all, she's nearly, twenty."

"Why don't her parents remove her?"

"She's only got a father, and he's very much pre-, occupied with big business. Her mother and a brother and sister were killed last year in a car crash."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Lacey said.

She went about her duties thoughtfully after dinner that night ... and the staff and the older girls all had fate dinner. The juniors were put to bed after glasses of milk and fruit junkets. Rose Bligh was such a delicious little beauty that it was highly likely she could feel jealous of her without fully realising it herself, and although Fleur Berringer was not quite such a beauty she was far more vitally alive and quite fascinating if you found boundless vitality and a ravishing pair of black-lashed brown eyes fascinating.

Then, too, she dressed as if she had left school behind 'her long ago, and everything she wore was breathtakingly expensive. Her shoes were handmade in Paris, her tweeds came from Scotland, and her make-up from America. It was a decidedly "with it" style of make-up, and the amount of mascara she used could have alarmed some people, because it transformed her into a strange, doe-eyed creature of infinite grace and suppleness.

Rose Bligh, golden and nineteen was a fairytale beauty. She, too, had plenty of money to spend, and her mother chose everything she wore herself. Rose was not allowed much make-up, but she didn't need it. Neither was she allowed to use heavy perfumes ... but the room she shared with Fleur always reeked of perfume, which came across from

America in gilt caskets and crystal flagons, and graced the centre of the dressing-table the two girls shared.

Lacey, brought up in a country parsonage, and twenty-four years old, still used make-up extremely sparingly. It wasn't because she thought she didn't need it - indeed, her own looks depressed her at times, because she was no admirer of auburn hair and sun-kissed eyelashes. But the aftermath of her upbringing clung to her, and she found it difficult to adapt to a modern world.

The Ecole d'Unite was run by a woman with a modern outlook for young females growing up to take their place in an advanced modern society, and Lacey, who knew less than nothing about social life, and had hardly anything at air in the bank, was sometimes almost shocked by the evidences of modernity she saw around her. When girls of fifteen and sixteen talked to her openly of their boy-friends and the high times they had during the holidays - the night-clubs they attended, with parental permission, the X-films they returned to time and time again, the books they read and the jokes they appreciated - she felt as old-fashioned and out of touch, as if she was the original Cinderella who had somehow found her way to the Ecole d'Unite on the shores of a sophisticated Swiss-Italian lake.

And she had already discovered that even a lake can become sophisticated when the people who live near it own fast cars and speedboats, and give barbecues and dinner-parties for the over-privileged who know nothing whatsoever about simplicity.

To the rest of the staff at the Ecole Lacey was a nice enough English girl, who spoke with formality and looked a little like a narcissus in her cool whites and greens, and with her bright cap of hair and fascinating eyes. She had no idea that people considered her eyes fascinating, but the truth was that their effect was quite considerable when it was utterly unexpected. She had a way of looking at people steadily, for quite a long time, without fluttering an eyelid while



waiting for a reply to some question or statement of hers; and it never even occurred to her that her occasional frankness and outspokenness might make her more enemies than friends. Although in actual fact she had quite a few friends amongst the staff. She had even acquired one or two male acquaintances - the dancing-master and the music-master both admired her - and the widower father of one of the juniors had actually proposed to her.

It was her only proposal so far, and it had been brought about by propinquity. The father had arrived in Ardena to take his daughter out and about for a few days before leaving for some far distant corner of the world, and Lacey had been selected to accompany the two and provide some sort of a buffer for the moments when the junior grew tired - or bored - and needed a member of her own sex to turn to.

The proposal had come as a complete surprise to Lacey, and as she had never even thought of marrying a man who was twice her age, had a Latin temperament and distinctly Latin looks - and an apparently very satisfactory bank-balance - she said "No" without giving the matter any thought at all, and her first suitor went off to his far corner of the globe with a distinctly biased opinion of English girls.

He decided they were aloof, perhaps not quite human, and far from appreciative. He also decided they were amazingly correct - which was not what he had expected - and was annoyed because it took him some time to forget the slender, bright-haired girl who walked as if she trod on air, and every movement she made was graceful.

He sent her a gilded casket of chocolates from Paris, and attached a note to them:

*"You remind me of the sunrise, but you're as cool as the dawn. One day some fortunate man will arouse the noonday heat."*

Lacey felt embarrassed by the gift, and still more embarrassed by the prediction. She shared the chocolates amongst the Lower Third, and the junior whose father had sent them to her was amongst the grateful consumers.

But sometimes Lacey found herself dwelling upon that slightly romanticised prediction. *One day some fortunate man will arouse the noonday heat.*" But so far she had met no one who could, as the result of a word or a look, so much as stir her blood, and she was beginning to wonder whether there was, perhaps, something wrong with her blood, and whether she was in actual fact as cool as the dawn.

Dr. Roger Soames represented a type of man for whom she had little time because he was so obviously sure of himself. And his parting with her hadn't been particularly chivalrous.

"Go and teach someone English."

She had merely tried to warn him, without actually giving away the girls she had sought to put him in the picture.

He was - or he should be - a busy man. Dr. Dupont's was quite a large practice, and the one thing Dr. Dupont himself would never do was suffer malingerers gladly. On one occasion when the Middle School had gone down with a mysterious infection that had little effect upon the quality of their spirits he had suggested to the matron that she provided them with a few tasks to keep them occupied, and they had recovered with amazing alacrity.

Dr. Dupont would have rumbled Fleur and Rose and Carla. But not, apparently, Dr. Soames.

Lacey had decided right from the outset that he had more than, a touch of arrogance, and instead of being grateful to her he had seemed annoyed. He had looked at her as if he considered she was rather an

unpleasant person, a sneak. Or perhaps he thought of her just as a spoilsport.

Lacey wondered why she had bothered to intervene at all, and decided after a certain amount of introspection that it was because she herself was basically honest. She had been brought up to be honest in all matters that affected other people, and if that made her a sneak - well, she couldn't very well help it.

But she felt a little depressed, nevertheless.

After staff dinner that night she went for a walk in the last of the light, and when the light faded she wandered down by the lake shore and watched the firefly-like lights that were reflected in the water from the many buildings that had been erected in recent years on the lake shore, and which stood in brilliant gardens and had landing stages and boat- houses overhanging the pellucid water.

This was a world of wealth, opulence and ease. There were dinner-parties and social gatherings of all kinds going on around her, and the air was full of shreds of music that were wafted her way from smoothly gliding launches and graceful terraces on to which lighted windows opened. She looked up at them, and thought how attractive they looked, those lighted windows, gleaming amongst the trees.

And ringing the lake there were the night haunts that attracted the tourists in much the same way that a candle attracts a moth, and to which many of the locals were also firmly attached.

Lacey prepared to step off the broad, tree-edged pavement that fringed the lake shore and cross the road to the gates that led up to the Ecole. Occasional cars sped past her and prevented her crossing until the road was clear, and she noted them idly as they skimmed past. They were astonishingly sleek and elegant cars, bearing only infrequently British identification plates.

She had one foot on the pavement and one on the lowered surface of the road when a long cream car with a British identification plate seemed to swerve a little in her direction, and practically touched her before she had time to retreat hurriedly to the pavement.

She had a swift impression of a man and a girl in the car, and the man was wearing a dinner-jacket and had a clean-cut profile and rather light hair. His glance swung round to her as she deserted the safety of the pavement, and uncertain though the light was, and entirely momentary the impression, she distinctly saw him frown. It was Dr. Roger Soames, and she could practically hear him say to his companion - who also had light hair, and stones that sparkled at her ears — that that was a stupid young woman who had stepped out into the road.

If she wished to commit suicide why did she have to involve him?

## CHAPTER III

THE next day the invalids were allowed up, and the day after that life at the Ecole d' Unite returned completely to normal, with no more visits from Dr. Du- pont's substitute.

Lacey was allowed one full day off a week, and almost always she spent the whole of it out of doors. The day that the school settled down to its normal curriculum, and Miss Mackintosh ceased to carry trays to the sick-bay and thought thankfully of putting her feet up for an hour or so in the afternoon, the teacher of English coaxed some sandwiches and a flask of coffee out of the cook and set off up the mountainside.

It was that superbly beautiful thing when the weather is fine ... a day in late autumn. The trees shone like burnished copper interlaced with the apricot glow of nectarines and ripe mandarins, and where the forests of dark evergreen stood etched against the radiant blue of the sky there was restful- ness and shade, and a kind of scented peace.

Lacey loved the feel of walking over pine needles, and she loved to cast herself down on them and feast her eyes on the far-away glitter of the lake viewed between sprays of feathery conifer. After she had climbed a considerable distance above the Eoole the view was superb, and even the modern buildings that she sometimes thought ruined the lake shore were mellowed and softened by the slight haze.

She looked up into the wilderness of trees above her, and thought how wonderful it would be to climb to the skyline. Many of the girls attempted it, and they went up in parties, accompanied by guides, but Lacey for some reason had never yet been permitted to accompany them. She was not a very senior English teacher, and there were always the juniors to be taken care off, and Miss Mackintosh to be lent a hand.

She supposed that her real position at the Ecole - and she received a salary that fitted the role - was a kind of general factotum. But one day, she promised herself, she would climb the mountain and look down on Ardena from several thousands of feet above where she now sat with her back against the straight bole of a tree and her knees drawn up and her arms hugging them. And she wouldn't wait until they moved to the chalets that were so much closer to the skyline, because that would be cheating herself ... and according to her recipe for life one must never, under any circumstances, either cheat, or deceive oneself.

Which meant that one had frequently to enter into conclave with oneself, and sometimes there were issues that were difficult to face; and sometimes the results were dispiriting in any case.

Today, when she had eaten her lunch and allowed herself the infrequent cigarette that prevented her feeling quite a prude, she looked up into the green and wholly enticing world above her and decided that there was no time like the present, and she could make the effort today.

She was wearing a short tweed skirt and a handmade, soft blue sweater, and although her shoes were not exactly suitable they had low heels and were perfectly comfortable, so the ascent should not prove too difficult from the point of view of her feet. As for the rest, she was rested and refreshed, and she slung her canvas pack across one shoulder and set off up the path that at first wound perfectly gradually upwards, and even when the ascent became steeper was still not difficult to follow.

She would not have attempted this climb in high summer, when the glare demanded that she wear dark glasses; but today there was a gentle autumnal breeze, there was a constant running of cool, gurgling water as the melting snows high above her sent down their overflow and it divided into lively streams that fairly raced down the

mountainside, and the atmosphere was crisp and clear, save where the valley mist rose like cottonwool and evaporated as soon as it reached the skirts of the alpine meadows.

Lacey enjoyed walking, and it didn't in the least trouble her that she was making this ascent alone. She frequently went for long, lonely walks, and in a sense she preferred to be alone, because it enabled her to think and dwell upon certain aspects of her future which occasionally presented a problem.

After half an hour she had climbed to a high plateau from which she could look down into the valley and feel as if already she had detached herself from the solid earth. The path climbed steeply upwards, and the main road also climbed not far away, but after a short while it petered out, and very soon it was no more than a rough track leading to a couple of chalets that looked as if they had been built fairly recently, and were each perched on individual heights that gave Lacey a touch of vertigo as she looked up at them.

The first of these chalets she reached after another half-hour's climbing, and then she continued towards the second, which looked much larger. The first chalet had farm buildings attached to it, but the second had plainly been built to suit some individual taste.

Lacey stood with her head back-flung, looking up at it, wishing it was nearer, and that the occupant might "offer her a cup of tea - or at least a cup of cooling water; and it was then, while she was being very incautious about the slippery quality of the shale that covered the steeply sloping path - and the gradient at that particular spot was very nearly perpendicular - that her feet shot from under her and she described a kind of backward somersault and then started rolling backwards down the path up which a minute or so ago she had toiled with the greatest determination and no particularly clear idea why she was making the effort at all.

In her ears, as she rolled like a stone down the path, she heard the musical chorus of the running water, and a roar where it plunged two or three hundred feet to form a kind of miniature Niagara at the foot of a perilous drop; and then the roar deafened her as she hit her head against a tree trunk, and after that it was just as if she wandered through corridors of silence and she had no knowledge at all of anything that went on around her. Not until hands touched her and someone lifted her, and she blinked her eyes foolishly at the uncertain figure that bent over her.

It was some time before her vision cleared and she was able to make out the figure with anything like distinctness, and by that time she had been forced to grow accustomed to the sound of a voice that demanded, over and over again, to know whether or not she was hurt.

"Fraulein!" The voice was a man's, and apart from its merciless insistence when all she wanted to do was to lie still and be left in peace it was peculiarly pleasant. It had a deep note, and it was what she would have called very masculine ... a light baritone voice, and it addressed her at first in German, then in French, then in English. "You are hurt, Fraulein? Mademoiselle, please tell me where you are hurt! Is it, I wonder, that you are slightly concussed? Do you hear me?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, and made a tremendous effort to sit upright. "Of course I hear you!"

He supported her with an arm. He had a rucksack strapped across his back, and he was wearing khaki shorts and an open-necked khaki-coloured shirt.

"Good!" he exclaimed, with relief. "I was beginning to be afraid I would have trouble with you. Now, perhaps, when you have rested for a few minutes, and recovered your breath, you will accept my assistance as far as my chalet."



*"Your chalet?"*

He gestured with an arm.

"The one up there. Fortunately for you I was standing on the verandah when you appeared in the path, and I saw you look upwards and I realised immediately you were not taking very much care considering the nature of the ground on which you were standing. It was more or less inevitable that you would miss your footing and slide backwards, and when one begins to slide backwards in the mountains anything can happen. It was lucky for you that you did not go over that drop," and he gestured to the one that overhung the cascade, still filling the air with its restless turmoil.

Lacey shuddered. She only just resisted an impulse to clutch at him and cling to him, and he seemed to understand that she was appalled by the danger of her position and might never, on her own, have found the courage to get to her feet.

As it was, with his assistance she was gently eased to her feet, and then while he still supported her with one arm he looked down at her anxiously out of a pair of dark brown eyes that were almost certainly the most beautiful pair of dark brown eyes she had ever seen lighting a man's face.

As for the rest of him, he was spare, and of medium height, and his skin and hair were both dark. If she had met him in the African jungle she would have gathered that he was an explorer. Meeting him on an exposed mountainside in Switzerland she could not decide immediately either what he was, or what he was doing there ... except that, apparently, he owned the chalet on the plateau above them. And he spoke both German, French and English effortlessly.

"Oh, dear!" she said, leaning against him for a few seconds and feeling a little sick. "What would have happened to me, do you think, if you - if you hadn't seen me fall?"

"We won't go into that now," he replied, the very faintest note of humour in his voice. "I did see you fall, and I am here." It was as soothing and reassuring as if he had said, "And from now on you have nothing to worry about... nothing whatsoever!"

What he did say was: "Do you think you can walk? Or shall I make a tremendous effort and carry you ? "

There was a soft twinkle in the magnificent dark eyes as he regarded her, and confused though she still was she realised that he was attempting to reassure her by being mildly humorous.

For one thing, he didn't look tough enough to carry her, and for another the path was so steep they would probably both go rolling backwards if he attempted to do so. She said with a feeble smile: "You couldn't possibly carry me!"

"Oh, but I could," he assured her. Her white eyelids blinked at him, and the gold of her lashes fluttered in the gold of the afternoon sunshine.

"But I'm nearly eight stone-"

"A prodigious weight, but if necessary I'll put my own feeble strength to the test!"

And she could tell by the way he smiled at her, in a withdrawn manner, that he meant it.

However, with his assistance, she managed to crawl forward up the path, and after a yard or so the vertigo passed, and she felt stronger. By the time she reached his chalet, however, what with the glare of

the sun and the dazzle from off the mountain peaks, her head was aching so badly that she felt stupid again, and as if he realised exactly how she was feeling he swung her up in his arms and carried her along the garden path until they reached the foot of the chalet steps.

Lacey had no clear idea of reaching the chalet, but she did know, vaguely, that she was carried through into a cool room and the arms that had borne her with such ease lowered her to a couch which felt superbly comfortable, cushions were stuffed in behind her head, and the soothing, understanding voice of her new acquaintance told her he would give her something to take that would ease the pain in her head.

Afterwards she was a trifle confused as to how it was that he knew she had such a searing headache, for, she couldn't remember actually telling him so. Ana then, while she was feeling too shaken, apart from anything else, to concern herself about anything, he brought her a couple of tablets and handed her a glass of water to enable her to dispose of them.

He said quietly:

"When you've swallowed the tablets just lie there quietly and rest. I won't be far away."

She struggled up on her cushions and, watching him draw the curtains, attempted to compose her disordered thoughts sufficiently to pose one or two pertinent questions.

"Who are you?" she tried to say. "You're being so terribly kind, I..." And then the fog that separated her from him - the fog caused largely by the pain in her head - seemed to deepen, and she made a desperate effort not to lose contact with him altogether. "I've got to get back to the Ecole.,..." She heard her own voice, thinly, trying to insist. *"How am I going to get back to the Ecole?"*

"Don't worry," he returned. "I'll see you get back to the Ecole when you're fit enough to be moved."

Hours later she opened her eyes, and he was standing by the window and watching the last of the sunset as it illumined the whole of the valley. The curtains had been drawn back again, and the wide window-space - the kind of window she understood was described as a "picture window" in modern building circles - framed a large area of rose-flushed sky, so wildly rose-flushed that it was just as if the sky was on fire.

Lacey, whose head felt remarkably clear again, while the pain in it seemed to have vanished, sat up with a distinctly unwise movement that brought a little of the pain back, and instantly the khaki-clad figure by the window turned towards her.

"Feeling better?" He moved softly over the fitted, pale-coloured carpet and stood looking down at her kindly. "You've slept like a log for several hours, and I think it's done you good, but I'm not quite sure about the head. You've a bump on it the size of an egg, and it will take a day or two to subside."

Gingerly Lacey investigated the bump on her head, and felt quite alarmed by the size of it, but he reassured her with a small smile.

"It really will go down quite soon. So far as I can discover you've no bones broken, and you're more or less intact, so you've nothing really to worry about."

"Except getting back to the Ecole," she reminded him huskily. "I've *got* to get back!"

"Is it the Ecole d'Unite?"

"Yes."

"I gather you're not one of the pupils?"

"No; I teach there."

"Then, as I happen to know the Principal, I'll get in touch with her. I'll explain that it would be unwise for you to make the journey down the mountain tonight, but I'll see to it that you're safely restored to her tomorrow. You can sleep here in one of my spare rooms tonight, and the woman who comes in from the village to look after me will stay here also and look after you if you need anything. I'll put up at the inn for the night, but in the morning I'll join you for breakfast. I hope you'll feel very much better by then."

But Lacey simply had to protest at these arrangements.

"Apart from the fact that I simply can't turn you out of your own house for the night I've got to get back," she insisted. "The Principal will expect it -"

"I've told you I'll talk to the Principal."

"H-how?"

"By telephone, of course." His smile was gently humouring. "You don't imagine we're without a telephone up here?"

Her hazel-grey eyes widened.

"I didn't dream you'd have one."

"Well, I have ... and I've all the usual amenities up here, so you don't need to fear primitive conditions." He glanced around him, as he spoke, at the large, exceptionally pleasant room that was furnished in a manner that indicated very plainly that he was a man of means, and

now that she was feeling comparatively clear in the head Lacey was able to appreciate quite keenly the luxury of the couch on which she was reclining, and in particular she thought the soft blue tiles of his recently fitted wood-burning stove were most attractive. As for the rest of the room, it contained deep armchairs, a desk in highly polished wood, a small rosewood dining-table in an alcove, books, pictures, and even a baby grand piano ... all selected by a man with taste and discrimination and fairly diversified interests. The latter was indicated by his choice of books - and at a distance of several feet, and in the strange almost unearthly mountain light that filled the room, Lacey could recognise famous sets of memoirs, and other English volumes, as well as a selection of French novels - and his pictures, that looked to her like originals, and if they were, judging by the quality, they must be worth a great deal of money.

"This is a very beautiful room," she said, the admiring exclamation wrung from her after she had followed his glance round the room. Then, as he stood there smiling at her quizzically, she ventured to slide one foot off the couch, and made an effort to stand up.

Instantly the room seemed to spin round her, and she felt ridiculously weak. She even put out a hand to clutch at something, and found she was clutching at his arm.

"You see?" he said, in that curiously gentle way of Ms, easing her back on to the couch, and restoring the cushions beneath her head. "You were very, very slightly concussed by that contact with a tree trunk, and you are in no condition to sustain a drive down the mountain tonight. My car is in the garage, and I could drive you down, but I won't."

There was surprising decisiveness in his voice.

She heard herself laugh weakly.

"In addition to a telephone you have a car," she said. "I didn't think the road continued as far as this chalet."

"There is a back road - rather rough - by which it is reached. It is because the road is so very rough that I wouldn't risk driving you over it tonight."

She lay looking up at him. Then she asked thoughtfully:

"How do you know that I'm a bit concussed... or was? If it comes to that," she added, still more thoughtfully, while her hazel-grey eyes fixed themselves on his face, "how do you know I couldn't take a bit of bumping on your rough road tonight? How do you know, if it comes to another thing, that I haven't any broken bones? At the moment I feel as if all my bones are broken."

"I examined you while you were asleep."

Her eyes flew open wide.

"You did?"

"And my answer to your other questions is that I just know!"

She lay quietly looking up at him. The light in the sky faded, his outline grew very dim, but she felt very strongly that he was standing even closer to the couch than he was.

They heard his daily woman come in from the village.

"May I ask who you are?" she enquired, a little shyly.

"The name is Heist."

"And mine is Cavendish... Lacey Cavendish."

"Lacey?" For the second time in less than a week a man's eyebrows ascended at the sound of her name. Then he said softly, appreciatively ... much more appreciatively than Dr. Roger Soames: "It is charming."

"Thank you," she answered simply.



## CHAPTER IV

LACEY slept that night in an extremely comfortable bed in a room that had plainly been fitted up as a guest-room, and Frau Bader, Herr Heist's housekeeper - when he was on a visit to his mountain chalet - brought her her breakfast in the morning and explained that her employer was still at the inn. But he had left instructions that he expected to be carried out implicitly, and those were that the English Fraulein was to be allowed to sleep as long as possible; and if by chance she didn't waken by the time he was due to return down the mountain he would send someone to await her convenience and drive her down when she was ready.

But Lacey was so horrified by the knowledge that she had already slept as late as ten o'clock that she fairly sprang out of bed when Frau Bader brought her her breakfast tray.

Frau Bader was a somewhat inscrutable-faced woman of middle age who merely smiled very slightly when Lacey, wearing a voluminous homemade nightgown, pointed in horror at the clock.

"I can't *possibly* have slept as late as that! I never do... I mean, it's unheard of."

Frau Bader set down her breakfast tray on the bedside table, and observed that the circumstances were a little unusual. The Fraulein had an accident ... she had received a nasty bump on the head. Was it more comfortable this morning?

Lacey investigated the bump very cautiously, and was able to report that it was not quite so tender as it had been the night before. And as a result of sleeping for so many hours without once being disturbed she herself felt practically as good as new again. But she hadn't very much appetite for the rolls and the butter and the honey that were on the breakfast tray.

"However, I'd love a cup of coffee," she said thirstily, and the housekeeper poured her one and recommended that she got back in bed to enjoy it.

"I ought really to be getting dressed," Lacey said, an anxious eye on the clock. What Madame Beauregarde would think of her protracted absence she couldn't think. Unless Herr Heist had some sort of influence over her - and he had said that he knew her very well - and had managed to convince her that her junior English teacher was not making the most of a few scattered scratches and bruises, but really<sup>1</sup> had been in no condition to be moved the night before, her reception at the Ecole, when she returned to it, would be very cool indeed.

"I will run a bath for you," Frau Bader said, and left the room while Lacey finished the coffee.

Lacey very fortunately had a few simple aids to a fairly impeccable appearance in her knapsack, and by the time Herr Heist arrived at the chalet she was looking very much as she normally did when ready to face the day. The housekeeper had cleaned and pressed her skirt for her, and her shoes had been cleaned, too. Her misty blue wool sweater had had a fairly large piece taken out of one elbow, but Frau Bader's clever fingers had darned it, and it was not in the least noticeable, despite the fact that the wool used did not altogether match.

With her hair neatly combed and her mouth lightly lipsticked she waited to receive the congratulations of her host on her all but complete recovery. He walked into the sitting-room via the verandah and she felt instant astonishment because he was dressed very differently from the way in which he had been dressed when she saw him last. Then he had looked casual enough in his khaki shorts, and thick woollen stockings; but this morning he was dressed with care, in a neat dark lounge suit and an impeccably tied tie.

In the sunset light the evening before he had struck her as a brown man ... a slight, but possibly very strong man, with the most beautiful liquid dark eyes she had ever seen in her life. This morning the eyes were still liquidly beautiful, but his expression was a trifle withdrawn. She noticed, particularly, how well shaved he was, and he brought an aura of after-shave lotion with him into the chalet living-room. His dark eyebrows went up at sight of her, and then he said with unexpected brevity:

"You are recovered? Good! Shall we go?"

Outside, in the brilliant sunshine that was bathing every exposed inch of the mountainside, although the woods - as always - were in sinisterly sable shadow, his car waited.

It was the sort of car that caused the eyes to open wide, and the fact that it was chauffeur-driven caused Lacey's eyes to open even wider. A glass partition separated the passengers from the man behind the wheel, and having issued a few precise instructions to the latter the man called Heist got in quietly and saw to it that the partition was really closed. Then he turned to Lacey, sharing the well-upholstered seat with him, and smiled at her.

"You are quite comfortable, yes? " he enquired.

"Very comfortable, thank you," she answered.

"Frau Bader tells me that you did not eat your breakfast, but otherwise you seem more or less restored."

"I'm perfectly all right again, thank you," she answered rather breathlessly.

He lay back in his corner and lighted 'himself a cigarette.

"You do not object if I smoke?"

"Of course not."

"Last night you told me that you do not smoke very much, so I think, as you have had little breakfast, it is better that you do not do so now."

"Oh, I don't really like cigarettes," she confessed.

He studied the glowing tip of his own. In the broad light of day she was able to observe what very fine and shapely hands he had as he tapped the ash from his cigarette; and as she glanced quickly at his profile that struck her as rather fine and shapely, too.

She had tried rather hard to find out from Frau Bader what type of man he was, and in particular what, if anything, he did for a living. The chalet and its contents had told her that he could be described as comfortably off, but Frau Bader declined to reveal anything about him. She had shrugged her shoulders in a manner intended to indicate that she did not quite understand the discreet questions put to her - although she spoke English remarkably well for a woman of the mountains, and most of the time Lacey spoke to her in her native German. Therefore it became clear to Lacey that either Herr Heist had made a particular point of instructing his housekeeper not to talk about him, or the housekeeper was the kind of woman who wouldn't talk in any case.

When she said good-bye to Lacey she had shaken her hand with positive enthusiasm, as if she was far from sorry to see the last of her; and Lacey's grateful thanks for the loan of her nightdress had won from her a faint uplifting of her greying eyebrows.

"It was nothing," she said. "Nothing at all, Frau- lein."

She did not say, "When you climb the mountain again, Fraulein, I hope you will call and see me," as most hospitable innkeepers' wives would have said. She just made it plain that she wasn't particularly anxious to see the English schoolteacher again.

"I expect you are wondering what happened when I telephoned Madame Beauregarde last night," Heist remarked suddenly, as the chauffeur took a mountain bend with a degree of aplomb that proved he was very conversant with such roads.

Lacey turned her face towards him.

"What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing, of course ... except that she was glad I telephoned."

"She wasn't... angry?"

"Angry?" His beautifully marked black brows ascended.

"With me, I mean, for being so foolish as to attempt a climb on my own. After all, I hadn't any right to do so, because we're supposed not to do things like that alone. The rules make it clear that only when we're in couples - or better still, in a party - must we do any climbing. And that goes for the staff as well as the pupils."

He seemed mildly bored by the information. In fact, his whole air was slightly preoccupied ... and Lacey, who had been very much impressed by him the night before for a reason she did not quite understand - unless the blow on the head that she had received had heightened her perceptiveness and it had seemed to her that the quietly spoken Heist with his understanding eyes and occasional gentle smile and strong mouth was quite, quite unlike any man she had ever met before, and therefore her meeting with him was rather a remarkable thing - had a curious sense of let-down this morning because unless she was imagining things he was a little bored by her company. And, in any case, he had far more absorbing matters on his mind to keep him preoccupied.

She sighed suddenly ... sighed without realising what she was doing, because it was such a very, very beautiful morning, for the first time

in her life she was riding in an expensive, chauffeur-driven car that had a long cream bonnet and dazzling attachments and made hardly any sound at all as it sped down to one quite different the night before. And young as Ardena, and the man beside her had seemed some- she was she secretly dreaded the thought of getting back to the old familiar round after such an unlooked-for adventure - even if it had included a bump on the head.

Below them the lake sparkled, and the white buildings on the lake shore were all white and exciting in the strange, clear atmosphere. If life was really an adventure *everything* would sparkle, and instead of going back to a form of servitude there would be the next episode in this sudden, unlooked- for break in routine ... And the next episode would go on to the next, and the next. And the next!

Instead of which she knew perfectly well that there would be no more episodes.

And therefore she sighed.

Instantly her companion turned to her, and the whole expression of his face altered.

"There is something wrong?" he asked. "You are not, perhaps, feeling so well after all? The head is hurting?" and despite the movement of the car his shapely fingers probed the lump without causing her to do more than wince very slightly.

"No, it is nothing," she assured him. "Just a slight soreness."

"It will be tender for a few days yet." He regarded her with anxiety. "Perhaps I should insist that you go to bed for a day at least after your experience, and rest."

"No, no," she said, horrified. "That is quite unnecessary."

He frowned at her, smiled suddenly with extraordinary sweetness, and in a way that softened the whole expression of his eyes miraculously, and told her:

"You say that because you are afraid to admit the truth to Madame Beauregarde. But believe me, I will do that for you. There is no need for you to do anything at all, not even to apologise. Madame Beauregarde will understand perfectly."

"Will she?" Lacey flicked her eyes at him in surprise. "She might understand you, but she won't understand me. She will be annoyed with me."

He shook his head at her.

"I promise you she will not be annoyed."

The school gates were approaching, and the ear shot between them and travelled smoothly up the drive. Lacey allowed herself to be helped out of the car by Heist's chauffeur, an extremely punctilious and rather good-looking young man in neat livery, and Heist himself led the way up the steps. He stood aside for Lacey to precede him into the cool, marble-floored entrance hall, and then realising that she had suddenly become a bundle of anxious nerves suggested that she allowed him an interview with the Principal before offering any explanations and abject apologies herself. He also suggested that she went straight up to her own room and waited there to be summoned, if she was to be summoned, to Madame Beauregarde's sanctum. But he assured her with a faintly amused quirk at one corner of his mouth that she really had nothing to fear, and he did not think she would receive a summons.

"I think you can undress and slip into bed," he added. "Maybe later on you will be sent for ... tomorrow, I would say. Today do not look upon yourself as a transgressor."

He did not say that he would ever see her again - or, indeed, that he hoped he would see her again; and he turned on his heel and left her when the trim Swiss maidservant who normally opened the door to visitors returned from delivering his message to the Principal and he heard that she would see him immediately. Lacey made her way somewhat flatly upstairs to her room. It was a very small room, right at the top of the building, but at least it was her own, and once inside it she did not have to be disturbed, unless some senior member of the staff wished particularly to see her.

She became aware for the first time that day that her head was aching, and every bone in her body seemed to ache in concert with it. She supposed it was something she had to expect after such a fall as she had had the day before; but having had such an excellent night, and felt as good as new when she entered the car, it seemed a little strange that, in the loneliness of her own room at the Ecole, she should suddenly become aware of all her bruises and feel rather sick at the same time.

She was seriously afraid that, if Madame Beauregarde did send for her, her wits would hardly be bright enough to enable her to defend herself against scathing criticism. And if Madame decided to dispense with her for causing alarm and despondency - to say nothing of inconvenience - she would have to accept it and simply offer her apologies.

After waiting for about half an hour without anyone coming near her she slipped out of her clothes and crawled into her own bed. At least it was a refuge ... a kind of refuge. But she kept thinking of the bed she had occupied the night before, and the slender man in the dark lounge suit who had been so kind to her and then gone off and left her without a single word of farewell.

She must have been dosing uneasily for an hour or so when she became aware that there was someone standing beside her bed. It was



Miss Mackintosh, grinning at her as if she was highly amused and extremely diverted at the same time.

"Well, and how are you?" she asked in her broad Scots. "I can see that you're not feeling very good, and I'm not surprised. I hear that you went mountain climbing yesterday and got the worst of it. You're lucky you didn't break any bones."

Lacey attempted to sit up in bed, and then winced.

"I'm not sure that I didn't break a few bones," she admitted, continuing to wince.

"No, you can take it from me and Dr. Heist that you're all in one piece," Miss Mackintosh assured her cheerfully. "But you're to spend the rest of the day in bed, and tomorrow if you still feel a bit bashed about we'll send for Dr. Soames. Maybe he'll fix you up with a bottle of embrocation -"

"Did you say ... *Doctor* Heist?" Lacey enquired, not really in the least surprised, although she did feel unreasonably offended for some reason that wasn't particularly clear to her at that moment.

"Aye, of course he's Dr. Heist. I'm surprised he didn't tell you himself ... Dr. Ludwig Heist, Ardena's leading physician and a very brilliant consultant. He runs a kind of private nursing home at the other end of the lake. Now if it had been me who'd spent the night in his chalet I'd have felt I'd had an experience to crow about!"

"Why?" Lacey asked, as if it didn't matter anyway.

"Why?" Miss Mackintosh sounded surprised. "Because, for one thing, I'll bet it was very comfortable, and for another he's the most sought-after bachelor in these parts. The nurses at the hospital go gooey-eyed when it's his day to do a round of the Wards, and if one of them gets singled out for any sort of attention from him it's a

red-letter day for her. They say he doesn't normally pay much attention to anyone - except his patients. But the ladies of the district love to put him down on their dinnerparty lists, even if he doesn't accept. It's a kind of feather in the cap if he accepts an invitation to drink a dry Martini or lead a local businessman's wife into dinner."

"Perhaps he doesn't like dry Martinis, and doesn't much care for local businessmen's wives," Lacey commented, in such a spiteful tone that the matron's eyebrows went up still higher. "Which will explain why he doesn't accept many invitations."

"Oh, but I didn't say he *doesn't* accept invitations," Matron returned, seating herself on the foot of the bed and preparing to discuss the subject further ^He does ... but not always when and where you'd expect him to do so. I'd say he's choosy. And of course, a man in his position can afford to be choosy. A wealthy doctor *and* a bachelor ... even Madame Beauregarde eats out of his hand. She said at once that you must stay in bed, and that you were to do whatever he said you must do."

"And did he - did he issue any particular instructions about me?" Lacey, with her face half covered by the bedclothes, enquired rather faintly.

Miss Mackintosh looked expansive and curious at the same time.

"Aye, he did. A sedative to be taken every four hours, and some tablets to make certain that you sleep well tonight. He seemed to think you'd been pretty badly shaken up." The curiosity overcame her. "What *was* it like in his chalet, and what sort of a person is he, really? Was he very nice to you? Very kind? The general opinion is that he's not madly keen on women, but there must always be exceptions. One day I suppose he'll marry ... some lucky woman!" No one would have ever guessed that Miss Mackintosh was in her fifties, and inclined to

look down on marriage. "Do tell me how he treated you, and did his housekeeper make a fuss of you? They say she absolutely ruins him."

"It wasn't his housekeeper. It was a woman from the village, and she looked after me in an extremely adequate manner," Lacey replied, as if she was reciting a lesson. She dragged the sheet up higher over her face. "I'd like to go to sleep, if you don't mind, Matron," she mumbled, and Miss Mackintosh looked mildly hurt. "Oh, very well," she answered. "But when you're feeling better you must tell me all the details."

And Lacey knew that as soon as the hammering in her head had ceased, and her bones were less brittle, Miss Mackintosh really would insist on hearing all the details.

## CHAPTER V

THE next day Lacey, although still feeling stiff and what Miss Mackintosh very aptly described as "rather bashed about", got up and made her apologies to Madame Beauregarde, and she was astounded because the Principal received her smilingly and dismissed her without uttering a word of rebuke. She simply said that Lacey must be more careful in the future, and what a blessing it was for all concerned that Dr. Heist had a holiday chalet right beside the spot where her teacher of English elected to turn a back somersault. But for Dr. Heist the matter might have been serious.

Lacey entirely agreed with her, but her experience had done something to her attitude of mind which amazed herself. She felt depressed, inclined to look upon the future as something that loomed ahead of her, rather than hopefully awaited her; and as for the immediate present, there was little about it to commend itself to her or anyone.

The girls at the Ecole d'Unite led a very pleasant life, and all sorts of diversions were provided for them. They were taken to the theatre by various mistresses, and occasionally they were allowed to attend dances and public functions. The senior girls, in particular, were encouraged to enjoy social occasions, and their parents provided the essential trappings for these occasions.

Fleur Berringer had so many un-schoolgirlish clothes that she was the envy of everybody else, and Rose Bligh ran her very close. All girls had their hair professionally washed and set once a week, and most of them had their nails manicured and lacquered at the same time, and went in for beauty treatments.

A week after Lacey's accident, when she was feeling more like herself, she was given to understand that it was her turn to escort Miss Berringer and Miss Bligh and one other girl who was fairly new to the

school to a Mozart concert in the local Kursaal. In summertime the concerts were held in the Kursaal gardens, but as November was approaching they were given inside; and as the local people loved full-dress occasions it would provide an excuse for dressing up.

Fleur and Rose, recovered from their joint indisposition, spent the better part of the afternoon pre: paring for the evening. Rose laid out a shimmering blue dress with a very short skirt and very little in the way of a back, and Fleur unhooked a golden lamé dress from its hanger and spread that over the foot of her bed. Both girls covered their faces with face-packs during the afternoon and rested in darkened rooms with cotton-wool pads over their eyes, and the emphasis laid upon personal attractiveness and bodily care at the Ecole made it permissible for both of them to miss (a) a piano lesson and (b) a lesson in advanced French in order that this highly desirable end in itself should be achieved.

When the time came for them to set forth Madame Beauregarde, who caught a glimpse of them as she made her way across the hall to her own strictly private sanctum, where she proposed to spend the evening on an Empire couch watching television, felt so proud of them that she paused to congratulate them on their appearance. But Lacey, who was their escort, and was not nearly so spectacularly attired, felt as if she was a kind of drab ladies' companion as she tagged along behind.

A taxi took them to the concert hall, and in the cab the girls re-did their faces. Lacey watched them with a kind of tolerant amusement, although she also wondered what their parents would have said if they could have seen them at that moment ... and whether they would wholeheartedly approve.

Fleur looked at least twenty-five, and ravishingly beautiful, while Rose was more like the fairy on the Christmas tree in her shimmering slip of a dress. They smelled of Dior perfume, and sparkled with

gems. The mixture of Swiss and Italian ladies in the audience tonight would not - could not, she thought - sparkle more disturbingly.

The first person they met when they arrived at the Kursaal was Dr. Soames. He was escorting a lovely Germanic-looking girl with blonde hair... the same blonde-headed girl, Lacey thought, that she had seen seated beside him in his car on the night when that same car had passed perilously close to her when she stepped off the kerb.

Dr. Soames, utterly immaculate in evening dress, and almost aggressively English, recalled the incident as soon as his eyes alighted on Lacey, and he paused to have a few words with her while his companion went on ahead.

"Ah, Miss Lacey Cavendish!" he exclaimed. His blue eyes mocked her, although at the same time they very faintly admired her in her two-seasons-old dress of simple black chiffon ornamented with a few rhinestones that threw into prominence her remarkably beautiful, shining red-gold hair, and her slender neck. "You see, I do remember that it isn't Lucy!"

Fleur and Rose both turned and came towards them eagerly, and the blonde-headed girl also turned frowned, and protested:

"Roger! We are late already..."

But Dr. Soames went on smiling mockingly at Lacey.

"Do-you usually wander about the lake shore at night With your eyes half closed?" he demanded. "If you do, you're going to need my services one day. The other night I nearly ran you down!"

"But you didn't stop!" she accused him.

"No," His eyes narrowed. "Did you expect me to?"

Drily Lacey answered:

"Not when you were accompanied by your friend here."

Fleur interrupted in her warm, husky South American voice:

"You didn't come back to see me again. Dr. Soames, and it took days for that horrid rash to clear up!"

Roger frowned.

"Did you expect me to stop?" he once more demanded of Lacey.

His young German friend slid her hand inside his arm and attempted, quite rudely, to drag him away.

"Rogaire, please! Come, Rogaire!" she softly hissed at him. "I dislike to take my seat when the place is full!"

Rose Bligh turned her enchanting blue eyes on him and simply smiled.

Lacey dragged the girls away.

"Come along, girls!" she exclaimed determinedly. "Fleur, I believe you have the tickets, and we can't get in without them. Let me have them, please!"

Fleur looked petulant and annoyed.

"Why did you have to drag us away when I wished to say something more to Dr. Soames?" she demanded.

"Dr. Soames has a friend with him, and did not wish to be held up," Lacey replied.

"That is not true." Fleur was gazing backwards over her shoulder, and her smouldering dark eyes were intrigued as well as resentful. "He is standing perfectly still and staring after us ... after you!" she corrected herself, in a certain amount of obvious amazement, since if Dr. Soames had to stare after anyone he surely would prefer that it should be someone essentially glamorous, like herself, or even her close friend, Rose Bligh. "And what did he mean when he asked you whether you expected him to stop? You didn't answer!"

"It's nothing to do with you," Lacey replied, more shortly, and as the tickets had been handed over and they were making their way to their seats Fleur had no opportunity to say anything further.

During the first part of the concert Fleur's eyes roved continually until they fastened on Dr. Soames and his companion. In addition to being a very soignée young woman her eyes were exceptionally expressive, and after brooding for a short time on Roger Soames they slowly filled with disdain because the girl who was with him was not, she considered, the type of young woman he should be seen with.

She was no connection of one of the better families in Ardena, and therefore, in the opinion of the American girl, definitely not to be cultivated. She was smart, but her clothes might very easily have been bought off the peg, just as Miss Cavendish's - her eyes swinging round to her - were only too obviously bought in such a manner.

Fleur's lovely, rosy, slightly over-full lower lip curled. She was a snob of snobs, and she was annoyed with Roger Soames because he had not spoken directly to her. She was annoyed with the girl who was with him because she had no right to be with him, and she was annoyed with Lacey Cavendish because she was just a teacher of English, and had no right to be in the picture at all.

On Lacey's other side the dreamy-eyed Rose sat and appeared to quietly enjoy the concert. Her swinging golden hair gleamed beneath



the lights, her fastidious make-up attracted roving glances, and her whole demure attitude was entirely deceptive.

She was secretly extremely bored, longing to be doing something far more exciting than just sitting at a concert and listening to music she could have listened to just as easily on a tape-recorder. Her long blue eyes with their feathery golden eyelashes slid sideways at Fleur, and she sensed that she was acutely bored, too.

Only Miss Cavendish - whose expression, actually, gave away little - was probably honestly enjoying herself.

Fleur studied her secretly for a short while, and wondered what she would look like if she were really well dressed. She had the most gorgeously-tinted hair, and her complexion was like porcelain, warmed by a delicate flush. Rose, who quite liked her, thought what a pity it was that she had to earn her own living; and what a difference it would make to her daily life if she had Fleur's, or her own, background.

Then, it was just possible, she might outshine both of them. As it was, she managed to look quite distinguished. But that was probably because black suited her - even inexpensive black.

For every pair of admiring eyes that fixed themselves on Fleur and Rose's face, at least one pair attached themselves to Lacey Cavendish's ... and it was while she was looking about her and taking mental notes of the absorbed masculine eyes gazing in their direction that Rose noticed for the first time the eyes of the dark man seated slightly above them on the other side of the centre gangway.

Rose gave a delighted little gasp, and then she touched Lacey's arm impulsively.

"There is someone I know very well here tonight," she whispered excitedly. "I have known him since I was quite small. He is over there on the far side of the aisle!"

Without quite realising what she was doing Lacey followed the direction of her eyes.

She found herself meeting a pair of dark eyes that were, familiar ... far more familiar than they had any right to be since she had known their owner for only a very short time. But that was because she had thought of them constantly since that one meeting; and, by some extraordinary coincidence, even while listening to the concerto she had been thinking of them ... trying to recall how very dark they were, whether they were really black or brown, whether they were basically soft, or merely just rather humane eyes.

Distant eyes, when his interest had temporarily evaporated ... even a little cool when it had flagged altogether.

And now, all at once, she made the discovery that he was here in the Kursaal with her, listening to the exquisite sounds of music as everyone else was. But, like Dr. Roger Soames, he was not alone. He had a companion who was not just the occupier of the seat next to him, but obviously very well known to him. She leaned towards him, saying something in a low tone, looking up at him just a trifle archly, although she was not in the least like Roger Soames's companion.

She had smooth fair hair that was twined rather severely about a shapely head, and she looked as if she might be well on in her thirties ... a graceful rather than an attractive woman, gowned in black with very little in the way of ornamentation, although her ear-rings looked good, and so did the bracelet that flashed on her wrist. And that arch smile grew when her companion turned to look at her.

"It's Uncle Ludwig ... I've called him that for years, although he's not really a relative," Rose confided to Lacey. "My mother and father know him awfully well, and my mother was once a patient in his nursing home. He's awfully kind and sweet... I adore him!" she concluded enthusiastically. "And," she added, "I think he's seen me!"

Lacey was quite sure he had seen all three of them, but she endeavoured to prevent Rose from looking round again and attempting to attract his attention. If Dr. Heist had wanted to recognise them he could have done so, instead of turning deliberately away and saying something to his companion.

Rose whispered:

"In the interval! He'll probably speak to us in the interval! We are going out for drinks, aren't we? "

Lacey had been instructed to buy them glasses of innocuous fruit juice, and she knew that Fleur would absolutely insist on "stretching her legs", as she called it, in the interval. And having caught sight of Dr. Heist Rose would also insist... although normally she was not so keen on leaving her seat as Fleur was. Fleur liked to attract attention, to meet people if it was humanly possible, but Rose was less easily diverted.

However, when the interval arrived, Lacey knew that unless he was very wily, and anxious to avoid them, Rose would pounce on him.

There was a terrific crush in the refreshment- room when they entered it, and at first it looked as if, short of a miracle, Rose would not run her adored old friend to earth. She made Lacey approach' the bar on two separate occasions to buy orange squash for them, and having spun out her second drink for as long as she could - as long as she dared, that is, if they were to regain their seats in time - in the hope that Dr. Heist might make his appearance at any moment and betray

delighted surprise, she was somewhat taken aback when he walked coolly into the refreshment-room without his friend and accosted than.

And it wasn't Rose he accosted, but Lacey.

"You are better?" he asked, offering her his hand and gazing at her keenly. His eyes -and they really were black, she decided - reminded her of subdued black velvet. "Ah, yes, I see you are looking very well indeed! Not even a lingering trace of your experience."

For the second time that night both girls gazed at Miss Cavendish with a certain amount of surprise, and more than a modicum of irritation because it seemed to be her night for capturing the limelight. Then, before Lacey herself could admit that she was fully and completely restored to her normal health, the impatient Rose grasped at the doctor's arm, and forced him to look down at her.

He smiled.

"Yes, I caught sight of you before you caught sight of me." He patted her hand. "There is no one else I know with quite that fairy-gold hair of yours. And you are so unbelievably pretty that it would be impossible to mistake you for anyone else!" His lightly tanned fingers touched her cheek. "When are you coming to have dinner with me, *Liebling!* It is some time since I saw you at my house."

Fleur, who was all eyes, and immediately intrigued, tried her brilliant smile on him ... she always hoped that it was a slightly languorous smile.

"Introduce me, Rose," she commanded, her South American accent particularly noticeable. "Even Miss Cavendish seems to have the advantage of me," and she glared in a hostile fashion at the English girl.

Rose complied with the request, wondering while she did so how it was that Lacey had got to know Dr. Heist, and the doctor allowed a bright sparkle of amusement to invade the darkness of his eyes and held out a courteous hand to Fleur.

"You must forgive me, Fraulein, because I did not insist upon being presented immediately," he apologised with great charm. "Miss Cavendish had a slight accident the other day, and I was a little concerned about her."

"Oh!" exclaimed both girls in unison, and Lacey felt their concerted gaze become levelled upon her.

Dr. Heist made no attempt to enlighten them further, and indeed, as the refreshment-room was emptying rapidly and the second part of the concert was about to start he had to cut short the conversation. He said smilingly to Rose: "Remember, I shall expect you to come and visit me soon ... and you must bring your friend, and why not Miss Cavendish, if she would not be bored?" His glance swung round a trifle quizzically to Lacey. "I will see that you all three receive invitations to my next dinner-party. Or possibly you would prefer to come to tea? Do not the English greatly enjoy afternoon tea?" his white teeth gleaming at Lacey. "I believe they make a kind of fetish of it!"

But Rose said immediately that she, personally, was not keen on afternoon tea.

"I would much rather that you invited us to dinner."

"*Much* rather," from Fleur.

Dr. Heist smiled at them whimsically.

"But my dinner-parties take place rather late in the evening," he explained, "and it might be a little too late for schoolgirls. What do

you think, Miss Cavendish? Will Madame Beauregarde allow you all out so late?"

I'm sure Madame Beauregarde will make an exception in the case of Rose and Fleur if you ask her, Dr. Heist," she replied stiffly, remembering with what ease he had secured her a free pardon after her adventure on the mountainside.

His smile took on a more distinctly amused gleam.

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"But what of you? But then you are of age, aren't you? I shall not need to appeal in your case."

His friend, the elegant but not particularly attractive young woman in black made her appearance in the doorway, and he turned to her and apologised if he had kept her waiting. She looked surprised to see him surrounded by such a bevy of somewhat youthful beauty, and then answered in the most melodious voice that Lacey had ever heard in her life that he hadn't kept her waiting, and of course it didn't matter if he had.

She smiled at Lacey. In fact, she smiled at all three of them. Her smile was the most relaxed thing Lacey had ever seen, and her light grey eyes had a look of humour in them that plainly gave away the fact that she was not in the least resentful because she had, for a few minutes, been kept waiting.

"But I'm afraid the orchestra is tuning up -"

"Yes, yes," he said. "We will not commit the unforgivable sin and take our seats when everyone is seated." He sketched a bow to the three young women ... very slightly ironical when it included Rose

and Fleur. "Enjoy your evening, little ones. I shall not forget that it is up to me to arrange our next meeting."

And without presenting them to his companion he took the latter by the arm and they disappeared in the direction of the thickly-carpeted stairs.

Lacey allowed a few seconds to elapse before permitting herself and her charges to follow them. Rose and Fleur kept whispering to one another, hazarding guesses as to the identity of the friend of Dr. Heist who had not had her name disclosed to them. Lacey was a little shocked by the cruelty of their observations ... the little they allowed her in the way of charm. Rose was of the opinion that the mysterious "girl-friend", as she called her, was Dr. Heist's secretary, and that he was taking her out for the evening as a kind of treat. Fleur, who was slightly older, and therefore more shrewd and less easily deceived by the apparently obvious, thought she bought her clothes in the right places and had too much elegance and confidence for a secretary, but she was certainly no beauty.

She was surprised that so smart a man as Ludwig Heist - whom she had heard about, but not previously met - should be seen about with such an unspectacular female, no longer in the first flush of her youth, when half the unattached - and attached! - women in Ardena would be enchanted to accept his escort.

She thought he was "madly masculine and quite a dish," but she didn't think he had the easy blue-eyed charm of Dr. Soames. And in any case, he was not English. Fleur, at this particular stage of her existence, was determined to be attracted by Englishmen, and if possible to marry one of them one day. She thought men like Roger Soames were exciting because they gave away so little, and were capable of being cruel.

It was her definition of indifference. The Englishman's cold-blooded indifference.

Rose argued that Dr. Heist had the power to do things to people ... but she didn't quite know what it was. She herself had been fascinated by him ever since he borrowed her from her parents for a day and took her out for a picnic. He had charmed her with ice lollies and bought her a fabulous box of chocolates. She still had the satin ribbon that had decorated them.

Lacey urged them to cease their exchanges and hurry up the stairs to their seats, and as soon as they reached them she made a determined effort to forget the encounter in the refreshment-room and concentrate on the music. There was a well-known soprano who was about to sing, and she felt it would be too rude and very inconsiderate if one did not give her the whole of one's attention.

The same went for her two companions. In the privacy of the room which they shared at the Ecole d'Unite they could continue the conversation which had begun in the refreshment-room - and almost certainly would! But for the moment, and while she was in a position to insist that they did so, they would remember their manners.

But during the whole length of the aria which the soprano rendered delightfully - receiving at the end nothing in the way of applause, because Swiss audiences never applaud - and afterwards while a pianist played Chopin she knew an almost uncontrollable desire to turn her own head sideways from time to time, and discover whether the two pairs of eyes which she felt were watching her on the far side of the aisle really were doing so.

She was quite certain that they weren't, but it was an extraordinary sensation just the same.



## CHAPTER VI

DURING the next week the weather changed, and winter really set in in earnest on the lake shore.

Up until then they had had magical golden days, and days when it was a delight to walk in the woods, and even go sailing and battling if you were really intrepid. Lacey was not an athlete, and she contented herself with walking in the woods, so it was a disappointment to her when she knew that the golden days were over, and would probably not return again until the following spring.

When the mist closed down and they were shut in by it for days on end, and even the high peaks were blotted out as if they had ceased to exist, then was the time to face up to realities. The temperature lowered itself dramatically and the central heating started working overtime at the Ecole d'Unite. Pupils put away summery clothes and brought out their thick sweaters and anoraks, their ski-pants and thick-soled boots.

It was quite likely that when the mist cleared there would not be any snow; but it was just as likely that there would be. At least the higher altitudes would have received a considerable powdering, and some of the lower ledges would be white and unrecognisable. The girls at the Ecole looked forward to December, when they would move to their chalets four thousand feet above where they were now facing up to the rigours of autumn; but none of them enjoyed the in-between period, when their close proximity to the lake made life seem very damp and dismal.

There was the usual crop of autumn chills and colds, and Dr. Soames was sent for more than once to take temperatures and test pulses. Lacey, who despite her slender build and rather ethereal look at times was fairly resistant to this sort of thing, did not succumb herself, but she ran into Dr. Soames more than once in the corridors of the school,

and once or twice she met him out of doors, when she was returning from shopping expeditions to the town or taking juniors to the dentist.

Every time he came face to face with her he smiled in a somewhat curious manner, and paused to have a word with her. She never quite knew what to talk to him about, and there was always something cool and critical in his smile that immediately put her on the defensive where he was concerned. He had heard about her accident on the mountain, and he accused her of being tired of life.

"Either you're presenting yourself as a target for motorists, or you're rolling over ledges," he remarked with a cheerfulness, and a complete lack of sympathy, that annoyed her. "Don't you like Switzerland? Are you the victim of unrequited affection? Or what is it?" His blue eyes derided her. "I remember the first time I talked to you you didn't look very happy. You were highly critical of some of the more favoured occupants of this decidedly plushy establishment, and I wonder now whether it could be pure envy. Are you envious of all the pupils whose well-lined parents think nothing at all of paying fat fees to Madame Beauregarde to give them the superficial gloss those parents think they need?"

"Of course not!"

Lacey sounded really indignant, and he observed that when she was annoyed she got a most attractive colour.

"You're pretty, you know," he told her. "You don't have to feel envious of charmers like Fleur Berringer and little Rose Bligh."

Rose Bligh was coming along the path at the moment, and he smiled at her as if the sight of her made his day. She was certainly worth smiling at, for her short white fur coat was genuine white mink, and attached to it was a hood beneath which her pale gold hair escaped and caressed her cheeks, like delicate feathers of pale gold sunlight.

Her enchanting blue eyes did not actually light Up, as Fleur Berringer's handsome dark ones would have done, but she flashed him a coquettish answering smile, and as she proceeded on her way to the house he whistled softly.

"Would you believe it? A schoolgirl who looks like a film starlet backed by a generous and doting sugar-daddy! But although I admire Miss Bligh I don't think she can hold a candle to Miss Berringer. Miss Berringer is Sophia Loren and Gina Lollo- brigida rolled into one! She has all the fire of the Latin races combined with the brash assurance of a young American girl. And her father is what I can only describe as vulgarly rich."

"Does that make her seem more attractive than she actually is in your eyes?"

He smiled at her lazily.

"I'm a poor man, you know. I haven't even got my own practice yet, and I could do with a rich father-in-law. It certainly does make her seem quite fantastically attractive."

Lacey declined to believe that he expected her to take him seriously, especially as the derisive gleam in his eyes was more like a positive sparkle of slightly unkind amusement. For some reason, as she knew, he had not gone overboard about her at their first meeting, and she doubted very much whether he would have done so even if she had a rich father, and was one of the more promising pupils at the Ecole. Also, despite his irritating smile and his cool, indifferent manner she suspected that he was not really indifferent at all. There were stories about him in Ardena, where he had become popular in a very brief space of time, that reflected quite a lot of credit on him. He was kind to children, and when children were his patients they received the very maximum amount of his attention. He was good to old people, and put himself out to make their lives more bearable. As a doctor he

was generally liked and approved of, and it was only when he appeared to be unable to resist the provocative smiles of precocious teenagers that Lacey felt she had a right to disapprove of him.

For that reason and the obvious reason that he didn't like her they appeared unlikely ever to get along well together.

And yet one afternoon he surprised her by asking her to have tea with him. It was in the Hotel Meurice, where she was awaiting the return of a junior who had been taken on a shopping spree by a visiting father who was handing her back into custody in about an hour, and having nothing better to do Lacey was sitting desultorily in one of the public lounges. She was glancing idly through magazines and toying with the idea of ordering herself a pot of tea, since it was four o'clock in the afternoon and a very wet, cold afternoon outside, when Dr. Soames came in through the swing doors and cocked an eyebrow at sight of her.

"What, all alone?" he asked. He dropped into a chair at her little round table and smiled at her one-sidedly. She was very neat and trim in a fine wool suit, and her hair as always was beautifully brushed and shining. She didn't remind him of a narcissus, but she did remind him of something connected with the woods ... perhaps because her suit was green and even her neat suede shoes were the colour of midsummer foliage.

In the over-heated lounge, full of comfortable chairs and discreetly arranged flowers - the hothouse variety - and well-lined, plushy visitors to the lake shore, she made him think of something cool and withdrawn that had strayed in from the shrouded woods above the town. The woods where the mist clung like trailing scarves of chiffon and the faded glory of autumn was entirely banished from sight.

Lacey's autumnal hair and her slender greenness, the matt perfection of her pale skin, intrigued him. He apologised for being slightly wet -

and as he never wore a hat the rain was shining on his light, attractive hair - and suggested they sampled the rich gateau that was being wheeled about on a tea- trolley and ordered something to go with it.

"China tea? I always think China tea goes down well on a wet afternoon, even at home in England where we nearly always drink Indian tea. That is a peculiarity of the British, their refusal to take to China tea, or even to have it once or twice a week. On the Continent people are more catholic in their tastes."

"I like China tea." But she was not all that sure she was going to accept his invitation. "I'm waiting for one of our third-formers who is having an exciting afternoon with Father. He's promised to buy her anything she wants ... and as he's off to Peru next week she'll probably take him at his word."

"Nice. Nice to have a rich father, I mean," Roger amplified. "Particularly if you're a girl."

Lacey recalled that the subject of rich fathers was inclined to obsess him, and she said nothing. She watched him signal a waitress, and in a matter of minutes the rich gateau was being wheeled to their table, and the order for China tea given. Roger also helped himself to cherry tartlets and a confection of almonds, kirsch and cream, and tried to induce Lacey to do the same.

She shuddered.

"I have to think of my figure."

"Nonsense." He glanced at it with unconcealed approval, and licked cream off his fingers. "You have a perfect figure, and you know it. And I'll warrant you don't do very much about it in order to keep it perfect."

"How do you know what I do to preserve my figure? And how, in point of fact, do you know anything at all about me ? "

"I don't." His blue eyes met hers, and they were smiling at her. "I'm just guessing."

"Your guess could be wrong. For all you know I live on fruit juice and cereals."

"Not you." He bit into a cherry tartlet, and she was quite fascinated by his obvious enjoyment.

"Despite that deceptive air of fragility of yours I should say you're very healthy, and, health - balanced health - is not maintained on a restricted diet. Besides, you couldn't flash those greenish eyes at me in the way you do if you lived on cereals."

She laughed, and for the first time since they met they seemed to be heading towards an easy comradeship. Then she asked him what he was doing there, anyway, and whether he was paid so highly that he could afford lush hotels for his afternoon snacks, and he upset the easy comradeship notion by answering immediately that he was there to meet Fleur Berringer, who had made the assignation herself, but apparently hadn't found it possible to turn up.

"She said three o'clock at the Meurice, and I've been hanging about here since three. At least she might have had the decency to telephone, or get the desk to hand me out a message. The one thing I do not like doing is hanging about waiting for young women who fail to materialise."

"Then why do so?" Lacey's voice was cold and censorious. "You know perfectly well that the girls at the Ecole are not permitted to make individual arrangements to meet anyone outside the school premises ... without the sanction of Madame Beauregarde, that is.

Certainly she would have a fit if she thought Fleur was making arrangements to meet you without her knowledge."

"Why?" His white teeth flashed across the table at her. "Aren't I the young ladies' medical adviser at the moment, and for that very reason alone there can be no harm in her meeting me."

"You know perfectly well that the arrangement would be more likely to appeal to Madame Beauregarde if you were not a medical adviser."

*"Touche!"* He regarded his empty plate regretfully. "What I'm going to do when I go home and there are no more cakes like the ones they make out here I don't know." Then he lighted himself a cigarette and smiled at her whimsically. "You can believe me or not as you think fit, but I wasn't a consenting party to this arrangement this afternoon. I think Fleur is enchanting, but I have a job to do and a reputation to maintain - as you've just more or less reminded me - and I found it a trifle irksome to be summoned to the Meurice to listen to some girlish outpouring which could just have easily have been passed to one of her female friends. It's probably not in the least important, and it would be embarrassing -"

"You mean she just wants to see you ? "

"Yes."

He exhaled a cloud of fragrant tobacco smoke and let it drift across the table until it enveloped her. Enclosed by the fragrant haze, she realised that his blue eyes were watching her with unconcealed interest.

"You simply can't understand why she should want to see me for some reason that had nothing to do with her health. And if she wasn't well, of course, your matron would send for me!"

"I..." Lacey finished the last piece of her gateau, but unlike the doctor who was watching her with such extraordinary intentness she did not lick her fingers. She wiped them on a wisp of cambric handkerchief that she produced from her handbag. "I don't think you should see Fleur," she announced finally and flatly. "Not outside the school, anyway."

"But she wants to marry an Englishman, and you haven't any real facilities for the fostering of that sort of relationship." His eyes were suddenly dancing with amusement, and they temporarily disconcerted her. "What do you do when you want to get together with your boy-friend?"

"I haven't got a boy-friend."

"You mean you haven't got one out here-?"

"I haven't got one at all."

"No!" He leaned his elbow on the table and his chin on his hand, and prepared to enjoy himself. "Then what do you *do* with yourself when you're off duty?"

"All sorts of things."

"Like wandering about on the lake shore by yourself, or climbing mountains by yourself?"

"I v didn't climb a mountain by myself." She sounded impatient. "I simply climbed as far as -"

"Dr. Heist's chalet?" She flushed immediately, and for jio particular reason, and he instantly wagged a finger at her while he looked drily amused.



"Come, come! You shouldn't pick on the most eligible bachelor in the district and then climb up to his chalet and get yourself rescued from a difficult situation by him! I understand you spent the night in his chalet. Dear, dear." He shook his handsome fair head at her. "People will talk, you know!"

She flushed more brilliantly than ever. She felt outraged.

"If you're trying to involve Dr. Heist in something unpleasant..."

"I'm not trying to involve Dr. Heist, and I'm not trying to involve you, either." But he was staring at her with enlightenment. "Dr. Heist is senior to me, and terribly well thought of in the district, and naturally I wouldn't say a word that would harm his reputation ... or yours, if it comes to that." He suddenly leaned across the table and flicked an end of her bright hair. "Is it really natural? I mean, do you do nothing at all to keep it that colour? "

The swing doors had opened behind them, and Lacey felt a slight draught as two people walked into the public lounge. One of them, although she didn't realise it immediately, was Dr. Heist, and the other was the fair-haired woman who had been with him at the Kursaal concert. It was not until she saw Roger Soames looking over the top of her head with interest that she slightly turned her head, and then she discovered that Dr. Heist was practically at her elbow.

As she looked up into his eyes she thought they were a little cool, and she wondered whether he had seen that familiar gesture of Roger's when he leaned across the table and touched her hair. Judging by the reserve in the senior consultant's expression he had seen, and he plainly did not think a hotel lounge the right place for intimate gestures of that sort.

And the knowledge which she had that the gesture was not in the slightest degree intimate brought the colour rolling in a hot, painful tide over her face and neck.

"Good afternoon, Miss Cavendish." Dr. Heist bowed to her. His companion had wandered over to a far table, and was smiling across the room at Lacey from there. She looked extremely smart in a dark fur coat and hat, and she looked far more attractive than she had done at the Kursaal. "What an appalling afternoon it is! I don't expect you think it's worth coming all the way to Switzerland for weather like this?" He nodded curtly to Soames. "You, too, Soames! You'll both have to exercise patience until the snows come."

Then, having linked them together in a casual phrase, he walked across to his friend and joined her at the table at which an attentive waitress was already standing. The friend picked up the menu and consulted it.

"China tea," she ordered, "and a piece of that gorgeous gateau."

Roger smiled.

"The situation repeats itself," he murmured.

"Only the lady looks as if there is nothing chance about their meeting. And I seem to recall hearing that he's planning to marry her. Well, I suppose she simply had to appeal to someone, but she wouldn't appeal to me."

## CHAPTER VII

Two days after this chance encounter Lacey heard that Dr. Heist had recollected his promise to invite her, Rose Bligh and Fleur Berringer to dinner, and em invitation arrived for them at the Ecole, and She was given to understand by Madame Beauregarde that she was to chaperone the two young ladies on their evening out.

Without having it driven home to her she understood perfectly that she was only included in the invitation because the school rules made it impossible for any young woman to set out for a dinner or any other engagement unescorted - unless she was to dine with a parent or close relative, or be entertained by them. In the case of Dr. Heist, he was an eminent local physician, but not related to either of the two principals in the invitation by ties of blood ... therefore someone simply had to go along with them.

Madame Beauregarde smiled at Lacey and made it clear that she was being excessively honoured, but she must not let the honour go to her head.

Lacey decided to buy herself a new dress for the occasion? and to have her hair properly done at the hairdresser's. Normally she washed her own hair, but you couldn't spend the evening amongst a selection of Ardena's most beautifully groomed women and overcome the disadvantage of feeling hopelessly dowdy unless you took steps beforehand to avoid such a depressing experience.

It wasn't that she wanted to impress anyone, and least of all Dr. Heist, who probably wouldn't even notice what she was wearing. But there is such a thing as natural pride, as well as national pride ... and she was, after all, British.

She didn't want to see those handsome, well- cared-for Swiss women, sparkling like fireflies in the night as a result of the generous presents

their menfolk made to them and the solid weight of jewellery they carried about on their persons, looking down their noses at her and telling each other that the British were dowdy and it was all part of the decline and fall of the British Empire. Since she had received an invitation she would be received on her merit as a guest, whatever Madame Beauregarde might have to say on the subject, and she meant that as a guest she wouldn't let the side down.

At least, that was what she told herself once she had somewhat rashly decided to visit a certain famous dress shop in the best part of Ardena, and, if necessary, part with a Whole month's salary in order to ensure that there should be nothing wrong with her appearance.

The dress shop she visited - and she had done so more than once with Rose and Fleur and some of the other girls - was the kind of establishment that caters for the upper stratum in a community. If Dr. Heist had had a wife she would have purchased at least a part of her wardrobe at Madame Claire's, and that went for the wives of most of the leading citizens of Ardena.

Lacey wasn't the wife of a leading citizen, and she wasn't even a close relative, and she usually sat and waited on a gilded chair while others made their choice. But she was known to Madame Claire, who thought her rather an unusual young woman and quite striking with that hair of hers, and she was immediately intrigued when Lacey entered her salon alone and said a little breathlessly that she wanted to buy a dress for herself.

Madame sensed a romance, and was ready to be of the utmost assistance. After all, some of those girls at the Ecole were very plain by comparison with this one, and she took a kind of pleasure in the task of helping her to find what she wanted.

She dismissed colours because they were inclined to fight with that beautiful Titian hair, and having done so she immediately made it

clear that she herself would choose black for Miss Cavendish. She had a kittle black dress that would be absolutely perfect if her customer would try it on; and when Lacey pointed out that she already had a little black dress, and had been thinking of something more revolutionary, Madame shook her head.

"With your colouring, mademoiselle, you cannot have too many black dresses ... or white, or cloudy grey, or navy-blue if it is for daytime. But for evening, for the little dinner, *black* is the choice you cannot possibly afterwards regret!"

"It isn't a little dinner I want the dress for," Lacey felt she ought to make it clear. "It is for a dinner party at the house of Dr. Ludwig Heist,"

"Dr. *Heist!*" the well-shaped eyebrows ascended in mingled astonishment and interest. "But that is different, mademoiselle! It is, however, even more important that you wear black. You will not, then, clash with any of the other ladies' gowns."

She lifted out a slender black number from one of her glass-fronted cupboards, and instantly Lacey knew that she couldn't resist it. It was as unlike her other black dinner-dress as chalk is from cheese ... and she knew before she tried it on that she would look well in it.

She was perfectly right. The black dress was made of stiffened lace ... very beautiful and by no means inexpensive lace. She found that out when she saw the price tag. It had an exceptionally attractive neckline that made the most of her creamy throat and smooth shoulders, and for the rest, there was very little of it, but what little there was made her look as if her graceful shape was covered as far as the knees in gleaming black cobwebs, and below the knees she planned to wear some very expensive tights that she had already purchased, and a pair of slim black shoes with diamante buckles that were her most extravagant purchase in recent weeks.

Bought to wear with her other black dress which she would now feel like relegating to the back of her wardrobe, at least until the novelty of the new one had worn off a little.

Having decided upon her dress and paid for it, she watched it smothered in tissue paper and encased in a super-smart-looking dress box, and carried it with Mr to the shop next door, where she bought underwear to go with the new creation, and a gauzy length of black chiffon lightly dusted with moonbeams just in case the night of the dinner-party should prove exceptionally cold and the central heating in Dr. Heist's house not up to counteracting her goose pimples.

Then she went on to the hairdresser where she already had an appointment, and decided to have a little off her gleaming tresses, and a rather fetching new hair-style adapted to suit her face. When she finally left the hands of Monsieur Jules, who normally concerned himself only with the coiffures of the local elite, but had been tempted by the sheer beauty of her hair to get to work on it himself, she knew that she was going to cause a few raised eyebrows when she returned to the Ecole. And she hoped no one was going to make comments - although Miss Mackintosh almost certainly would! - and that no one when they saw her new dress would think she had been grossly extravagant.

Altogether, she had spent nearly two months' salary on her appearance, and it worried her a little when the first flush of enthusiasm was over because she couldn't really afford to do anything of the kind.

Miss Mackintosh, she was sure, would think her quite mad.

The night of the dinner-party she soaked herself <sup>1</sup> in a very hot bath and then gave herself up to the sheer pleasure of dressing herself up.

She had allowed herself plenty of time ... time to attend to such details as her nails, her eyebrows - which were inclined to grow bushy unless she dealt with them - her make-up.

Normally she used very little make-up, but tonight she made discreet use of mascara and a very light dusting of eye-shadow to emphasise the strange crystal clarity of her greenish-grey, thickly-lashed eyes. She decided to allow the tips of her eyelashes to remain bright while she darkened them close to the roots, where they were attached to her velvety white eyelids. Then she applied lipstick - a delicate geranium pink - sprayed herself with perfume and dabbed perfume on the lobes of her ears and on the inside of her wrists, and finally took a good look at herself in the mirror.

She couldn't be sure that other people would share her opinion, but she thought she looked mildly sensational ... so sensational that she didn't recognise herself immediately. Her hair-do really was a success, and as for the black dress ... well, Madame Claire had been right. If she wanted to appear at her best she should always wear black. By contrast with it her skin looked almost unnaturally fair and perfect ... rather like alabaster warmed oil the inside with a faint rosy glow.

She expected Fleur and Rose to stare when she joined them, but she was not prepared for Fleur's comment:

"Suffering cats!" Fleur exclaimed, and stared very hard indeed. "That dress must have set you back a packet!"

"It was rather expensive," Lacey admitted, annoyed because she felt self-conscious.

Rose, who was by far and away the nicer- natured of the two girls, and so very well content with her own appearance that she felt she could spare a little appreciation for a mere teacher of English, smiled

at her and said with enthusiasm that she thought she looked very nice indeed. In fact, she couldn't really look nicer!

"Thank you." Lacey wasn't sure that that was a compliment to fill her with courage, but she accepted it in the mood it was offered, and then suggested that as they were a little late already they had better hurry out to the hired car.

It was a very long, gleaming, and impressively black car, and it was hired from a local garage who were accustomed to taking lovely ladies out to dine in the evenings. The uniformed chauffeur handed them in very carefully and provided them with rugs since the temperature had dropped dramatically since tea-time, and there were actually fat flakes of snow in the air.

What it was like higher up the mountain Lacey paused to wonder, and hugged her third-year nylon fur coat round her. She imagined a wilderness of white above the lowering clouds, and thought that if it went on snowing at this rate even the lake shore would be white by morning.

There were the usual gleaming cars on the glistening road taking people out for the evening, and despite the poor quality of the weather the lights along the lake shore were as bright as ever. There were the cafe signs, and the sign of the one theatre apart from the Kursaal that kept open during the winter. The shops had lighted windows, but pedestrians were being buffeted by the icy wind, and very few of them paused to take advantage of the brightness of the windows.

The street in which Dr. Heist lived was very quiet and extremely salubrious. His house stood back and was surrounded by quite a pleasing garden, and reached by a short drive. Lights were streaming out through the windows of the house, and mellow golden light streamed out from the front door when it was opened.



Lacey and her two charges alighted from their hired car and climbed the steps to the front door a little diffidently. There were other cars in the drive, proving that quite a number of guests had arrived already; and Lacey saw Rose glance at them, and even Fleur seemed impressed.

"It's to be quite an occasion!" she exclaimed, in her husky American drawl. "Your Dr. Heist must really be someone in these parts."

"He is," Rose asserted. And then because she sounded almost childishly enthusiastic, and realised it herself, she amended: "What I mean is, he's a marvellous doctor. He cured my mother of something very nasty when she was staying here years ago."

Rose cast her eye along the row of cars, and picked out one that interested her. But she merely smiled to herself and said nothing.

The glow of central heating that reached them when Dr. Heist's door was opened to them was most welcoming. Dr. Heist's manservant, a smooth dark Italian from across the lake, helped them off with their things and then indicated a room set apart for the ladies. It seemed to be full of softly chattering women when the three girls entered it, and because only Lacey was over twenty and they were all three from an establishment devoted to the improvement of tender, feminine youth - which meant lack of social experience - they were inclined to hang back and look as if they were uncertain what was expected of them when they saw the small army of sophisticated older members of their own sex.

Then Fleur, who was never shy or unsure of herself for long, moved forward to one of the mirrors and started retouching her make-up. Rose followed suit, but Lacey decided that if there was anything wrong with her appearance at this early stage of the evening it would have to remain uncorrected. For one thing, Dr. Heist's friend was

amongst the occupants of the powder-room, and she came across and spoke to Lacey.

"You're Miss Cavendish, aren't you?" she said. "I've met you, I think, on two occasions, and Dr. Heist has told me something about you. Don't you teach at the Ecole d'Unite?"

Lacey admitted that she did.

Dr. Heist's friend, elegantly but soberly gowned as usual, with some magnificent emerald ear-rings and matching bracelets relieving the sombreness of her appearance, smiled as if she realised she was guilty of an omission.

"You don't know me, do you? My name is Reisenfeld ... Gerda Reisenfeld. I should like us to be friends, Miss Cavendish," and she held out her hand. "Dr. Heist seems to think your position is a little lonely here in Ardena."

"Oh, really?"

But Lacey was so surprised she could say nothing further ... not even acknowledge the offer of friendship.

Fraulein Reisenfeld glanced at herself in a mirror, and patted an end of the gleaming, pale hair that encircled her head. Then she glanced in an amused fashion at Lacey's two charges.

"Miss Berringer and Miss Bligh are two very attractive young women," she observed. "When I was their age I was already acting the part of housekeeper to my father. But in those days, despite what is nowadays said of the rapid development of young people generally, we had an extremely well developed sense of responsibility and purpose for the future, and young women at finishing schools did not attend functions of this sort. However, Dr. Heist seems to think it amusing to invite them here. I am not at all sure I agree with him."

And as her face was suddenly intensely serious, and her eyes and mouth disapproving, Lacey gathered that the one thing she really disapproved of in connection with Fleur and Rose was the superabundance of feminine appeal they shared between them ... And the fact that Dr. Heist, being a man, was not entirely blind to it.

Otherwise why had he bothered to invite them to his dinner-party?

Lacey managed to detach the two girls from the mirror they were sharing, and after presenting them formally to Fraulein Reisenfeld she decided the moment was ripe to pay her respects to the host.

He was in the hall when they crossed it on their way to the main salon, and Lacey at least was almost startled . by the attractiveness of his appearance in evening dress ... very formal evening dress, with a white tie and neat diamond studs in his shirt front. He looked entirely in keeping with his house, which was elegant in a severely masculine way, and full of carefully selected art treasures and some beautiful Chinese pottery and thick Chinese carpets.

He had quite obviously been informed of their arrival, and was waiting to receive them. Rose, who knew him best, gave him her hand without awkwardness or shyness, and invited his opinion of the dress she was wearing. She pirouetted on one very slender heel, and her wild silk dress in palest harebell blue floated out from the waist, and her delicate but incisive perfume filled the hall.

Ludwig Heist crinkled up his nose, and at the same time his eyes expressed admiration. The child was really exquisitely lovely, and from the golden tips of her shoes to the golden crown of her head she was everything a fastidious man with a passion for collecting *objets d'art* must approve. And as he had known her since she was a golden-headed infant it was perfectly understandable that she should receive an extra special welcome from the host, and while she turned all ways for his inspection she allowed him to retain one of her hands

... which he forgot to give back to her for several rather long-drawn-out seconds after the inspection was over.

"You are, as always, enchanting," he told her. "And you fill me with amazement because every time I see you you are so much more of a woman!" He touched her cheek lightly and caressingly with a long index finger. "When I first knew your mother she was very much as you are now, but that was fifteen years ago, and the thought of it makes me feel very old!"

"Rubbish!" She caught at his arm and clung to it for a moment while her gold head touched his shoulder and her blue eyes gazed upwards almost languishingly into his. "Fifteen years ago you must have been very young, and in any case a man ages much more slowly than a woman. A man of thirty and a woman of thirty, for instance ... well, they just haven't anything in common! The woman is old - by comparison! The man is exciting!"

Fraulein Reisenfeld came up behind them and, overhearing, observed drily:

"What an interesting piece of information!"

Dr. Heist smiled at her.

"The sweeping statements of youth! You mustn't pay any attention to them, Gerda," he recommended. But her expression did not grow any less tight-lipped. He extended his hand to Fleur, and then quietly gripped Lacey's fingers.

"How nice to see you again, Miss Cavendish," he greeted her, without any expression at all in his eyes. "You will, I am sure, be very happy to hear that Dr. Soames is amongst my guests tonight. You and he seem to know one another quite well, and as you are both English I suppose that isn't at all surprising/"^

Before Lacey could answer Fleur gave a little uninhibited whoop of delight, and darted ahead of them into the salon. Dr. Heist smiled wryly - and, she subjected, commiseratingly - at Lacey.

"Perhaps I should have taken more care when I issued my invitations," he remarked, before he turned from her to welcome another guest.

The beautiful main salon of the house was full when at last Lacey entered it, and she wondered what sort of a dining table Dr. Heist had, and whether he expected to seat them all comfortably at dinner. Later she was to find out that it was an exceptionally long dinner-table, just as his dining-room was very long and gracious, and the number of people present filled the satin-damask covered chairs, and there was not one of them left over to stand forlornly against the wall.

Roger Soames waved to her as soon as he saw her enter the room, and although by this time Rose had attached herself to him as firmly as a limpet it didn't prevent him giving Lacey a special greeting, and smiling at her as if he had been eagerly awaiting her arrival.

"Dr. Heist said I was to take you into dinner," he said, "and I've been looking forward to it." He managed to shake off Rose for a sufficiently long enough period to take Lacey by the arm and lead her over into a corner. He put a drink into her hand and sat down beside her on a small Empire couch, and let her see by his eyes that he thought her black lace dress was probably the most sensible purchase she had ever made in her life.

"You look," he told her, as if he was searching for the right word, "enchanted. There is no other woman here tonight who can hold a candle to you."

"What rubbish," Lacey exclaimed, but his words caused her a thrill of unexpected pleasure nevertheless ... particularly as Dr. Heist, on

welcoming her, had seemed quite unimpressed by her appearance. "You know perfectly well that I couldn't possibly compete with - all these others," and she waved a hand to indicate the exquisitely gowned Swiss women, and the dark-eyed Fleur and the golden-headed Rose.

"That is the silliest thing you ever said," Roger exclaimed. He bent forward until his chin just brushed her hair. "I don't know what you've done to it; but it's gorgeous," he told her with enthusiasm. "And as for your perfume," crinkling his nose in the same manner that Dr. Heist had done a short time before, "it's having quite a shattering effect on me. By the time I've sat beside you all the evening you'll find it difficult to dislodge me."

She laughed, and pretended to be merely amused by his exaggerated statements, but that didn't prevent the Englishman from opening her small brocade handbag and extracting her lace handkerchief and deliberately inhaling her perfume. "Wonderful," he declared.

Dr. Heist appeared on her other hand and bent politely over her.

"Can I get you another drink, Miss Cavendish?" he enquired, a trifle stiffly. "I see that your glass is nearly empty."

"No... No, thank you!" she answered rather hurriedly, and looking up into his dark eyes she thought there was a faint suggestion of contempt in them. "I never have more than one drink at any time."

"Abstemious," Roger Soames murmured.

"You are quite sure?" Dr. Heist's black eyebrows went partially upwards.

"Quite sure."

At dinner the rest of the guests settled down to what they obviously expected to be a first-class, admirably served meal, and in between listening to the flow of conversation - English, French and German discussions going on all around her - and watching the animated expressions and trying to answer questions put to her by Roger Soames at the same time, Lacey took particular note of the excellence of the food that was served, the high quality of the wines that accompanied it, and decided that Dr. Heist must have an excellent housekeeper as well as a first-class cook somewhere hidden away in his establishment. And when she questioned Roger on the subject he admitted that the doctor, he believed, did himself very well, and was known to be extremely fussy where the running of his home was concerned... and no doubt that was one reason why he was planning to marry Fraulein Reisenfeld, who although she was no beauty and must be well on in her mid- thirties, certainly looked as if she could be entrusted to take over the role of mistress of such an establishment as this.

Lacey glanced along the length of the rosewood table at her - she was seated on the host's left hand, while an elderly dowager was on his right - and viewed between vases of yellow and white roses, with a background of olive green walls and olive green carpet and satin-damask hangings, a magnificent flower-piece in oils which hung above the fireplace just entering into the picture and looking, as it were, over her shapely shoulder, she certainly gave the impression that she fitted in.

She entered into very little conversation. In fact she said little, save when the host addressed her. But apart from the odd moments when she glanced at Rose Bligh, and her tightened lips betrayed the fact that she did not like her or even approve of her, her expression was mostly perfectly serene. She looked happy, contented. It was the expression, Lacey decided, that gave away the true state of her mind, and announced to anyone who was interested that she no longer had

any doubts about her future, and although she was not married she would be before very long.

It was the expression of an elegant cat who knew that there would always be a bowl of cream on hand however long, and otherwise difficult, the future might fee.

Indeed, it meant that her future was secured.

Lacey was too far away from the host to be addressed by him while dinner lasted, but once it was over they returned to the salon, and there coffee was handed round by the Italian manservant assisted by a trim Swiss maid. There was no one who actually poured out, as would have been the case in England, but that was probably because Fraulein Reisenfeld was not yet Frau Heist, and she would hardly like to undertake this duty until she was.

Only once during the rest of the evening did Ludwig Heist make his way to the corner of the room where Lacey sat. And then he only spared her a bare few minutes while he asked her one or two questions about her life in England, how long she proposed to remain in Ardena, and whether she had any plans for returning home to England. She assured him that her plans were very uncertain affairs, but she anticipated being in Ardena for the rest of the winter.

He looked down at her thoughtfully with his dark eyes.

"Beyond that you do not know what you will do?"

"No, Doctor."

"But you are quite happy in Ardena?"

She looked surprised. "I'm happy in my job."

"You like teaching?"



"Yes, I think I can say I like it."

"But you do not propose to go on teaching indefinitely?"

She looked still more surprised. "I have to earn my living, Dr. Heist," she reminded him.

He was sitting on the end of the couch on which she also sat, and his expression as he stared at the carpet struck her as distinctly formal, and rather bored.

"What about marriage? Do not all young women plan to marry one day?"

Rose Bligh came up behind him and leant familiarly against his shoulder.

'Doctor,' she coaxed, 'will you show me your collection of jade? You used to have quite a large collection. I remember my mother was madly keen to possess it.'

He looked round at her smilingly. The impression Lacey received was that he was relieved to be provided with an excuse to leave her to her own devices.

"It is in my library," he answered Rose. "If you care to come with me I will be delighted to show it to you ... and you can tell your mother that I still possess it," rising and smiling down at her almost intimately. She had her hand on his sleeve and he drew it through his arm. "Come along."

Over by the piano Fraulein Reisenfeld watched them go, and although she was turning over music at the stand she plainly ceased to have any interest in what she was doing once she had witnessed the exit of Dr. Heist and the eighteen-year-old schoolgirl who clung to

his arm in a very obvious manner as if she was on excellent terms with him, and they both" knew it.

Before Dr. Heist and Rose returned to the salon a few of the guests took their departure. It was snowing outside in earnest now, and in the quiet streets adjoining the lake shore footfalls and car wheels were muffled by the carpet of white. Dr. Soames had had to take his departure shortly after dinner, even before the coffee was handed round, because of an urgent call from a patient, and when the moment arrived for Lacey and her charges to leave, too, it was discovered that their hired car had not merely not arrived on time to return them to the Ecole, but as a result of having got stuck in a snowdrift it could not get through, and every other car the garage possessed was already out battling with the weather and conveying people to their homes from theatres and nightclubs and other entertainments.

Lacey was appalled because she could not think what they were going to do. The cars were leaving the quiet cul-de-sac one after the other, and in one of them Fleur managed to get a lift, while Rose was accommodated with a lift in another. That meant that Lacey was the only one without any means of transport to get her home, and she was<sup>^</sup> beginning to decide that she would have to walk when Dr. Heist spoke quietly in her ear.

"There is no need for you to be concerned, Miss Cavendish. Luckily Miss Berringer and Miss Bligh are both on their way home. It was clever of me, don't you think, to secure lifts for them? And now I will drive you home. It is my chauffeur's evening out, but I will drive you myself."

He sounded so complacent that Lacey glanced up at him wonderingly. Why, the thought crossed her mind, hadn't he offered to drive them all three home instead of securing lifts for her charges? As she looked up into his dark eyes she noticed that their expression was

more relaxed than it had been all the evening, and he was smiling at her a little whimsically.

"You think I might have offered to drive Rose and Fleur? Well I suppose I might... but somehow it never occurred to me. And there is the saying that two is company and three represents a crowd. Well, four would have been a bigger crowd, wouldn't it?" He helped her into her nylon fur coat. "Come along, Miss Cavendish ... Miss Lacey Cavendish! Do you know," conversationally, "I have thought a great deal about your name since first I heard it, and I have decided that it suits you. It suits you very well indeed! And I... I like it!"

## CHAPTER VIII

LACEY was amazed to find how much snow had fallen while Dr. Heist and his guests had been enjoying their well-cooked dinner and afterwards drinking coffee and indulging in light conversation.

When she arrived at his house with Fleur and Rose there had been a thin covering of snow on the ground. Now a strange silence overhung everything because the snow was so deep. Already, however, the ploughs had been out in Ardena, and cars were able to proceed at a reasonable rate of speed.

It had even stopped snowing for a short while, and overhead there were a few stars shining frostily in an inky dark blue sky. As they drove along beside the lake the stars were mirrored in the surface of the water, and so were the peaks with their fresh covering of snow that now stood revealed in all their majesty and splendour, with only a few swirls of mist entwining themselves about the lower levels.

Lacey found the comfort of the interior of the car extremely acceptable on such a night, but it was not the same car in which she had once travelled down the mountain with Dr. Heist after her accident outside his chalet. It was a somewhat smaller car, but very elegant and slightly rakish, and designed to be handled by a man in the mood to appreciate his form of travel rather than the amount of mileage he could cover without any effort on his own part.

She rather gathered, as she sat beside Heist at the wheel, that he enjoyed driving when he had the opportunity to relax in the driving seat, and was not thinking about the next patient he was due to visit or whom he had arranged to see at his clinic. His gloved hands rested lightly but in a competent manner on the wheel, and although his eyes remained glued to the road ahead he did not create the impression of concentrating on the business of driving and nothing else.

When Lacey glanced sideways at him his dark, attractive profile looked thoughtful, but not withdrawn.

He had handed her a rug to place over her knees when they entered the car, and she snuggled cosily beneath it, gripping her hands in her lap. The windscreen wipers purred softly because of the one or two flakes of snow that fluttered down occasionally, and what with the warmth of the heater and the comfort, of the upholstery the atmosphere inside the car was in some curious way intimate, and far more relaxed than it had been in his more impressive car on the way down the mountain.

"You enjoyed yourself tonight?" he asked softly, after a while, and while they were still proceeding along the lake shore.

Lacey was strangely startled by the question.

"Why, yes," she answered, as if she had been taken aback by it.  
"Why, yes."

"You don't sound entirely certain." There was a smile in his voice, and on his lips.

"Oh, but I did, I - I assure you I did, Doctor. It was a very enjoyable evening," she emphasised.

"You don't, perhaps, enjoy dinner-parties?"

"I don't get many opportunities to go to dinner parties," she confessed ruefully.

"In Ardena we are always giving dinner-parties, and luncheon-parties, and - supper-parties. It is our method of keeping in close contact with our friends. You haven't many friends in Ardena?"

"Not many."

"Fraulein Reisenfeld is most anxious to make a friend of you. I trust you will meet her advances half-way."

Again she felt surprised.

"Fraulein Reisenfeld? That is very kind of her..." But she puckered her eyebrows. "I don't quite understand why she should bother about me."

"No?" The light from the dashboard played over his face as he glanced at her momentarily sideways. "Gerda is a very good friend of mine, and we have many interests in common," he explained a trifle obscurely. "When I take a particular interest in any one thing Gerda almost invariably follows suit."

There was a moment of silence, and then she said, pleating the rug over her knees:

"You're not trying to tell me that, as a result of coming to my assistance when I rolled down the mountain, you've a particular interest in me, are you Doctor?"

His white teeth gleamed as he smiled more broadly.

"Well, why not?" he demanded, in an amused way. "After all, when one saves a life that life, according to an ancient superstition, rightfully belongs to the saver of it. No one can say I saved your life that fine afternoon on the mountain, but if your accident had happened anywhere other than right outside my chalet you might have had some difficulty in righting yourself without assistance ... and I doubt very much whether you could have walked back alone to Ardena with that lump on your head. You looked extremely groggy, you know, when I came upon you."

She gazed at him soberly.

"Yes; I expect I did," she said. "I felt groggy," she admitted.

His hand deserted the wheel for an instant and came out and lightly touched her knee.

"Poor little one," he said. "And you're not really very big, are you?" he added whimsically.

She glanced at him again. She Remembered that she had thought him incapable of carrying her as far as his chalet if she had been unable to walk.., not because he was undersized, or anything like that, but because of the slenderness of his build, and the curious elegance that clung about him even when he was wearing a khaki shirt and shorts.

But now that she knew him better she was perfectly certain that he could have carried her for quite a considerable distance had the need arisen. There was a certain steely quality of strength about him, despite his slenderness and his elegance... and even when his hand alighted lightly on her knee there was a sense of that strength being communicated to her, whether he knew it himself or not.

She said in the same sober voice, an apologetic voice, too:

"I don't think I've ever really thanked you, Dr. Heist, for all the trouble you put yourself to on my account that night on the mountain. You actually turned out of your chalet and spent the night at the inn because I suppose it wouldn't have been quite right if you'd remained there."

"Do you think it would have been quite right?" By contrast his tone was light, and still whimsical. "Do you?"

"It could have been a little compromising."

"For you, do you mean? "

"For you, too. For both of us, I suppose."

"And it wouldn't have been right if I'd compromised you, would it?"

"And I'd compromised you."

They had reached a part of the lake shore where it was very quiet, and very free from traffic ... and even at that late hour in Ardena, with snow on the ground, there was still quite a lot of traffic about. People were proceeding cautiously homewards from parties and other social gatherings, and occasionally a face peered out from a passing car and its owner recognised Dr. Heist and waved to him. There was the flash of a white, well-cared-for hand and a braceleted wrist, and a pair of curious eyes peering at Lacey. Sometimes several pairs of curious eyes.

She sat well back in her corner of his car, hoping she wasn't compromising him now.

But this end of the lake, from which they would soon turn off to reach the Ecole, was as deserted as if everyone had already gone home, and there were no eyes about at all to observe them. Dr. Heist brought his car to a standstill at a point where they had a wonderful view of the lake and the peaks on the opposite side, and while she was still wondering why he had done so, and why he was not more intent on getting back to the comfort of his own house, he produced a cigarette-case from his pocket and offered it to her.

"I know you don't smoke very often, but you do occasionally, don't you?" His very dark eyes were regarding her thoughtfully. "It's companionable, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it is." She accepted a cigarette.

His fate came nearer to her as he held a light to the tip of it.



"It was odd how we met that day, wasn't it?" he said, sinking back into his seat.

"Very odd."

"I have wondered about you very often since then. I hoped you didn't feel too stiff and sore that next day after I left you. I left a prescription for the matron to get made up for you, and I hope it worked."

"It did," she admitted gratefully. "It worked miraculously."

He sat staring at her for so long and in silence that she began to feel embarrassed; and then he turned his eyes towards the snows on the opposite shore.

"Tell me," he said curtly, "how well do you know Dr. Soames?"

She was immediately surprised.

"Hardly at all," she admitted.

His eyes swung round to her again, and she saw his dark eyebrows go up.

"Is that really true?" he asked.

"Of course it's true." She sounded offended.

"But he's a fellow countryman of yours," he reminded her.

"What difference does that make?"

"You might wish to see quite a lot of him because ... well, because he is a fellow countryman."

It was her turn to look amused, and slightly incredulous.

"Dr. Heist," she enquired in an amused tone, "do you like your own countrymen just because they're your own countrymen?"

The intense darkness of his eyes was lit by a sudden, curiously relieved, smile. In the light of the dashboard she could see the same smile curving his shapely lips, turning them up slightly and attractively at the corners.

"I see what you mean," he said. "I see what you mean."

"Well?"

Abruptly he frowned again.

"Then if that is true why do you permit him to touch your face in a public restaurant?" The frown was displeased, the dark eyes critical and unsmiling. "I saw him do so myself the other day, while you were taking tea with him, and you did not seem to mind. He bent forward across the table and played with a curl of your hair."

She could recall the incident herself, and at the time she had felt annoyed with Roger Soames, who probably made a habit of doing that sort of thing when he was buying a pretty girl tea, or devoting some portion of his off-duty time to her. But now she found it difficult to explain why she had not objected more strongly.

"It was nothing," she said ... in a way defensively. "As a matter of fact," certainly not at all truthfully, "I don't really recall him doing anything of the kind."

"But you just said it was nothing."

"Well, it obviously was nothing, since I hardly noticed it." And then, under the accusation of his eyes, she felt indignant. "It was really nothing more than Rose clinging to your arm in public, and making it perfectly plain that she ... well, she likes you very much indeed. In

fact, she says so," and this time it was her eyes that accused him. The soft, greenish-grey twin lakes between her brightly-tipped eyelashes regarded him with temporarily unconcealed displeasure and resentment. "Why should you consider it perfectly all right for Rose to behave like that in public and object just because Dr. Soames - probably quite by accident - touched my cheek?"

For a moment he looked almost taken aback; and then, to her complete surprise, he put back his shapely dark head and laughed. He laughed as if he was really enjoying himself, and life was one hundred per cent pure pleasure and delight.

"Dear little Rose," he exclaimed. "She is enchanting, is she not? I do hope she has arrived back at the Ecole safely." Then he crushed his cigarette out in the ash-tray and quickly lighted another. He drew her attention to the fairytale picture the lake presented. "Is it not beautiful?" he asked, almost with fervour. "Ardena has been quite literally under a cloud for several weeks now, but soon she will emerge and be really beautiful again. Up there," nodding towards the high peaks that soared above them, "the snow will soon harden, and then we shall put on our skis and discover how delightful it can be to be simply alive. I shall spend week-ends at my chalet - week-ends when I can get away, that is - the hotel will open, and the Ecole d'Unite will remove itself in a body. Will you like living on the side of the mountain, Lacey?"

She was startled by his abrupt use of her name... and then she was suddenly confused.

"Yes, I shall like it very much," she told him.

He regarded her with a strange complacency.

"You have yet to find out how well you will like it," he warned her. "But I am fairly certain you will like it. However," quizzically, "you must try not to slide down the mountain too often."

Irresistibly she smiled at him. That is to say, she smiled as if compelled.

"I'll try," she promised.

His expression sobered.

"I must take you back," he said. He leaned across the seat behind her to make certain the window on her side was fastened. "Is there a draught?" he asked.

"No. It's beautifully warm here in the car. I wish I hadn't got to - to leave it."

"Do you?"

His arm was still along the back of the seat, and as she turned her head towards him a strand of her hair lightly brushed against his face. She felt him stiffen for a moment, and the expression of his eyes that were only inches from her own baffled her altogether. Then she felt as if the blood leapt in her veins as he spoke jerkily, and he put up a hand and almost wonderingly touched her cheek.

"I objected to Soames doing this," he admitted, "but I do not altogether blame him. You are very young and very lovely and very English - despite your un-English hair. Do you know that, Lacey?"

Her breath caught in her throat, and a pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat.

"If you say so, Dr. Heist," she tried to make a joke of it.

"I do say so."

His fingers slipped down until they caught hold of her chin, and she could hardly believe it... but his dark, well-shaven face was coming nearer. And then he released her and spoke jerkily again.

"Remind me that there is something I must do one day, little Lacey," he barely breathed.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Kiss you," he answered.

## CHAPTER IX

THE snow lasted for several days, and then a thaw set in and there was a further period of mist and rain and depressingly bad weather before the genuine snow arrived. By that time Christmas had come and gone, many of the girls at the Ecole d'Unite had been scattered to the four winds for the period of the Christmas break, and one or two did not return after the holiday to continue the winter term.

There was a handful of new girls, and Rose Bligh and Fleur Berringer returned from holidaying in exotic sun-spots with wonderful outfits of winter sports clothes with which they hoped to arouse envy in the breasts of all the other girls.

During the Christmas break Lacey remained at the school, and so did Miss Mackintosh and a few other members of the permanent staff. Madame Beauregarde flew off to Paris, and her deputy organised a few festive treats for those who were less fortunate than the main body and had to take advantage of the security that the school offered.

They had an English-style Christmas dinner, with turkey and plum pudding and various other trimmings, and on Boxing Day a dance was arranged in the evening to which people like Dr. Roger Soames were invited. In the absence of Fleur Berringer he concentrated all his attention on Lacey, and she felt vaguely irritated by him because he laid a kind of obvious siege to her, and refused to be snubbed when she felt like handing out a few snubs, and even sent her a rather expensive Christmas gift which she declined to accept because she had nothing to offer him in return apart from a Christmas card.

And as everyone sent Christmas cards to everyone else this meant nothing at all. Not even that she had him particularly in mind when she chose the card.

Fraulein Reisenfeld sent her an unusually attractive card, and added a kind of postscript to the usual good wishes saying that she hoped to meet her again soon. Dr. Ludwig Heist did not send Lacey a card, but he sent her an invitation to a New Year's Eve dinner-party, at which Fraulein Reisenfeld was to act the part of hostess, and he also scrawled a few lines at the bottom of the invitation.

*"After dinner we shall be going on to a cabaret, and will dance the New Year in. As this is not term time you mustn't try to think up an excuse !"*

Lacey did not think up an excuse, but she was strangely reluctant to accept the invitation ... and at the same time for some extraordinary reason she couldn't bear the thought of simply turning it down. She had not seen Dr. Heist since the night he drove her home from the very first dinner-party she attended at his house - so far the first and last, for this was to be at an hotel - and every time she remembered that drive she also recollected his somewhat odd behaviour and the one unforgettable thing he had said to her:

"Remind me that there is something I must do one day," he had said. And when she asked him what it was he had answered, "Kiss you!"

Dr. Heist, she felt sure, was not the kind of man who went around making promises of that kind indiscriminately; and yet she simply could not understand why it was her he wished to kiss.

On calm reflection she told herself that it was just because he was temporarily carried away - she was attractive enough in her way, and it had been late at night in a parked car while the first snow of winter enclosed them in a kind of white wonderland - and he hadn't really, of course, been in the least serious. The next time he saw her he would be polite and charming as usual, but that would be all.

And then she remembered the odd note in his voice, the way he had looked at her.

Ajid-'when she received his second invitation she felt afraid of accepting it, because if she did so she would find out whether or not he had been serious on that other occasion ... and if it hadn't been a serious request to remind him of something he must do— one day! - then she knew perfectly well that a bubble would have been pricked, and life would never be quite the same again.

She would have suffered a disillusionment ... quite a bitter disillusionment. And for some reason which she was as yet far from understanding she was terrified of the effects of that disillusionment.

Nevertheless, although she felt it might be wiser to decline the invitation - to think up an excuse that would not sound as if it had been invented - she did accept it, and she did attend the New Year's Eve dance at the Meurice.

She bought herself for the occasion another new dress, and this time she left black alone and chose a delectable soft green chiffon. It swirled about her like young spring green foliage, and by contrast the red-gold of her hair was the red-gold of autumn leaves. Fraulein Reisenfeld told her she looked enchanting, and Lacey was surprised because the Swiss woman's eyes were full of genuine admiration, and she even seemed pleased that Lacey had succeeded in putting herself across, as it were, so well.

Both at dinner at the doctor's house, and in the hotel ballroom afterwards, although there were so many women present whose dresses had cost small fortunes, and whose jewels were a temptation to half the jewel thieves in Europe, the English girl with very little in the way of adornment stood out as something quite unique ... and as she wasn't aware of the effect herself her charm was enhanced by the slightly wondering look in her greenish-grey eyes when people



smiled at her, and seemed happy to know her, particularly the young male members of Dr. Heist's party.

Dr. Heist himself, for a reason which Lacey was not in a position to appreciate, seemed in a sober mood. The ballroom was decked with flowers and streamers and endless quantities of tinsel, but his was no tinsel mood.

At dinner he was the perfect, but slightly grave, host. At the hotel afterwards he danced with each of his female guests - including, of course, Lacey - in turn; and then danced twice more with Fraulein Reisenfeld before abruptly disappearing, and he only reappeared in time to join in the general New Year toast.

He lifted his glass to Lacey, and his dark eyes compelled hers to meet them.

"A happy New Year," he said. "May everything you've ever wished for come to pass in the next twelvemonths!"

Lacey, as she met his eyes and acknowledged the toast, felt that breathless sensation in her throat again. Her pulses were all leaping and bounding like a mountain stream bounding over rocks and boulders and heedlessly careering down a mountainside.

She saw Fraulein Reisenfeld lift her glass to Heist, and the expression in her rather light grey eyes was faintly whimsical, but also distinctly intimate, or so Lacey thought.

"Good luck, Ludwig!" she called across the room to him, softly. "The very best of luck this year! Luck you deserve!"

Afterwards, Lacey found herself sitting in a corner with her, and unexpectedly she brought up the subject of Rose Bligh.

"Is she not a charming little thing?" the doctor's friend said. "And so pretty that I almost gasp whenever I see her ! Such a pity she couldn't be with us tonight ... " Her glance sought the doctor out, on the other side of the room. "Do you know, Dr. Heist has known her since she was a very small girl."

"Yes, I do know that," Lacey answered, wondering why, since she was not present amongst the guests, they were discussing Rose Bligh.

Almost broodingly Fraulein Reisenfeld's eyes continued to rest on the doctor.

"Her mother and father are very charming people also, but the father is several years older than Rose's mother. It is, how I think you call it, May and December ... Is that it? Such a pity, because they seem to be very happy together!"

Lacey looked and sounded perplexed.

"But lots of married couples are - happy together who are quite far apart in age," she pointed out to Fraulein Reisenfeld.

"Ah! You think so?" The Fraulein glanced at her, seemed relieved because she had expressed such an opinion, and then glanced once more across the room at Dr. Heist, and the same brooding expression seeped back into her eyes and even seemed to be lit by a faint gleam of sympathy ... or was it pity? Lacey wondered, as she gazed thoughtfully at Gerda Reisenfeld.

"You think, then, that May and December can be happy together? " Miss Reisenfeld asked Lacey.

"I see absolutely no reason why they shouldn't be."

"You think the fact that the father and mother...?" And then she broke off deliberately, and seemed shocked because she had said so much.

"Sometimes I permit my thoughts to betray me," she confessed to the English girl, who sat as if she was slightly stunned at her side, while the orchestra played lilting dance music, and couples danced tirelessly on the highly polished floor. "It is not that I wish to interfere, you understand?" looking almost appealingly at Lacey. "But when one is so anxious that everything shall turn out well, and because of an attitude of mind there is a very real danger that it won't ... well, when it is such an old, and good, friend, it is all most disturbing and really rather upsetting! Especially at the commencement of a new year!"

"Yes, I see," Lacey said again, but she felt as if someone had aimed an unexpected blow at her below the belt. She also felt as if her sudden enlightenment had cast a blight across all her own prospects in the new year; and indeed, there might just as well not be any new year ahead of her ... not if she had to live through it!

She was appalled because all at once the whole of her future had become a wilderness.

"You are such an understanding person." Fraulein Reisenfeld turned to her impulsively. "Somehow I felt that the moment we met ... and I believe Ludwig felt it, too. The girls at the Ecole are fortunate that you are there to teach them English, and Rose is particularly fortunate because you seem to be her friend. She tells me that she likes you very much."

"That is very nice of her," Lacey murmured mechanically.

Fraulein Reisenfeld smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

"Go on being her friend. Be a good friend to all of them, but particularly to Rose. She is so heart-breakingly lovely, and who knows what the future holds for her? Since someone we both know and, I'm sure, admire, is impossibly obstinate at times!"

Lacey managed to make her way to the ladies' powder room, and once there she decided to seize the opportunity to recover herself if she could. She felt shaken. As a matter of fact, she felt shattered, and since it had never even occurred to her that Ludwig Heist was seriously infatuated with Rose the shock was like something physical.

She had been impressed, of course, by Rose's transparent attachment to the doctor; and it had seemed to her that he was particularly gentle with Rose ... far nicer, perhaps, than he was to anyone else. She had even commented to him on the way in which Rose clung to his arm, and seemed generally to hang around him whenever she had the opportunity ... and he had smiled and looked amused. He had certainly not looked as if it meant anything to him.

But Fraulein Reisenfeld, whom everyone thought was going to marry Heist, was in a position to know. Quite possibly she was in a better position than anyone else to know just how highly the doctor thought of Rose. And apparently she was quite certain that he did think of her very highly; but he was somewhat deterred by the difference in their ages ... May and December, as the Fraulein put it. He thought of himself as December, and the heart-breakingly lovely Rose was May, without a doubt.

But why - and what - did a sophisticated man, an extremely shrewd man, like Ludwig Heist, see in Rose? Who, at best, was a little empty-headed, and only a month or so ago had been running a temperature for the express purpose of having Dr. Roger Soames sent for ... who had since become the property of Fleur Berringer!

Or sq that ripe American charmer, with enough money in the bank to feed the nation, seemed to imagine.

' The band was playing a modern waltz when Lacey at last made her way back into the ballroom; and because she was in no mood to dance

- should anyone catch sight of her and ask her to do so - she hastened out into the glassed-in verandah, where the lights were discreet and low and the pot plants created an illusion of tropical growth and provided a useful screen for anyone who wished to keep out of sight for the time being.

She didn't expect to run into her host making a somewhat abortive effort to keep out of sight, but she did. He was standing beneath a colourful hibiscus, and also partially concealed by an enormous palm that was spreading its branches near at hand, and he was smoking a cigarette and gazing broodingly out through the glass at the forecourt of the hotel, where a large number of cars were grouped together. There was no snow tonight, and the forecourt was gleaming with rain, and perhaps that accounted for the somewhat surprising air of dejection that actually seemed to cause his normally well-held shoulders to hunch a little.

Or on the other hand, Lacey thought - when she attempted too late to retrace her steps without being noticed by him - it wasn't very likely. There was a far more simple and more easily acceptable reason ... acceptable since her brief talk with Fraulein Reisenfeld, at least.

He was wishing that little golden-headed Rose was one of his guests, and not somewhere far away at the opposite end of the world.

"Don't go," he said, rather sharply, as Lacey began to withdraw. She had blundered into his retreat without realising that the palm concealed anyone, and now she was embarrassed because it could look as if she had deliberately sought to disturb him. "Why, if you came out here to get away from the others, do you have to defeat your object by letting me drive you away ? "

He had turned round fully and was looking at her, in her delightful green dress, as if he actually welcomed the interruption ... which was somewhat surprising if he was brooding on Rose. People who wished

to dwell upon absent loved ones at the start of a new year didn't wish to be disturbed. Or so Lacey was inclined to believe.

But Dr. Heist was actually smiling suddenly, holding out a hand to her.

"Why don't you come and sit down? There are two chairs here ... not very comfortable ones, but if you're tired as a result of dancing they'll at least make it possible for you to take the weight off your feet." He continued to smile as he looked down at her slender, leaf-green feet. "Such very pretty feet, if you'll permit me to say so. Entirely in keeping with the rest of you tonight."

"Thank you, Dr. Heist," she returned stiffly. She didn't quite understand herself why she spoke so stiffly - almost ungraciously. But it could have been because she was under the influence of a form of shock. Fraulein Reisenfeld had shocked, startled, and utterly confused her.

The doctor's smile grew wry.

"Don't you like compliments? Or aren't I permitted to pay them ? "

"Of course." She looked up at him awkwardly. "Naturally I like compliments. I suppose all members of my sex do."

"I am not exactly a connoisseur of your sex." He flicked ash from his cigarette, delicately, into the tub that supported the palm. "I understand their health problems, but their mental attitudes, those are beyond me."

She put back her head as she looked up at him this time, and as she was seated on the small white- painted garden seat, and he was leaning against one of the supports of the verandah it was necessary for her to do so if she was to really study his face. It was a face that had interested her right from the beginning of their acquaintance, but

tonight she sought to penetrate the smooth, attractive facade in order to gather something of what he was thinking and feeling. But although there was a tiny gleam of mockery in his eyes the dark depths told her nothing at all that could provide her with any clues. His mouth was set in faintly smiling lines, but apart from that it was a very serious mouth, and she received the impression that he was in a serious mood. Any compliments he paid her were not just empty compliments. He meant what he said.

Which brought a tiny glow to her heart all at once ... although his next words extinguished it.

"A young woman like yourself ... you represent the complete enigma. I wouldn't even try to understand you."

"No?" She felt resentful immediately. "You mean it wouldn't be worth the effort?"

He shrugged. He was wearing full evening dress tonight ... white tie and tails, and there was no doubt about it he was most distinguished. The sight of him actually made her heart ache as if it had developed a toothache.

"It could be worth the effort, but it would take such a tremendous effort. You're on guard most of the time, and when you're not ... well then, it's hardly necessary."

"You mean there are times when I'm extremely transparent?"

"There are times when we're all of us transparent."

He was determined, apparently, not to answer any of her questions in an unequivocal manner, and she bit her lip rather hard and put another question to him. One he should find it easier to answer.

"I suppose you don't find it in the least difficult to understand someone like Rose Bligh?"

"Rose?" His whole expression seemed to light up, and his eyes gleamed with humour. "But of course I don't find it difficult to understand Rose. She is completely feminine, quite enchanting, a little cruel sometimes - as all true daughters of Eve are! - and entirely - on the surface. There are no dark depths about Rose, nothing devious or withheld. One knows precisely where one is with Rose."

Splendid, Lacey thought. He should be very happy. At least he knew that he occupied a very large place in her affections. His one and only difficulty was in trying to convince himself that he was not too old to marry her; and that if he did marry her he could make her happy ... as anyone as enchanting as Rose had a right to be happy.

Lacey began to wish wholeheartedly that she had turned down the invitation for this evening. He probably didn't mean to be cruel, but he was making her feel as if she was an oddity ... an oddity he had once wanted to kiss!

Which made him and his attitude seem all the more odd.

There was silence between them for a moment, and they could both hear the enticing dance music in the ballroom, and the rhythmic tapping of feet. Then Heist said with sudden stiffness:

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to persuade Dr. Soames to be one of my guests tonight. Apparently he had already agreed to join some other party ... which is hardly an acceptable reason for his absence to you, but it's the only one I can offer. I do assure you that I sent him an invitation at the same time that I sent you yours."

She felt that this was almost too much.



"I can't imagine why you thought I would expect to find Dr. Soames amongst your guests," she exclaimed with so much exasperation in her voice that he stared at her. "Just because Dr. Soames is what you call a fellow countryman does he *have* to be part and parcel of everything I do, and confront me at every turn no matter where I go?" She stood up, feeling so shaken by her own indignation that her voice quivered, and Dr. Heist went on staring at her. The slim breasts beneath the swathes of leaf-green chiffon heaved, and all at once she realised that she was fighting for her own composure. "It must be very late, Doctor. I - I ought to go," she said.

"It isn't one o'clock yet."

"All the same, I think I ought to go -"

"I promised to drive you home, and of course I'll do so. But since this is somewhat of an occasion don't you think you could delay your departure just a little longer?" He cocked his dark head slightly, listening to the change in the music. "They're playing another waltz ... a Viennese waltz this time." He looked at her almost appealingly. "Couldn't we dance it together?"

She shook her head. She was punishing herself but she carried on with the punishment wholeheartedly.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but I must go," she said, as inexorably as if nothing under heaven could induce her to change her mind. "I don't wish to drag you away from your guests, so perhaps I could ring for a taxi? I know the reception desk is closed, but the porter might ring for one for me."

For a long, long moment he looked at her, saw that she looked almost hard-faced and determined, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said. "My chauffeur is outside in the car-park, and I'll get him to drive you home. I'm sure you'll understand that it's a

little early for me to be torn away from my guests. As a host I have certain obligations to fulfil, and although it would give me great pleasure to drive you home I'm afraid it's a pleasure that will have to be postponed."

And without giving her time to change her mind, or even to properly realise how very rude and inconsiderate she must have sounded insisting on leaving the party at this comparatively young hour of the evening - or rather, morning - he turned on his heel and left her standing in the verandah while he went in search of his chauffeur.

And having unearthed his chauffeur - who was actually not in the car park but having a good time in the staff quarters of the hotel - and briefed him, the doctor did not wait to escort her to his car, but waved carelessly to her from the vestibule as she went in search of her coat. She thought his face was distinctly unsmiling as he called across the deserted, marble-floored space:

"Thank you so much for coming, Miss Cavendish. It's a pity you couldn't stay a little longer, but my chauffeur will see you safely to the Ecole. Fortunately there's no snow tonight, so you're unlikely to run into any difficulties. Good-bye, and a Happy New Year!"

She thought that even the chauffeur looked at her oddly as he held open the door of the car and handed her a rug to tuck over her knees.

## CHAPTER X

THE next time she saw Dr. Heist the snow was falling in earnest, they were six thousand feet up the mountain, and the New Year celebrations seemed a long, long time ago ... although in actual fact it was only a matter of weeks since he had sent her home in his chauffeur-driven car.

Lacey had grown used to living on the side of the mountain, sharing a many-balconied chalet with a selection of the girls from the Ecole. There were other girls living in other chalets near by, and the whole formed a kind of community presided over by Madame Beauregarde herself, who was accommodated in a very new dwelling which she shared with her deputy. The older chalets were large and commodious, and they reminded Lacey of large and somewhat ungainly brown birds sitting on the edge of the village beneath their tremendous spans of steep sloping roof that resembled the wings of old brown owls. After the first really heavy falls of snow these sloping roofs were obliterated by large fat eiderdowns of white, and if you left the village to go skiing on the hillsides it was often impossible to pick out a particular dwelling because only portions of the walls and plumes of smoke ascending from the chimneys gave away the fact that some sort of a dwelling was there at all.

The village, on close inspection, was very picturesque, with a single village street, a post office, a couple of stores, a couple of hotels, and a small church that was tucked away out of sight behind one of the hotels. In the summer-time three-quarters of the population of the village filed into church on Sunday mornings, but in the winter it was a different matter.

Winter was a grim affair on the side of the mountain. That is to say, it was a grim affair for the people who lived there and worked there all the year round; but for the holiday-makers, the winter sports enthusiasts and the girls at the Ecole d'Unite, it was a lighthearted,

colourful, sparkling affair from dawn till dusk once the snow had hardened sufficiently to enable them to spend most of the time out of doors, and during daylight hours the skies were clear and the sun shone.

It was Lacey's first winter on the mountain, and although it took her some little time to get accustomed to the altitude and to make her way about on skis she-very quickly appreciated the sense of exhilaration, and the delight of watching bright yellow sunlight on virgin snow, and the curious indigo patches that the dark woods made against the snow. The forests of fir and juniper that climbed to the very summit of the mountain, and clothed in a similar manner all the surrounding peaks, fascinated her by their remoteness; and at the close of day when the peaks turned pink with the candy-floss light of sunset, and the vast areas of forest seemed temporarily to catch fire, she watched until the bright light faded, and only the splendour of the afterglow was left to catch her breath.

The afterglow was purest magic. The whole of the wide valley, on the floor of which clustered Ardena and the bright string of lakes that nestled; at the feet of the mountains, was blotted out by a blue bloom like the blue bloom on grapes, and even the ski-scarred sides of the mountains ceased to exist as the haze wrapped them gently about and left the diamond-bright peaks emerging into the translucent blueness of the sky and the wonderful lemon light that was the result of the going down of the sun.

While that lemon light lingered the first stars appeared and shone like brooches pinned to turquoise velvet, and if there was a new moon that was the moment for it to make its appearance and climb into the immensity above the frozen peaks. If the moon was late rising, or there was no moon at all, then, when the afterglow faded, a sable blackness closed down over the world of mountains and frozen torrents and spreading forests. To be caught on the side of the mountain a kilometre or so from the village once the sun had set was a

frightening experience if you were new to that kind of life, and it was a rule in the winter quarters of the Ecole that no one was out after sunset unless for a very good reason, and only then if accompanied by someone who knew the area.

After a long day in the open, with few lessons and well-cooked meals, the girls were glad to retire to their beds early, and the little night life that there was in the village was no concern of theirs. They could see the lights shining forth from the windows of the hotels - one of them called itself the Hotel Splendide - and hear the strains of dance music and occasional zither music that floated across the intervening space; and if their imaginations were particularly lively it was a simple matter to picture the after-dinner scene inside the hotels, with bronzed skiers in gay *apres-ski* clothes disporting themselves on a square of dance floor, and other couples sitting out in the glassed-in verandahs, and yet other couples propping up the bar in the room that was a combination of clubroom, dance room, and public lounge.

Lacey had seen the interior of one of these rooms, and she was not greatly attracted by the plain pine walls and the tables with the checked cloths that ringed the dance floor. Even the Hotel Rosenhorn, that prided itself on being really up-to-date, was not like any of the hotels in Ardena, where plush and mirrors ran riot in the Victorian survivals, and in the newer structures a cubist calm and elegance prevailed.

Yet people flocked to the village of Griinwald, under the shadow of eternal snows. Both hotels were filled to capacity from January onwards, and the ski instructor at the Rosenhorn was in constant demand. Madame Beauregarde had a contract with him to pass her girls out from the nursery slopes, and most of them took as naturally to skis as ducks take to water. A few of them were inclined to test the patience of the instructor, and Lacey was amongst this few at first, until she discovered that she, too, had an aptitude for standing upright

on highly polished snow and skimming downhill as if she also had a pair of wings.

But she knew that she couldn't ever hope to compete with Fleur Berringer, who was the school's prize performer. Her name was down for all the competitions that would take place when it was somewhat nearer the end of the season, and for all the intermediate ones that were designed to propitiate the visitors who came in between.

Rose Bligh was also quite a good skier, and so was Carla Minetti. These three girls usually went about as a trio, and as they always had plenty of pocket-money they spent a large portion of their time that was not devoted to the ski-slopes to drinking coffee and consuming rich cream cakes in the one and only cafe that Griinwald boasted. Sometimes they penetrated as far as the Rosenhorn bar, but this was strictly out of bounds and it was always somewhat of a risk to be seen sitting on a stool and drinking Vichy water or tonic water, harmless though these beverages were in themselves.

Whenever Fleur made her appearance in the Rosenhorn bar she was quickly surrounded by a group of unattached male visitors to the hotel. Her anoraks were always the most expensive obtainable, and she went in for jewel-bright colours that exactly suited her flashing, South American type of looks. She also looked several years older than her nineteen summers, and was content to be thought far older if it meant that she was also accepted as sophisticated.

Rose Bligh, on the other hand, was a little nervous when she was mistaken for an emancipated young woman of means. It was quite obvious that she - or her parents - had the means; but it was not always as obvious that she was emancipated.

She was inclined to chatter about the routine life of the school, and to mention people like Mademoiselle, the French mistress, and Miss Mao kintosh, the matron. Sometimes the group of hangers-on was

inclined to look a little startled when they realised that she was no more than a schoolgirl.

Fleur resented this. She preferred it when Lacey, who was more often than not attached to the trio, could coax her into accompanying them into the Rosenhorn, and further persuaded to drink a tonic water with them. Fleur's ego felt much better when Lacey was around, not merely because she was sufficiently adult to prevent raised eyebrows, but she did not cramp their style in the way that Mademoiselle or Miss Mackintosh most certainly would have done. And she was not so glamorous that she received the maximum amount of attention. Fleur always liked to be the one who did that.

They had been at Griinwald a fortnight when she discovered that Roger Soames had made a booking for the week-end. He was booked in at the Rosenhorn. It was a cause for jubilation so far as Fleur was concerned.

She could barely wait for the week-end. She had her hair done at the hotel by the blonde German hairdresser, and looked out something particularly ravishing to wear should he invite her to have dinner at the hotel. For some reason she seemed to think it was highly likely that he would, but Lacey doubted whether Madame Beauregarde would give her permission to keep a dinner date now that they were up here in the mountains.

Madame had the well-being of her charges to think of, and she liked to think that they were all safely under lock and key when night closed down. For one thing it was half a mile to the hotel, and for another she did not approve of pupils - even those who were most senior - meeting people who were not their parents, or approved of by their parents, for social evenings.

And as Dr. Soames was the school doctor for the time being that was another reason why she would almost certainly not approve.

But Roger arrived, and he did not invite Fleur to dine with him. The only thing he invited her to do was to eat as many cream cakes as her capacity would permit her, and drink as many cups of hot chocolate with cream floating on it in great puffs as the same capacity would allow, in the village caf6 when he met her there by accident on the Sunday morning, and after that he apparently saw little or nothing of her.

He was a dedicated skier, and the ski slopes saw more of him than anyone in Grunwald. He returned to Ardena on Monday morning, and Fleur went about with a badly concealed look of annoyance on her face and a certain sullen resentment in her eyes.

Next time, she told Lacey. Next time I will have it out with him, and he will *have* to ask me to the hotel. I shall write to him beforehand and make certain that he does.

Lacey decided that it was no concern of hers, and if Roger chose to get involved with a girl like Fleur - who was accustomed to having everything her own way - then he must take the consequences if his involvement recoiled on him when he least wished it to do so .

The next week-end it was Rose who was excited. Dr. Heist was coming to stay at his chalet, and he was bringing a party of friends with him. How she had gleaned this news Lacey had no idea, but apparently, like Fleur, she had her secret methods of worming out information.

Rose was excited - or so she said - because it was always fun when the doctor came to stay at his chalet and the school was in residence at Grunwald. The previous winter he had spent a lot of time at the chalet, and she and several of her friends had been frequently invited to join the members of his house-party on the ski-slopes, and on gala evenings at the hotel. Madame had no objections whatsoever to their linking up with Dr. Heist's party for the simple reason that Dr. Heist's



reputation was utterly without blemish and an aura of success clung about him, and on more than one occasion Dr. Heist had recommended a parent to send her daughter to the Ecole d'Unite.

Therefore Madame Beauregarde was indebted to Dr. Heist.

Also the doctor always undertook to see the girls home. If the roads were difficult for cars he used a horse-drawn sleigh, and Rose was particularly enthusiastic about this means of transport. The horse - which was put to other uses during the summer months - had bells attached to its harness, and driving home after a party to their accompanying jingle was what Rose considered a fitting termination to an enjoyable evening, and one that couldn't be repeated too often while the season lasted.

She did not say whether the doctor had ever driven her home alone in the sleigh, but it seemed highly likely that he had done so at some time or other, and Lacey accepted it that he had. As Rose was the one who was always singled out for his attention, and according to Fraulein Reisenfeld was very close to his heart, it was too much to expect that he wouldn't have seized as many opportunities to be alone with her as he could ... even if, for the sake of his professional reputation alone, he had to be careful about doing it too often.

Lacey declined to think about Rose and the doctor during the moments that they were alone, but she was schooling herself to think of them as particularly suited to one another. For she did not share Fraulein Reisenfeld's views - which apparently were also the doctor's - on May and December marriages; and every time she thought of Rose's fairness, and Ludwig Heist's darkness, she could not escape from the conviction that one enhanced the other *to* such an extent that a marriage between them could be nothing short of a success.

And if Rose's parents had any sense they would surely let her marry the man she wanted to marry, particularly as he was so eminently fitted to take care of her, and he hadn't even yet reached the peak of his profession.

As for Lacey, it didn't matter to her whether he was a successful consultant or not. She only knew that there had been one occasion when she had come close to giving herself away completely in his presence - and in his car; and for at least twenty-four hours after that night she had been living in a state of bliss because of a certain way he had looked at her, and certain words he had used to her.

Now that she was fully aware of what a fool she would have made of herself if she *hpd* been a little more transparent that evening in the car, she knew that she must never permit herself the luxury of being off guard in his presence again. She must never for one moment believe that he was serious when - and if - he said something that was purely the result of a pleasant evening and perhaps a touch of moonlight on snow.

After all, she was a reasonably attractive girl, and reasonably attractive girls did inspire a kind of passing homage when the setting and the climatic conditions were right, men being predisposed to that sort of thing.

Cynically she urged herself to remember this.

When, therefore, she ran into Dr. Heist in the post office the morning after he was reported to have arrived the evening before, she adopted an attitude that was formal and slightly frigid right from the outset. Allowing for the fact that the sight of him threw her temporarily off balance, and the sight of him in ski clothes that somehow lent him a far more casual and approachable air than his tailored suits and dinner-jackets did, immediately caused her heart to bound almost hopefully, as if at last they were on some sort of even keel or general

meeting ground, the polite, frozen mask that clamped down over her face as his eyes appeared to light up was remarkable.

He even called her "Lacey," without a moment's hesitation, and insisted that she accompany him to the café next door for one of their special hot chocolates. She said in a prim voice that she really hadn't got the time to spare, but he simply smiled and told her he didn't believe it.

"You were just setting off for the slopes, weren't you?" he accused. And as she had just propped her awkward impedimenta upright in a corner of the wooden-walled post office in order to be free of it while she bought her stamps, and was actually about to enjoy a free day which she had intended to devote to the perfection of her performance on skis, she couldn't very well deny that that was precisely what she was doing.

"Well then, why do you say that you haven't time to go next door with me?" His dark eyes - and a little of the unconcealed pleasure that had appeared in them for a few moments - seemed to her to rake her mercilessly from top to toe before he forced her to meet his level look. "Is it," drily, "that you don't like chocolate? If not, there's always coffee, or hot milk, or mulled wine. Have you tried mulled wine after climbing back to the village after a descent into the valley?"

"No," she admitted, "I haven't."

"Then you'll have to do so sometime. But," and he glanced at his watch, "it's a little early for it at this hour. We'd better make it coffee."

She realised that she couldn't very well refuse his invitation outright, and he picked up her skis and carried them for her to the café next door. He set them up in a corner and selected a table for them, and as it was still very early in the morning they had the place more or less to

themselves. The coffee was brought and a plate of pastries, but Lacey refused the latter as if one of her major problems was keeping her weight down - which it most certainly was not - and was surprised when Heist consumed two before she was half-way through her first cup of coffee.

He grinned at her almost boyishly as he saw her eyes grow a trifle larger.

"Healthy appetite," he commented. "I never stop eating while I'm up here in the mountains. It's the air, you know." She agreed with him that the air was wonderful.

His eyes roved over the slenderness of her figure again and she gathered that he approved of her neat navy blue anorak and dark blue pants. Although he didn't say anything a certain gleam in the darkness of his eyes told her as much. She saw the whiteness of his teeth - and up here in the mountains he already looked remarkably bronzed - as he smiled.

"How good are you when you get out there on the slopes?" he asked. "Have you had much practice as yet?"

"Quite a lot," she admitted. "But the weather has been a bit mixed. It's snowing now," noticing the fat flakes that were flattening themselves against the window of the café.

"Yes." He glanced at them. "But the report is good, and I don't think the new snow will last. Is it safe for you to be out alone, or are you making for the nursery slopes? "

She felt indignant.

"I passed out from the nursery slopes a fortnight ago she told him. She was particularly indignant because Rose, having had many more opportunities, was almost as good a skier as Fleur, and the fact that he

must be well aware of this and at the same time imagined Lacey was still making for the nursery slopes seemed somehow to set her apart and put her in a category that caused people to smile, because she was a raw beginner, and raw beginners were gauche and therefore unattractive to watch, whether it was skiing or any other form of sport.

"Oh, did you?" He helped himself to a couple of cubes of sugar from the sugar bowl and unwrapped them and dropped them into his coffee, and then he lighted a cigarette. He watched her in an amused fashion through the haze of smoke the cigarette created. "Then am I to understand that you are now a highly qualified performer, and we shall see you taking part in the ski trials when the first lot are held?"

"Of course not." She felt still more indignant because he was making fun of her rather openly. "But I can get about on my own, in case you think I ought not to be allowed out without an instructor."

"I do assure you I wasn't thinking anything of the kind." But the solemnness of his expression was belied by the twinkle in his eyes. "However, I feel I ought to congratulate you since you've plainly made unusual progress. I think you told me at some time or other that you'd never skied before you came to Switzerland."

"That's quite right." But she realised she sounded stiff and ungracious. "We don't get many opportunities to learn to ski at home in England," she added, more for something to say than for any other reason.

There was silence between them for several seconds, while he smoked thoughtfully and at the same time continued to regard her as if she perplexed him - and, it was just possible, disappointed him.

On the far side of the village street, through the flying snowflakes, she could see his car - the big one in which she had once been driven

down the mountain - parked not very far from the Hotel Rosenhorn. She was surprised that he risked it on snowbound roads, and made an observation to that effect. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, the roads are not as bad as all that yet. Haven't you noticed that the bus gets through? So why should not I? "

"But a car isn't much use to you up here in the mountains."

He stubbed his cigarette out in an ash-tray.

"As I shall be lunching at my hotel, and not returning to my chalet until evening, I can drive you back to the Ecole when you've finished exercising out there," indicating the snowy waste beyond the window. But he did not offer to accompany her while she was doing what he described as her "exercising", and the omission brought a faint flush to her cheeks, for she realised he was probably exhibition material himself, and the thought of wasting a morning on the ski slopes with a beginner - even one who was beginning to pride herself on being rather more than that - was something he could not face up to.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said, feeling the flush mantling under her skin, "but it's no trouble at all to me to walk back to the Ecole."

"Carrying your skis ? "

"The slopes are too steep behind the school for me to ski back."

Once more his eyebrows ascended, and she realised that she had made an admission of incompetence. Then, before either of them could say anything further, the cafe door burst inwards and Rose and Fraulein Reisenfeld entered.

Rose was wearing her white mink anorak and exquisite pale blue ski-pants, and there were particles of snow, clinging to the bright ends

of her hair, and the whole of her delicious, creamily-tinted skin was rosily flushed with exercise. She came in, more or less towing Fraulein Reisenfeld, who was soberly clad in an all-black outfit, and having left their skis outside they stamped the snow from their boots and then made unhesitatingly for the table at which sat Lacey and Dr. Heist.

Fraulein Reisenfeld smiled at Lacey, and acknowledged her with graceful inclination of the head; but Rose directed all her smiles at the doctor and then pounced like a greedy child on the cream cakes and proceeded to devour one without even asking permission.

Dr. Heist fairly beamed at her.

"Anyone would think they starved you at the Ecole," he observed. "But for the fact that Miss Cavendish has just refused to eat anything at all I would be inclined to think that they do."

Rose flashed her enchanting little even white teeth at him before burying them in a layer of chocolate flavoured with rum.

"Lacey is terribly moderate about most things," she remarked, for a reason which Lacey herself failed to understand since she was not exactly a slave to moderation. "She hardly smokes, and she seldom if ever drinks, and she never gets into trouble for doing any of the outrageous things we others do because, I suppose," with a faintly contemptuous flickering of her eyelashes at the teacher of English, "it simply wouldn't occur to her to do so. Or she just wouldn't want to." Nevertheless, she smiled at Lacey. "Don't tell me you've been let off the hook today and are going off on your own? I noticed your skis over there in the corner as we came in."

Lacey felt her skin growing slightly hot, but she admitted that she had been granted a free day ... which, as a matter of fact, she had richly earned, since she had been doing double duty ever since the school

moved up into the mountains because of a mistress who had been taken ill.

"I thought of attempting one of the longer runs today," she confessed, feeling very self-conscious as they all stared at her politely, and Fraulein Reisenfeld said something about the weather looking a bit doubtful.

"If you're not awfully sure of yourself yet I wouldn't risk getting into difficulties," she said gently to Lacey. "I'm not a very good skier myself - certainly not in the same class as Dr. Heist and Rose - so I recognise my limitations and seldom if ever get into difficulties," laughing a little.

"Sound advice, Lacey," Rose observed, licking cream off her fingers; but the doctor seemed unable to remove his eyes from the fair face framed in spun-gold hair from which the white mink hood had fallen back and was lying on her shoulders, and he didn't drive home the importance of recognising your own limitations when you were attached to a pair of skis. He didn't even recommend Lacey to stick to the shorter runs.

She finished her coffee and made to rise. Rose was asking eagerly whether they were all three going to lunch at the hotel, or whether the doctor's housekeeper was giving them lunch at his chalet - from which Lacey gathered that Rose had been invited to attach herself to the doctor and Fraulein Reisenfeld for the day. There was a good deal of talk about trying one of the higher runs over the Engelhorner that afternoon, which bore out the theory that Rose, like Lacey, had been excused school for the day, and it was somewhat difficult for Lacey to make clear her intention of leaving them while Rose chattered away like a happily uninhibited monkey sure of the ground on which she stood - or the branch to which she very possessively clung; but at last Fraulein Reisenfeld, who was preventing Lacey from making any



decisive movement, stood up to allow her to pass her, and the doctor, too, stood up.

"So you're really going to try to prove that a fortnight on the nursery slopes can work miracles?" he said, smiling at her a little peculiarly, but not pressing her to stay, or to join them later on, when they, too, were out on the slopes. "Well, unless you deliberately take risks you can't come to much real harm ... and I'm sure you're too sensible to take risks."

She stared at him for a moment, convinced that there was a faintly disparaging note in his voice. Did he, too, like Rose - whom he so openly admired and approved of - consider that she made a fetish of moderation?

If so he must think her terribly dull. Which he probably did!

Only Fraulein Reisenfeld seemed rather sorry to see her go.

"What a pity you can't join us," she observed, waiting for someone to second the half invitation; but no one did.

Rose waved a careless hand, but didn't really glance at her; the doctor turned aside to order hot chocolate for Rose.

Lacey realised that it was snowing quite hard outside before she opened the door, and when she got outside with her skis it came at her in a wild flurry and stung her over-heated cheeks like a flurry of diamond-bright pellets. She felt her eyes begin to water, and as she stumbled along awkwardly with her skis down the length of the village street her eyes began to smart and to prick, as if there was more moisture behind them.

She blinked it away, apostrophising herself because it simply proved how foolish some people could be ... and it was time she adopted a more practical approach to life. A more realistic approach.

She was Lacey Cavendish, teacher of English, and she couldn't hope to compete with the fabulous Rose, who had everything, including Ludwig Heist's apparently undying admiration.

But she felt a very forlorn figure as she moved off down the street, and the whiteness of the snow encompassed her.

## CHAPTER XI

ALTHOUGH the snow eased off after about half an hour, and finally ceased altogether, she lost her enthusiasm for a day on the frozen slopes, and returned to the Ecole in time for the normal school lunch. The blinding whiteness of the snow under a sky that was full of an angry leaden light had dazzled her, the dark woods had struck her as menacing as well as depressing, and she had wanted to escape from them. She found the solitude of her own room after lunch much more inviting than the outside world, although by that time the sky had cleared and the sun was shining brilliantly again.

She watched for the return of Rose during the late afternoon, but there was no sign of her. In the middle of the afternoon she had noticed a lone skier on the rather steep slope that lay immediately below the main building of the Ecole, who had fascinated her because he had appeared to be doing nothing but killing time. It was quite plain that he was a practised skier, for he took off occasionally like a bird in flight across the valley, and then she saw him making the slow and arduous ascent again, and always he was within sight of the windows of the temporary buildings that constituted the Ecole.

It was impossible for Lacey to recognise anyone at that distance, but she thought she made out a yellow scarf trailing in the wind; and apart from that the skier was very soberly clad, like a stark black bird against the snow.

Shortly before dusk he disappeared, and then Rose came home, and Miss Mackintosh brought Lacey a telephone message.

Fraulein Reisenfeld wished to know whether she was back yet, and had asked for an invitation to be passed on to her. Would she join the doctor and one or two fresh guests who were arriving by the evening bus for morning coffee in the cafe, and could they look for her at ten o'clock the following day? Of course, if she liked to bring Fleur with

her that would be excellent. Dr. Soames was amongst the guests who were arriving that night.

Rose, naturally, would be amongst the party.

Lacey thanked Miss Mackintosh for troubling to bring her the telephone message, and went down to offer her services amongst the juniors the following day. Owing to the continued indisposition of the mistress who normally had charge of them in the mouatakis Lacey knew that Madame Beauregarde would welcome her offer, and she was proved perfectly right.

Madame said it was very good of her to be prepared to do double duty at such a time, and she really did appreciate it. She gave Lacey to understand that any extra devotion to duty at the present time would not be forgotten when they were no longer short-staffed, and she could have a whole weekend off if she wished it as soon as she could be spared. Lacey thanked her, and said she did not think she would require a whole weekend off, and she was so thankful that her time was likely to be fully occupied in the immediate future and she would have no opportunity to accept stray invitations when they came her way that she felt as if Madame Beauregarde had already satisfactorily rewarded her services.

It meant that the next day she was nowhere near the main café in the village street when a somewhat noisy party largely composed of Dr. Heist's friends and acquaintances gathered there for hot beverages and the usual rich accompaniments before setting off for the ski slopes; and she did not know that Dr. Soames made a special enquiry about her, and Fleur's day was somewhat spoiled because he repeated his enquiry on several occasions, and seemed to be a little annoyed that no one had seriously attempted to rope Lacey into the fun and games on the ski slopes.

Fleur finally grew quite petulant and left him halfway down a run to go off on her own, and when he finally caught up with her and she had to accept his assistance with a faulty ski strap she did so with a sulky grace that apparently left him quite unmoved, and he didn't even ask her to dance with him at the gala dance at the hotel that night. A number of girls from the Ecole were to be permitted to attend the dance, and Fleur and Rose, almost as a matter of course, were amongst this favoured few.

Fleur, having overcome her ill-humour sufficiently to insist on it, wanted Roger to agree to devote the better part of the evening to her, but he was ungallant enough to refuse outright.

"I don't know that I shall dance," he said. "I'm up here for a rest from my usual arduous duties," grinning at her, "and to enjoy the skiing. And as my own doctor I prescribe one or two early nights while I've got the chance. And if I go up over the Engelhorner, as I mean to do, I don't think I'll have the strength to dance."

"Not even if Miss Cavendish puts in an appearance?" Fleur demanded, her great dark eyes sparkling ominously, and a challenge in her voice.

"Well, that might, of course, make a difference." Roger smiled at her, with a touch of indolence. "Miss Cavendish and I were born and bred in the same part of the world. We actually hail from the same English county. So you'll understand perfectly I'm sure, if I feel that I can't possibly let her down."

"You mean that you'll dance with her if she'll dance with you?"

"I should feel it my duty to do so," on a glib note.

"I hate you!" she declared, her eyes flashing and her breasts heaving.

"Oh, come now," he attempted to soothe her, "there isn't any need to do that. Miss Cavendish - Lacey as I prefer to think of her - doesn't have half the fun you do. She works hard and she gets little time to play. You and your fellow sybarites do little else but play. Besides, I'm growing quite attached to Lacey."

"You mean that you - you *like* her?" Fleur demanded, stammering a little.

He smiled with thoroughly irritating complacency. "I'm not quite sure what you mean by *like*. I admire the girl... I adore her red hair. I think she's having rather a thin time at the moment, and I feel the urge to champion her. If I were thinking of marrying and settling down ... well, there's a lot about Lacey that would appeal to a man. Particularly a doctor."

"Do you think I would make a good doctor's wife?"

"No, darling, I don't." He was leaning against the bar in the Rosenhorn, lazily smoking a cigarette. "I think you're far too rich and far too spoiled. If you're seriously thinking of picking on someone to marry as soon as they let you loose from the Ecole I should pick on someone like yourself ... a playboy. You'd find life deadly dull in a hard-working doctor's establishment."

"I wouldn't, and you know it!" But she was furious with him for attributing to Lacey virtues that she didn't possess herself. "I hate you!" she repeated. "You're not even fair."

"I think I am." He smiled at her more gently. "I'm preventing you from making a mess of your life. Run away and look for your playboy."

"While you go off and look for Miss Cavendish?"

Gnashing her teeth together, she left him, and within a matter of minutes she had run into Rose, who was on her way to a rendezvous with Dr. Heist. Fleur unburdened herself to her friend, and expressed the opinion that it wouldn't be long before Lacey handed in her notice to Madame Beauregarde on the grounds that she was settling down in England and becoming a doctor's wife.

Rose passed on her version to Fraulein Reisenfeld, and according to it announcement of an engagement between Roger Soames and Lacey Cavendish was more or less imminent.

She had it on very good authority.

Lacey did not attend the gala dance, and for three days she saw nothing at all of Dr. Heist. When next she saw him he was driving his impressive car, and it seemed to fill the village street at its narrowest point, and he splashed her with the mud created by melting «now as he passed. He had plenty of time to recognise her, for the car was proceeding slowly and cautiously, but he did not even nod to her through the windscreen.

The expression on his face was extremely cold, just as the frozen night that was closing in all around them was cold and raw and inhospitable.

Lacey went on her way to the Ecole, trudging awkwardly along on her skis, and she was glad to see lights shining out from the various chalets; because they very, very faintly warmed her heart with their welcoming glow.

The next day Rose twisted her ankle on the snow slopes, and Dr. Heist saw her personally back to the Ecole. He lifted her out of his car and carried her as if she was a very precious burden indeed up the frozen path to the main building where she was lodged, and after he had carried her up to her room he went into private conclave with

Madame Beauregarde concerning her and her accident. It was made clear that she was not to attempt to do any skiing for several days, and he would call at the school the following day to have a look at her ankle.

He did, and he expressed himself as satisfied, but she must rest and avoid putting any strain on the ankle, and once again he said he would look in on his patient the following day.

But Rose, by this time, was becoming bored with inactivity, and it particularly irked her that she was taking no part in the lighthearted activities that were preoccupying all the members of Ludwig Heist's house-party. And when the doctor failed to look in the following day, and telephoned instead to the effect that he had been called down the mountain for urgent consultations and would not be back until the following day, she refused to play the part of interesting invalid any longer, and announced that her ankle - which had never been badly strained in any case - was completely normal again.

She insisted on donning skis and rushing off to join Fleur at the hotel, and the following day as Madame Beauregarde was also absent, and Miss Mackintosh was preoccupied with a couple of sick juniors, she defied Lacey when she tried to prevent her going off on a long climb with a party of newcomers from the hotel, and perhaps because she was vexed at the non-appearance of Dr. Heist - who might at least have made the effort to see her by lunch-time, she thought - she set off on the climb immediately after lunch, and was still absent when the dusk was closing in.

The rest of the party returned in good time for dinner, but of Rose there was no sign. Dr. Heist had arrived at the school buildings about four o'clock in the afternoon, and as proof that he had not even been to his chalet to change he was still in his consulting-room clothes. He looked at first unbelieving, and then grimly outraged, when Lacey told him that she had been unable to prevent his patient joining the



party from the hotel, and to her consternation he vented so much icily-voiced disapproval on her undeserving head that at first she could do nothing but stare at him in astonishment. Then, when she realised that there was nothing simulated about his indignation, and that he was genuinely furious with her, for a reason that it was a little difficult to understand since she was not in a sufficiently senior position to have very much power of control over the senior pupils, she flushed crimson and attempted to explain the situation.

"Madame Beauregarde was called away, and Miss Mackintosh has her hands full. Mademoiselle is still suffering from a strained back, and I'm still relieving the junior maths mistress. We really are very short-staffed, and - and I haven't any real authority ..."

"Then why are you here at all?" he demanded, looking at her with an incredibly bleak pair of dark eyes.

"I - I..." she stammered. "Because it's my job, I suppose."

"It was your job to keep an eye on Miss Bligh, and I particularly entrusted you with the task of looking after her. I warned you that her ankle must be rested for several days, and whatever she did she mustn't put any weight on it, and certainly she mustn't buckle a pair of skis on to her feet ..., and yet you allowed her to go off on a long climb with comparative strangers, and already the afternoon is dosing in and she is not back!"

He walked to the window and looked out at the lengthening shadows that were swallowing up the whiteness of the snow, and against the snowline the petrified woods looked dark and still, and above them the icy peaks soared into the changing blue of the evening sky. Already the pink light of sunset was trailing like a gauzy scarf across the peaks on the other side of the valley as the ball of sun slipped lower and lower, and the stealthy purple haze that crept up from the valley at this hour was beginning its slow ascent. Soon the whole of

the valley would be in shadow and it would be impossible to distinguish between one vague shape and another out there on the white slopes below the window, and as it was there appeared to be almost nothing that moved within reach of the searching eye.

Lacey stood at Heist's side and together they made an attempt to pick out a recognisable blob that would eventually draw nearer and climb higher up the slope. But apart from a man in a red cap plunging down into the valley there was nothing.

Lacey swallowed an uneasy lump in her throat because Rose should be back by now, and she might have met with an accident. But almost as keen as her anxiety for Rose was the agony of humiliation she was experiencing because a burden of responsibility had been laid on her and apparently she had failed to discharge it. And because she had failed to discharge it she had been mercilessly rebuked for her carelessness.

"I'm sure she's all right," she breathed, as she stood at the doctor's side. "She's a wonderful skier, and there didn't seem to be anything really wrong with her ankle when she set off." She could have added that there had never really seemed to be very much wrong with it, and from the way Rose had been getting about the house the day before it seemed she hadn't even suffered any particular discomfort.

The doctor said nothing, and she spoke again jerkily.

"Shall I go and look for her?"

"You?" He turned and regarded her in some disdain. "But you can't even ski... or at any rate not properly!"

"H-how do you know?"

"I watched you, a couple of days ago. You oughtn't to be allowed out with skis attached to your feet unless accompanied by someone who

could pull you out of drifts every five seconds or so. I'm surprised that you haven't broken your neck in your efforts to prove to yourself that the nursery slopes are no longer for you."

She felt surprised that he knew so much about her occasional wild flounderings on the major ski runs, but at the same time the raw edge of contempt in his voice brought a hot blush to her cheeks.

"I'm not always as bad as you seem to think," she muttered protestingly. "It's just that I don't always have the right amount of confidence when it's most needed."

He didn't even glance at her.

"If you take my advice you'll stick to less adventurous pursuits," he replied coldly. He glanced at his watch. "I'd better go. I'll drive back to the hotel and see if by any chance she's turned up there yet."

"Can I - can I come with you?"

She didn't know how she found the courage to ask him, but she did.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"If you wish."

In silence they drove through the deepening dusk to the hotel, and once there he left her sitting in the car while he ran up the steps to the entrance. Lacey waited for the swing doors to receive him before she let herself out of the car and followed him up the steps. In the vestibule they came face to face.

"She's not here." His face was really grim. "The people she went off with this afternoon are back, but she is not."

There was a whole world of accusation in his voice, and Lacey decided there and then that if anything had happened to Rose - even something slight and inconvenient - he would never, never forgive her.

Other people flocked into the vestibule, and there was a great deal of talk and a clattering of iron-shod boots on the parquet flooring. Lights were springing up all over the hotel, and the vestibule and the inner hall were no exception. Beneath the lights bronzed faces and multi-coloured sweaters and parkas formed. 9. strange kaleidoscope, and from the nearby bar came a further hubbub as the returning enthusiasts fortified themselves after exhausting attempts on the Engelhorner, and the Blitzenhorner. With tankardS and glasses in their hands they swarmed out into the vestibule to hear about the missing Rose, and everyone of them seemed to think it was quite extraordinary when she was such an experienced skier.

"There was nothing wrong with her ankle when I saw her last," one man's voice proclaimed, and another insisted that he had seen her going strongly for the summit of the Engelhorner in the company of a man who was a stranger to him a good hour and a half before he himself turned for home. The members of the party with whom she had originally set out all agreed that she had deserted them soon after they set out, but they none of them knew what had happened to her after that. They were all newcomers to Griinwald, and they not unnaturally assumed that she, who had been there for several weeks, knew what she was doing when she left them.

Dr. Heist's expression was growing grimmer and grimmer with every second that passed, and after hearing the various statements he turned on his heel and announced curtly over his shoulder to Lacey that there was only one thing to be done.

"We'll have to get up a search-party, but first of all I must go and change."

She followed him down the steps.

"You mean you'll join in the search-party?"

"But of course!" He looked up at her as if he was amazed that she should imagine for one moment that he would not be amongst the searchers for Rose. "You'd better go back to the Ecole," he said. "Do you think you can manage to get there on your own?"

She did not answer the sarcastic enquiry in his voice, but watched him start up his car and drive off in the direction of his chalet... the chalet in which she herself had once spent a night. A not unmemorable night.

One or two people had followed them down the steps into the main village street, but they dispersed as the car drove off and she turned for the Ecole. She assumed that at least a proportion of them would be willing to form part of the search-party, but she herself had had a sudden idea, and she determined to find out whether it was an inspired one or not.

Occasionally - very occasionally - Rose looked in at the other hotel, the Splendide, which was never patronised by Dr. Heist and his friends, but which seemed to attract Rose. She thought its slight dubiousness quaint, and enjoyed putting coins in the fruit machines and juke-boxes, and was not above having a drink at the bar if no one she knew was near enough to rebuke her.

Tonight, with the darkness closing down like a mantle over the mountains and the isolated village, with its long, winding village street, Lacey set off to make absolutely certain Rose was not at the Splendide, being entertained by someone she had recently met. And because the mysterious hunch she had received was a very strong hunch she was not in the least surprised to find Rose sitting on a high stool at the bar and chatting animatedly with an exceptionally

healthy-looking young man in a violently striped sweater who was quite obviously already badly smitten by her charms, while she had never looked more pleased with herself nor more entirely in command of the situation and absolutely free from even a minor twinge in a recently strained ankle.

She looked round as Lacey entered the bar and waved her glass of something perfectly innocuous at her, and invited her to join them.

"This is John Harmsworth," she introduced him. "He's American, and we met hours and hours ago." She smiled at John Harmsworth as she had never smiled at Ludwig Heist, and he smiled back. "Do you know, John, I absolutely forgot that they might start looking for me," she said as if she was highly amused by the thought. "For all I know, they're already getting a search-party together."

Lacey spoke quietly and very coldly from the door.

"They are, and the search-party is to be headed by Dr. Heist. If you don't want the whole village to turn out tonight and a lot of people to risk breaking their necks in the dark you'll get on the telephone at once to Dr. Heist at his chalet and let him know that you're perfectly safe!"

And having delivered herself of this short speech she turned on her heel and walked out into the village street.

## CHAPTER XII

THE next day Rose apologised, and Dr. Heist telephoned the Principal of the Ecole and requested her to convey his apologies to Miss Cavendish. He was afraid, he admitted, that he had behaved rather unreasonably towards her the previous day, and he hoped she would forgive him and overlook it.

Madame Beauregarde, who had summoned Lacey to her private sanctum, tried to make her understand that the doctor had not really been unreasonable. Miss Bligh was very important to him... Madame forgot that she hadn't any right to do so and hinted broadly that he was going to marry her. It would be such fun for the school when the engagement was announced, and they would all almost certainly be invited to the wedding.

Lacy tried to smile and look as if she could hardly wait for an invitation to the wedding of Rose and Dr. Heist, and then a way of escape opened up before her as Madame Beauregarde confided that their staff shortages were over and two new and highly qualified teachers were arriving at the school the following day. This meant that Lacey would no longer be required to give up the free time that was rightfully hers, and it also meant that she was no longer indispensable.

It meant, in point of fact, that she could be dispensed with.

One of the new teachers was a highly qualified instructor in English. The other would help out generally.

Lacey felt as if a light had dawned where not even the faintest glimmer of light had been hoped for; and although once she had accepted the fact that it was a guiding light she also recognised that she was behaving irrationally, and quite possibly not at all in her own best interests, it didn't really trouble her, and most certainly didn't

deter her, because she simply didn't want to come face to face with Dr. Ludwig Heist ever again.

For weeks she had been perfectly well aware that what was happening to her menaced her whole future happiness; but now she knew with the same amount of clarity that her future happiness was blighted in any case, and the one thing she didn't have to put up with was the torment of seeing Dr. Heist again. Dr. Heist in an apologetic mood because when he was consumed with anxiety on account of Rose Bligh he had overlooked the fact that Lacey could hardly be to blame when hers was not a position of authority in the school and had made her feel like a temporary criminal simply as a result of the way he looked at her, and the tone in which he addressed her.

She would never forget sitting in his car while he left her to stride into the Hotel Rosenhorn and make his enquiries about Rose; and afterwards he had abandoned her in the village street and after finding Rose she had had to make her way home in the dark without skis and nothing but a sense of utter desolation in her heart.

So far as she was aware he had not telephoned to find out whether *she* had arrived back safely, and Rose had spent the night in his chalet - probably occupying the same bed that she had once occupied - and been sent back to the school the following day in the doctor's enormous car that always looked so out of place in the village street, where it spent a lot of time sitting outside the Hotel Rosenhorn.

It was true that Dr. Heist hadn't accompanied Rose back to the school himself ... and she had looked a trifle subdued when she entered the school building. But that was probably because reaction had set in when the doctor knew she was safe, and he hadn't hesitated to rebuke her for causing him so much unnecessary anxiety.

Then he might not have liked the idea of her spending several hours in the company of John Harmsworth, and actually drinking with him



in the bar of the one hotel in Grunwald Dr. Heist himself did not patronise.

But, Whatever the reasons for Rose looking subdued, Lacey felt as if she had actually achieved something when she walked into the post-office the day after the incident and paid for a seat in the yellow post-bus as far as Ardena. It was a seat for the following day, and that meant that she would have ample time to pack a few things in a light suitcase - leaving the rest of her things carefully packed to be sent on after her - and write a note for Madame Beauregarde to be delivered when she was safely away from the school buildings, and another note for Miss Mackintosh with whom she had recently become quite friendly, and hope that her reasons for leaving the Ecole would be accepted, and that no one would consider it in the least strange that she had been recalled to England urgently, and as a result of the recall was prepared to sacrifice a quarter's salary, according to the terms of her agreement.

She had no doubt that when she got back to England she would soon find herself a job, but in the meantime she had to get used to the idea of leaving Grunwald and Ardena for ever - for nothing, *nothing*, would ever induce her to return to them! - and saying good-bye to familiar sights and scenes and knowing in her heart that the very last thing she wanted to do was to leave them. And the very last thing she wanted to do was to return to England, where she had few friends, and life would seem quite strange.

But at least it would be preferable to seeing Dr. Heist and Rose driving by in one or other of his cars, looking into the Ecole - visiting Madame Beauregarde for old times' sake once Rose was married, issuing invitations to senior students and teaching staff to have dinner with them - and seeing a certain amount of sympathy in Fraulein Reisenfeld's eyes.

For Lacey believed that Fraulein Reisenfeld had a pretty shrewd idea how she felt about Ludwig Heist, the man with the dark, dark eyes that had fascinated her from the moment she opened her own eyes and found them very close to hers, while her bruised and battered body lay on a mountain path.

In order that she should forget Dr. Heist as quickly as possible and the mistaken messages that she had thought his eyes had flashed to her once she had paid for her seat on the post-bus, she went across to the cafe and bought herself a coffee laced with thick cream - after all, what did it matter about her figure now? - ordered some rich pastries which she simply could not attempt to consume once they had arrived, and then pushed the whole lot away from her, settled her bill and went out into the village street.

Dr. Heist's car was standing outside the Rosen- horn, so that meant he was in the hotel - probably entertaining his friends to an expensive lunch. She buckled her skis on to her feet and skied off down the village street as far as the point where it branched off to Dr. Heist's chalet, which stood lonely and impressively new and cosily wrapped about with snow on a slight eminence above the valley.

She remembered that eminence, and she remembered the path which led up from Ardena, and on which she had once slipped and rolled backwards for several yards. At that season of the year it had been a reasonably negotiable path, albeit exceedingly steep, but now it was choked with snow, and on either side of it the slopes that were even steeper descended into the valley. As if that path on which she had once given herself a rather more than severe headache fascinated her she stood leaning against the fence that guarded the top of it, and looked down almost wistfully at the virgin whiteness of the snow.

When she had climbed up the path there had been autumn leaves lying thick on every inch of it, and the woods on either side had still

been bright with colours of autumn. Now they were black and slightly sinister, and the autumn leaves were buried deep beneath the snow.

She lifted her eyes to the chalet, and she thought she saw a movement at one of the windows, but it could have been her imagination. She watched the smoke curling up out of the main chimney, and she thought of the comfortable rooms that would be heated by the stoves with which that chimney connected, and in particular the room in which she had once lain on a couch while the owner of the chalet stood looking down at her anxiously, and outside the fires of sunset flamed across the sky.

Since that night everything had been changed for her... and now, as a result of that night, everything was going to be still more changed. She was going home to England, and she didn't want to go. There would be new scenes, fresh faces, a fresh set of colleagues with whom she would have to work, fresh sets of rules to be obeyed, other pupils, a new headmistress ... possibly, if she went on working for years and years, quite a large number of at present unknown headmistresses, and a large number of Miss Mackintoshes with whom she would have to co-operate. She saw herself growing grey in the service of the young, retiring eventually on a pension and living in a one-room flat in London, or perhaps somewhere in the provinces. It was hardly likely that she would ever be able to afford a cottage - a dream cottage where she might at least eke out her days in dignity, very likely sharing it with someone like Miss Mackintosh, who would be doing the same thing.

But perhaps if she kept in touch with Miss Mackintosh they might eventually share a cottage together. It would be better than living in a London one-room flat.

She felt suddenly very cold, although the sun was shining brightly and it was a really beautiful mountain day. With a kind of suppressed envy in her heart she gazed at the white wonderland that surrounded

her, and then it was all misted out by absurd moisture that was welling in her eyes, and she actually had to shake her head to get rid of the bright drops that welled over and would be frozen on her cheeks if she didn't do something about it.

Crying? Crying because a dream had been born, and most unwisely she had encouraged it to live, and now she had to perform the offices at its funeral!

She sniffed, and shook her head angrily. Well, she didn't really care. In the last few weeks she had learned to ski, and that was something! She recalled how unkindly - even uncharitably - critical Dr. Heist had been of her skiing, and gazed at the white slope immediately below her.

She had never attempted anything as steep as that, but it would be something if, before she went home to England, she satisfied herself that she was capable of negotiating it, and that without cannoning into the woods that would await her at the bottom and cracking her skull against a tree.

She squared her shoulders, and told herself that it was a final challenge ... and what had she got to lose, anyway? Not much! Only a long, lonely life as a schoolteacher ... and if she did a workmanlike job on that slope then she would have done something for her ego, and perhaps she wouldn't feel so badly in future because a slender man with dark eyes and a normally quiet and contained voice had once told her with cruel and cutting emphasis that she ought not to be allowed out with skis on her feet!

She sat down on the edge of the slope overhanging the deep drop and tested her skis and made certain the straps were secure and that there was nothing likely to come adrift during her flight downhill. And when she was satisfied that she had taken all possible precautions against misadventure as a result of careless preparation, she once

more stood up - albeit somewhat awkwardly since the slope was almost vertical - on the unsafe side of the fence that separated the slope from the road, drew a deep breath and straightened her back despite the knowledge which she had that a slightly crouching position was better for the take-off, then closed her eyes and felt the ground give way beneath her feet.

After the first shock of taking off she opened her eyes and felt horrified by the sight of the valley rushing up to meet her. Pine woods, larch forests, forests of scented juniper ... the shimmer of frozen water on the valley floor, they were all coming up at her, and the wind was rushing past her ears.

She felt as if her heart had stopped beating, and she wasn't really breathing at all. She was suspended in space, and the whole world was waiting to catch her as she fell. Her ears were bursting, but at the same time there was a tremendous drumming in them as if frozen cascades had burst their bonds and were roaring into life almost on top of her, and what ever she did now she would be caught up and obliterated by that cascade.

And then there was a moment of brief exhilaration before cold horror seized her and she realised precisely what she had done and what precisely would happen to her when her head hit the bole of the first tree trunk.

She closed her eyes again ... At least she needn't look. And then something had happened, and she was falling like a bird or a stone and the icy cascade closed over her.

## CHAPTER XIII

WHEN hands pulled her out she was too numb and confused to have the least idea who it was.

In a way she resented being extracted like a cork from that soft and yielding mass of snow; and at least while her head and shoulders were buried she knew a wonderful sensation like complete oblivion, and she didn't even have to ask herself whether she had actually hit a tree-trunk, or what it was that had happened to her.

If no one had been near to rescue her she could have remained buried, her senses would have deserted her altogether, and the beautiful oblivion would have gone on and on for ever.

But the man working hard to release her didn't share these sentiments. In addition he was furious because she was apparently quite stupid, and she actually protested when he set her on her feet.

"Little idiot!" Her skis were so badly buckled that she couldn't stand, and when an acute fear seized him that she had broken at least one of her legs his tone changed and he ordered her to lie still and not make a single movement while he extricated her from her skis. "Whatever you do don't make matters worse than they are at the moment! You may or may not have sustained some sort of an injury, but I don't think you have--" His hands were passing like lightning over the whole of her body, supine on the snow. "Tell me," he pleaded rather huskily, "does anything hurt?"

She managed to shake her head, from which the hood had fallen back so that her hair gleamed like blood against the snow.

"No, nothing hurts. I'm quite all right."

"You don't deserve to be." His voice was furious again. But at the same time he slipped an arm beneath her bright head and drew it so

that it rested in the crook of his own arm. "Lacey! Why did you do it?" he demanded.

"Why did I do what?" It was beautifully comfortable in the crook of his arm, and the snow all around her was as soft as a feather bed.

"Make that jump? It was almost a hundred to one against your getting away with it, and when I realised what you intended I made frantic efforts to get to you to stop you, but it was too late." Shakily his brown fingers were playing with the vivid ends of her hair. "My heart stopped when I saw you take off!"

She lay looking up at him and smiling slightly. It was almost exactly like a previous occasion ... only on that occasion he had been a complete stranger, and she had been feeling sick and shaken and not at all in the mood for taking advantage of the situation. Now, when it seemed he was genuinely upset and even the dark bronze of his face was not as dark a bronze as usual, because he was suffering from shock and the after-effects of shock, she could lie and savour the extraordinary piquancy of the situation, and try to take it in that he *was* upset, and he wasn't merely upset; his dark eyes were swimming with a mixture of tenderness, concern, incredulity and anger. Only the anger was dying away altogether, and as she nestled her head against him the concern vanished, and the incredulity, and only the tenderness remained. Such tenderness as she had never known before.

"Little one," he breathed, touching her cheek, "I wanted to die when I thought nothing lay between you and certain death. But now, miraculously, it's all right, and you are safe! I can't really take it in. You'll have to forgive me, because I feel as if I need a strong stimulant!"

And he passed one hand across his brow in a bemused fashion.

At that she sat upright, and she looked at him in astonishment.

"But.... but why...?" she wanted to know.

He smiled at her crookedly. The afternoon sunshine was gilding his dark hair, and there were particles of snow on his thick black eyelashes.

"Are you trying to convince me that you don't know?" he asked.

"I don't know."

He looked at first puzzled, and then incredulous again.

"But this is not possible. Right from the first you must have known!"

"All I know is that you're going to marry Rose, and I hope you'll be happy," she said as if she was reciting a lesson, and without properly realising what she was saying; and then, because despite the absence of broken bones and even serious bruises - or, at any rate, she didn't seem to have any bruises at the moment - she felt herself being overcome by an overpowering weakness she suddenly, and to her horror, dissolved into a flood of tears, and it was as much as he could do to stem them even with the use of his own immaculate pocket-handkerchief and a positive torrent of words that shook her to her very foundations when she thought about them afterwards.

"You ridiculous sweetheart... Oh, my poor little one!" he exclaimed, closing both his arms around her. "I haven't the remotest intention of marrying Rose, and I'm very certain she hasn't the smallest wish to marry me, so you don't have to offer us your congratulations, or make yourself so deathly miserable offering them. If I'm to understand that you took that header into the blue just now because you thought I was about to announce my engagement then you can dry your tears and accept the fact that I am going to be married ... but not to Rose! Why, you absurd, adorable, enchanting, incalculable, redheaded witch,



from the moment I saw you I've been under a spell ... Only I don't know very much about redheaded English witches, and you've behaved towards me with such persistent coolness that I was beginning to feel quite despairing!"

"Coolness?" Her drowned eyes gazed upwards into his. "But it isn't I who have been cool. And in any case, what did you expect when you made it so clear that you thought the world of Rose?"

"I don't think the world of her, but I am very fond of her. I also used her, I'm afraid, somewhat shamelessly, in order to try to arouse a modest amount of jealousy in you. Apparently I succeeded far more than I ever intended."

"But Fraulein Reisenfeld...?"

"I know." He nodded his head soberly. "She, too, tried to convince you I was dying of love for Rose, which wasn't in the least sensible of her when she knew perfectly well it was you who held my heart. However, I'm quite sure she only wanted to help me, and she found it difficult to understand you."

"I thought I was as transparent as glass."

"No, my darling," he assured her, "you were never that."

She could hardly believe that he had called her "my darling", and "adorable" and "enchanting", and quite a lot of other things besides. Her distressing weakness vanished, and she looked at him with parted lips.

"Then there was Roger Soames." He frowned as he uttered the name. "We were both fairly certain you liked him very much."

A slow and delightful smile irradiated the whole of her face.

"What nonsense," she exclaimed, "that you should think anything of the kind!"

"Then can I take it that you would not attempt suicide over him?"

She was amazed.

"Suicide? But I didn't consciously attempt suicide just now. Only I -I was bitterly unhappy -"

"Because of Rose?"

"Because of the way you talked to me when you thought her missing."

He uttered a sound between a groan and a horrified acknowledgement of his own stupidity.

"I know I behaved to you abominably," he admitted, "and it was most unfair. I was concerned about Rose, but I knew it wasn't your fault if she had met with an accident. Rose is far too independent a person, and far too spoiled, to heed the protests of a youthful teacher of English." He held her tightly against his fast beating heart, and stroked her cheek with that long, unsteady index finger of his. "Darling, I don't quite know what came over me," he admitted, "but I honestly think I wanted to hurt you. You see, Rose had said something about Roger Soames voicing the intention of marrying you. And naturally I assumed that you were ready and willing to marry him!"

"I see," she breathed, and then she let out a long, long sigh of relief. "It seems that we've both been ... rather stupid, doesn't it?" she whispered.

He shook his sleek dark head.

"It was I who behaved criminally ... and because I behaved criminally you might now be badly hurt!" His dark cheek blanched a little. "You could have been killed, you know!"

"But I wasn't."

She leaned against him in utter contentment, and he put a finger under her chin and lifted it so that he could look into her eyes.

"I've got to get you back up that slope to my chalet," he told her. "And the sooner I do so the better, because you've sustained a shock, and you ought to be receiving treatment for it. But we've both apparently been very unhappy lately, and there will never be a moment quite like this again in the whole of our lives." He smiled whimsically as he glanced around him at the frozen slopes, with the declining light of late afternoon shining redly all about them, and dark firs overhanging them. "It never occurred to me that I would ever tell you how much I love you in a snowdrift, but here at least we are utterly alone, and no one can come between us and interrupt us, and up there in my chalet there are still one or two friends who are staying with me. So I'm going to make the most of this precious moment and remind you of something I once said to you -"

"I know." She was suddenly acutely shy, but she couldn't pretend with him. "You said I was to remind you that-"

"One day I would have to kiss you! Well, it seems that that day has arrived, and for some extraordinary reason we're wasting time." His fingers forced her face out into the open, he searched her eyes almost anxiously. "You do believe that I love you with all my heart ? "

"And I love you!" she breathed.

"And if you marry me it will mean that you won't ever go home again to England to live, and all your interests will lie here in Switzerland? You'll be a doctor's wife, and I'm a very busy man for most of the

time. YouH have to share me with my work! You might not always like that, but as compensation - if you love me as I love you! - you'll know that for at least a part of the time we'll be together, and however preoccupied I may seem at times you'll be the only really important thing in my life! My little love! My small, redheaded English sweetheart!"

"Oh, Ludwig! " she breathed.

He smiled crookedly.

"Do you think you'll get used to such an alien- sounding name as that? - alien in your ears, I mean!" he asked her.

"For weeks I've thought it a wonderful name.

I've said it over to myself often and often," she confessed.

"Then say it now," he commanded.

"Ludwig." She touched his face. "I love you so much that it - hurts," she managed.

He crushed her up in his arms. Then, somewhat ruthlessly, his mouth found hers.

The whole world rocked round her ... the world of icy peaks, frozen forests and petrified streams... the same world that had seemed about to engulf her when she made her tremendous jump.

"Darling, darling." He held her tightly crushed in his arms for several more minutes, and he covered every inch of her face with kisses, so that it burned fierily when he finally let her go. He surveyed her with approval as he drew her to her feet. "You are no snowmaiden now," he told her. "You look as if you are made of fire, and that is precisely how I feel!"

He looked up at the slope above them.

"You can't possibly manage that without your ' skis - and one of them, I'm afraid, is broken," he said. "But there is a gender, if rather longer, way round, and we are not in any hurry." He smiled in a thoroughly contented manner as the candy-pink light started spreading across the high peaks, and the blue mist came creeping up from the valley. "We shall be able to watch the afterglow together, and that is always the most wonderful time of day in the mountains, I think. And after that we shall reach my chalet, and there you will spend the night, and your Madame Beauregarde will be informed that in future you will spend many, many nights in my chalet."

"And in Ardena?" She smiled up at him with grey eyes like stars. "In Ardena one can also watch the afterglow," she reminded him.

"True." With his arm and his hands helping her they began the ascent. "In Ardena we will do lots of things that have nothing to do with watching the afterglow."