

THE LILY POND

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I was coming home. For the first time in twelve years I was returning to Montville, the place of my birth. I should have been bursting with happiness, but with the welcome I had received—or rather, the lack of it—I felt like a stranger. And indeed, that is how I was being treated as the carriage rattled across the newly-built bridge over the narrowest portion of the York River and brought us into the Mobjack Bay area where Montville was located, less than half a mile from the bay itself.

I sat in the rear seat with Delphine LaSalle who had been my companion in Europe for a year. In the front, sat Zella LaSalle, my father's housekeeper. Beside her was Martin Collier, the gardener-coachman. I sat back trying to remember the type of person he was. As I recalled, he was so taciturn as to be almost surly. I remembered one other thing about him—he was forever chasing me out of the stables.

As for Zella, she was now engaged in conversation with her niece Delphine. I was completely ignored and I couldn't help the feeling of irritation that arose in me. I didn't resent their conversing—for no doubt they were happy to see one another after a year's absence—but Zella might at least have inquired about my health and then given me an opportunity to ask about my father. Instead, she kept up a running chatter with Delphine, heedless of me.

However, I was determined not to show my annoyance and I settled back to enjoy the beauty of the countryside. Some of it I could recall, even though I'd left Montville twelve years ago, when I was barely seven. I'd spent my growing years in a private school, then I moved on to a finishing school. After that, I'd spent one year in the company of Delphine, traveling abroad. Not once, in all those

years, had I returned home. Even now, if my father had had his way about it, I would be on my way to the Orient, for that is what he had planned for me, with Delphine again as my companion.

But I had other plans. I had learned something which made my returning home to Virginia imperative. I wanted to become re-acquainted with my father whom I remembered as stern and dour. Perhaps now that I was grown, I would find him vastly changed. That is what I hoped for. That is what I longed for. I missed Montville, even though I'd been so young when I left it.

My great grandfather had built it, his son had added to it and, in turn, his son, who became my father, had again added still more to the main structure until it was a very large building on a very large estate.

For years, I'd been longing to see it again. My childhood with my mother had been so happy. That is, as long as it had lasted. I had known much love from my mother. It was almost as if she had devoted herself to me to make up for the lack of affection I received from my father. As I think back now, I wonder what attracted her to him, unless it was his good looks. But I can still remember racing with her over the green lawns or playing hide-and-seek behind the enormous boxwood bushes, or scampering through the formal gardens to rush into the forest beyond them.

Sometimes we'd go down to the beach, although it was very rocky, and look for objects washed up from Chesapeake Bay. We'd pick great armsful of wild flowers, disdaining the cultivated ones because Martin supplied them and we wanted to decorate the house with something we'd brought home.

Mama had been so beautiful and gay then. She'd died very suddenly—so I'd been told. They'd taken her away when I wasn't even at home, and she never came back. No one talked about her illness, nor did I attend her funeral. At the time, I was too young to question the details of her death and it wasn't until some time later that it occurred to me that I didn't even know where she was buried, although there was a family burying ground right here on the estate where some thirty-odd Montvilles were interred. There was also a slave graveyard where eight hundred slaves had been buried.

These memories came back to me as the carriage rolled closer and closer toward the high, red-brick gateposts and the heavy-iron gate that was never closed. When we passed through this, I felt I was really home and I also felt I had a right to ask any question I wished.

Zella was gushing a torrent of words, mostly about Delphine's mother, who was Zella's sister, and I had to lean forward and actually inject my person between the two women before Zella would stop long enough to listen to me.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I said, "but I wish to know if my father is at home."

"He ain't," Zella said curtly. "Whatever give you the idea he would be." She continued her conversation as if there'd been no interruption. "Now, Delphine, I sent your letters to your mama—every last one of them...."

I sat back, despairing of trying to learn anything from Zella. I was sadly disappointed, for I'd hoped Papa would at least be at the pier when the ship docked, but only Mr. Donald Converse from the law firm which Papa retained, had been there. Then I prayed he'd be here at Montville, but it seemed he was not. I hadn't seen him in more than two and a half years. I was even on the verge of forgetting what he looked like.

He was good to me. He sent me more money than I knew what to do with, and arranged this world tour which I'd finally cut short. He'd planned it to last two years, but one was enough for me. Over Delphine's pleading objections I called the rest of it off and wrote Papa that I was on my way home. Now he wasn't even here to greet me.

Then the road made the familiar turn and my heart gave a leap as Montville lay there before me. Nothing had changed. The two-and-one-half-story, red-brick mansion with its two large wings, looked just the same. The boxwood was higher and thicker. The ginkgo tree beside the curving drive to the entrance porch was in bloom and so were the roses in the formal gardens.

I saw the playhouse where I'd spent so many enjoyable hours when I was a child. It even had a wide portico with fluted pillars that I had once yearned to climb and never did. The round ice house was still intact, and the barns and stables were freshly painted. Certainly Papa hadn't allowed anything to decay here.

I had but a glimpse of the lily pond, well behind the house, and I longed to sit on its bank and enjoy the quiet and serenity of this vast estate.

I'm Laura Montville. I was born in this house and I love it. My childhood had been fun-filled and wonderful with Mama who had attempted to bring me up in a world of laughter and well-being. A world that had all changed after she died. Papa had gone away for weeks then and when he returned, he was barely civil to me and very stern with the servants. He had his offices in Norfolk and in New York and he rarely came to Montville any more.

I'd hoped it would be different now, but it was obvious there had been no change. Nor would there be unless I created the change and that I was determined to do. If Papa wouldn't come to see me, I would go to see him. He may have been content to let Montville simply exist, but I meant to put some life in the estate and the house. The years between may have been dull and drab; but from now on, it was going to be different.

Though Montville hadn't changed, I had. Until a few weeks ago, I'd been afraid to do anything against Papa's wishes. I'd obeyed Delphine as if she were my mother, instead of a paid companion. However, when Delphine had the audacity to order me to remain abroad and continue on to the Orient, I rebelled.

Oh, I was well aware of how much she was enjoying it, finding the companionship of men aboard ship and in every hotel and resort we stopped at. She was highly lacking in the qualities of a good companion for I was left to myself a great deal of the time because of her flirtatious nature. I should have written to Papa and told him about it except that I was now nineteen and I felt both angry and hurt because of the way he had ignored me through my growing years. And I knew full well that Delphine had been hired as my companion and this voyage abroad had been planned only as a means to keep me from returning home where I would be underfoot.

However I felt it was time some consideration was given to what I wanted to do. I had made a silent vow with myself to cease being the timid, mousy girl and become, instead, a modern young lady who knew her own mind and had the courage to follow her dictates.

Therefore, when Delphine told me, in quite definite terms, that I was to continue the voyage to the Orient, I defied her. She was so stunned that, for a few moments, she was speechless. Then she attempted to use guile by appealing to my sympathies, telling me she had never traveled before, that this was the only opportunity she would ever have to embark on such an adventure and that a trip to the Orient was something she had always dreamed about, but never dared believe possible.

I told her that with me, it was

quite capable of traveling back to the United States by myself and I fully intended to do so. She pretended to be shocked that such a genteel person as myself would do such a thing. However, I was not deterred by her words. Rather I was amused, for I felt that Delphine was lacking in many of the qualities requisite as a companion for a young girl. She was aware that I was in a very good position to report her behavior to my father so she quieted down after that, particularly after I reminded her that she would be off Papa's payroll if she did not comply with my wishes.

Delphine had never forgiven me for my rebellion. In a way, I suppose I couldn't blame her, for she had lived in less-than-moderate circumstances before she took the position as my companion. From then on, she lived in luxury and certainly made the most of it.

She also incurred expenses which were charged up to me. That included dresses and other wearing apparel which were scarcely consistent with the income of a companion. However, I never revealed her dishonesty for I felt that my father could well afford it. Perhaps that wasn't proper, but as I said before, I felt great resentment toward my father who, so far as I could remember, had never exhibited the slightest trace of affection for me. However, I knew how to handle Delphine now, for I no longer feared her and she was quite aware of it.

Martin drew up on the reins and the carriage halted before the entrance. He remained seated, waiting for us to disembark. However, since I was determined to become the mistress of Montville, I was equally determined that I would be treated as such, so I leaned forward and tapped his shoulder with my parasol.

"You will help me down, please, and then see that all the baggage is brought in. After that, you will arrange to have the rest of the baggage sent here."

Martin growled something beneath that walrus mustache, scraggly and tobacco-stained, but he got down and gave me his hand. Delphine, who had been ready to step down from the carriage, remained where she was and it was as well she did, for I felt my temper rising.

But I did soften when the other servants came out onto the big porch and lined up to greet me. Efrem, the aging Negro who once ran Montville, was delighted to see me. So was his rotund wife Minnie, who had been our cook ever since I could remember. The other three maids were new, but they were respectful and looked capable. The hostler, who had once taught me to ride, looked much older than I'd expected. He'd always been a favorite of mine and I hugged him soundly and called him Uncle Charlie, my childhood name for him.

Then I walked briskly into the house, with Zella trailing me, Delphine behind her. In the mahogany-paneled entry hall with its twelve-foot high ceiling, I was suddenly assailed by a feeling of extreme loneliness, as if this great old house was not merely receiving me but engulfing me. I had no memory of its being so dark. In fact, I thought the entrance hall dismal. The huge chandelier wasn't lit, of course, though I felt it should be. Then I glanced into the formal parlor to see that the window shades were all pulled down, making that room also dark and dreary. I had the strange impression that the house I had once loved so much was dead, and this was its skeleton. I gave a shudder and turned quickly to Zella.

"Raise all the shades and pull back the draperies at once. This place is as dreary as a tomb and I will not have it that way. Let in the sunlight."

"But Master Montville has never complained or . . ."

"If my father were here, he would tell you that my orders are to be followed. Since he isn't, I will tell you now I intend to be mistress of this household. I wish the shades to be raised and light let into the house."

Zella's lips formed to make an angry retort, but she never uttered it. Instead, she gave orders to the maids who immediately set to work obeying them. I indicated the

two portmanteaus Martin had left at the foot of the winding staircase.

"Please see that they are taken to my rooms immediately," I instructed Zella, then I ran lightly up the stairs.

Had I been alone, I would have rushed into my bedroom and burst into tears, but I was resolved that no one in this house was going to see me cry. I was no longer the child who had tearfully left twelve years ago, but a woman who was quite capable of taking over this household. However, the thought left me small pleasure for what I had desired more than anything was a sight of Papa. I had tried to tell myself that it was only a childish memory that told me he had been stern and forbidding and cold. Yet the very fact that he had remained away from my homecoming was proof that he was not even remotely interested in seeing me.

The parlor room of my suite was also in darkness. I moved impatiently over to the windows, moved the draperies aside and raised the shades. Then I opened the windows to allow the summer sweetness to seep into the room so that it would overcome the close, almost musty smell it had acquired from being shut up so long. I shook off the feeling of depression which had beset me when I entered the house and looked around. Then I knew I was home, for here was everything familiar to me. My own personal things, almost forgotten—but seeing them made everything come back in a rush. The little cedar-stuffed pillows Mama had bought for me as souvenirs in Norfolk when I was seven. My dolls which sat in a row on the shelf. The dried flowers arranged on a velvet backing, framed and covered with glass to hang upon the wall. Mama had helped me with that. The many, many other things that warmed and welcomed me as the house itself had not.

The bedroom had been left intact. The four poster with its white canopy was shining with polish and bright with the whiteness of the spread and the canopy itself. My old books were in the small case near the bed. My dresser had the comb, brush, mirror, shoehorn and buttonhook neatly arranged. Even my little-girl dresses were still hanging in the closet.

Zella trudged in with one bag; Delphine with the other.

Zella set it down and I thanked her as she left. Delphine, on the other hand, paused to admire her reflection in the mirror. We were not very much alike. In fact, the contrast between us favored her, but in an artificial sort of way. She was seven years older than I, a willowy girl with bleached hair that certainly had created a sensation in Paris. She had fine, long legs which she didn't mind showing on occasion and she dressed well. She was undoubtedly quite beautiful from a distance, but when one drew closer, it was easy to see the harshness of her face, especially around her mouth and eyes.

By contrast I was three inches shorter than her five feet seven. My hair was brownish-red and my eyes were a grayish-blue. I was lucky in that my ears and nose were small and well-shaped, and I had Papa's somewhat belligerent looking jawline. But the shape of my face and the softness of my other features were those of Mama. I thought I looked much like her now that I was grown, but I wasn't certain, because she'd been gone a long time.

Thinking of my mother brought up the memory of an evening when Delphine had returned late one night, after having imbibed too much champagne. She was in a most disagreeable mood. I had never forgotten that night for she had said something about my mother which had burned into my brain with the sharpness of acid. Something which had prompted me to return home immediately.

Watching her arranging her hair before the mirror, I said, "Just what are your plans now that I am, once again, home?"

The look of astonishment on her face didn't surprise me. "But Laura," she said, with a note of fear, "I had hoped to continue as your companion. After all, you are only nineteen."

"And quite capable of taking care of myself," I replied. "Much more so, I might add, than you."

Her eyes lowered in feigned modesty. "I hope you won't tell on me. After all, I am still young—only twenty-six—and I do enjoy fun."

"I have no intention of telling on you, but I really don't need you."

From somewhere, she seemed to regain her old spirit.

"May I remind you, Laura, that your father hired me and it is up to him to dismiss me?"

"Of course you are right," I was forced to agree. "And I did not wish to be unkind. You will be most welcome to remain at Montville until my father decides that your services are no longer necessary."

"Thank you," she replied, though there was no warmth in her words.

"Let us go into the parlor and sit down," I said. "I wish to speak with you on another matter."

"But my Aunt Zella wishes to see me downstairs . . ." she seemed eager to be free of me.

"I believe that, since you are still my companion, my wishes come before those of Zella."

"Of course."

She followed me, with lagging steps, into the parlor where we sat down, facing one another.

"You will recall," I began, "the evening you told me—it was at the Crillon in Paris—that my mother was not dead, but had eloped with Mr. James Brownlee who lived on the estate next to us."

Her face flamed. "Forgive me, Laura. I meant nothing by it. I was resentful of you. You have so much and I have nothing."

I smiled. "You have had quite a lot since you became my companion, but we shan't go into that. Just now, I wish to discuss that story you told concerning my mother. Were you speaking the truth?"

"No . . . there is no truth in it. I was just mouthing words."

"Tell me the truth, Delphine, or I shan't wait until my father discharges you. I shall do this instant."

She wrung her hands nervously. "I had sworn never to tell you, but I had been drinking—my tongue became loosened—I had no control over my thoughts. I'm sorry I spoke of it. I beg of you to forgive me. It's possible it is not true—merely gossip spoken by people who were jealous of your mother's charm and beauty. Quite often these stories are lies."

"I intend to find out for myself if this one is," I said. "And I shall inquire of no less a person than Mrs. Brownlee. That is all, Delphine. You may go."

"Yes, Miss," she exclaimed, unable to hide her surprise at the change in me.

I closed the door after she departed and then I removed my dress and lay down on top of the bed covers. I was tired. It had been a grueling voyage, even though we'd crossed the Atlantic on one of the new fast steamships.

Now I was home, against Papa's orders, and I knew why I had cut short the world trip. It was because of Delphine. I wanted to know the truth about Mama. I wanted to discover if she had eloped and that was why Papa took such slight interest in me. I still believed Delphine had lied. She'd lied before, many times. Cheated as well, on the accounting of our expenses. She was sly and shrewd, and to hurt me she would have thought up just such a falsehood.

Mama had always been gay, but in a quiet way. She'd been with me almost all the time. While I had seen Mr. Brownlee often, I had never noticed any signs of a romance between him and Mama. True, I had been very young and perhaps it had all escaped me. But how could a woman so wonderfully kind, so gentle and understanding, have done such a thing? I refused to believe it was true. For all I knew, Mr. James Brownlee lived with his wife, whose name I remembered to be Felicia, and their only child, a son named Peter, of whom I had been extremely fond, for, small as I was, he had been very kind to me. He was four years older than I and I would be happy to see him again.

It was already mid-afternoon, but I found myself unable to wait until the morrow with the question unanswered. What I was about to do was daring and indiscreet, but I excused myself on the grounds that Papa was partly to blame for my action. If he had been here, I could have asked him. I was a grown woman and his daughter and certainly, I had a right to know.

I arose, opened my bag and found a dress that had escaped wrinkling. It was a pretty blue visiting dress of flowered bengaline, trimmed with a Swiss belt and deep lace cuffs. The bodice was adorned with lace frillings, with similar lace edging the front panel of the skirt. I placed a small toque upon my head which was trimmed both front

and back with a blue satin bow. I picked up my gloves and left my suite. It would be necessary for me to take a rig to the Brownlee estate, but that would pose no problem for I had learned to drive while abroad.

In the corridor I paused and then walked directly to the rooms Mama and Papa had shared. Somewhat to my surprise, I found the door locked, so I gave up the idea of going in for now. Other bedroom doors were open. Twenty or more people could be comfortably put up in this house. But the corridors were dark. I'd never thought of the house as this dreary before, but possibly as a child I had brought my own light with me, or Mama and Papa, in their happiness, had muted the dullness of the dark walls and the deep red rug. That is, I supposed, Mama had been happy with Papa, though I always stood in awe of him. Perhaps because he never seemed to see me.

I remember once his coming into the formal parlor to talk with Mama and I had said, deep inside of me, "Please look at me, Papa. Please look at me." Yet not once did he glance in my direction.

After he left, I ran to Mama and cried. She put her arms around me and placed her cheek against mine and her tears mingled with mine as she tried to explain that he was a very busy man and I must try to understand. That one day he would realize how lonely little girls are and then he would take me in his arms and love me as she did. Yet he never had.

I walked down the staircase. There was no one about. But then I glanced down the hallway and Efrem, a smile on his kindly face, came toward me.

"Going out, Miss Laura?"

"Yes, Efrem," I said. "Come out onto the porch with me. I have something I wish to ask you."

"Yes, Miss Laura," he said and let me pass through the door he opened. Then he stood beside me and we looked out over the boxwood, the great oaks, the tulip poplars, pecans and maples. The arbors and everything else that went to make up this wonderful estate. Roses bloomed, lilacs were fading, but the snowballs, the pride of China, pomegranates and the Sapanica, added their colors.

"When was Papa here last?" I asked him, all but

oblivious to this beauty, so intent was I on the mission which I was about to undertake.

"Been 'bout five . . . six months, Miss Laura. He doesn't come often."

"Is he well?"

"Reckon so. Looked fine last time I saw him. Gettin' a mite gray, but we all do. 'Ceptin' me. I'm gray as can be already."

"You're a handsome man," I said. "It becomes you. Efrem, we never had any secrets. Not you and I. If I ask you another question, will you tell me the truth?"

"Reckon so, if I can," he said. He shook his massive head. "Rather you didn't though, 'cause I got me a good idea what the question is" goin' to be."

"Did my mother run away with Mr. Brownlee?"

"Miss Laura, I don't know. Some say she did. Your Papa, he never did talk about it. The word was that she died of a disease folks can get very easy so she was buried somewhere else. There wasn't even a funeral. That's what is said."

"But it's also said she didn't die at all but eloped."

"Yes'm. That was said too."

"Do you believe it, Efrem?"

"I can answer that right fast, Miss Laura. I don't believe a word of it."

"But Papa does?"

"Don't rightly know, Miss Laura. Reckon he does though. Man can mourn his woman a long time, but your Papa's never stopped. He's a saddened man, a lonely man and sometimes, a bitter one. Don't be too hard on him, Miss Laura, please. Try to understand."

"I will, Efrem," I replied, though I was thinking of my own loneliness as he spoke. I had had years of it. Apparently my resentment made itself evident in my features for Efrem's voice was almost a plea when next he spoke.

"Please, Miss Laura, don't do anythin' 'bout this. If you find out it's true, that won't do you a mite of good. Just say it ain't true—like I've always done. It's easier that way and nobody gets hurt."

"I have to know," I said. "I can't go on wondering what's wrong with Papa. If this is true, then I can understand him, but I have to find out."

"Yes, Miss Laura, I reckon you do at that."

"Did Mr. Brownlee disappear about the same time?"

Efrem nodded. "Same day. Just up and went. Never heard from again."

"Were they together often? Did you ever see them together?"

"I ain't about to answer that, Miss Laura. You can fire me you want to, but I don't talk about a good woman who might be dead. It ain't right I should and I won't."

"Thank you, Efrem. I respect you for it. Now please have Uncle Charlie bring around a rig. At once."

"Yes, Miss Laura," he said, and moved off with surprising agility for one his age.

I wandered down to the ginkgo tree and looked up among its fan-shaped leaves to the pale blossoms that seemed so fragile against the sky. I suddenly remembered the lily pond out behind the house and I wanted to go there for it had been one of my favorite places when I was a child, but there wasn't time. It would have to wait until I returned. So would the playhouse which I yearned to inspect once more.

At any rate, I was home. My reception had been hardly a happy one, since Papa hadn't thought it worth taking time off to greet me. Perhaps I would only remind him of the woman he had lost, and the pain of it was too great for him to bear. That I could understand, and I did believe I looked a great deal like Mama. Except for the firmness of my jawline, I certainly didn't resemble Papa in any way.

Then I heard the sound of the approaching rig and I returned to the drive where I waited until the hostler pulled up. Efrem was on the seat and he quickly got down to help me up.

"I wish you wouldn't go, Miss Laura," he said.

"Why, Efrem, I don't believe I even mentioned to you where I was going."

"Don't have to. I know. Some things are better left dead and buried. Ain't no earthly use in diggin' 'em up."

"I'm sorry I don't agree with you," I said. "I'll be back in time for supper."

I drove through the red-brick gate and then along the narrow road which led to the Brownlee plantation. Once it had been planted in tobacco, but as I moved along, I regarded the once-fertile acres now lying fallow. The Brownlees had always been wealthy and it was possible that Mrs. Brownlee didn't care to be troubled by the details of running a plantation.

But certainly Peter could have done so. I wondered if he was still living there and my spirits lifted as I thought of him. He had been a handsome boy and we used to play together, as children. He was forever slipping over onto our property seeking me out. He was a good playmate and when we were with other children, he was my staunchest defender against any insult, fancied or real. Once, in my girlish enthusiasms, I had asked him if he would marry me. He retorted that he'd have to grow up first and he'd have to love me, but just now he only loved his mother.

I smiled, remembering the incident, but as quickly I sobered. If he was living with his mother, he might not want to see me. Especially if the story I had heard regarding the elopement of my mother and his father was true.

Then I saw the house and noted that it too, hadn't changed. Willowbrook was a freshly-painted white, almost as large a house as ours. The long porch supported eight fluted pillars which, in turn, held up a slanted roof that projected well beyond the porch itself. It was a lovely house, both inside and out. I'd always liked to come here.

I alighted and dropped the weight to hold the horses in check. Then I walked up onto the porch and before I reached the door, Mrs. Brownlee opened it.

I was shocked at the sight of her. She looked twenty-five years older instead of twelve and her rapidly graying hair

was sadly in need of attention. She wore a black dress, high at the throat, as if she were in mourning. Perhaps she was—for a husband she had lost to another woman.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Brownlee," I said, my tone friendly. "I'm ..."

"You're Laura Montville," she interrupted in a chill voice.

"Yes," I replied, a little surprised that she had recognized me. Apparently she read my mind, for her next words ended my wonderment.

"You're the image of your mother."

"Thank you," I replied, taking it as a compliment, though knowing it wasn't meant as such. "May I come in? I wish to speak to you on a personal matter."

"If you wish," she replied indifferently. She stepped back and allowed me room to enter. I followed her through the reception hall and into a drawing room which was once beautiful, but now, through lack of care, looked almost tawdry.

She motioned me to a chair and sat down opposite me.

"May I ask first, if Peter is well?"

"He is and he's a fine young man. My only comfort."

"Then he is still here," I replied, keeping my voice friendly.

"Where else would he be?" she asked indignantly. "Is it Peter about whom you came to see me?"

"No, Mrs. Brownlee. My visit here concerns some information I seek, concerning my mother and your husband. I have recently heard a story I hesitate to believe and I wish to ask you if it is true. However, from the coolness of your manner, I can see that you do believe the story."

"The story is true. I'm surprised you have only just heard of it."

"My father informed me, years ago, that my mother was taken ill suddenly and died. That it was necessary for her to be buried at once and she was, but not in these parts."

"Your father wished to spare you the scandal. That is also why he sent you away to school and kept you away from here." Her smile was grim. "It didn't take long for you to hear it after you returned."

"I heard it while I was abroad," I told her calmly. "Will you tell me, please, if your husband told you he was in love with my mother?"

"He did not. No more than your mother told your father she was in love with my husband. Oh, they were secretive about it. I had not the slightest suspicion. . . ."

"Mrs. Brownlee, did you ever try not believing it? Perhaps something else may have happened."

"We have proof they were in love. There is no question about that."

"We?"

"Your father and I. He found the proof. Ask him. He suffered too, but it's the wife who suffers the most. I have a fine son who does his best, but that is not enough. I need my husband and he is not here. Gone with your mother these many years . . ."

Her tone had turned vicious and mine was angry as I answered her. "I care not what proof my father has, Mrs. Brownlee. I knew my mother and I believe in her. If you loved your husband as much as you profess, you should have had some faith in him as well."

"Ask your father," she replied. "Ask him. Then you will not doubt again."

"My mother was in love with my father. I could see it every time they were together."

"You were a mere child," she said scornfully.

"That is true, but a child sees with clear vision. Often better than an adult."

"Very well—if they did not run away together, what happened to them? They disappeared at the same time. Can that be coincidence? Oh no—not after you read what he wrote to her. . ."

"Wrote?" I asked. "I don't understand . . ."

"Love poetry. Verses of it. As plain as the English language can make it. You're still a child, Laura. Grow up! Just because this woman was your mother, hardly makes her a saint."

"I never thought of my mother as a saint, Mrs. Brownlee. But I do believe she was a woman of virtue and nothing you or anyone else may say, will change my mind."

"Your father will tell you. You're grown up now. You needn't be shielded any longer."

"He undoubtedly will, if that is the story which has been told about my mother, for my father never gave me the love my mother did. I'm surprised he never told me."

"Your father was a hard-working, successful man. He hadn't the time to devote to you. And since your mother gave you so much love, there is small need for you to grieve over your father's lack of it."

"I am not grieving," I replied, finding it difficult to hold my temper in check, for there was open hatred in the woman's eyes for me. "I merely wish to state I do not believe the evil story which has been told about the disappearance of my mother and your husband. But even if it were true, I would still swear to her goodness."

My words seemed to have the effect of a blow, for she jerked back in astonishment, seemingly too stunned to speak.

"If Peter is here, may I see him? I would like to extend my greetings."

"He is not here. And I will state openly that I do not wish you to see him. Stay away from both of us. Get out of this house . . . you are so like her, you bring it all back. All the pain and heartbreak and loneliness . . . all the deceit which I never dreamed my James capable of." She rested her elbow on the arm of the chair and covered her eyes with her hand.

I couldn't help but be touched by her sorrow so I arose, knowing further talk would serve no purpose. "Good-by, Mrs. Brownlee," I said, very softly, and walked from the room and out of the house.

I moved across the porch, down the steps and lifted the weight into the rig before I climbed aboard. I slapped the horse with the reins and he started at a leisurely pace down the road and away from the house. There were tears forming in my eyes, but I was resolved that this woman would not see me cry. If the story were true, if I had proof of it, I knew I would shed copious tears.

But the memories of my mother's goodness were still with me and they were too dear. She could not have done such a thing. Perhaps James Brownlee had cleverly enticed her away and then held her by force. There was a possibility in that idea. But if such had happened, Mr. Brownlee had changed radically, for I remembered him as

a very kind man, gentle of nature, usually smiling, and never with an evil word about anyone. A father who adored his son. I couldn't believe he'd gone off that way, and yet, apparently, there seemed to be indisputable proof. It had changed Felicia Brownlee from a gracious lady to an embittered woman, so the evidence must be extremely strong.

Papa was a man of much pride as well. He would have pretended, for my benefit, that Mama had died and been quickly buried. That would have been his way. But if she had died, he would have mourned her. Yet how did I know he hadn't for, at her disappearance, I'd been immediately placed in a private school. My eyes widened in sudden awareness. Of course! Now I understood. He couldn't bear the sight of me for it, as Mrs. Brownlee had said, I was the image of my mother as a young woman, I'd undoubtedly had her features as a child, and the sight of me had embittered him to such an extent that his hatred extended to me.

Now I understood why Papa had ignored me all these years. Why I'd had all the money I wished for to gratify my every whim, but no love. He seemed to have done everything possible to forget me. In my years at school he had visited me only twice and that was because I was ill and he'd been asked to come. At graduation, he sent Donald Collier, the lawyer. Then I'd been turned over to the care of Delphine and been promptly packed off on a two-year, world cruise. No one asked me if I wished to go—Delphine simply packed my things and off we went.

So several years had elapsed since I'd seen my father. It was painfully clear to me, and had been for some time, that he did not wish to see me. My last hope had vanished when he didn't appear to welcome me at the pier when I arrived from Europe.

I bent my head then and let the tears come. Had anyone been there to see, I should not have given way, but' along this lonely road, I felt that I had to cry. Not for myself, but for my mother. What could have induced her to give up all she had? A wonderful life with Papa who loved her beyond measure. With Montville for a home, which any woman would have been proud of. As I recalled James Brownlee, he'd been a quiet person and certainly not one

who would sweep a woman like Mama off her feet. It was true that my impression of him was that of a young girl, but I certainly could recall nothing romantic about him. Kind and gentle, but not romantic.

I became aware that the rig had stopped and the horse was boldly munching on grass alongside the road. I dried my tears and looked up at the sky. It was darkening. I turned over the watch pinned to my dress and saw that I was going to be late for my evening meal.

I got the horse moving again and sent him at a good clip back to Montville. This time, as I approached the house, it was almost dark and now I saw how really gloomy the place looked. It sent a shudder through me, though I had no idea why it should. But the house stood there, framed by the boxwood and the tall trees, and it seemed forbidding and ugly. Perhaps it had seemed this way to Mama, and that was one reason she had run off.

But even as the thought occurred to me, I disputed it. She had been devoted to me and would never have abandoned me. I would not allow myself to believe she had done so and would not entertain such a thought even for a second, in the future.

I drove around to the carriage house and turned the rig over to Uncle Charlie. Then I walked slowly down the path to the front door and continued on into the house. The entrance hall chandelier was now lit and threw its millions of tiny rays from the faceted crystals about the room. I went to the dining room to find a place set for me. Apparently, Delphine had already eaten or had other plans for the evening.

Zella appeared as I entered. She clapped her hands and a maid came at once to seat me and then to hurry to the kitchen and return with a tureen of Minnie's superb chicken soup. I wasn't hungry, but I knew how disappointed Minnie would be if I didn't eat everything she sent out to me.

I would have liked company, but then there was only Delphine, and since I was not in a mood to want Delphine's company, I didn't query as to her whereabouts.

Minnie's light, airy biscuits came next, along with a chicken stew that brought me back over the years. I never used to be able to get enough of it. The gravy was yellow

and thick, and the potatoes I spooned it over, were fleecy as clouds. The carrots were creamed and lightly seasoned with rosemary the way I liked them and, for dessert, there was a blanc mange that again spoke eloquently of Minnie's superb skill.

I made my way through the hall and out into the kitchen where Minnie was busily engaged in cleaning up. Her round face beamed as I entered and she paused in the act of bringing some dishes over to the sink.

"Minnie, that was the best meal I've had since I left Montville," I told her. "I've missed your cooking and I've missed you."

"Thank you, honey," she said. "It sure is good to have you back home. Don't go away soon now 'cause here's where you belong."

"I won't, Minnie," I promised. "I won't go away ever again. This is my home and here is where I'm going to stay, though there will be some changes made."

"That won't hurt none," she said meaningly. "Place sure needs some brightening and laughter. Needs that most of all and it don't cost a thing."

"You're right," I agreed, "and I'll see that it gets it." I headed for the back door. "I'm going to take a walk. I haven't seen the lily pond since my return."

"Don't you fall in now," she cautioned.

I smiled. "Don't worry. I'm not a little girl any more."

I left the house and started for the pond. It was about a four-minute walk and I made my leisurely way toward it, breathing in the sweetness of the evening air. There was still a trace of reflected light remaining in the sky and I made out the burned ruins quite readily. As I regarded it, I sighed in dismay.

Papa had left it just as it was after the fire burned out. The walkway, barely visible, was as it had been when I went away, reaching out over the water and burned through only close by the summer house.

I made my way around the pond and I walked out onto the walkway, desirous of a closer look at the ruins. I reached the end of the approach and stood there peering into the gloom.

There was absolutely no warning of what was about to happen. Not a sound, no gurgle of water, no harsh breath-

ing. Just a hand that reached up out of the murky pond, seized my right ankle and toppled me off the walkway into the water.

It was all so unexpected and rapid that I had no chance to cry out, or escape whoever had done this. At no time did I even glimpse the person who was below the water's surface, but I quickly found out someone was. I was pulled down and down until I felt the muddy bottom under my flailing hands. I was trying to reach whoever held me, but I was quite unable to do so. Then my head was suddenly seized in the crook of a strong arm, and I was dragged down to the mud.

My lungs were bursting. I'd had no time to fill them and I knew if I breathed in this muddy water, I'd soon drown. I began to struggle desperately, to kick out, hoping to catch this attacker at some vulnerable point. I failed. I then used my arms and hands. I gave my body a quick twist, slipped free of the grasp around my neck and then I battled to reach the surface. At the same time, I tried kicking again at the person who was still fighting to keep me down.

My head broke the water between the lily pads and I drank in the cool, fresh air until the dizziness and weakness began to leave me. But the same hands grasped me around the waist and I was pulled down again, but this time I managed to emit one loud, shrill scream for help before I was dragged under.

I fought and struggled, but I was using up the air in my lungs very rapidly and I knew there'd be no chance to rise and get more. The thought came to me, during my exertions, that someone was trying to drown me. I was actually being murdered. A shock of terror went through me to be exceeded only by my outrage. The latter lent me added strength and I fought, again, very hard, in an effort to break the grip around my waist.

There was a considerable movement of the water close by and suddenly the grip around my middle was gone, but before I could kick my way to the surface, someone seized me by the shoulders and turned me over and then raised me rapidly until I came clear of the surface. I breathed deeply and wondered if I was about to be dragged under again. If so, I knew I could no longer fight my assailant

for I was already weak from my efforts. I tried to free myself from the grip of whoever was holding me, but I had expended all my strength and I went limp.

Then I realized I was being towed ashore. Strong arms lifted me, carried me up onto the shore and set me down, where I lay, panting and weak from the shock of what I had undergone. I tried to open my eyes, but it was too much of an effort.

"Laura . . . Laura . . . are you hurt? Laura . . . answer me. Open your eyes. It's Peter."

"Peter," I said in wonderment. "Is it really you, Peter?"

"Of course, it is," he answered gently. "What in the world happened? No . . . don't answer. Just rest. You're exhausted."

I felt sudden relief flow through me and I opened my eyes and attempted to sit up, but the effort was too much. I lay back.

"How did you happen to come here?" I asked, my tone grateful.

"Mama said you'd been to call."

"I'm surprised she told you. I'm even more surprised that you are here."

"I can guess how she acted. In fact, I know. She told me what she said to you. I'm sorry."

"I understand. She is still mourning the loss of your father, but in bitterness."

"Yes," he admitted. "But think not too harshly of her. She's a lonely woman."

"I know what loneliness is," I replied. "I grew up surrounded by it. But I never allowed myself to become bitter."

"Thank God you didn't. I missed you, Laura," he said. "I missed looking after you."

I managed a smile. "I no sooner return than you have to start doing just that. How did you happen to be here?"

"I came to call on you. I heard a scream and I came running . . . I could see someone was struggling in the water."

"There were two of us struggling."

"Two of you?"

"Someone pulled me off the walkway into the water and was trying to drown me."

While the darkness prevented my seeing his face, I could hear the amazement in his voice. "Why on earth would anyone want to do that?"

"I don't know. Nor do I know who it was."

"I saw no one, but while I was bringing you ashore, it would be quite possible for the other person to swim to the opposite bank and crawl out. With the trees shading the banks, it's difficult to see and it's too dark now anyway."

This time, with Peter's help, I managed to sit up. I leaned against a tree nearby and he sat down, facing me.

"I think," he said sensibly, "you had better go in the house and get into dry clothes."

I tried to peer through the darkness to see his features, but it was all but impossible. However, I was able to make out a lean face surmounted by slicked-down hair that was plastered to his cheeks. He looked bedraggled, the little I could see of him, but to me he looked quite wonderful.

"Thank you, Peter, for saving my life."

"It's a life well worth saving," he said firmly.

I wondered if his mother or my father would agree about that. It didn't seem to matter at the moment, for at last I was being welcomed to Montville. I had nearly been drowned in order to achieve it, but now there was someone, other than the servants, who was pleased to see me. At last, I hoped Peter was pleased. I know that wet though I was, with a chill that was beginning to seep through me, I felt warmed by his presence. I felt, at last, that I was home.

"You know," Peter said, "I'll wager we look like a couple of wet rats. We can't sit around like this. We'll likely end up getting pneumonia. But I do wish to see you and talk to you. My horse is close by. I'll ride home and change. Then if you feel able to receive a visitor, I'll return."

"I think I could tell better how I feel, after I stand."

He was on his feet in a moment, helping me to mine. Much to my gratitude, I found that I was steady and, though a trifle weak, none the worse for my experience.

"May I bring you back to the house?" he asked.

"It isn't necessary," I replied. "You had better return home and change. That is, if you're really Peter Brownlee."

"Who else could I possibly be?"

"You might be the person who tried to murder me," I said and I meant every word.

"No, no, Laura!" he exclaimed. "I came over here, impatient to see you! I wanted to see if you are as beautiful a young woman as you were a child."

I couldn't help the laughter that escaped me. "And you find me wet, bedraggled and muddy."

"Take heart, I'm the same," he said with a chuckle. "And now, young lady, I insist you return to the house. I'll escort you to the door. If, as you say, there was one attempt on your life, I wish to make certain there is not a second."

"Do you doubt me?" I asked as he took my elbow and guided me along the path.

"I do not, though I am sorely puzzled."

"No more than I, Peter. And if you are Peter, I suggest you meet me where you used to seek me out—and if you don't remember where that is, you are not Peter Brownlee."

"I shan't tell you where the spot is, but be assured, I shall meet you there," he said.

He left me at the back door. The kitchen was now in darkness so I had no opportunity to see him, but it was as well, for I didn't wish him to view me in such a state.

I went into the house and met no one on my way upstairs to my rooms. There, I lit the lamps in the sitting room and those in my bedroom. Then I got out of my wet clothes, bathed the mud from my face and hands, rubbed my hair briskly with a towel and brushed it before tying it with a satin ribbon. It looked better that way for it wasn't completely dry and I didn't wish to take more time. I was impatient to see Peter. Exhausted though I was when he had taken me from the water, I was charmed by his warmth and most anxious to see him in lamplight. I wondered if he felt the same about me.

I patted French cologne around my shoulders, neck and ears and I was careful about my selection of a dress. I picked up a lace-edged handkerchief and left my suite, returning downstairs and exiting through the front door. I made my way easily through the darkness to the playhouse.

It wasn't locked for the simple reason that it had never been provided with one.

All this I did, including the trip to the playhouse, through the darkness, without pausing once to remember that I had almost been killed a very short time before. All I wanted to do now was see Peter again.

When I had last seen him, he'd been a boy of eleven and I'd been a girl of seven. Now he was a grown man and I was a young lady who was supposed to be quite sophisticated, having spent a year abroad. Yet the thought of facing Peter in the lamplight left me as tremulous as a young girl at her first party. Would he like me, really like me, I wondered. How I hoped so, for I had adored him as a little girl. Partly because he had been so good to me; partly because he had been so handsome.

I lit two lamps and wondered if anyone from the main house would be attracted by them. If so and they came to investigate, I'd send them away. I looked about me and I nodded in approval at what I saw. The playhouse had been wonderfully kept up and for this, I must give Zella credit. There was even a checkerboard set up ready for play, just as it had always been when I was a child.

Peter wasn't quite as quick about getting back as I had estimated and while I waited, some reaction set in. I thought back to my struggle in the water and I knew that there had been a genuine attempt to kill me. Someone had actually been in the lily pond, hiding beneath the lily pads, waiting for me.

Yet how could that be? I hadn't even known I was going to the lily pond until moments before I got there. And how would anyone possibly guess I would walk out along the walkway where I could be seized. They couldn't, for these actions of mine couldn't possibly have been anticipated.

Therefore, it meant that someone had been in the lily pond anyway. But, in heaven's name, why? It was no place to swim. The bottom was deep in mud, easily stirred up. The lily pads and the roots made movement through the water difficult, although it was deep enough to swim in.

I had no time to consider this mystery further, for I

heard the sound of Peter's approaching horse and I opened the door and stood there, with the lamplight behind me, waiting to greet him.

He swung out of the saddle and bounded eagerly across the grass. His movements were brisk and when he crossed the porch, both hands outstretched for mine, I thought he was just about the handsomest young man I had ever set eyes on. But it was his warm friendliness that really enchanted me and when his face broke into a smile at sight of me, I completely forgot that my return to Montville had been disheartening and dangerous.

Peter had grown into quite a handsome young man—he was twenty-three now. I could see that his hair was a light shade of brown, his eyes a vivid blue, even in the weak lamplight which reached us on the porch. He was much taller than I—at least eight inches taller, and well-put-together, with strong-looking shoulders and a gracefully-slim waistline.

"Laura," he said fervently, "it is really you. All the way here I kept saying your name just to convince myself you had really come back. My horse must think me slightly daft, for I did the same thing on my return. Let me look at you." He grasped my arms lightly and swung me around so that I faced the light.

"Gracious," I exclaimed, feeling color rise to my face, "I couldn't put my hair up for there wasn't time to dry it completely."

"It looks lovely," he exclaimed. "And you're beautiful. You're just as I dreamed you would be—even more so. Welcome home, Laura, and please—don't go away again."

"Thank you, Peter," I replied, beaming at his words.

"Minnie asked the same thing of me tonight. It's so good to hear her words repeated."

"It was through Minnie and Efrem that I kept track of you," Peter said. "I'd have written except that I wasn't certain you would care to answer."

"But why wouldn't I?" I exclaimed.

"Oh . . ." he shrugged. "Let's sit down. There's a lot to talk about and I may as well sit down."

He dusted off the top step with his handkerchief and I sat down and arranged my skirts.

"It may sound strange, but I am glad to be back—to see Montville again—to be welcomed by you."

"Montville wasn't any fun after you left."

"It wasn't any fun after my mother left," I said with sadness. "But what ever gave you the thought that I wouldn't write to you?"

"Oh . . . because of your mother and my father."

"Do you really believe that story, Peter?"

"I fear I do," he said. "In fact, there is little question about it."

"You are older than I, but as a boy, did you ever suspect that your father was in love with my mother?"

"No." The promptness and firmness of his answer pleased me.

"I didn't either. Of course, I never knew about it until a few weeks ago. That is what prompted me to return home at once. I had to learn the truth."

"You mean your father never told you the truth until recently?"

"He has never told me the story. I learned it from Delphine."

"Delphine?" he asked with a frown.

"She's Zella's niece. Papa hired her to chaperone me—to be my companion—on a two years around-the-world tour."

"Two years? But I learned from Minnie you left school only a year ago."

"You have been keeping track of me," I said, highly gratified.

"I must admit to the truth of that," he said.

"It was Delphine who told me the story. She taunted

me with it one night. However, she had been drinking and I thought she was making it up."

"She was scarcely a fit chaperone for a young girl fresh from school," he commented. "Why would your father hire such a woman?"

"I doubt he knew what she was really like and I wouldn't write to him because he would have referred it to his secretary or his lawyer, Mr. Converse."

"What is the age of your chaperone?"

"She's twenty-six and most attractive. It was her first trip abroad, her first taste of luxurious living and she made the most of it. Being attractive, she didn't lack for male companionship whether it was France, Germany, Austria, England—and I was alone a good deal of the time. But sometimes, when she'd had too much to drink, she would return in an ugly mood. I had always, up until then, tolerated her when she was in such a condition even though she was very dictatorial. But this evening I rebelled. She told me not to be so high and mighty. Then she blurted out the news about my mother and your father. I was first shocked and then I became enraged that she would revile my mother's good name."

"I can understand your being appalled, especially after believing your mother dead since you left Montville."

"Afterward, she denied the truth of the story. Told me she had made it up. But by then, my mind had been poisoned by her words and I could do naught but return to Montville and find out for myself if she spoke the truth."

"Except that my motives are selfish in wanting you to return to Montville, I wish you had never come back. I wish you had never heard the true story."

"Then you really believe it," I said in fresh astonishment.

He nodded.

"Now I know why Papa sent me away. He hated me because I reminded him of Mama."

"I don't believe your father hates you," Peter protested.

"He does," I said vehemently. "He never paid any attention to me, even before Mama died—or disappeared. He only visited me twice while I was at school—when he was sent for because I was ill. He didn't see me off when

I went to Europe, nor did he meet me at the dock when I returned. He hates the sight of me."

Peter reached over and took one of my hands. He held it between both of his. "He's a famous and very successful man. He has worked all his life. But he's a lonely man. He doesn't know how to enjoy himself. I understand he remains by himself most of the time."

"You mean, he still misses my mother—or does he hate her? Is he bitter, as your mother is?"

"I don't know," Peter commented, "for I have rarely seen him in these parts. I doubt he comes here more than once or twice a year."

"That's the impression I got when I entered the house. It was in darkness, with all the shades drawn."

"Certainly no way to welcome you home."

"Peter, I don't wish to give the wrong impression of Papa. He was always generous with his money. Even Delphine supplied herself with a wardrobe and entered it on my expense account, yet he never complained at the bills he received."

"In other words, you had everything but a father," Peter said, somewhat grimly. "I can sympathize with you for I am going through almost the same thing. It may even be worse because Mama keeps talking and talking about what happened, as if it were yesterday. She won't forget and so she builds on her hate. I have to listen to that, I grew up listening to it. Be grateful you don't have to go through that."

"Your mother used to be so different. Remember the picnics we had with our mothers."

He smiled. "You collected caterpillars and I collected snakes."

"And frightened our mothers unmercifully for fear you'd find a poisonous one."

We laughed at the memory, but as quickly we sobered, for our thoughts were of the past and what it had done to us.

A night bird began singing somewhere beyond the lily pond. There was a dull flash of heat lightning on the horizon and the frogs were setting up an incessant chatter now that they'd recovered from the invasion of their pool.

Everything was so perfect here—everything except the people.

"I still can't make myself believe my mother ran off with your father," I said. "I cannot think of either my mother or your father as being . . . that kind."

"My father wrote ardent love poems to her. I read some of them. Oh, they were in love all right."

"How in the world did you come across them?" I asked.

"I didn't. Your father did. Several of them. He brought them for Mama to read."

"Were they really written by your father?"

"Without the slightest doubt. And no man could have written them unless he was deeply and truly in love. No woman would have accepted them unless she returned that love. I wish there was some way to question their disappearance, but there simply is not."

"But not to have heard from them, or of them, for all this time."

"It's a big country. There are sixty-three million people in it and in the next three years, when we reach the beginning of the new century, there'll be more than seventy-six million. Two persons could easily lose themselves in a crowd like that."

"I suppose so," I said dejectedly. "Peter, if I accidentally met Mama, I'd forgive her. I'd instantly tell her how much I've missed her and how much I love her. Because I do love her. Now that I can cherish the hope that she is alive, it's like a great big ache inside me."

He nodded glumly. "I feel the same way about Papa. You know, he never took anything with him. He left every dollar he had. Wherever they went, they must have wanted to start all over again."

"Will this make it hard for us to be friends?" I asked.

"Why should it?"

"What will people think?"

"I don't care what people think, do you?"

"Not one bit," I replied promptly. "I'm glad you're here. At least, I have one friend."

He stood up and looked down at me while he spoke. "Laura, I told you how wonderful it is to see you again and we have so much to talk about, but aren't we forgetting the most important thing of all?"

"I fear I don't understand."

"A little while ago, someone tried to kill you."

"I had forgotten it," I admitted. "But your mentioning it brings it all back and I'm frightened by what happened."

"You said someone seized your ankle . . ."

"Yes . . . as I reached the end of the walkway . . . the bridge . . . where the fire had burned through."

"Are you sure it was a hand? I mean . . . if the long root of a lily, for instance, had become entangled on the bridge and you stepped into the center of it and tripped . . . Or a piece of rotted wood gave way . . .?"

"No," I said. "Nor did I trip. There was nothing on the bridge. A hand reached up from the water and dragged me down. Someone had an arm around me throat, a grip around my waist. I was held. There was nothing fanciful about it."

"All right," he said. "I only wanted to know if you were certain. Now we have to determine who it was."

"I don't know. I haven't any idea, nor do I know why it was done."

"Perhaps someone meant only to frighten you."

"That may be, but to me it seemed very real, more like a genuine attempt to drown me. Surely you don't doubt me."

"Of course I don't," he said promptly. "You were never one to exaggerate and I did hear you cry out. When I got to the pond, you were below the water. I waded in and swam to you. I must confess I saw no one else, but a good swimmer could have remained under water despite all the lily roots and the pads."

"Do you think I should go to the police about it, Peter?"

His smile was grim. "Our police is a constable who can hardly find his way home. Besides, you have nothing by which to prove the attack. But do exercise caution in going about the estate at night."

"I intend to." My mind returned to the problem which most beset me. "Peter, do you have any of the poetry your father wrote?"

He nodded. "Mama has it."

"May I see it? I still find this impossible to believe. Perhaps the poetry may convince me."

"I'll bring it. There are several. I must admit they're very good."

"To sway a woman like my mother, they must have been." I arose suddenly. "Oh, Peter, I hurt inside, just thinking about it."

His hands rested lightly on my shoulders. "Then why upset yourself? Why read them? Why not remember your mother as you knew her—sweet and dear and gay. Once my mother was like that—once, long ago."

"But she changed and because of that, I must convince myself that my mother was responsible. As of this moment, despite what you say, I cannot—I will not. Perhaps, after I've read the poems, I'll understand better. I may see something in them, something that will help me to understand why she did such a thing."

"Then if you must see them, I'll ride the south meadow tomorrow morning at eleven," he said. "I'll have the poetry with me."

I nodded. "I will be there. Now I must return to the house."

"I'll accompany you to the door," he said, reaching for my hand. "The person who tried to drown you in the water may be a trespasser. I shan't risk your safety—not after waiting all these years for your return."

"Do we still keep horses?" I asked as we strolled back to the house.

"You do. And it's a fine stable."

We reached the spot where his horse was grazing. "Oh," I exclaimed. "I forgot to put out the lamps in the play-house."

"I'll do it," he said.

"Then you needn't come further. There's open space between here and the house, as you can see. Good night, Peter."

"Good night, Laura. And thanks for coming home. I'd like to say more, but just now that will have to do."

I looked up at him in surprise and saw that his eyes were regarding me tenderly. I felt my breath quicken in my throat and withdrew my hand from his and continued on my way, without looking back.

I felt tears touch my eyes at his dearness and I wondered if I was falling in love with Peter. It wouldn't be

difficult. The thought of it made me wonder what my father would say. Would he even care? He probably wouldn't give it a thought. In fact, he might welcome it—for then he'd be rid of me.

I marveled at how wonderfully Peter had stood the years, with the knowledge of what his father had done. He, too, had been as lacking in parental love as I, for I knew now his mother was so wrapped up in her own grief, she had constantly let her son know of his father's betrayal. Yet it hadn't made him bitter, nor filled him with hatred. He was the same Peter I'd known as a boy. He was strong and courageous and I must be the same. He still loved his father as I did my mother. That thought heartened me.

I quickened my steps for I didn't feel as much courage as I'd pretended. When I arrived here, I'd felt no fear on the estate, but after what had happened at the pond, I was eager for the safety of the house. From now on, I would probably dread the night and I would lie awake experiencing again those ugly moments when I was pulled down beneath the black water of the lily pond and held there to die.

I passed between the thick boxwood and on to the porch steps. There I heard a squeaking sound and then someone arose from one of the rockers. I was so startled that I cried out.

"It's only me." Delphine spoke through the darkness. "You're as nervous as a cat. I declare, Laura, if you're that scared, why are you wandering around in the dark?"

I walked up the stairs and stood beside her. "Sit down, Delphine," I said. "It's a lovely evening and we can talk."

She resumed her chair. I moved behind the rocker on which she sat and I let my fingers lightly touch her hair. It was perfectly dry. I sat down beside her.

"A rather terrifying thing happened to me tonight. You may help me discover who was responsible. Were you in the house all evening since supper?"

"Yes . . . I unpacked and I told Aunt Zella about our trip."

"Is there anyone else on this estate except for the servants?"

"Why, not that I know of. I haven't been here long

either you recall, but I think Aunt Zella would have mentioned anyone else. Why? In heaven's name, what's wrong?"

"Earlier this evening I walked out over the old bridge that leads to the burned-out summerhouse in the middle of the lily pond. Do you recall it?"

"I . . . think so. The summerhouse had burned down..."

"Yes. Well, someone was hidden in the pond. Whomever it was reached up, grasped my ankle and toppled me into the water. Then I was held under water to drown."

She gave a gasp of astonishment. "Drown? Laura, are you making this up?"

"I wish I were."

"But who was it?"

"I don't know. I never had a glimpse of whomever did it. I was too busy struggling to get free."

"Oh, Laura, you must be mistaken. Why would anyone wish to kill you?"

"I don't know," I exclaimed, annoyance that she disbelieved me. "But I tell you it happened."

"I don't know what to say. It sounds impossible . . . incredible..."

"I tell you it happened and I intend to find out who did it. I believe it was a deliberate attempt to murder me. For what reason, I cannot say, but the next time, I shall be better prepared."

"It's my fault," she said promptly. "I should have been with you. That is why your papa hired me. I am remiss, and I do ask your forgiveness, but I thought there could be no safer place on earth than right here at your own home...."

"I am old enough to care for myself," I said. "There is no need for you to follow me about. In fact, I forbid it. Tomorrow I shall write Papa about what happened and he will..." I paused and sighed despairingly. "Oh, what does it matter? Papa will send a lawyer, or a letter from his secretary. What does he care what happens to me?"

"It is true that your papa has acted strangely," Delphine admitted. "He could have come to meet us at the boat. After all, one of his offices is in New York and he was very likely there."

"Oh," I said with veiled sarcasm, "he was most kind. He sent Mr. Converse."

"Mr. Converse is a fine young man, Laura. I believe he likes you very much."

"That is gratifying, but he is not a satisfactory substitute for a father I haven't even seen in years. I'm heart-sick, Delphine. I have done nothing to deserve such treatment. He cannot be so busy he had not even a moment for his only child. Why does he treat me this way?"

Without waiting for a reply, I stormed off the porch and into the house. I ran up the stairs to my room and I slammed the door behind me. Only one lamp illuminated the room so I lit two more. I was so angry that if Papa had an office in the village, I would have gone there and demanded of him the reason for not even acknowledging I was alive.

Gradually my fury died away, however, for with me there was also a mixture of fear and of profound sorrow. I who, a few hours ago, had refused to consider that Mama had run off, was now almost convinced she had. If Peter was convinced of it, it must be so. His father and my mother must have gone away together. Otherwise, one or the other would have been heard from. Their illicit romance and relationship made it necessary they live secretly, so neither was able to send any word, nor, perhaps, did they want to. That was the only possible explanation for their silence.

Then a shiver of fear ran through me as I thought of the attack on my life. I wasn't certain that I had convinced Delphine of it. Perhaps she thought I had made it up to call attention to myself—to make my father come to me.

Apparently no one but Peter had heard me scream, for certainly none of the servants came to investigate. Nor did Delphine or Zella. When I closed my eyes, I relived those few agonizing moments over again and was once again aware of the muddy water closing in on me. I could feel it in my nose and taste it in my mouth. I had never been so frightened before.

I disrobed and took a bath in the hope that it would relax me. Then I stepped into my nightdress, buttoned it and, after extinguishing all the lamps except the one at my

bedside, I slipped between the covers and lay quietly. I was reluctant to put out my bedside lamp for I didn't want to be engulfed by the darkness. It was too much like the dark water of the lily pond. I again thought of the attack and my mind sought a possible reason for it, but no answer came. I wondered if Peter's mother could have done such a thing. The idea was preposterous. Still, her hatred for me had been evident this afternoon. My head began to ache as I sought vainly for an answer and I turned my thoughts to Peter.

His goodness and his dearness and his strength had a calming effect on me and at last my eyelids started to droop. I turned the lamp down, raised the chimney and blew out the flame. Then I sank back against the pillow and fell asleep. My exhaustion was such that even my new-born terror of the darkness could not overcome it.

I awoke refreshed—until everything came back to me. Then I thought of meeting Peter this morning and I smiled. I longed to see him again, yet I dreaded it too, for he was bringing proof of the elopement of his father and my mother. Yet I had to see it. Otherwise, I could not believe it. Last night, I thought Peter had convinced me of it, but with the new day, I thrust such a thought aside. I wondered if even the poems would persuade me. I hoped not, for I cherished the memories I had of my mother.

However, my common sense told me that regardless of my mother's guilt or innocence, there was no reason for me to discard those memories. They were a part of her life that only I shared and when I thought of my father's coldness and indifference toward me all these years, perhaps Mama had been driven to it. She too, may have been

lonely and without the companionship of a husband who drove himself in his desire to assure his success.

James Brownlee was a different type. He was quiet, friendly and even played games with Peter and me. But at all times, his wife Felicia was present, along with my mother. And the women seemed to enjoy the fun as much as we did. No, "I would not condemn my mother for her fall from grace, if indeed, she was guilty of such an act.

I arose, performed my ablutions and opened my closet. I was pleased to see that my luggage had been unpacked and my wardrobe pressed. I looked through my clothes until I came upon my riding costume. I donned it and went downstairs to breakfast.

There was no sign of Delphine so once again I dined alone. I smiled in amusement as I recalled her dismay when I suggested to her that I no longer needed her. Certainly, she was making no attempt to be in my company. Not that I minded, for I knew that neither Delphine nor I were overly fond of one another, but I wondered just why she wished to remain here. Surely, now that she had served an apprenticeship as a companion for me, Papa would not hesitate to give her a recommendation so that she could do likewise with another girl my age. And certainly, with a testimonial from Papa, she would have no trouble in finding employment.

I turned my attention to my breakfast which was Minnie's cooking at her best. Scrambled eggs so light they all but floated and if they could, for company they would have had her raised rolls, for they too, were airy and delicious. The bacon was crisp as I liked it and the breakfast coffee strong and black.

I went through the kitchen on my way out and greeted Minnie and Efrem. At the stables, I saw no sign of Uncle Charlie, but Martin Collier was fussing around. He was in need of a shave and he was so bent over he looked like a gnome. He certainly wasn't so old he needed to look that way, but he apparently had so little to do, he just got stooped from sitting around so much. I was pleasantly surprised that he did deign to touch the brim of his hat for my benefit.

"Martin, I'm going for a morning ride. I'm not familiar

with our stable so please be good enough to choose a gentle horse. I haven't ridden in some time."

He didn't answer, but he shuffled into the barn and presently he led out a black mare that looked sleek but not skittish. I mounted somewhat awkwardly for it had been a long time. I soon had the feel of it, however, and I sent the mare trotting down the road to a point where I could enter the pasture land without jumping a fence.

I rode by the old slave cemetery with its many small white crosses. My ancestors had kept slaves, but they'd treated them kindly and given them their freedom long before the Civil War. As a result, none ever left the plantation and that was why the cemetery was so large.

Before me, the old plantation lay unworked, but the grass had been kept down and the pasture land was green and lush. All for a man who came here once or twice a year. It simply didn't make sense to me. Perhaps Papa was so wealthy, an investment of this nature didn't matter to him. It had to be something like that. The plantation had been in the family for three generations or more, but certainly Papa had no sentimental attachment to it. At least, not now. Apparently he lost interest after what had happened between Mama and James Brownlee.

Then I saw Peter riding toward me. He always had been skillful with horses, even when he was but eight and nine. He rode gracefully, mounted on a chestnut horse that glistened in the morning sunlight.

I raised a hand and waved gayly, but the only evidence he gave that he'd seen me was to turn his horse in my direction. I had been on the verge of taking my horse into a gallop in my anxiety to reach him, but he seemed in no hurry to reach me. I was puzzled and a little hurt by his behavior.

However, our greeting was friendly and we dismounted near a clump of poplar trees where there was shade and coolness. We turned the horses to graze and sat down.

"Did you have any more frights?" he asked, eyeing me with concern.

"No," I assured him. "I slept well and this morning, it scarcely seems real."

"Daylight helps to make one less wary of night terrors,"

he commented. "Nevertheless, what happened to you isn't to be dismissed lightly. It could be an interloper."

"But what would he be doing in the water?"

"He may have been using the burned-out shell of the summerhouse as a resting place when you came along. In an effort to escape detection, he jumped into the water."

"But why would he pull me in?"

"I know," he replied, his smile grim. "It doesn't make sense."

"I can think of no one on this estate I would suspect. Zella certainly has no reason and while Delphine doesn't care about me since I spoiled her tour, it seems unreasonable to suspect her either. However, when I returned last evening, she was on the porch and I contrived to touch her hair. It was quite dry. Had she been in the pool, it would likely still have been wet. The other servants, except for those who have been here for many years, don't even know me. However," I added calmly, "there is your mother. Can she swim?"

He looked at me in surprise. "She could—very well. If she still does, I do not know. However, she could scarcely have known you would go to the summerhouse."

"I thought of that also," I assured him. "Did you see her after you returned home?"

"No, she had retired."

"Does she know you've been to see me?" I asked.

"Yes," he admitted, though avoiding my gaze.

"And she disapproves."

He nodded. "Her hatred of your mother extends to you. That is unreasonable, but she has been quite unreasonable ever since Papa left."

"Did she ask you not to see me?" I felt my face flame at the question, but I had to ask it.

Again he nodded. "I told her I was coming to see you this morning."

Now I knew the reason for his somber spirits. "There was a scene. She became angry and forbade you to do so."

"I'm here, Laura," he said and this time his eyes looked into mine and I knew no one could force Peter to do what he did not wish or felt was not right.

"Thank you, Peter," I said quietly. "I suppose Papa

would behave in like fashion if he thought I knew what is purported to be the true story."

"I fear it is the true story."

"I can't make myself believe it," I replied. "Last night, I thought I did after I talked with you. Yet this morning, when I awoke and thought about it, I knew I would never believe my mother to be guilty of such an act."

"It's such a waste—all this hatred," he exclaimed vehemently. "Look at our plantations—lying fallow when they could be growing tobacco. I studied farming, Laura. Scientific farming. It's something that's never been done before. Up until now, people just planted their seed and prayed the rainfall would be good. There's more than that to farming. Especially tobacco farming and I predict that some day tobacco is going to be one of the most valuable crops in the world."

"Our combined plantations would produce a great deal of it," I ventured. "But we must convince our parents of it."

He looked doubtful. "Don't raise your hopes."

"I shan't give up hope," I replied. "Despite what happened last night, I find it good to be home. I hope to remain here."

"Were you thinking of leaving?" Peter asked in sudden concern.

"After what happened to me in the pond last night, I'm not certain."

"I intend to make sure there's no repetition of that," he said adamantly.

"I suppose the best way is for me to remain away from the lily pond," I reasoned. "It's certainly not the prettiest spot with the skeleton of the summerhouse and the rotted boards which lead to it. I wonder why Papa didn't either have it torn down or build a new one."

"Perhaps because he is never here long enough to order it done."

I thought a moment, "I believe I should write and suggest it to him. So long as I'm here, I can supervise it. I would like it rebuilt. I loved that summerhouse."

"Remember the picnics we had there with our mothers?" Peter asked, smiling.

"I remember lots of happy times we had on this estate," I said.

"Your mother always insisted we have our parties and picnics here," Peter mused. "It was never at our estate. Perhaps because yours is so much bigger and more beautiful."

"Thank you, Peter," I said. "But I doubt that was the reason."

"Then what was?" he queried.

"How should I know?" I asked, shrugging. Then I sombered. "Do you suppose ... ?"

His features revealed he was thinking of the same thing . . . that my mother remained away from the Brownlee estate and from James Brownlee, for fear of revealing their love.

"Oh no, Peter."

His face flamed. "Forgive me," he said. "I just wish every time we start a conversation, it didn't end up with doubts and accusations."

"Did you bring the poetry?" I asked.

"Don't read it, Laura," he begged. "Don't spoil your memories, your dreams."

"I must read it," I said firmly and extended a hand. "Please give it to me."

Reluctantly, Peter took it from his pocket and handed it over. It was folded and the pages were well worn, as if they had been handled endlessly.

"I had to take them from my mother's desk," he said. "She keeps it in a secret compartment though she revealed to me its whereabouts."

"Then you must have them back," I said, wishing I could take them and destroy them.

"I must."

I opened the pages and began reading. Almost instantly, I was swept by the lilt of the verse, the feeling in it, the emotion which was expressed. This was superb poetry. There was no amateur rhyming, but rather the work of someone who knew how to make words sing a unique song of love. James Brownlee spoke of his love quietly, but so persuasively it brought tears to my eyes. It was beautiful and poignant and I found myself enthralled.

"Peter," I whispered, my voice tremulous, "this is beautiful. It's like music."

"I liked it too," he stated. "I had no idea Papa wrote

verse. He never seemed very romantic to me, as I think back. Yet he was a gentle person and kind—always kind."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "I remember him. And thinking back, as clearly as my mind's eye will permit, it seemed to me that he was quite devoted to your mother."

"They were happy together," Peter said in a matter-of-fact manner. "That's what puzzled me at first, made the hurt inside me so sharp and deep. And I know that that's what made Mama so bitter. Papa's running away came as such a shock."

"Is this how she learned of it?" I asked, holding up the papers.

"Yes," he said. "Your father brought them over. He found them in your mother's room."

"Didn't he leave a note of any kind?" I asked.

"No. Nor did your mother."

"That is what makes it so difficult for me to accept," I reasoned. "You have just mentioned your father's gentleness and kindness. My memories of my mother— are likewise. So how could they have done such a thing?"

"How could they have sat down and written a note, telling of their plans?" he countered. "That, too, would be cruel. Perhaps they ran away on the spur of the moment."

I shook my head in bewilderment. "I just cannot accept it."

"I respect you for your loyalty," he replied. "But how else can you explain their absence? An absence of twelve years."

"I can't," I replied. I handed the poems back to Peter and my attention was caught by movement in the distance. I shaded my eyes and peered in the direction of the house. "Someone's riding this way. I wonder who ..."

Peter arose quickly. "I can't identify him at this distance. But that's one of your horses."

The rider continued to head in our direction and as he drew closer, I also tried to identify him, but I could not. He appeared to be none-too-steady on a horse and he certainly wasn't dressed for riding. A derby hat was jammed down hard over his eyes to keep it in place. A heavy gold watch chain across his vest bounced up and down.

Not until he was almost ready to pull up did sudden

recognition come to me and I was so startled I gasped in astonishment.

"Papa!"

"Your father?" Peter asked in surprise.

"Yes . . . oh, yes, I'm certain," I cried and I ran toward him. He had stopped the horse and slid off the animal clumsily. He was grayer than he was when he last visited me at school and there were more wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, but he was Adam Montville, my father, and I went to him eagerly, never once thinking of the fact that he had ignored me for twelve years.

My arms raised to embrace him, but his right arm came up and thrust me from him. I was so stunned I stood transfixed. Papa moved past me and strode up to where Peter stood.

"You're Peter Brownlee, are you not?" he asked.

"I am, sir."

"Get off my property and stay away from . . . from Laura!"

"Why should I, sir? We were friends as children, we wish to continue to be so."

"Yes, Papa," I said defiantly, "why should Peter not see me?"

He flashed me an angry look. "Be quiet, Laura. As for you, Brownlee, I'm warning you once—get off this property and stay off."

"Please go, Peter," I said. My father's face had grown so red with rage, I feared he might have a stroke. "I will talk to Papa. I'm sure he has a reason for behaving in such a fashion."

"I have," Papa stated flatly. "And we'll return to the house so I may tell you."

Peter's eyes bade me a farewell, but they also told me he would see me again. Mine flashed my gratitude for his understanding. Papa had been inexcusably rude and of course I knew the reason for it, but since he didn't know I knew, I could be expected to be puzzled by his outburst.

"Get on your horse, Laura. We'll ride back."

I moved over to where Peter's and my horses were grazing. As I mounted, Peter moved over to assist me.

"Take your hands off her, you . . . you . . ." Papa roared in a voice like thunder.

"Please, Papa," I pleaded. "I needed assistance."

After making certain I was safely in the saddle, Peter mounted and rode away, never once looking back. My father took out a handkerchief and wiped perspiration from his face. His rage was monstrous to behold.

"Let us go back, Papa," I said calmly. "I want to hear your explanation for your behavior toward Peter. So far as I am concerned, it was unpardonable."

I had maintained a calmness I didn't feel for I didn't wish to upset Papa further. Now, however, I rode on ahead, for I too felt anger. Apparently, I had inherited some of Papa's temper, but I was determined not to allow my ire to take precedence over my reason, for the time had come now to face my father, to hear him tell me the story of my mother's disappearance. I wondered, in his present state of mind, if he would use discretion in relating it.

At the stable, Martin threw me a vengeful smile as he took my horse. Apparently, someone had spied on me and told my father I was with Peter and Papa had come riding out to order Peter off the property. I walked around to the front of the house.

Both Zella and Delphine were on the porch. I noticed that Delphine was dressed in her best. Suddenly, it occurred to me that she and Zella had known Papa was coming today, yet had remained silent about it. I passed by them without giving them a glance for I sensed that they were as pleased about what had happened as Martin. Despite my anger, I felt tears of frustration flood my eyes and once inside the house, I ran up the stairs to my room. I couldn't face Papa now. And if he sent for me, I would refuse to come. I needed time to compose myself.

Once in my room, I threw myself across the bed and cried, sobs wracking my body. I knew it wasn't anger that did this to me. Nor was it even what Papa had done to Peter. It was because of Papa's behavior toward me.

He hadn't seen me in years and when I ran to embrace him, he had thrust me from him. Yet why should I have expected his behavior toward me to have been different. He had never exhibited the slightest affection toward me. I was his daughter, his only child, though he manifested not the slightest degree of pride in that fact. How I wished,

in my moments of grief, that I could hate him. Hate him the way he must still hate Mama and James Brownlee.

But when my tears had spent themselves and I lay there, I knew that hate wasn't the answer. Hate destroyed. It embittered. I had seen with my own eyes what it had done to Papa and Felicia Brownlee. I was determined it would not do the same to me.

I stayed in my room for the remainder of the day. It was childish of me, but I wasn't yet ready to see Papa. I wanted to be completely in control of myself before I ventured downstairs.

No one disturbed my solitude until supper when Minnie brought me up a tray of food.

"Child, you've just got to eat," she said as she placed the tray of food on the table and drew up a chair for me. "Now you just sit down here and pick up that soup spoon. Mopin' ain't gonna do you no good. No sense you lettin' certain people in this house think they got the best of you."

The chicken fricassee with dumplings teased my nostrils and I moved languidly over to the table. Minnie had certainly brought me enough for two, but as I regarded it, I realized I had skipped my midday meal and suddenly I was famished.

I sat down, picked up my napkin and started on the chicken gumbo soup. "Thank you, Minnie, for bringing me up a tray. And you're right. I have been behaving childishly. I'll try to do better. As soon as I eat, I'll go downstairs."

"You jus' do that," she said firmly. "That Delphine is makin' goo-goo-eyes at your Papa. How he ever picked her to travel around with you is more than I can understand."

I smiled and her face beamed. At least, Delphine hadn't fooled Minnie. Nobody did. I remember, as a child, trying to do it, but I never got very far.

I took her hand and pressed it against my cheek. "I don't know what I'd do if you and Efrem weren't here. It just wouldn't seem like home. Papa—Papa just wasn't nice to me today."

"He's a grievin' man," she said, patting the top of my head. "Don't be too hard on him, honey. He's missed your mama mighty bad."

"You don't believe she ran away, do you?" I asked, searching her face.

" 'Course I don't," she said consolingly.

"But what do you think happened to her?" I asked, desperation filling my voice.

"I don't rightly know, honey," she said. "But I think if she could come back, she would. 'Specially to see you."

"I'm beholden to you for saying that, Minnie. It's just what I wanted -to hear."

"It's no more'n I believe," she said quietly. "Now eat your supper, then come downstairs and get your Papa to pay attention to you instead of that painted-up Delphine who wouldn't be true to no man no matter who he was."

For the first time that day, I laughed. And Minnie threw back her head and laughed with me. Then, with a further admonition for me to eat every bite, she went back to her kitchen.

I had bathed my face, patted cologne about my shoulders and donned a teagown of pink silk with chiffon drapes. I had purchased it in Paris and it was the latest word in fashion.

Even Zella, as she passed me in the reception hall carrying a small tray, couldn't help but be impressed by my appearance. It gratified me and gave me courage to face my father.

I entered the large drawing room and found Delphine seated close by Papa, with only a small table between them. He held a brandy glass in his hand and was listening attentively as she spoke eloquently of our travels abroad. There was a glass of wine on the table alongside her. I wondered if she would be discreet about the amount she drank. I rather thought she would for she was doing her best to impress Papa and that wasn't difficult, for Delphine had a

way of charming any man. She knew all the wiles and took care to employ them. I seated myself close by.

"Good evening, Papa," I said, when Delphine paused to pick up her drink and sip from it.

"I'm sorry you couldn't join us for your meals, Laura, but Minnie said you had a headache."

Dear Minnie, I thought, telling a little fib to explain my absence. "I did, but I no longer feel it and decided to come down."

"I'm glad," he replied, "for I wish to speak with you in the library. Will you excuse us, Miss LaSalle?"

"Of course, Mr. Montville," Delphine replied, her smile demure. "I only hope I didn't bore you, relating our adventures and misadventures while abroad."

"On the contrary," my father said, returning the smile. "I think Laura was most fortunate to be with a companion who was so competent and had such an enjoyable sense of humor."

"My most gracious thanks to you, Sir," she said, bowing her head just the slightest. Her eyes thanked him too, I noticed, as she widened them and then lowered them in feigned modesty. I wasn't being unfair to her. I knew her to be crafty, deceitful and, on occasion, cruel.

My father offered his arm to me and he led me to the dark-paneled library. So dark it used to frighten me when I was a child, but tonight it was softly lamplit and with its large, comfortable, leather-covered chairs, book-lined walls and furniture gleaming with polish, it was both relaxing and peaceful. Whatever fear I'd once felt in this room had spent itself. I liked it and I made a mental note to spend many hours here. It would take many hours to read a fraction of the books which were gathered here. It smelled of leather from the book bindings and I noticed that the draperies were still drawn against the light. I would attend to that matter in the morning. Just now, I was interested in what my father had to say. Much to my surprise he opened the conversation by referring to Delphine. Apparently she had made quite an impression.

"Miss Delphine," he said, "is a most attractive young lady. This is the first time I have ever met her. She was hired by Mr. Converse. And speaking of Donald—he'll be

here tomorrow. He came down with me, but business in Norfolk delayed him."

"I will be pleased to see Mr. Converse again," I said.

He closed the library door and went around the desk to seat himself behind it. I sat down in a corner of the divan.

He regarded me silently for a moment as he rested his hands on the desk. I was surprised to see him clasp and unclasp them in what amounted to a gesture of nervousness. Yet I couldn't conceive of my father ever not being in command of a situation. Little though I'd seen of him, after this morning's encounter with Peter, I knew him to be a forceful personality.

"You're angry with me, Laura."

"Not now, Papa. I was this morning though. You were rude to Peter."

"I was and I must explain my behavior."

I wondered why I didn't blurt out the fact that I was aware of the reason, but I remained silent. I wanted to hear what he said about Mama and James Brownlee.

"When you were small, I told you that your mama had died suddenly and was buried elsewhere." He paused as if waiting for a reply, but when I remained silent he went on. "That was not the truth. Your mother disappeared at the same time James Brownlee did. Evidence I found gave proof that she had run away with James."

"I don't believe it," I said quietly.

His eyes widened in shock at my statement.

"You mean, you are of the opinion I made up such a story?"

"No," I replied, regarding him coldly. "You think you are speaking the truth as you know it. But I will never believe Mama would betray you."

"Nevertheless, she did," he said, his voice rising.

"You have such evidence?"

"I have," he replied.

"May I see it?"

"No!" he said, with a firmness matching my own.

"Papa," I said, "I haven't been completely honest with you. I have already seen the evidence. Poems written by James Brownlee to Mama. They're beautiful."

"He's a blackguard," he exclaimed, pounding the desk with his fist. "He betrayed my wife."

"Before I will believe that, I must hear it from Mama's lips."

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Did you pay Felicia Brownlee a visit?"

"I did," I replied. "For it was the story of Mama's supposed betrayal of you that brought me home. I had to learn the truth."

"I had hoped to shield you from it."

"Is that why you sent me away?"

"Yes," he said, but he averted his eyes.

"But why did you never visit me at school? Why did you not allow me to return to Montville, even for brief periods? Or why did you not take a vacation with me?"

"I'm a very busy man," he said brusquely. "I have grave responsibilities."

"Being a father is a responsibility," I said remindfully.

"It is," he admitted, but did not pursue the subject. "Was it Felicia who showed you the poetry?"

"No. She ordered me from the house. She said she hated the sight of me for I reminded her of Mama."

"You're the image of her," he said and I thought there was a catch in his voice. "But Felicia shouldn't have treated you so."

"Nor should you have treated Peter as you did," I replied. "There is no reason why we cannot be friends."

"Is that how you regard him?"

I colored without knowing why. For some reason the question seemed personal.

"I see," my father said. "That's exactly what I was afraid of. That's why I don't wish you to see him again. That's why I don't want him on this property."

"Papa," I exclaimed, "we are just friends. We are only now becoming re-acquainted."

"It was he who showed you the poetry," he reasoned.

"It was," I replied. "We spoke of Mama and his papa last night. He told me he had evidence that they were in love. I asked him to bring it to me this morning. I had just finished reading the poems when you appeared."

"Then you know of your mother's perfidy."

"I told you, Papa, I don't believe it."

"Then we will not discuss it again. I don't wish her name mentioned in this house. It is too—painful."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Did you love her that much?"

"With all my heart," he said, almost choking on his words.

"I thought you hated her," I said softly. How I longed to go to this man, to place my arms around him, to comfort him. Yet after the way he had thrust me from him this morning, I could not.

"Perhaps I did for a while," he said, looking off into space. "But I've suffered for feeling that way."

I knew there was nothing more to say on that subject. I hadn't told him who had revealed Mama's disappearance to me, nor would I, just now. There had been enough anger in this house for one day. However, I had to tell him about the attack on my life, for I didn't want a repetition of it.

"Papa, I arrived here only last night. Yet, within a few hours, someone tried to murder me."

"What was that?" He half arose. "Murder you? I don't understand ..."

"I was walking around the estate and I went out over the bridge to the old summerhouse. Someone in the lily pond reached up and seized my ankle and toppled me into the water. Then that person endeavored to keep me under water until drowned."

"Laura . . . this is not a joke? This is not something . . . to worry me . . . to get back at me . . . ?" His face was ashen and drawn.

"Peter Brownlee heard me cry out and he dove into the pond and, without question, frightened away my attacker and then pulled me out of the water. He saved my life. For that you drove him from our land and denied him admission again."

Papa nodded, some of his color and assurance returning. "So that's it! You were under a great obligation to him. This explains a great deal to me...."

"Does it explain who tried to kill me, and can you come upon a single reason why it happened?"

"No—no, not a single reason. Nor can you, I warrant."

"What do you mean, Papa? What are you getting at?"

"The reason is one so plain it lies hidden from your powers of observation. Did you see Peter Brownlee dive into the pool?"

"Why, no—I was being held under water . . ."

"Ah—yes. But suppose it was Peter Brownlee who had pulled you into the water in the first place, then pretended to try to murder you, and after that, by a great flailing of arms and legs make it seem he had just arrived to drive away the attacker. Then he removed you from the water and was a hero in your eyes. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, Papa, I thought of him being the murderer."

"Well then?"

"I am convinced that Peter saved my life and there was an attacker who would have killed me if Peter had not arrived in time."

Papa leaned back with a great sigh. "Perhaps you're right. It could be a way of reaching me. There are many people who hate me, you know. A successful man makes enemies."

"That is true, Papa," I agreed.

"I will tell Martin and Charlie to be on the lookout for any prowlers," he said. "And it would be wise for you not to roam the estate after dark, in case there should be a repetition."

"I shan't," I assured him. "But there's one thing more, Papa."

"Yes?"

"I intended to see Peter. I like him and I trust him. Besides, I need a friend here and he's the only one I know. Don't forget, it's been twelve years since I left Montville. The playmates I had are grown up. Some, quite possibly, married and all of them are strangers to me."

"I understand," he spoke quietly, as if he were weighing his words carefully. "So long as you remain friends, I have no objection. However, were you to fall in love . . ."

"That hasn't happened," I said, believing it to be the truth.

A touch of sternness crept into his voice as he said, "Don't let it!"

I don't know why, but I smiled. Somehow, instead of making me angry, I was amused that he would attempt to dictate to me in regard to the extent of affection in which I should hold Peter. Perhaps another reason for my amusement was that I knew I would disregard his warning were I to lose my heart to Peter.

My father spoke again. "Who told you about your mother?"

"Delphine," I replied. "Later she denied it. Said it was merely rumor. But her revelation disturbed me to such an extent I insisted on returning home."

"Do you wish me to dismiss her?"

"Not because of that," I replied. "However, I no longer need a companion. I'm quite old enough to care for myself. In fact, I did so abroad."

"Nevertheless, I believe I shall continue to keep her as your companion, especially in view of what happened to you last night. Or do you number her among your suspects?"

"I have no suspects, Papa. However, in all honesty, I will reveal that I touched her hair later last night to see if it was damp. It was not. Therefore, it could not have been she."

He looked pleased and I felt a touch of fear, wondering if the crafty Delphine had already succeeded in putting my father under her spell.

"I'm glad to hear it, but somehow, I gather you don't care about her."

I gave him a direct look. "I really think you might have made a better selection."

"I didn't make the selection. I let Donald Converse do it. His firm did investigate her and knowing she was Zella's niece, I felt she would take a greater interest in you. However, if you wish me to dismiss her, I shall."

"No, Papa," I said. "Perhaps you're wise in having her remain."

"I think so, my dear. Also, it would be unkind to give her immediate notice. Never do anything in haste or anger, Laura, especially when it concerns people."

He looked tortured as he spoke and once again, I longed to go to him, to place my arms around him and comfort him, yet I dare not, for fear he might again thrust me from him.

"I'll be here a week," he continued. "And I hope you will remain here, now that you have returned."

"I hope to, Papa," I replied, "provided no more attempts are made on my life."

"I'm sorely puzzled by that," he said. "I'll take all precautions and suggest that you do the same."

"I will, Papa?"

"Tell me, why did you go out to the summerhouse in darkness?"

"It was just a whim. I used to love the spot as a child."

"Did anyone suggest you go there?"

"No. Nor did I tell anyone I was going. Papa, why don't you rebuild it?"

"I'll do no such thing." Again that note of sternness crept into his voice—or was it terror.

"Then tear it down. It's horrible to behold."

"One of these days, I'll have it removed."

"Soon, Papa. I don't like to look at such destruction and decay. It reminds me of the way Mama's good name has been destroyed."

"Laura!" He arose with such force, his chair tilted back and struck the wall.

"I can't help it, Papa. It does."

"Good night, Laura."

"Good night, Papa."

I arose, despair once again overwhelming me, as I beheld the shock in Papa's face at my words. I left the room, closing the door behind me. He was a strange man. I suppose Minnie was right when she had said he was 'a grievin' man. But he was also a difficult one to understand.

However, I knew now he didn't hate me, but I had no evidence that he loved me either. His concern for me, when I spoke of the murderous attack on me last night, had been genuine. Yet I knew he was at as much of a loss to explain it as I was.

The following afternoon, Papa and I strolled the estate, conversing easily. We didn't linger near the lily pond, for, to me, the summerhouse and the rotting walkway were an eyesore.

I didn't know what his thoughts were regarding it, but we were getting along so splendidly, I decided not to mention again either the rebuilding of it, or the tearing of it down.

We entered the playhouse which he had caused to be built especially for me and which had been my fondest delight when I was a little girl. Here was a complete house in miniature. An iron stove in which a coal fire could actually be built and it had an oven in which small biscuits, cookies and pies could be baked. There were small dishes and child-size cooking utensils, imported because nothing like them were made in the United States.

The parlor had half adult furniture, half child's pieces, because Mama had told me, when I was small, that I should expect grown-up visitors and they'd never fit in my regular chairs. So these larger ones were bought and became part of the furnishings. I sat down in one of them and Papa sank gratefully into another. We'd been walking for more than an hour without a rest.

"I'm out of shape," he complained good-naturedly. "Takes a young girl like you to make me realize it though. I should spend more time here and now that you are home,

I shall. However, I'll only be able to remain here for a week at present, but I'll be back often and stay as long as possible."

"Papa, did you know that Peter studied farming at school?"

"I know nothing about Peter," he said, his manner cooling.

I pretended to ignore it. "It seems a shame that this farm and his are lying fallow when they could be producing tobacco. Peter is convinced tobacco growing will become one of the most important crops in the world."

"I fear your interest in Peter is greater than you have given me cause to believe."

"Is it wrong to want to see a young man put his talents to use? He wants to ..."

"He has an estate. Why doesn't he do it?"

"I suppose because of his mother."

"No doubt. She is a wealthy woman. She doesn't need the income from planting tobacco, nor do we."

"But to allow this ground to go to waste. Besides, it would allow Peter to do what he wants."

"My dear, you have been home only two days, yet you are trying to make over Montville and Felicia Brownlee's estate. You cannot dictate to Felicia, nor can you to me."

"I'm sorry, Papa," I said, but I hadn't given up. I knew I wasn't interested in attempting to reason with Mrs. Brownlee, but I was hopeful that I could persuade Papa to allow Peter to cultivate our land. However, this wasn't the time to pursue it.

"Papa," I said boldly, "you forbade me to mention Mama's name, but I must. There are things I have to know."

His face tightened as he said, "Very well."

"Did she leave a note when she—went away?"

"No."

"Did she take any of her possessions?"

"Nothing except her dog Fluffy and the clothes she was wearing."

"Mama always wore a beautiful cameo on a chain around her neck. May I have it, Papa? I'd like it as a memento."

"I have never laid eyes on it since her disappearance, so apparently she was wearing it."

I nodded understandingly. "Did you ever hear from her or Mr. Brownlee?"

"Never. And now, I believe we've exhausted the subject."

He arose and reached out his hand for me. "Come along.

Let's go through the arbors on our way back. I understand we have some beautiful roses this year."

We started back, inspecting the rose bushes, breathtaking in their beauty. We reached the house and Zella opened the door for us. I went directly upstairs to my rooms, took off my dress and lay down to rest. But shortly, I heard the rumble of the approaching carriage and I knew Donald Converse was arriving. I donned my pink silk teagown, all the while wondering why Papa was so positive that Mama and James Brownlee had gone off together when he didn't even have a note from either of them as proof of it.

Then I thought about that strange attempt to kill me and the version Papa offered in explanation. That Peter was responsible, and had made a great commotion to make it seem someone else was in the pond. But though I hadn't seen Peter in years, I still felt I knew him too well. And I trusted him.

But someone had dragged me under and, try as I might, I couldn't even hazard a guess as to whom it was. I came to the half-hearted conclusion that it must have been someone passing through the estate with no business there, who had tried to frighten me. But—why would such a person be wading or swimming in that murky pool? Unless it was a maniac. I shuddered at the thought.

I was, however, greatly pleased that Papa had relented and I could see Peter again without it being against his will. I did respect Papa and I wanted to obey him. I wanted very much for us to be friends.

A quick glance in the mirror satisfied me as to my appearance and I went down to greet Donald Converse. It had been, I thought, a long time since a guest had been properly received at Montville.

Mr. Converse and I were good friends. He was pleasant to be with and he was quite a striking young man in appearance. His hair was blond and his eyes bright blue. He smiled easily and there was an attractive cleft in his chin. He was tall—taller than Peter, I judged, and he dressed extremely well. I knew he was regarded as a brilliant young attorney who was bound to make a substantial place in the world for himself, very likely on the political side, though his appearance was somewhat against him there, for the males of this country favored a more rugged-looking, less-

handsome type. If the women voted, I'm sure he would have been elected President with little trouble.

He took both my hands. "Welcome home, Laura. You look wonderful."

"Thank you, Mr. Converse. I am well and I'm very happy to have Papa with me."

"He came down as soon as he could get away."

"I know and he intends to stay a week."

"Good! He needs a rest."

"I shall do my best to see that he gets it. You're in time for supper, Mr. Converse, and we do have a gem of a cook, so I hope your appetite is good."

"It is," he assured me. "This fresh air inspires even a jaded one. Please . . . let it be Donald. You're quite grown up now and I expect we'll be seeing a great deal of one another."

I smiled. "Very well. . . Donald. Tell me, were you surprised that Papa came down here?"

"I would have been except that he wanted to see you very much."

"I'm surprised to hear that," I said. "From the manner in which he avoided seeing me all these years, I thought he scarcely knew of my existence."

"He was aware of it," Donald said. "I can attest to that. But have you given no thought to the fact that this place harbors tragic memories for him? I mean, of course," he added hastily, "your mother's death."

"I know the true story—at least, what is purported to be the true story, Donald, so there is no need to continue the ruse."

"I'm sorry you had to be told, but in a way, it's best."

"Suppose you greet Papa and then we shall take a walk in the gardens. I believe he is in the library."

He was gone but a few moments and when he returned, he was hatless and he looked quite boyish and very handsome. We roamed the estate and I showed him the playhouse and we peered into the round ice house where Minnie kept her butter and cream cooling. We walked through the arbors and admired the boxwood and the ginkgo tree. Then we found ourselves on the bank of the lily pond.

"I wish Papa would either tear down that summerhouse or build a new one. That is such an eyesore."

"I once asked your father why he didn't do just that and he replied that he couldn't bear to. I presume it meant a great deal to him and to your mother. Yet soon it will decay and fall into the pond and then it will be necessary to drag it out, piece by piece."

"Apparently Papa is more sentimental than I believed," I commented.

"He loved your mother dearly," Donald said remindfully.

"And Mama loved him," I replied quickly. "Oh yes, she did," I added, noting the disbelief in his eyes. "And nothing you or anyone says will convince me otherwise for I do not believe she and Mr. Brownlee ran away together."

"I admire you for making such a statement," Donald said and there was no doubting his sincerity. "But all evidence points..."

"A few poems," I said scathingly. "Oh, they're beautiful and filled with love, but to me, that isn't sufficient evidence."

"Then where are your mother and Mr. Brownlee?"

"How I wish I knew," I said. "Tell me, Donald, did my father ever do anything about trying to find my mother?"

Donald shook his head. "Nothing. We even suggested it on the theory that if Brownlee didn't do very well, they might be in need, and perhaps your father would provide. He gave the suggestion no consideration. In fact, he never commented on it."

"I understand there are detectives who search for missing people and Papa's influence could have made the police conduct some sort of a search."

"Laura, perhaps he didn't want to know. He was hurt, and the sort of wound he suffered heals slowly, even without being irritated by reminders of what caused it. In my opinion, he accepted the idea that your mother knew what she was doing, and therefore there was little or nothing your father could do about it. It was the sensible attitude for him to have taken, I assure you."

"If such was the case, which I do not believe," I said stubbornly.

He stopped me by lightly taking my arm as we walked toward the house. "Laura, Brownlee put it in writing. They both vanished at the same time. They were in love. They were so in love that he abandoned a wife and a son, while

she left behind you—and your father. Theirs must have been an overwhelming love, but it did happen. It is true."

I had much of my father's stubbornness in me. "I will believe it when I heard directly from one of them, not before. And I do believe it best that we give up discussing it because if Papa hears us, I'm sure he will not approve. Besides, it is almost time for supper and I remember Zella gets very upset when anyone is late."

"Zella's a martinet," he said with a smile. "Her niece is quite a girl though."

"A fact with which she is very thoroughly familiar," I said. "She's been shining up to Papa. Oh, I know Delphine. She has a way with men, but it's the same way with all men. Her eyes, her speech, her walk . . . everything. It does draw attention to her, but it never varies."

"I had no idea she was like that. When I hired her, she seemed to be quite demure and most eager to please you."

"To please herself is the better way to express it, Donald. But then, if she is ambitious, who can blame her for that?"

The talk at supper proved to be spritely and interesting, though I took little part in the conversation that flew between Delphine, Donald and Papa. Delphine was exerting all her charm, and both Papa and Donald seemed to have fallen prey to it. There were a few times when I was tempted to take her down a peg, but I desisted because Papa seemed to be having a good time, and he was completely relaxed from all the cares and the worries of his work.

Donald also seemed to be enjoying himself, though now and then he favored me with a knowing look and smile as if to tell me he understood Delphine, and I suppose he did. I hoped Papa did. I thought of his marrying Delphine and my having her for a step-mother and the thought almost made me skip Minnie's dessert which was a floating island in a sauce made of wine. It had always been my favorite. However, I decided not to allow Delphine to spoil my appreciation of this dessert, and I ate it with all the savor it deserved.

Papa and Donald excused themselves right after supper. They would be served their coffee and brandy in the library where they had a great deal of work to do.

Delphine, who had taken no wine during supper, now arose and filled her glass with sherry at the sideboard.

"I'm glad your father is going to remain here for a few days," Delphine said. "I'm sure the rest will do him good."

"Undoubtedly, and I intend to see that he does rest," I said pointedly.

She looked amused. "Was he furious because you had seen the young Mr. Brownlee?"

"He has granted me permission to see Peter whenever I choose."

She seemed stunned by this news. "Why, I heard that he ..."

She stopped short, realizing she had made a mistake, but it was too late to rectify it now.

"A mistake, Delphine? Oh, you must be referring to his anger when he first saw Peter and me together. You see, he didn't understand that Peter and I wish to be friends. Now that he does, he quite approves. Who eavesdropped from the woods to overhear? Was it Martin, or Zella? Or did your curiosity get the better of you?"

"Martin," she said promptly. "He told us there'd be trouble when your father rode out to find you. Martin said Mr. Brownlee was with you."

"It does seem that the help take it upon themselves to show great interest in what my father and I do," I said.

"They mean no harm," Delphine said airily. "It's done all over."

"Yes, I suppose it is." I left my coffee and arose to walk away before I said something in anger that I might later rue. I went upstairs to my rooms, picked up a magazine I had brought from New York, but I was unable to concentrate. There were too many forces pulling at me from too many directions. I was surrounded by controversy, but mainly I lived in the shadow of my mother, who had been branded as unchaste. I was determined to do everything I could to prove it a lie.

Had she returned at this moment, I would have gone into her arms. We'd been very close. I'd loved her very much. What she was purported to have done was not like her. Oh, the poetry I'd read could have swayed some innocent girl, perhaps, but mother was a woman who had borne a child, who had the love of a good man, a great man. Mere poetry might set her heart aflutter, but never her brain.

Yet she was gone. She and James Brownlee went to-

gether, for it couldn't have been a coincidence. While I had never known Mr. Brownlee too well, I had always regarded him as a kind and good man, devoted to his family and his work.

I couldn't think of two more unlikely people to do a thing like this. The whole affair was impossible. Yet they were gone and I was the only one who didn't believe they had gone together. Even Peter was convinced of it. Papa, who was a well-educated and quite-clever man, didn't doubt it for a moment. I stood alone in my opinion that what they believed was not the truth—and I would continue to think that way.

I prepared for bed. At least I was safe tonight, with Papa here and Donald as well, for he was spending the night. Somehow, I felt that Peter wouldn't be far away either, and I found great consolation in that.

The sleep I had anticipated was not for me this night even though the day had been pleasant. I had lost much of my terror and gained renewed confidence. At least I knew my father didn't hate me. That thought was reassuring and what I had learned from Efrem, Minnie and Donald gave me a better understanding of him.

Seated before the bureau, I brushed my hair leisurely and tried putting it up in two or three different styles. I was relaxed and quite content, if not happy, for all day long I had also been too close to the memory of my mother.

Finally I blew out the parlor lamps and entered my bedroom where I extinguished the lamps there. Then I went to one of the windows overlooking the front of the house, and raised the curtain. I drew back the drapery also and opened the window for I liked fresh air while I slept.

There was a half moon, but it seemed to give an unusual

amount of light. The whole front area appeared to be flooded with it so that the boxwood gave growth to myriad and varied shadows that seemed to dance over the lawn.

"Laura . . . Laura . . ."

The voice came out of the moonlight. It was so soft as to be almost a whisper. I saw no one. Yet I was certain I'd heard it for it had been clear and it was that of a woman, low-pitched, pleading, anxiety-filled. I leaned out of the window to look straight down. There was only moonlight and shadows.

"Laura... dear Laura..." the voice called again.

My eyes searched the lawn, scanned the shrubbery, and still nothing moved except my heart which was beating madly. I could feel the chill prickles of fear climbing my spine and my mouth had gone suddenly dry.

For the voice was so soft as to be scarcely human, and yet it did remind me of . . . Mama's. "Laurie . . . Laurie . . ." came the gentle, crooning voice.

I suddenly remembered. That was what Mama used to call me. It was her pet name for me and no one else ever used it.

The circumstances, the moonlit estate, the late hour, the silences, and now the voice, should have filled me with a dread that the estate was being haunted by my mother. But no such idea came into my mind. I could think only that Mama was back. That she wished to see me, to talk to me, take me in her arms and tell me the story I had been told was a lie.

To have cried out her name would have awakened everyone. This voice was scarcely more than a whisper, but it carried well and reached me so plainly. Perhaps she didn't want anyone else to know she had come. Then I saw the figure. An indistinct blur of white, moving rapidly across the front of the estate and heading toward the rear. Whomever—or whatever—it was seemed to be clad in a flowing gown of such extreme sheerness, that her own movements sent it billowing out behind her.

Then I saw something else that utterly convinced me. On the heels of this woman came a dog. A small white poodle, frisking along happily, joining in a game it didn't understand, perhaps, but enjoying it none the less.

Mama used to have such a dog. I'd entirely forgotten

about the animal, though I shouldn't have, because he was as much my playmate as hers. His name was Fluffy, yet it was impossible that he could still be alive.

I was so utterly mixed up at that moment nothing made much sense except that my name had been called and in a voice I thought reminded me of Mama's. Then someone had come running lightly into full view. Yet I hesitated until the figure stopped, turned and beckoned to me with long sweeping motions of its right arm.

I withdrew from the window, quickly threw a cloak over my shoulders and put on a pair of shoes. I took care to leave my room silently, for I didn't wish to disturb anyone until I knew what this was about.

Downstairs, a single, low-burning lamp was on a table near the door. I went on out into the night. It was warm and pleasant. I hastened into the open area between the boxwoods. The figure had been beckoning to me from the foot of the red maple and I sped in that direction. Yet I found no one.

I looked back at the house, but could see no lights burning. I went on, searching for the figure, but not yet daring to call out. I thought perhaps, if it was Mama, she would have gone to the playhouse, but that stood dark and forlorn, its door closed. I passed on by it and continued my search for the elusive figure until I came to the edge of the lily pond. I stood there for a moment, then I slowly turned around to search in every direction. I was puzzled for since the woman had called, then beckoned to me, certainly she wanted to meet me. Now I had come and she had vanished. I didn't even catch a glimpse of the poodle.

Disheartened, I walked slowly along the banks of the large pool and I passed the remains of the bridge from which I'd been tumbled into the water. I shuddered slightly at the memory of that incident.

Then I saw her! She wasn't standing at the edge of the pool waiting for me, or beckoning to me. She was in the pool, floating face down, the white gown sodden and limp, her long hair flowing out as if the pond were possessed of a current and was pulling at it.

I stood there, transfixed in sheer horror, but only for a moment. I was tempted to jump into the pond and try to drag her out, but I doubted I could. The lily pads would

make that too difficult. Objects taken from the pond had to be lifted and carried—just as Peter had carried me.

I whirled about and ran back toward the house. Now I was not trying to maintain any silence. The woman in the pond needed help and needed it quickly, if it wasn't already too late.

I began shouting and screaming as I neared the house and almost at once I saw lamps being lit. I looked up and saw Papa at his window. I called up to him.

"Come down, Papa . . . quickly . . . I need help."

He didn't ask what was wrong. He withdrew from the window and in less than two minutes he was running from the porch toward me, tying his dressing gown as he ran. The others had not yet appeared, but they were coming, for lights were moving inside of the house now.

Zella came first and reached us just as I began telling Papa what had happened.

"There's a woman in the pond. I fear she is drowned."

I had expected Papa to grow excited, but I was hardly prepared to see him place his hand to his brow and almost fall before he recovered his wits. But the next instant, he was running toward the pond. He'd not said a word, but the shock of my words had not left his face.

Donald reached me next and then Efrem came running from around the house. I told them hastily what had happened and they, in turn, hurried toward the lily pond. I knew I had to follow, though I was not anxious to.

"We may be needed," Zella said.

I was startled at the sound of her voice for I'd forgotten she was there.

"Yes—we may," I said.

"Are you sure she was dead?"

"I don't know. I don't believe she was in the water long enough to drown. Come . . . we're wasting time."

I set out as fast as I could run. Zella remained where she was. When I reached the pond, Papa, Donald and Efrem were hurrying along its bank, peering into the water. There was no sign of the woman.

Then Peter burst from the surrounding gardens and came to my side. So he had been out there, just as I surmised. I welcomed him warmly and told him the story.

"I saw this woman floating face down," I said. "But she doesn't seem to be here now."

"Are you sure," Papa asked, "you didn't just see a patch of moonlight...?"

"I saw the woman. The same one who called to me and beckoned to me to come out. I saw her running across the estate. I followed her here. I swear it."

Without a word or any further hesitation, Peter pulled off his boots and went wading into the pool. He moved aside the lily pads and began to explore the pond methodically so that he would miss none of it.

"Come out of there," Papa called to him. "Come out of that pool, do you hear me?"

Peter looked up, standing in water up to his hips. "She may have sunk. We've got to be sure."

Papa covered his face with both hands and turned around as if he couldn't bear the sight. Then Donald, who wore a nightdress, also waded into the water. Peter swam and dove beneath the surface. Between them, they covered every foot of it in less than twenty minutes. They both came out, muddy, wet and dirty.

"No dead woman in there," Peter said. "I'm sorry I intruded, Mr. Montville, but I thought this was an emergency. ..."

"No matter," Papa said. "Your judgment was good. I spoke in haste. Thank you for your help. And my apologies for my behavior yesterday morning. And thank you, Donald. You two cannot know one another. Peter Brownlee—Donald Converse, of my law firm."

They shook hands. Under any other conditions, it might have been ludicrous to watch, for Donald was not an enchanting figure in his water-soaked nightdress, nor Peter in his bare feet and sodden clothes. Apparently he'd lost his hosiery while swimming. They both looked equally absurd. But at that moment I was too upset to see anything humorous in the situation.

"There was a woman floating on the water," I insisted. "I did see her."

Papa came to me and placed his arm around me. "At least we are certain she is not here now. Perhaps she fainted and recovered in time to climb out of the pond.

It's damp here and definitely chilly. Come along, Laura. We'll talk about this in the library."

I fell in step with him. Once I turned my head and saw Peter still on the bank of the pond. I wanted to go to him, for I knew he would believe me. I saw him pick up his shoes and begin putting them on.

Efrem went to the kitchen where Minnie was bound to be, no doubt already with a fire in the stove and the coffee pot on. I was right for I could smell the coffee a moment or two later. Papa led me into the library—just the two of us. Zella went upstairs, as did Donald, to get into something dry, and wash off the mud from his legs and feet.

Papa sat down and raised the top of his humidor from which he took a slim, light brown cheroot. He lit it and settled back in his chair.

"Sit down, Laura, and tell me everything that happened. Leave out nothing."

"You probably won't believe me, Papa," I said. "But it happened. When I raised my window just before getting into bed, I heard my voice called. It was a woman."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

"I . . . thought I did. Perhaps because I wanted to. I thought it was Mama. Of course I was mistaken. At any rate, the woman called my name again and again, but very softly. I could see no one, though there was a good moon. Then..."

"Yes, Laura," he urged. "You heard this voice ..."

"Then I saw her running across the lawn. She was all in white . . . some sort of a flimsy gown—like chiffon. I hurried downstairs, but I couldn't see her. I searched the estate, but she had disappeared and then . . . then I saw her in the pond..."

"Laura, of course you saw all this, but where is the woman? We found no trace of her."

"I don't know. I should have waded out and tried to bring her ashore, but I could not have done so. I was in that pool myself..."

"Of course," he said understandingly. "You have a horror of it."

"Yes," I admitted. "But that wasn't what stopped me. The roots and vines are entangling . . . I could not have

dragged her out alone . . . so I went for help. It seemed the best thing to do."

"But you are certain you saw the woman in the water."

"Yes . . . yes, I saw her."

"Did you recognize her?"

"No, Papa. I never saw her face."

"Strange," he said. "I cannot account for it. Tell me, how did it happen Peter arrived so conveniently?"

"I do not know for certain. I . . . think, perhaps, he was guarding the premises."

"That's thoughtful of him," Papa said. "Though it does seem he appears readily when something happens. I think we'd all best go to bed now . . . after we have a cup of coffee. There seems to be nothing we can do. In the morning we'll make another search of the premises."

"Yes, Papa," I said. "You don't believe my story, do you?"

He came around from behind the desk and placed an arm fondly about my shoulders. "It isn't that I disbelieve you, my dear, but I do wish there was more in the way of proof."

"Papa—remember Mama's little dog Fluffy?"

He nodded, his face a mask of coldness again. Any mention of the past brought this on promptly, I had come to notice.

"He was a little white poodle, wasn't he?"

"Yes . . . a white poodle."

"There was a little white poodle with the woman tonight. A lively little thing. Just like Fluffy."

His eyes widened in astonishment and he gave me a sharp look.

"It's the truth, Papa. I swear it. I saw the woman, I heard her soft voice calling to me, using Mama's pet name of Laurie. Do you remember?"

"Yes," he said, his voice a hoarse croak.

"Please believe me," I pleaded.

"I'm trying to, my dear girl, I'm trying to," he said, regarding me with pity. "But I fear your return to Montville has brought back such vivid memories, you are believing it because you want to believe it. You may have dreamed it, then wakened and it seemed so real, you felt it was true."

"No, Papa! No!" I exclaimed.

"Please don't upset yourself," he said. "You'd best have a glass of milk. It will soothe and calm you."

I sighed and linked my arm beneath his and we went to the kitchen. It was a large room, for once Montville had many guests who remained sometimes for days. Some huge feasts had been prepared here.

At the red cloth-covered table sat Donald, Zella and Delphine. She wore a silk nightdress she'd bought in Paris and charged to Papa, and over it a lacy peignoir with matching lace cap. She was listening attentively to Donald, but when we entered, she quickly indicated that Papa was to sit beside her.

He nodded and took that chair while I moved over beside Donald. Minnie, a flannel wrapper engulfing her rotund frame like a tent, served coffee and some left-over cake. She warmed milk for me, added salt and a little butter and I drank it gratefully. No one mentioned the woman in the pond. She should have been the only subject for discussion, but they avoided it.

I feared not one of them believed me. The thought frustrated me and made me a little angry, but then I tried to be fair. Would I have believed such a story? I wondered. It did sound preposterous, yet it was true. How I wished Peter were here so I could talk with him. Somehow, I felt he would believe me. How I wished I could go to him, yet I dared not. I knew Papa would not like it, for he should have invited him in to share in this light repast with us, yet he dismissed him, after expressing his thanks and apologizing for his behavior of the previous day. I knew that somehow, I must find Peter on the morrow and talk with him. Perhaps he could find an answer to the mysterious lady and her dog.

In bed, I lay awake trying to solve the puzzle. The woman knew my name, even my pet name. Her voice had sounded like Mama's. What if Mama really had returned? Surely she'd have felt she could hardly face Papa, but I might be of a more-forgiving nature so she might come to me first. It was even possible she had another dog like Fluffy, for she had loved the little poodle so much I'm sure if she did get another pet, it would be one as much

like Fluffy as possible. I knew I was clutching at a theory I wanted to believe, but there was some substance to it—except for seeing the woman lying in the pond and then having her vanish in a matter of a few minutes. *Yet I had seen it!*

What I was really trying to do, I knew very well, was convince myself that what I had viewed was not an apparition. Or something fashioned by my mind because I wanted Mama back with me so much now that there was hope she was alive. It could have been a dream manufactured from wishful thinking, for Mama had been much in my thoughts ever since I returned.

But why had she gone to the pool at all, whomever she was? And how did she manage to fall into it? Certainly she'd escaped, for Donald and Peter had searched carefully and even if she'd been dead and the body sunk to the bottom, they were bound to have found her.

And why had she been wearing such strange garments? I had to admit they did give her a ghostly appearance. Unable to find an answer to any of this, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but I found myself on edge, listening for that voice. Dreading to hear it for I knew if it came, despite my fear, I would again seek her out.

Was my mind affected in some way? Had this sorrow festered within me these years without my being aware of it because I'd been too young to really know? But I had believed Mama to be dead. I had heard no hint of her running away with another man until recently. I had been content with the knowledge that she was dead, and I had grown accustomed to it. Therefore, it was not a long-fermenting sorrow that brought on an aberration.

I heard that woman. I saw her. I saw the little dog. I saw her beckoning to me and I saw her in the pool. If she vanished—along with the dog—then there was some explanation for it. When she was found, we would have the whole story. Until then, I must never even think for a moment that this was my imagination playing tricks on me.

Tomorrow, I would find Peter. If we put our heads together we might determine some sort of solution or, if not that, a plan on how to act if this happened again. For I had a feeling it would. Somehow I felt that there was danger

around me, waiting for the proper time to strike. I must be ever vigilant and trust no one save Peter, my father, Efrem, Minnie and Uncle Charlie.

Certainly Papa believed some of what I told him for his agitation, when he heard about the woman in the pond, had been quite startling. I'd been afraid, for a moment or two, that he might faint.

Then I composed myself for sleep by forcing everything out of my mind save my thoughts of Peter Brownlee, though before I did slip into a sound sleep, I recalled portions of the poems Peter's father had written to Mama. I recited them in my mind and found them comforting and pleasant.

I had a great love of poetry and always kept a book of poems at my side to read over and over again until I had memorized many of those of Byron, Keats and Shelley, among others. Therefore, it was not difficult to recall some of the verses I'd read this morning which were purported to have been written by Peter's father. The first I recalled was,

A bower, a retreat
Where we can meet
And I can see
Your love revealed
In your precious face
With laughing mouth
And languid eyes,
So filled with promise
Yet they tantalize.
For when I move
To clasp you close
You slip away
From my embrace . . .

There was more, but the remainder escaped me. A second verse of another poem certainly spoke of eloquent love.

I hold my breath at sight of thee
Lest thou should vanish if I stir
I plead with thee, on bended knee
To be my own, my lady fair.

My mind was lulled by the rhythm of the words and soon I drifted off into an easy sleep, free from nightmares of being pulled down into the pond to be drowned or of seeing an elusive lady beckoning me to join her and her little dog, then finding her lying, face down, in the pond.

Despite a good night's sleep, I was restless in the morning. I was quite aware that this was inspired by a slowly-growing fear of this house and the estate. Each new day was not one to be faced with joy and happiness, but with anxiety, sometimes terror and always foreboding. The doubts as to my own state of mind were growing stronger, the more I thought about what had happened and how unexplainable all of it was. I knew very well that Papa wanted to believe me, but was finding it difficult. Zella and Delphine were almost openly jeering in their manner toward me, while Donald seemed to prefer to ignore what had happened the previous night by not referring to it.

But Peter believed me. I felt certain of it. How grateful I was that he had come to Montville that evening to pay his respects at my arrival, only to end up rescuing me from being drowned. I took heart at the thought of him and felt that if it weren't for him, I would wish mightily to leave. Yet I wondered if I could—especially since I had seen that lady with her little dog. Could it be Mama? How I wanted it to be! Yet . . . I shook my head in bewilderment for the puzzle was too much for me. I needed Peter to talk to. We got along so well and I found his presence comforting.

After breakfast I made my way out to the stables and found Uncle Charlie busily grooming one of the horses. He tipped his battered old hat to me, but he didn't stop work.

"I went riding two days ago," I told him in pretended

pique, "but you weren't here, Uncle Charlie. I was depending on you to pick me out a nice horse."

"She sent me to the village, Miss. I told her I'm head hostler here and I don't run no errands, but she told me to go or I'd be fired."

"Are you speaking of Zella?" I asked.

"Nobody but that old witch would try to give me such orders, Miss."

"Uncle Charlie, nobody can fire you. And you don't have to run any errands."

"Thank you, Miss. I don't mind running errands, but I don't like the bossy way she has."

"How long has she been asking you to run errands? After all, she has Martin to do that."

"She's let me well alone these years, Miss. Only lately—since you came back, I'd say, has she been sending me away. Like she don't want us to meet."

I wondered if Uncle Charlie just happened to be right. By being absent, he'd have had no chance to advise me that Papa was arriving and Zella may have hoped Papa would find Peter and me together. Yet why should she display her dislike for me—and since my return she certainly had.

Was it because I had insisted on returning home and thereby had spoiled Delphine's extended vacation? Or was Felicia Brownlee a part of this plot? Had she enlisted the help of Zella in an effort to drive me away from here? Because of Peter? Or because she couldn't bear the sight of me. I hadn't even caught a glimpse of her since the day I'd paid her a visit. Or had I and not known it? Could she have been the woman in the gossamer gown with the little dog? Was it she who had beckoned to me? And had she thrown herself into the pond in an effort to frighten me? Had Peter really been there last night in his efforts to protect me, or was he aware of what she was doing? If so, I would not believe he would condone it. Rather, he had discovered her missing from the house and had come in search of her, perhaps realizing what she was attempting to do.

I was well aware of Felicia Brownlee's hatred for me, but I had never known her to be vicious or vengeful. However, Peter had spoken of her bitterness and her constant harping

on her husband's unfaithfulness. So it was quite possible that her enmity was such that she had decided to play cruel tricks on me. The thought sickened me and I tried to thrust it from my mind, but it persisted.

"Uncle Charlie," I said, "do you remember the little poodle Mama had?"

"Sassy little fella, he was, Miss. Let's see now . . . name of Fluff... something like that, wasn't it?"

"Fluffy. Have you seen another little poodle around here that looked as Huffy did?"

He shook his head. "No, Miss. Nary a sign of any dog like that."

"Thank you. I remember how very nice you kept the stables even when I was just a little girl and they're just as nicely kept now. I'm very grateful. Don't let Zella worry you. Come to me if she does."

"I will that, and thank you. Way I see it, she's had her own way here so many years she thinks she owns Montville. Walks around like the lady of the manor, she does. With her nose stuck up in the air, and it's been many a time she invited some of her old cronies from the village to come and stay awhile. It ain't right for someone like her to take advantage when the master never comes here."

"Perhaps my father will come more often now that I'm back. At any rate, I intend to remain, so Zella will have to reform."

"Do my heart good to see it happen, Miss. She's been walkin' high, wide and handsome these last years."

As I left, he was smiling like a man who'd been waiting for a day like this a long, long time. Poor Uncle Charlie, who had never imposed upon anyone.

But I had other things to occupy my mind. I was looking for a little white poodle, and a woman who seemed to haunt the lily pond and then vanish.

I walked about the estate for half an hour, looking for signs of the dog. There was nothing. Yet a dog had to be kept somewhere and was bound to bark or whimper now and then. I reached the lily pond and sat down on one of the old wooden benches. I looked out across the lovely display of water flowers and the scene was marred only by the blackened, rotting side of the summerhouse. It was

an eyesore in an otherwise beautiful spot. Perhaps one of the loveliest on the entire estate.

Peter came out of the lilac bushes so silently that I was unaware of his presence until he greeted me. I jumped in sudden panic, even though he'd spoken quietly so as not to frighten me, for such was the state of my mind these days. He sat down beside me.

"I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean to startle you. That was quite a walk you took about the premises."

"You saw me?" I asked. "But why didn't you let me know you were there?"

"I followed you, just in case whoever has been doing all this mischief might be up to more. I didn't see anyone."

"I was sitting here wondering why that woman had deliberately gone into the pond and pretended she was dead."

"Perhaps she wasn't pretending."

"Do you mean she was killed? Just as someone tried to kill me? And then her body taken away?"

"It's a possibility, Laura. We have to consider everything."

"Peter, I beg your forgiveness for saying this, but I have been considering the fact that the woman may have been your mother."

Peter regarded me with astonishment. "Oh no, Laura. I'm sure Mama would do no such thing."

"I wish I were as sure. She hates me so and she forbade you to see me."

"Nevertheless, I'm here."

"I know and that may be the reason she is attempting to frighten me away from Montville."

His smile as he regarded me was gentle. "It would do no good. I'd follow you wherever you went."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Why, Peter, I . . . I . . ."

"Is it so astonishing that I've fallen in love with you?" he asked. "I believe that even when we were children, I loved you. Is there reason for me to hope that you may, in time, return my affection?"

I thought of my father's warning about not falling in love with Peter and so I spoke cautiously. "I am very fond of you. But just now, I'm so upset by what has happened to me since my return that I find it difficult to think rationally about anything so serious as being in love. I will say

this though. Papa has rescinded his order that you remain off the property. It heartened me to have him say that."

"It does the same for me," Peter said kindly. "He spoke hastily. As for you, I shall be patient. Yet I do feel a slight concern about Donald Converse. Who is he?"

"He's a member of Papa's law firm. It was Donald who really looked after me in my later years at school. It was he who met us at the pier."

"Then you're well acquainted with him," Peter said, eying me carefully.

"Oh yes. Donald and I are old friends, though I've only just started to call him by his first name."

"Is that significant?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, though I felt I knew the answer to my question.

"I mean—is he in love with you?"

"He has never mentioned such a thing," I replied. "He is, after all, employed by my father."

"What has that to do with his being in love with you?" Peter persisted.

"Please, Peter, I regard him as a friend."

"Just as you regard me," he replied.

"For the present," I said, not daring to meet his eyes which I could feel regarding me with intensity.

"Look at me, Laura," he said, his voice almost a command.

I averted my face and would have arisen, but one hand grasped my arm lightly and his other touched my chin and turned my face so that I was forced to look into his eyes.

"You do love me," he said quietly. "Please say it."

"I... I can't, Peter."

"Your father?"

I gave a barely perceptible nod of my head. "I told him we were friends and would remain so."

"But why would you promise him that?" he asked in bewilderment.

"He—he seems fearful we might fall in love," I answered lamely.

"We have, Laura. We have."

"Oh, Peter," I cried, unable to hold back any longer, "I do love you. I can't help it. I want to be near you

all the time. When I'm away from you and I'm frightened, I think of you and it gives me strength."

"Oh, my darling," he said and there was such a fervency in his voice that I could no longer restrain my emotions.

His arms enclosed me and our lips touched. The embrace was brief, but it was fervent and we knew it sealed our love forevermore.

When Peter released me, he took one of my hands in his. "I would like to speak only of our love for one another," he said, and there was a huskiness to his voice as he spoke, "but your very life may be in danger and we must find out who attempted to drown you and who the woman was you saw last night. Please tell me everything that happened."

I related, in detail, what I had seen and what I had done. I even mentioned the mysterious woman calling me Laurie.

"Did she remind you of your mother?" he asked.

"Yes," I exclaimed. "That was the amazing thing. That's why I wasn't frightened. I was most anxious to come down and talk with her. But when I saw her in the pond, I was horrified."

He squeezed my hand reassuringly. "That's understandable."

"Peter," I asked, my voice hopeful, "do you suppose my mother and your father have returned?"

"No," he replied firmly. "If such were the case, I believe your mother would not have evaded you as she did."

"Of course," I said sadly. "They didn't come back. They could never come back."

"Do you mean because of the shame?"

"No." I looked straight at him and I said something I'd wished to give voice to for some time. "I am of the opinion they never went away."

He seemed startled at the idea. "What you're saying, Laura, is that you believe they are dead."

"That is what I believe. Don't ask me why I believe that. I don't know. Perhaps it's because I feel that if Mama were alive, I would have heard from her long before I was grown up. She would never have permitted me to endure the loneliness I did, no matter what the risk to

her would have been. My mother was kind and sweet, and she loved me very much."

I could see the doubt written in Peter's face. "Laura, I wish it were so. My father, too, was not the kind of man to go off with another's wife and leave behind a family. He was a conscientious man and a good man. But, Laura . . . there are times when reason and judgment are lost. When a man and a woman find themselves so hopelessly in love, they give up everything for that love. Had anything happened to either of them, there would have been some trace of it by now."

"It may be," I said, "that you are right, but until you prove your case beyond question, I must believe in mine."

"I have searched this estate and all around it for years. They are gone, Laura. They went together and forever. I wish I could believe in your way, but I cannot, in all honesty."

"Peter, we are entitled to our opinions. I hope yours is the correct one."

"No matter. I'm far more concerned with what's been happening to you. Except for the hours when I am compelled to sleep, I shall be somewhere about. If you do not see me, that doesn't mean I'm not there."

I pressed his hand to show my appreciation. "Thank you, Peter."

"Now I must go," he said. He leaned forward, kissed my brow lightly and arose.

He left as silently as he had come and I was alone again. Suddenly I wanted to return to the house to spend some time in Mama's rooms. I had a feeling of nearness to her when I was there, and I prayed there might be some token, some clue which would tell me where she was.

I made my way back to the house and stopped by the kitchen to chat with Minnie and Efrem for a little while. Minnie had decided, much to my delight, that I was now mistress, and wanted my advice on planning meals. However, she knew far more about Papa's likes and dislikes and about all I was required to do was approve, but it satisfied her for it meant that Zella had one less reason to interfere in the affairs of the kitchen.

From there, I made my way upstairs and went to Mama's rooms. The door was locked, as usual, but I sent

the upstairs maid to bring the keys from Zella. Instead, it was Zella who returned, and I could see how much she disapproved of my being admitted.

"Master gave orders nobody was to go in, Miss Laura," she protested. "The way I see it, that means you too."

"You have the keys," I said patiently. "Unlock the door, Zella. It is my desire to enter this suite now. If you refuse, I shall see that you are deprived of all the keys to this house. Make your choice."

She swallowed hard in an effort to cover her amazement, but she no longer protested and she unlocked the door. Then she hurried away and I had no doubt but that she was going at once to my father.

I closed the door and the dusty, stuffy parlor of the three-room suite seemed to quietly enfold and comfort me. I remembered the days when I used to come here to be with Mama and how I hated to leave.

The large bedroom should have been kept up. Mama had put much thought and work into it, but now the once-pale-pink draperies had faded to a yellowish color, the oval rug was so covered with dust that its gay colors too, were all but concealed. The canopy above the bed had a ragged-looking hole through the center of it and there were myriad cobwebs in the corners.

I opened closet doors. They were filled with Mama's clothes, musty-smelling now. Her shoes were in orderly rows on the floor and long shelves held her many hats, for she had loved them, large and gay and colorful.

I did notice that nothing of Papa's was here. Either in the closets, in the bureau drawers or in the bathroom. Perhaps he had all his possessions moved out before he locked up the rooms after Mama had disappeared.

I made up my mind that if I was to remain at Montville and if I was to act as mistress of this house, these rooms must not be left to decay. I struggled with the windows, and managed to open two of them to let in all the light and air possible. Now I could see how tawdry time and dust had made these otherwise lovely furnishings.

One of the three rooms was furnished as a small private library. Here was a somewhat ornate Louis XIV table which served as a desk. There were yellowed papers on it, a number of pens and a dried-out inkwell. I opened

the drawer in the table to find it well-filled with more paper, as if Mama had been an inveterate letter writer.

Half a dozen books were supported by brass bookends, badly tarnished. I had difficulty in prying one of the books free of its neighbor, for time had softened the leather bindings and made them stick. I could see how exquisite the bindings were, however. I tried to make out the title, but the gold imprint on the back had faded too much.

I opened it and discovered it was a volume of poems by Ravel Mandarav and Ella Savoy. They were the most successful modern day poets of wonderful love lyrics, widely read and quoted. Their books had been a part of my English-class studies in school and I remembered, with a smile, how charmed we girls of fourteen and fifteen had been with the sentiments they had so wonderfully put into rhyme.

I noticed that all of these books were by the same poet. Mother must have loved them. If she loved poetry that much, she was very likely more than ordinarily susceptible to the verse which James Brownlee had written to her. I know now I'd probably inherited my love of poetry from her.

Not even the wastebasket beneath the desk had been emptied and it contained several crumpled pieces of paper. Out of sheer curiosity I tried to smooth one of them out, but the paper cracked and broke. Nevertheless, I could see that Mama had been either copying some of the poetry, or attempting to fashion some of her own. She must have been very lonely to try to pass the time this way, and I had no doubt but that Papa was just as busy in those days as he was now.

I remember he had no time for me and I had more or less regarded him as almost a stranger whenever he was in the house. If Mama had sought the company of another man, she could scarcely be condemned.

Perhaps she hadn't been in love with James Brownlee at first, but Papa's complete neglect had all but sent her into the arms of her lover. In all good chance, what happened was likely as much Papa's fault as Mama's.

I arose from the desk and inspected the other volumes on the bookshelves. Many of them were by noted poets. Someday, I would read them all, I thought, but hardly

now. The atmosphere around Montville was not the sort that lent itself to the romance of poetry.

I heard Papa enter the parlor room. Zella had lost little time. I called to him.

"Papa... in here."

He came through the door as dour-looking as a storm cloud.

"I ordered these rooms sealed," he said. "I do not like having my orders disobeyed, Laura."

"Please sit down, Papa," I said. "I know you're angry, but what purpose does it serve to keep these rooms locked up? You can't lock up your memory. Everything in these rooms may remind you of her, but I hardly believe you require inanimate things to prod your memory, for I know she is still fresh in your mind."

"I didn't want her things disturbed," he said lamely. "It was a whim of mine, but you could have respected it."

"Papa, everything in these rooms is falling into ruin. If the presence of these objects torments you that much, then please allow me to take steps to see that they are all removed and then there will be nothing left to jog your memory."

"I do not wish her possessions touched," he said.

"Keeping them locked up is destructive. See for yourself. Papa, may I clean these rooms and move into them?"

"No," he said curtly.

"Very well then, if you insist, I shall close and lock the windows."

"That is my wish," he insisted.

"Yes, Papa," I said. "I did notice that you had all of your things removed before it was closed. At least, you were that practical."

He looked at me in astonishment for a moment and then a slow smile lit up his usually stern features.

"By heavens, you don't miss much, Laura. I may be a practical man, but you're just as practical a girl. If it is your wish to use these rooms, they are yours. You're right. A man cannot live with a memory for the rest of his life. I have been finding that out these past few days."

I was so elated at his change of heart that I ran to him, stood on tiptoe and impulsively kissed him on the cheek. His astonishment at my gesture was something to behold

and for a moment I thought he was going to take me in his arms, but he didn't. Whether because of self-consciousness or because he had never displayed any affection toward me, I knew not, but my heart was too filled with happiness to mind.

"Papa, I shall restore the rooms and enjoy them. You have lived too long with the memory of Mama. With this suite opened, you will find that some of the pain and hurt will go away."

"You're a wise girl and I daresay you're right. And now, let us go down to dinner. I had no idea how much I've missed Minnie's cooking. And to think I was considering pensioning her off."

"Along with Efrem and Uncle Charlie?" I asked.

"Yes. Zella is of the opinion they have become temperamental. They resent taking orders from her and, after all, she is the housekeeper."

"I know," I said, attempting reasoning, "but Zella, too, is getting on. Perhaps she is the one who is temperamental. I have found her to be extremely curt to me since I returned to Montville."

"I knew nothing of that," Papa said, in evident surprise.

"I didn't want to bother you about it. It's really not important."

"I think it is," he contradicted. "After all, you are the mistress of Montville now. There is no need for you to take rudeness from Zella or any employee."

"Perhaps that is exactly her reason for such behavior. She knew that, with my return, she was no longer the head of the household—that is, since you were here so little. Mayhap I have been a little intolerant of her, but such a thought never entered my mind."

"That may be so. Perhaps she fears you might dismiss her."

"Then I shall reassure her—should she give me the opportunity," I said, my smile wry.

"Laura," Papa said, and there was a slight mistiness to his eyes, "I'm glad you came home."

I regarded him with astonishment. "Papa, that's the first time in my memory that you ever said you were glad I was here. I will treasure your words."

"I know I've been remiss. I shall try to remedy that in the future. And now, let us go down to our noonday meal."

I linked my arm around his and we left the suite.

Seated at the table were Delphine, Donald, Papa and me. Zella, wearing a white-bibbed apron over her severely-cut black dress, supervised the serving of the meal and I will say, in all fairness, she was extremely competent.

As for Delphine, she was charmingly dressed in a Parisian frock, which Papa had unknowingly paid for, and was being her gay self. She had a way of making a man laugh and I had to admit that she did make a favorable table companion. Her traveling abroad had been a great help to her and I was forced to admire her for absorbing and learning all she had in the course of one year.

I noticed that Papa seemed to enjoy her company and more than once he threw back his head to laugh heartily at a clever bon mot she tossed. Even Donald enjoyed it, though it pleased me that she hadn't been able to monopolize him completely.

Donald was preparing to leave during the late afternoon and would return to New York. In a way, I was sorry to see him go for he was pleasant company and he was a stalwart protector, close at hand.

At dinner's end, he suggested a stroll in the gardens and so we left the house. I was well aware that Delphine would keep Papa occupied.

"I wish I didn't have to leave," Donald said, once we were outside. "I wish it because of the fright you had. I also wish it because I'll miss your company."

"Thank you, Donald," I replied. "I do appreciate your

efforts of last night when you attempted to find some clue as to the woman I saw in the pond. You do believe I saw someone, don't you?"

"I want to believe you," he replied honestly. "Though I would prefer that it was a dream you may have had and after you awakened, you held onto it."

"No, Donald, no," I replied. "She was really on the grounds and later, in the water."

He regarded me solemnly. "You are so certain that I must believe it."

I smiled. "It pleases me to hear you say that. I don't like to believe I am getting fanciful, but if everyone starts to doubt me—and last night after we returned to the house, I feared everyone did—then I will begin to doubt myself."

"I believe in you," Donald said. "Oh, Laura, I cannot leave without expressing that I have had a great fondness for you for some time. Before, when I would visit you at school, you were too young. But now, you are mature and I wish to say that..."

"Please, Donald," I entreated. "Say no more."

His eyes beseeched me. "I haven't said it yet. But I gather you have already been spoken for."

"No, Donald, not exactly," I said.

"Then..."

"I love , . . someone else." The words came almost reluctantly when really I should want to cry out the news for all the world to hear. I knew it was because I feared my father's wrath when he heard about it.

"It's that Peter Brownlee I met last night," Donald reasoned.

"Yes," I replied. "But please don't mention it to Papa. You know how he feels about Peter's father and I had to assure him my feeling for Peter was merely one of friendship. At the time I gave my word, I believed it to be the truth."

"I understand," Donald said, "and believe me, I shall say nothing."

"You are a very dear person, Donald. I've known that for some time. I do cherish your friendship."

"At least I have that," he said. Then he took my hand,

bent forward and lightly touched it to his lips. "I think I'll be leaving now. Do be cautious, Laura."

"I shall be," I promised.

We returned to the house and soon afterwards I bade Donald farewell, standing on the porch with Papa and Delphine who had also come out to bid their farewells. I watched the carriage as it moved down the drive and it was with a feeling of reluctance that I saw Donald disappear from view for I sensed that I had lost a strong ally.

When I turned to enter the house, Papa and Delphine were just going through the door and I noticed Delphine had slipped her arm through Papa's. I felt a flash of resentment that she should evidence such boldness and I felt an even greater resentment that Papa seemed to enjoy her company so much.

Yet I know that was unfair of me. He was entitled to some relaxation. He worked very hard and he had come down here to welcome me back to Montville. However, it seemed that Delphine was doing her best to monopolize him.

I decided to visit Mama's suite again and I went upstairs. Much to my surprise, I found the door locked. Now I did become angry. I went to my room and used the bell pull to summon the maid. When she came, I sent her in search of Zella. I paced back and forth the length of the living room, awaiting her.

She entered, minus her apron now, and her face was clearly puzzled.

"Zella, why did you lock my mother's suite?"

"I thought it was the proper thing to do," she replied in her usual cold manner.

"It's to be left open," I told her. "In fact, I'm moving in there as soon as it is cleaned up."

"I'll not open it until the Master says so."

She was taller than I and she looked down at me in open defiance. But I stood my ground for I knew that if I bowed to the dictates of this woman who had been openly antagonistic to me since my return, she would now become contemptuous.

"You don't need to open it at all," I told her, keeping my voice calm. "All you need do is get the key and bring it back to me. And you are to do so at once."

Her face blanched at my words and for a moment I thought she was going to flout my order. But she turned abruptly and left the room.

She was gone scarcely minutes and returned, holding the key in her hand. "Here it is, Miss. I'll have no further need of it."

"That is quite true, Zella. And thank you."

My tone, though courteous, was one of dismissal. She walked rapidly out of the room, her head held high, yet I noticed her hands, at her sides, had clenched into fists. Obviously, she was holding her temper in check.

I was sorry I'd had to assert myself so, yet at least Zella now knew I would not be cowed by her arbitrary manner. Soon, I intended to alert her to the fallacy that she could dictate to Minnie, Efrem and Uncle Charlie. However, I knew this was not the time for it. I didn't wish to openly quarrel with Zella and I had the feeling that had I laid down any more rules, we would have exchanged bitter words.

I closed the door, set the key on the table and went into the bedroom. There, I slipped out of my dress, drew the shades against the light and lay down. I found that I was weary and it was no trouble at all to slip off into a restful sleep.

I awoke in time to bathe my face, dress and go downstairs for supper. Delphine and Papa had to interrupt their game of chess which they planned to resume as soon as the meal was completed.

"I wasn't aware that you knew how to play chess," I said to Delphine at the table.

"I knew nothing about it," she said, favoring me with a smile which I knew was for Papa's benefit. "But your father has very patiently explained the game to me and I find it quite fascinating."

"I have a very apt pupil in Delphine," Papa said.

"You're very kind, Mr. Montville," Delphine said, regarding Papa with open admiration.

I could see that poor Papa, brilliant man that he was, was completely under Delphine's spell. It sickened me a little, but I was careful to keep my smile bright and my words cheerful as the meal progressed. However, my mind was on another matter. The little white dog! I was deter-

mined to look for that little animal whenever possible. I knew I had seen a lively, frisky dog and I was going to search for him. There were still traces of daylight in the sky and I saw no harm in beginning that search as soon as I had completed my meal. It would be more interesting than watching Delphine and Papa play chess and I was certain I wouldn't be missed.

Nor was I, for they weren't even aware when I excused myself and left the table. Delphine had succeeded in getting Papa to tell her about his world of finance and he had warmed to the subject.

I saw no evidence of anyone about when I went outside and I strolled along into the growing dusk, walking slowly along one of the garden paths, my eyes drinking in the beauty of the scene.

It was going to be an enchanting night. Warm, the air scented with the roses from the arbors. There were already early stars shining and soon, I felt certain, there would be a moon.

What horror, I thought, could invade a paradise such as this, and for what purpose? I turned to look back at the house, now looking like some monstrous shape in the gloom. There was something amiss, but I couldn't quite understand what it was. I began walking back toward the house studying it, trying to determine what it was that bothered me.

Then I knew. There were lights in Mama's room. The windows of the bedroom were yellow with what seemed to be candlelight. Yet no one was supposed to be in there and the door had been securely locked the last I knew.

I began running, my eyes still on the window, making certain they were not playing me tricks. I dashed into the entrance hall and up the stairs as fast as I could go. I ran down the corridor to Mama's room and tried to enter. The door was locked.

I began to feel the first twinges of the terror. Something or someone was on this estate which could come and go. Vanish at will, float in a pond and disappear in seconds. Enter locked doors and, very likely, leave by them.

"Zella," I called out loudly. "Zella . . . Zella . . ."

My cries rang through the silent house. I heard running

steps and Papa came pounding up the stairs. He moved swiftly down the corridor, followed more slowly by Delphine.

"What is it, child?" he asked. "What has happened?"

"I was outside, Papa, and I saw lights in Mama's room."

He shook the door hard. "But it's locked . . ."

"There were lights," I said, and I was pleading with him to believe me. Then Zella appeared, wearing a mouse-gray flannel wrapper. Apparently, she was retiring early.

"Unlock the door, Zella," Papa said. "At once."

"I cannot, sir," she said, completely unperturbed. "I don't have the key."

"Of course you have," Papa said. "You've always had the keys to the house."

"Miss Laura took the key," she pointed at the door, "to that room from me this afternoon."

I stood aghast for a moment as I recalled that the key reposed on the table in my sitting room. I turned and ran for it. My eyes flashed to the table once I entered the room. It was nearly dark and no lamps glowed in here, but I was able to detect the key, still laying where I had placed it. I picked it up and sped back to Mama's door.

Without a glance of apology at Zella or Papa, I placed the key in the lock, turned it and threw open the door. I moved quickly into the room, then stopped abruptly. Papa, who had followed me, brushed against me. The doors to the other two rooms were ajar and I could look directly into them.

I shook my head in bewilderment as I moved through the rooms, touching the candles to find them cold, the lamps dry and obviously not used in years. When I'd satisfied myself, Papa moved about, lighting several of the candles. Then he made a thorough search of the rooms. I sat down weakly in a dusty chair in the little library. Papa returned and stood before me.

Out of the corner of my eye I could also see Zella and Delphine, the former regarding me with unconcealed anger. Nor could I blame her. Delphine was careful to veil whatever she was thinking behind an expression which was mildly curious. Perhaps pitying would be a more appropriate word.

I looked up at Papa and I'm sure my eyes revealed the

inner misery I was suffering. Quietly, I said, "Truly Papa, there were lights in Mama's room."

He looked sorely perplexed as he said, "Mind you, Laura, I do not doubt but that you saw lights, but it seems impossible to account for them. The door was securely locked and there are no signs of anyone having been in here."

"No one could get in." Zella interjected herself into the conversation. "Miss Laura had the only key."

"But it was not in my possession when I saw the lights," I replied.

"Where was it?" Papa asked.

"On the table in my sitting room," I said.

"Is that where you left it?" he asked.

I nodded.

Papa looked across the room at Zella. "Can you account for this?"

"Sir, I was in my room, nursing a headache which hasn't been helped by being accused of entering these rooms."

"I'm sorry, Zella," my father said. "But we have to attempt to find out who is doing this. Delphine could have had no part in it for she has been with me. Is there, perchance, another key?"

"No, sir," Zella answered promptly. "Or if there is, I don't know of its whereabouts."

Papa turned back to me. "Where were you when you saw the lights?"

"In the garden. And I kept my eyes on the windows all the time I ran to the house. I'm sure it was candlelight and not a reflection of daylight."

"I believe you are certain you saw it," Papa said. "But I can't explain it. And you had the only key to the room." He turned again to Zella. "I gave Miss Laura permission to use this suite as her own. It will, of course, have to be cleaned up."

"Yes, sir," Zella said, then her lips compressed grimly. Obviously, she thoroughly disapproved of the idea.

"That's all, Zella," Papa said.

Zella turned abruptly and left the room. Delphine started to look around the suite.

"It will be beautiful when it's cleaned up," she commented. "Mrs. Montville had excellent taste."

"Yes," Papa said drily, "she did. Are you all right now, Laura?"

"Yes, Papa. I'm not frightened any more."

"You must have been mistaken about the lights," he said. "Often in the dusk, it's easy to grow confused. If you wish to join us, Laura ..."

"Thank you," I said, "but I think I'll just stay here and plan what to do with the suite."

"A fine idea. I compliment you, Laura. Most young girls would be too scared to stay here alone. I'm glad you're not that way. Come along, Delphine, and we'll finish the game."

I returned to my rooms and took two lamps from there. This light, along with the candles, quickly dissipated all the gloom. I left the door open, however, for the rooms did need airing. Then I began to remove the clothing from the closets.

I was suddenly aware that someone else was in the room with me and I gave a sharp cry of fear as I turned around. Zella stood there, her arms akimbo, her face scowling at me.

"If I may say so, Miss," she said, "you're such a scary thing that it's no wonder you see things that ain't there. A woman in the lily pond, lights in these rooms . . ."

"Tomorrow," I said, disregarding the obvious sneer in her voice, "you will have the drapes removed, also the shades, the runners and the doilies. You will have the windows washed and the rugs taken up and beaten. The furniture is to be cleaned and polished. Tomorrow night I intend to sleep in here."

"Yes, Miss," she said with reluctant obedience.

"That's all, Zella."

There was anger burning in her eyes, an anger she was unable to conceal, or perhaps took no pains to conceal, but she turned about and walked out. I knew I had one definite enemy on this estate, but I couldn't conceive of Zella being the woman in the pond.

I was doubly reassured when I stepped to a window and saw Peter on the estate. He was moving between the box-

wood trees, but there was no mistaking him. I found myself smiling happily because he was there.

I finished emptying out the closets, marveling at all the clothes Mama had. It did seem very strange to me that she had taken nothing. The dresses were, of course, no longer in style and too musty for further use. Her undergarments in the bureau drawers were of the finest quality but, like the dresses, all but destroyed by age and disuse. She had two dozen pairs of shoes, useless because they were completely out of fashion.

Her jewelry box was intact and many of the pieces were very valuable, I knew. Gradually, I worked my way through the parlor and bedroom until I was in the library again. Once more I sat at the desk and read some of the fragments of poetry, or whatever it was, that Mama had written.

I leaned back in the chair and frowned. Mama had apparently tried to write poetry. James Brownlee had actually written some fine poems and given them to her. Had she been endeavoring to answer him in kind? My fingers idly toyed with the leather-bound volume of Mandarav and Savoy's poetry. What was it my instructor in English literature had said when we studied these poems? They were like a secret diary, the innermost thoughts of two people very much in love and telling one another so in verse. That was what made them so popular. It was like reading a novel to study one of their books.

Two people in love and telling one another of this love in verse!

I gasped aloud and quickly took more of the rumpled, brittle papers from the wastebasket. I flattened them out as best I could. On one was an entire stanza, with the words worked over, crossed out, written in. But even with this rough copy, there was a familiar cadence to the poem.

I recalled the poems. Ravel Mandarav had written, all of which I'd read at school. Then I opened one of the books and studied some of Mandarav's poems. I knew enough about poetry to see the similarity between his and those I had read of James Brownlee.

Then I compared the few samples of Mama's poetry with the writings of Ella Savoy and again I seemed to see a strong similarity. I wondered if it could be possible that

James Brownlee had copied poems from the writings of Ravel Mandaray, so I spent two hours scanning every poem in the volumes which these two poets had written. I had need to read but a few lines to be sure that not one of the printed poems resembled those which James Brownlee had written.

I closed the last of the books slowly. Was it possible that James Brownlee was Ravel Mandaray and Mama was Ella Savoy? Well, why not? It was common knowledge that the poets wrote under assumed names because they wished to conceal their real identities, so intimate were their poems.

Then they must have been terribly in love to write these poems to one another. But would they, being that much in love, agree to have the poems printed? To make a public spectacle of their tender and wonderful love?

Of course, all this was mere conjecture. I was guessing. I wasn't that good a judge of poetry to be sure of the similarity. Besides, there was hardly enough of Mama's writing to tell. Yet, somehow, I thought I had accidentally come upon a vital detail.

There was yet another point to this. If they were the renowned poets, if they had written this lovely poetry to one another, then they must have been madly in love. Therefore, I was wrong in believing they had not gone away together. The thought sickened me, but it had to be faced.

I felt that Peter should know about this, but I hesitated for it was growing late. I'd spent more time here than I'd realized. I quickly rejected the idea of going to Papa about it for he had been hurt enough. If what I had discovered was the truth, then I intended to keep it as my secret, perhaps shared with Peter, but certainly with no one else.

I kept all of Mama's writings, but I replaced the books so no one would notice my intense interest in them. I walked into the bedroom and I felt that Mama was very close to me at this moment. If she were the poet Ella Savoy, I would be so proud of her, despite what she had done. And, I firmly reminded myself, I still had no actual proof of her guilt.

I went to my own rooms and locked the door. I was nervous, for the episode with the unexplained lights in the windows of Mama's suite still upset me. I prepared for bed after putting Mama's papers safely away in a drawer. Once the suite was in darkness, I looked out onto the estate, surprised that it wasn't as moonswept as I thought it might be. I could still see all the way to the boxwood, but beyond were only thick shadows.

I found myself looking for Peter, but there was no sign of him. In all likelihood, he was out there, seeing to my safety, but he was concealed by the trees and shrubbery. I felt a warm glow, thinking of him, and I felt blessed that he had sought me out on my return. I felt grateful that he believed all I had told him and yet his belief should not surprise me, for he loved me. And to love is to trust. I smiled as I felt Peter's love encompass me in a mantle of protection.

I finally blew out the lamp and settled myself for sleep. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I was still wide awake when I heard the scratching sound. Faint at first, but then more persistent. It had a familiar sound, one I should recognize but I did not. Not at first. Then I realized this was the same sound a small dog would make scratching on a door. Had the little dog I'd seen on the estate somehow gained admittance to the house and was outside my door?

Without further ado, I got out of bed hastily and, without lighting a lamp, I ran through the parlor and pulled open the door. The corridor was dark, but if there'd been a dog outside, scratching to come in, there was no sign of him now. I found matches and lit a lamp. Then I walked the length of the corridor and even looked down the stair-

case, but there was no little white dog. I waited in the night silences, straining my ears to hear any sound of the animal, but I heard nothing. I wondered if, by chance, he had slipped into my rooms while I made my search. I hurried back and made a rapid check of my suite, but there, was no dog.

I went to the window to look out onto the estate and there he was, frisking and gamboling over the lawn, darting at the boxwood shadows, but not barking, not making any sound when he should have been rending the silence in his excitement.

I put on shoes and a cloak and hurried downstairs, then out onto the estate. It was against my better judgment, but if that dog was real, if it existed, I wanted to know. I wanted to take the dog in my arms and feel its heart beat and find out why it made no sound.

But the dog had vanished, just as it had vanished before, just as the mysterious woman in white had disappeared. I called softly, hoping to attract the animal without awakening anyone. My steps were taking me in the direction of the pond and suddenly I was assailed by a terror that shook me. I was on the estate, alone, on a dark night, far enough away from the house so that my cries might not be heard if I had occasion to shout for help.

Yet I went on, compelled to do so by a determination to find the dog. If I didn't I would begin to question my own sanity and to remove all such doubts, I had to satisfy myself that this dog did exist, and not just in my imagination.

The pond seemed blacker than ever, interspersed with the white flowers, barely discernible by night. The frogs had grown silent at my approach, but as I hadn't moved in a few minutes now, they began to croak and chatter again. They were my safeguard. So long as they spoke in the night, no one was in the pond or moving about near it.

Then, above the noise of the frogs, I heard the whimper of the dog. It came from some distance away, but it was plain enough. A shiver of fear ran through me as I looked around, my eyes trying to cut through the shadows to see some sign of that little four-legged animal who was beginning to cause me such mental distress, but there was not a sign of him. There was nothing for me to do except

to follow the sound of his whimperings so, though my limbs shook slightly, I moved determinedly in what I hoped was the direction of the sound. Then some of my fear abated as the soft cries came again for I seemed to be closer to it. Surely now, I would soon be able to see the dog. Surely, in a moment, he would be wagging his tail and frisking about me, as he got acquainted with me.

But suddenly, I was leaving the estate itself, although Papa owned this land too. It had never been utilized for anything that I knew of and was wild and hilly. The whimper came again. All at once the thought occurred to me that the dog was probably being held; otherwise I would have heard him moving about, or he would have come to me when I called.

I tried again. "Fluffy," I called out. "Fluffy . . . here . . . here, Fluffy!"

And I stood aghast at what I had been doing! I was calling this dog as if it were Mama's. Surely my mind was playing tricks on me to have drawn from my memory so much remembrance of the little poodle that I was calling this mysterious animal by his name.

The whimpering led me on and I entered a winding path which led through a fringe of trees. When I burst into the open on the other side, I suddenly remembered what was here. I stood facing a high, sloping hillside with one slope cut away sheer. Its side shone a dull gray in the darkness. Part of the hill was composed of a form of granite and from this came the neat headstones that decorated all those graves in the slave cemetery.

When I was a child, I had been under specific and enforced orders never to come here, though I had, perversely, as a child will. I walked across the open space toward the fifty-foot-high wall of stone. If the dog was anywhere near here, I should certainly be able to see or hear him.

"Where are you?" I called out. "Here, doggie . . . doggie . . . here, pup . . . here, pup." I studiously avoided using the name of Mama's dead dog.

I moved a little closer and now I had to pick my steps for the ground was littered with big chunks of sharp rock, left there by the stone cutters years ago. It was certainly no place to be by night. I suddenly decided I was playing the fool and the best thing I could do was beat a hasty

retreat for home. Perhaps the dog had been used to lure me out of the house. Perhaps. . . . I dared not think. I wanted only the protection of the house.

As I turned away, I heard the first clatter of falling rock and then a roar as more and more began spilling down the side of the cliff. Small stones fell all about me. I looked up, but I could see nothing. As I was dressed mostly in white, I could very likely be seen from the top of the cliff, and I sensed that an avalanche of loose rock was coming down and I was directly beneath it.

There was a wild scrambling of feet, a shout, and someone came out of the dark to scoop me up and go racing straight toward the face of the cliff with me. Before he had taken a dozen steps, I knew it was Peter and the screams mounting to my lips died away.

The rocks were pelting the ground. I heard Peter grunt in pain as he was struck by one of them, but we were almost against the wall of the cliff now and safe, because the rocks spilling down, hit well out—at least ten yards from where we stood. My back was to the wall and Peter's arms enclosed me, while his body fully protected me.

It was like standing behind a huge waterfall. Dust arose in a great cloud to choke us and I buried my face against his shoulder while he held me close and bent his body over mine so that I was safe from harm.

The rock slide was a long time in stopping. When it finally did, Peter and I tried to move rapidly out of the dust cloud, but we were compelled to climb over rocks and stones, some taller than we were.

When we got to a point where the rock dust hadn't reached, we spent a few moments breathing in pure air and gasping to get enough of it.

I looked at him. Our faces were very close. "Thank God you came, Peter."

"I saw the dog," he said and, despite the terror of what we had been through, I felt relief flood through me at his words.

My hands gripped his arms. "Peter . . . a white poodle ...?"

"Yes. Exactly like the one your mother used to own. It made no sound, but it went dashing through those

trees. I couldn't follow because I was watching you and I couldn't take the chance of leaving you."

"Thank heaven, you didn't. I might have been crushed to death under that rock slide."

"That was what was meant to happen," he said.

"Peter. . . do you think this was all planned . . . ?"

"There's no question about it. How did you come to be out of the house?"

"I thought I heard the dog scratching on my door. I went to look and of course there was no dog. But I glanced out of my bedroom window and I saw the dog romping on the lawn. I hurried down. I wanted to find him and make sure he was real."

"He's real all right."

"Yes, I know that now, since you also saw him."

"I saw you at the lily pond. That's where I've been spending most of my time. I didn't know what you were up to, so I followed at a discreet distance, and I heard the first of the slide. Someone must have rolled a big rock off the top of the cliff after waiting until you were positioned just right."

"Then you're also sure this was an attempt to murder me. I haven't imagined that either."

"You have imagined nothing. All you have related is the truth. Laura, I'm frightened."

"You? Frightened?"

"Not for myself. For you. I love you, my dear. I can't bear to think of you in danger and I fear it surrounds you. Someone doesn't want you here. I wondered if, at first, it might have been a trespasser who became frightened at being discovered and tried to drown you. Then, when you saw the woman with the little dog and later viewed her in the pool, I wondered if someone was trying to frighten you away from Montville."

"But why, Peter?"

"If I could answer that, perhaps we would have the key to what this is all about. After what happened just minutes ago, I am horrified at the thought that someone is trying to murder you."

"If only I could think of who would want to do such a thing. I mean someone who would hate me with such vehemence as to want to destroy me."

His arms enclosed me. "My darling Laura," he said, "please don't go out on the estate again at night."

"I don't want to, Peter," I replied, "but I must find out about that little dog—and the woman." I paused, then reluctantly confessed, "I have thought about your mother doing this to me. That is, I did until this rock avalanche came down upon us."

"No, Laura," Peter disputed. "She would not be party to such heinous doings. She is bitter, but not vengeful."

I nodded. "I beg your forgiveness for voicing such a thought."

"I understand," Peter said kindly. "You're frightened, bewildered and lonely. You really have no one in that house to whom you are close."

"I'm not alone. I have you, Peter," I said, looking up into his dear face. "Your love has given me much courage. I feel protected by it."

"So far it hasn't failed you," he replied. "But we have to find the answer to who is trying to kill you—yes, kill you, Laura," he repeated as he saw terror rise in my eyes.

"How do we go about it?" I asked.

"I wish I knew. Just now, I must get you back to the house. But first..."

He drew me close and his lips touched mine in an embrace which revealed the true depth of his love. For a few moments, we forgot our recent terror and the dark cloud of hate which had hung over me since I arrived at Montville a few days ago.

The sound of voices interrupted the ecstasy which surged through me and Peter quickly released me.

"Remember," he said hurriedly as the voices drew closer, "trust no one."

"Not even my father?" I cried, amazed at his words.

"Can you trust him, Laura?" he asked. "Do you know him well enough to trust?"

I felt as if I'd been struck a blow. The words were cruel, yet I had to admit my father was, indeed, a stranger to me. Was he remaining here to be with me—or with Delphine? Did he wish to get rid of me? And was he remaining here to . . . ? If I hadn't loved Peter so, I would have felt deep anger at his words. Yet I could not, for I had been suspect of his mother. Our new-found love was

shadowed by our suspicions of those who should have been most dear to us, yet had become so embittered by the tragedy that had beset them, they had shut us out of their lives.

We could hear voices and see the flickering light of lanterns a few moments later. I recognized Papa's voice calling my name. Peter released me and cupped his hands to his mouth and called to Papa, telling him our location. In a few moments, Papa, Efrem and Uncle Charlie came hurrying toward us. Well behind them were Minnie, Delphine and the other maids. Zella arrived last, breathing hard from her exertions.

Papa took me in his arms and comforted me and told me not to worry.

I said, "Papa, look about you. All that loose rock fell as I stood directly below. Fortunately, Peter was close by and carried me to safety, else I would surely have been killed."

"For that, sir, you have my thanks," Papa said to Peter.

"It's time something was done about this," Peter responded. "What happened was a deliberate attempt to murder Laura, and it wasn't the first time."

"Did you see anyone?" Papa asked quickly.

"No, sir. But a big rock rolled off the edge of the cliff to start the avalanche, and it didn't come loose by itself."

"Tomorrow," Papa said, "we shall look into it. Now I wish to take Laura home. She has had enough for one evening."

"To that I agree," Peter replied. "Watch her carefully, Sir."

"Yes . . . I shall," Papa responded almost absently as he led me away and toward the house. The others trailed

behind us. No one spoke, but I was content for I knew they couldn't doubt the rock avalanche. The evidence was there for all to see and the air was still filled with dust which would take some time to settle. I knew now that everything I'd seen had been real. Peter had substantiated my story of the little white dog. That, in itself, had greatly heartened me.

I thought of the others following and the absence of Martin Collier in that group suddenly came to mind. Yet it wasn't surprising because the two times I had been in his presence since my return, I had smelled liquor on his breath, so he undoubtedly was in a stupor from its effect now. I could ask Minnie or Efrem about it, though I hardly thought it necessary.

Before we reached the house, Delphine quickened her steps so that she could walk alongside me. Whether it was to pretend to comfort me or whether it was to force Papa's attention to her, I didn't know. Nor did I care. For, wonder of wonders, his arm was about my shoulder and, looking up at him, I noticed his face deep in thought.

When we were safely back in the house, Minnie hurried off to make her inevitable warm milk. Papa disregarded everyone else and led me into his library where I sat down and told him what had happened.

"You heard a dog scratching on your door," he said. "But there was no dog. Then you saw the animal on the estate and you went out after him. You heard him whine and he led you to the face of the rock hill. Laura, are you certain all this happened as you told it?"

I began to arise from my chair half in anger, half in fear. "Papa, I have told you exactly what happened."

"Sit down, my child. I never said I doubted you, but you must admit that anyone else would have cause to doubt. A phantom woman who floats in the lily pond, a ghostly dog who frisks about the estate, but seen by no one except you ..."

"Peter saw the dog! *He saw the dog, Papa!* He told me so!"

"That young man could be only trying to keep you calm."

"Papa, he saw the dog. He told me it looked like

Fluffy, Mama's dog. If he had not seen the animal, how could he know?"

"Well put," Papa agreed. "But what reason lies behind this, Laura?"

"I don't know. Ever since I arrived, I have had the feeling that I am not welcome."

"By whom? There are none here save servants."

"I feel that Zella resents my presence. Delphine doesn't care about me, nor does Martin Collier."

"You also told me Mrs. Brownlee hated you, but do any of these people have a reason for wishing you dead?"

"No, Papa. Not that I know of."

"This doesn't make any sense, my child."

"Do you doubt the rock avalanche?" I cried.

"No, no," he exclaimed. "Though it's a possibility it was a natural one. They aren't infrequent, you know."

"I suppose not," I said wearily. "But I was lured out of the house by the little dog. I followed his cries to the end of the estate and if it hadn't been for Peter, I wouldn't be sitting her now, relating this to you."

"Forgive me, my dear," he said, his tone contrite. "I just can't conceive of anyone here wishing you harm."

"I wish I felt as certain of that," I replied coolly. "Of course you did say that perhaps it was a way of one of your enemies getting at you. Vengeance by someone who hates you."

He nodded slowly. "It's true. I did say that. However, I'm not so sure about it now. However, I do believe you should leave this estate for the time being."

"Oh no, Papa!" I cried out. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving Peter, despite the danger. "If . . . if someone is after me, they will follow me, no matter where I go and . . . and it's better for me to be here where I will be safe—at least while I'm in the house."

Papa looked doubtful. "But you don't remain in the house, despite my entreating you to do so."

"I wanted to touch the little dog—to make sure it was real. I told you it scratched on my door first. I saw no sign of it in the hall, but I did see it frisking about on the grounds. That's why I went out."

"Very well," Papa said, relenting. "I shall be here for the remainder of the week. But I wish to say one thing

more. I regard it as highly suspicious, the way Peter Brownlee happens to be so conveniently at hand whenever you are in need of help. Perhaps I do him an injustice, but those are my feelings."

"He has been close by because he has been watching the house and the estate, searching for whoever is doing this. I feel much safer knowing he is somewhere about."

My father regarded me carefully. "Just why is he showing such concern?"

I could feel color flame my face and I wanted to blurt out my love for Peter, but I dared not risk my father's anger. I knew that, though he had made his apologies to Peter, he had no particular liking for him.

"Is it so wrong for him to feel concern for a childhood friend?" I asked, evading his answer as best I could.

"I hope that is how you regard one another—as friends," Papa said, a touch of sternness creeping into his voice. "Remember, Laura, if you feel that you are falling in love with him, you are to come to me at once. It is of vital importance to both of you. Will you give me that promise?"

"Papa, I feel you are treating me as a child and I resent it," I said.

"In that case, I feel forced to remind you that I resent Peter Brownlee's presence on this estate. His mother swore she would never set foot on this land so long as she lived. I am of the opinion she ordered Peter to remain away as well, particularly since you told me of her evident dislike for you."

"Peter is a man of character. He will do what he believes to be right."

"My dear, I do not wish to quarrel with you, particularly after what you have been through, so we will not press this argument further. I am just as concerned with your safety as Peter is. But I must repeat, I find the young man's actions puzzling. You scarcely know him, yet he has assigned himself as a sort of guardian over your safety. Surely, mere friendship would not warrant such behavior."

"Peter is a very unusual young man," I said.

Papa eyed me speculatively, but made no further comment. "I think, perhaps, we should get some sleep now. Should you hear or see that dog again, let me know at

once. And, Laura . . . please understand that I do not doubt you. I have faith in your integrity. And, I may add, I too am fearful for you."

"Thank you, Papa," I said. I wanted to stand on tiptoe and kiss his cheek, for I knew he had strong doubts that Peter and I were merely friends. I was not so clever that I could hide the fact that I loved him and I feared Papa was more than a little suspicious.

Minnie met me in the corridor with a tray. My warm milk and a slice of golden pound cake was on it. I took it gratefully and returned to my room. Though I felt no appetite for food, I took a few nibbles of the cake and drank some of the milk while I thought about what had just happened.

I was just about to put out my sitting room lamp when a knock sounded on the door and Delphine identified herself.

I bade her enter and she came to sit down close by me. "I came to offer my sincere sympathies," she said. "You have been through so much, poor dear."

"Thank you, Delphine." I was surprised at her nocturnal visit, for this was the first time since our return that she had deigned to come near me.

"Your papa is very worried about you, but of course you must be aware of that."

"Fully aware, Delphine."

"He has been asking me if I noticed any . . . how did he put it? . . . any . . . anything odd. . . ."

"Did he use the word aberrations, Delphine?"

"Yes . . . oh, yes, that's the word."

"Do you mean that my father is questioning my sanity?"

Delphine pouted her pretty face. "I would not put it so crudely, Laura, but that is the essence of it. I did use the proper word that time, did I not?"

"Yes," I said. "You have made great progress and you are to be commended."

"You are making fun of me, you with your superior education. But I am learning, and some day I'll be as great a lady as you. Greater, perhaps."

"As Mrs. Adam Montville?" I asked bluntly. My words of praise were spoken in all sincerity, but she would not believe that.

Her face flamed and then went white with anger. "He could do worse," she said. "If you wish to be frank about it, shall I not be as well?"

"Thank you for admitting it, Delphine. Not that it was necessary, for you show your intentions of conquest every time you are with him. As for being frank, I prefer it."

"Then I'll say this," she exclaimed. "Don't try to turn your father against me. It will do you no good."

I smiled. "I shan't, for I believe he is intelligent enough to see through you."

She returned the smile, but it wasn't pleasant to behold. "He finds me witty and amusing. I find him a challenge. Your father is quite under my spell and I intend to keep him there."

"Your overconfidence may defeat you," I told her. "Papa is quite astute. I agree that you have been good for him . . . taken his mind off his work . . . caused him to relax."

"You haven't, with your silly visions."

"Please, Delphine, I don't wish to quarrel. I don't feel myself."

"All you want to do is call attention to yourself. You're jealous because your father prefers my company to yours so you make up all sorts of silly tales. You're trying to upset your father. You can't bear to see him enjoying himself."

"That isn't true, Delphine," I said, frowning. "I want only peace of mind."

"If that is so, why not let others have it? You're carrying on this way so that your father cannot give his entire attention to me. You wish to distract him from my—my charms."

"You're speaking nonsense," I told her, finally losing patience with her. "Since you came here only to harass me, I would appreciate it if you would leave."

With her usual skill, she covered her antagonism toward me by giving me one of her most winsome smiles. "Laura, forgive me. I really came here to tell you that your father is going to make you leave Montville. He feels it is not a proper place for you, not a safe place. It is cursed. Ever since your mother and this man who lived on the next estate ran off together, this estate has been

bad luck. My Aunt Zella tells me so and she knows, for she has spent many years here. This place should be torn down, burned down. As the summerhouse burned, so should this manor house burn."

"Good night, Delphine," I said. "It might be useful for you to know that I am not leaving here and that I no longer am in need of a companion. Therefore it would be wise if you sought other employment. I'm sure Papa will recommend you highly."

Her composure left her and she leaped to her feet in high anger. "You speak to me as if I were a mere servant to be dismissed. I am more than that and you must understand this. One day you will take orders from me. You will do as I say—and that day is not far off, I warn you."

"Good night," I said again, holding onto my temper with difficulty.

"You are mad. Your mind is beset by phantoms and fears. You dream of the mother you scarcely knew, the mother who abandoned you for James Brownlee. It is eating into your sanity, Laura, and you have not far to go before you will become insane. Incurably insane."

I arose, took her by the arm and piloted her to the door. I opened it and urged her into the corridor. Then I closed and locked the door.

I picked up the glass of milk which had grown cold and drank the rest in two quick swallows. I was so angry I felt like hurling the empty glass at the wall. I was not mad. I had no tendency toward insanity. Delphine had said that to hurt me, because she knew I stood squarely in the way of her ambitions. I resolved to get her out of this house as soon as possible, and it was my hope that Zella would go along with her.

I sneezed rather violently and went to the bureau for a handkerchief. Then I sneezed again and after a little while I could feel the chill come upon me and I knew I was getting a cold. The night had been damp and cool and I'd been lightly dressed. I'd no doubt been drenched with the perspiration of fear at the rockslide too, and this, combined with the night air, had given me a cold.

I sniffled and got into bed quickly. I did go to sleep promptly enough, but I awoke early because I was coughing—and sneezing again. By mid-morning I felt quite ill,

feverish and sometimes beset by chills. Minnie insisted upon attending to me personally, attention I cherished, but didn't relish for Minnie had her own ideas about curing a cold.

She made a poultice of grease and kerosene and liberally applied it to my chest. Then she brought hot wet towels and induced a great sweat. She also had some mysterious dark brown medicine which I took under protest, but I did take it. I told her the cure was worse than the cold, but she refused to be insulted and fussed over me until I had to admit I did feel better.

By mid-afternoon I thought I might like some nourishment. Minnie was prepared for that too, having made in her spare moments, half a dozen tempting dishes which were my favorites.

Papa came to sit by my bed for an hour or more, and we talked of trivial matters, neither of us wishing to become involved in the more serious affairs of this household. Zella paid me a courtesy visit and hoped I would soon be well. Delphine, apparently still angry, didn't come near me. Uncle Charlie brought me a small bouquet of black-eyed Susans which one of the maids placed in a vase for me.

Even Efrem paid me a visit. "I sought out Master Peter," he said, "and told him you was sick. Nothin' serious, but you'd stay abed. I think he went straightway home and to his own bed. He looked like he could use some rest."

"Thank you, Efrem," I said. Then, quickly I added, "What was Peter's father like? What sort of a man was he?"

"I couldn't say anythin' 'bout him 'cept he was quiet and polite and never gave a man cause to think he was standoffish because he was rich. Used to read a lot. Not many times I saw him when he didn't have a book under his arm. I would say he was a real gentleman, Miss Laura."

"Then his son takes after him," I said.

"He does, yes Ma'am, Master Peter does. And he's not had a pleasant time of it. Wants to get his Mama's plantation in business again and she won't let him. Says there is no need for her—or him—to get more money. But the land is there to be worked, and you got to give

a man credit when he wants to work it. The Lord didn't mean for fertile fields to lie idle. They should be planted."

"I have a feeling they will be, one of these days," I said.

Efrem smiled slowly. "And if you don't mind my sayin' so, Miss, I have a feelin' you'll be with him when they are, and that's the way it was meant to be."

"Why, Efrem, what makes you say such a thing?"

"Master Peter sent you a message," he added, then turned and looked toward the door to see if anyone was about.

"Please, Efrem, tell me what it is—quickly."

"He said to tell you he loved you and he didn't want you to forget it for a second."

I felt a warm glow flood through me. "Thank you, Efrem. Thank you for bringing me the message."

"Yes, Miss Laura. Now I got to get me back downstairs."

"Efrem . . ." I called to him. Then, lowering my voice, said, "Papa doesn't know."

"I understand, Miss Laura," he said, his smile gentle.

"One day he'll get over his bitterness, then you and Master Peter will marry and rule over these two estates. Mrs. Brownlee will change too. You'll see."

"I hope so."

He nodded assurance and left the room, erect and proud, and I knew what a devoted friend he was. I felt that I might have need of him too, before this was over.

All my time in bed wasn't devoted to visitors, but to the far more productive work of comparing the scraps of poetry in Mama's handwriting with the polished and perfect poems of Ravel Mandaray and Ella Savoy.

It had seemed a vain project, one built only on a faint and daring hope when I began, but more and more I wondered if the possibility didn't exist that Peter's father and my mother were not these two famous poets. I would have need of outside help to determine this, but I had that in the person of Donald Converse. The publishers of the poetry were in New York and Donald was there also. I planned to talk it over with Peter first, and if he agreed there was a chance, we could then ask Donald's help. I did wish, desperately, to compare more of the finished poems which were in his mother's possession, with the printed

pages I had studied so carefully. It did seem to me that there was a strong similarity, though the poems Peter had given me to read were by no means as polished and skilled.

If I did prove Mama and James Brownlee were these famous poets, perhaps I would only make matters worse. It was an accepted literary fact that the poetry was considered to be the genuine thoughts of two people wholly in love. It was also widely known that these were not their true names and this also added to the popularity of the pair. Some very famous names had been mentioned in connection with this poetry, though they had denied being the authors.

There was yet another thought that all but impelled me to go ahead with my plans. Should I be able to prove that the poets were James Brownlee and Aim Montville, then it was possible I might locate them.

Deeper thought made me hesitate, for should the poets be discovered as having left their families to be together, their popularity was bound to be dimmed. I was in a quandary from which there seemed no escape, and I would have to ask Peter's advice. The chances were I was following an illusion anyway. Mama could simply have been trying to write like those poets and so might Peter's father.

By evening my cold was much better and the sniffles and sneezes were all gone, completely due to Minnie's medications—according to her insistence. Of course I agreed, and why not, for I did feel greatly improved.

I ate supper in my rooms, but not in bed. After the tray was removed, I got dressed and went downstairs. It was a warm evening, and a lovely, moonlit one. I looked for Papa and found him in the library, deeply immersed in his work, so I tiptoed away without disturbing him. Zella and Delphine had apparently retired early and the house was silent.

I didn't wish to go back to the loneliness of my rooms, nor did I wish to remain here in this vast first floor with no one to talk to or even see. I did go to the kitchen to seek out Minnie, but she had already cleaned up and was nowhere in sight.

I'd spent the day in bed and I was restless. Perhaps

Peter was outside and I might find him. I was most anxious to see him, be near him and, particularly, to discuss this idea of mine about Mama and James Brownlee being the celebrated poets Ravel Mandaray and Ella Savoy.

I went upstairs to get a light woolen shawl to place about my shoulders, for I wanted no return of the cold. I knew I was being reckless in leaving the house, yet I felt no fear. But I was obsessed with the topic I wished to talk about with Peter. Also, I didn't plan to walk far. I felt that he would be somewhere about the estate and not too far from the house. If I was unable to find him, I would return.

However, I began to grow afraid soon after I left the vicinity of the house. My common sense told me I was doing a foolish thing, but I did want to find Peter. When I was far enough away from the house so I wouldn't be heard, I called his name softly, but there was no response. I continued on, walking slowly. There was moonlight over the estate, giving it an eerie appearance. Sometimes the shadows seemed to be dancing and brought me to a sharp halt until I realized what I saw was only an illusion.

Then, once again, though I had no intention of doing so, I neared the lily pond and I seemed to be drawn to it. Before I came in sight of it, I heard the faint sounds so I moved far more carefully and kept to the shadows that I might not be seen. Someone was near the pond and at this time of night that, in itself, was suspicious.

I left the path and moved through the brush until I had a clear view of the pond. What I saw made my heart cease beating for a moment but, oddly enough, I felt no great apprehension. Perhaps because the figure in the water was engaged in a rather ordinary thing. He or she—I couldn't be sure which—was using some sort of tool, possibly like a rake, and exploring the bottom of the pond with it. The person's back was toward me and I had no idea who it might be.

This time, instead of screaming for help, I backed away slowly and silently and I held my impatience in check until I was far enough away that my running steps wouldn't be heard. Then I sped hastily back to the house as fast as I could.

I entered the house and went straight to the library. Papa was bent over his books. I was so out of breath that when I entered the room, I was unable to speak and stood there gasping.

He came to his feet instantly and hurried to my side. "Laura, what is it? What's happened now?"

I finally was able to speak. "Lily pond. Someone . . . in it . . . poking at the bottom. . . ."

I had expected Papa to rush from the house and try to reach the lily pond before the person could escape. Instead, he reeled to the nearest chair and sat down heavily.

"Who . . . is . . . it?" he asked in a weak voice.

"I don't know, Papa. That's why I came directly to you. No one else knows what I saw. The person in the pond has no idea I saw him."

"Him? Are you sure it's a man?"

"No, Papa. The light was deceptive, the person had his back toward me. He, or she, wore some sort of cloak and a hat. It is impossible to say if it is a man or a woman."

"Very well," he said wearily, "we'll go see. It's come to this then, at last. I should have known."

"What are you talking about, Papa?" I asked.

"Never mind. Come on—we'll settle this now."

We left the house, but not in any great rush. I was ready to run all the way back, but Papa's steps were those of a man reluctant to go. So we walked along the path and finally we reached the vicinity of the pond. I seized his wrist and brought him to a stop.

"Papa . . . listen!"

He was silent a moment. "I hear nothing," he said.

"But if no one was near the pond, you would hear the frogs. At this time of year, they are very noisy, if they are not disturbed. So someone is there. It's not my imagination."

But a few seconds later, the frogs began their croaking as if on signal. I hurried forward in dismay. There was no one in the pond. Papa joined me and he was mopping his forehead although the night wasn't that warm he could have been perspiring.

"Well?" he asked me pointedly.

"There was someone," I insisted. "Whoever it is knows

when anyone except me is coming and manages to disappear. But I did see this person. . . ."

"It's quite obvious there is no one here now," Papa said. "Laura, it's time we talked this out and came to a decision. Something has to be done and at once."

Papa closed the library door, motioned me to the deep leather chair as he moved around the desk to resume his seat. There was only one lamp lit in the room and that was on his desk. It bathed our faces in light, but left the rest of the room in shadow. I would have preferred more light, for, after my most recent fright, I was resentful of shadows. However, Papa's somber mien dissuaded me from moving about the room, illuminating more lamps.

"Laura, I hope you won't become angry at me for what I am about to say, but I must speak. Please understand I am thinking only of your welfare."

"Of course, Papa." I had no idea of what was on his mind, but I knew I felt heartsick inside. I had been so certain that at last I could reveal to him solid evidence that none of the stories I had spoken of as happening to me were the fanciful products of my imagination. Yet tonight, I was again frustrated.

"You have come to me with various stories, which range from an attack on you in the pond when someone tried to drown you, to the figure of a woman floating in the pond—a woman who lured you from the house—a woman who had a little white poodle. In no case have I been able to find any evidence which will give credence to what you have told me."

"Have you forgotten the rock slide, Papa?" I asked, shaken by his words.

"Not in the least. However, that could have been a natural phenomenon. Rock slides do happen and off that cliff, it has occurred several times. The entire area there is strange and dangerous. What seems to be solid earth has often been revealed to be full of potholes or animal dens. It's shunned by everyone as being too treacherous to traverse, yet you went directly there."

"I was trying to find the white poodle. I beg of you to believe me when I say there was such a dog."

"No one else in this house saw it. I questioned the servants at length."

"Peter saw it."

Papa's hands raised and dropped to his desk in a gesture of impatience. "Peter again. I'm sorry, Laura, but I will not accept Peter's story of having seen the poodle. He is, obviously, too interested in you and will back you up in anything you say."

I blinked to hold back the tears, for my father was indirectly calling me a liar. However, I wasn't going to give way to hysterics like some silly school girl. I was a young woman of average intelligence and even though my own father disputed what I said had happened to me, I knew I had told the truth in every respect.

"Papa," I said quietly, "what is it you wish to say to me?"

"I want you to leave here tomorrow morning for New York City. I'll send Donald a telegram to meet you and install you in a fine hotel where you'll be among a great many people. I am hopeful that the change will take your mind off what has happened here. In due time you may return. By then, I feel certain none of these weird manifestations will happen again."

I was too stunned to cry, too hurt to argue. My first thought was of Peter and I knew I must see him before I left.

"May I first talk with Peter?"

"It would serve no purpose. I wish you to leave early tomorrow morning."

"I suppose Delphine is to accompany me."

"There would be little purpose in her doing that. You do not like her. I don't understand why not for she seems poised and charming."

"I have never disputed that," I replied, unable to conceal my irritation at his words. "She has worked very hard to perfect those traits."

"You sound like a jealous, bitter girl," Papa said, giving me a look of disapproval.

"I'm not jealous or bitter," I replied. "But I am concerned for you. Can't you understand that is what she wants? To have me out of the way so that she can be with you?"

"Laura, you're talking nonsense," Papa said and his irritation matched mine. "She asked me if she might remain here to visit her aunt."

"And play chess with you," I said, with a defiant toss of my head.

"I want to hear no more of that kind of talk from you," Papa said, and it was with difficulty that he kept his voice calm. "I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I have enjoyed Delphine's company during my stay here."

"I'm quite aware of that, Papa. Much more than you've enjoyed mine."

"Say no more, Laura," Papa exclaimed, slamming his hand on the desk. "You will do as I say. You will leave here early tomorrow morning."

I arose, meeting his stern gaze. "I will, Papa. And I am not surprised that you have turned against me to allow whoever has done these things to frighten me away from Montville, to win. You never cared about me as a child."

He had started to raise, but at my words he sank back in his chair and if I hadn't been so angry, I would have felt pity, for he suddenly looked old.

I continued, quick to take advantage. "Oh yes, I remember how you ignored me. How you would come into a room where I was with Mama and you wouldn't even look at me. It used to cut into me like a knife and often, after you left the room, I cried. Mama did her best to console me, telling me what a busy man you were and how you didn't know that little girls could be lonely and want their papas to take them up in their arms and love them. She told me that one day you would do that. But you never did. You never did. And always, all through my growing years, I kept hoping and longing for a papa, especially at school when I saw my schoolmates being loved by their

fathers who came to take them home or to visit them when they were passing through the town. I never had that, Papa. I never had any love after Mama died. I knew only a vast emptiness. Yes, Papa, a vast emptiness, created by your indifference. Donald Converse was the only father I ever knew. He was always kind to me. I believe he pitied me. He thinks he's in love with me. But I think he still pities me, for he knows how lonely I've always been. I'll be packed and ready to leave in the morning and you'll be rid of me. Good night, Papa."

I walked out, my head held high, yet scarcely able to see where I was going, so brimmed were my eyes with tears. I was stunned by the decision he had made, by the words he had spoken, by his disbelief and distrust in me. I had thought of him as a brilliant man, not swayed by the charms of a crafty girl like Delphine, yet I could see her fine hand in this. It was she who had persuaded him to such beliefs.

I went to my rooms and there seemed little left to do but pack. One of the first things I did was to get the poetry volumes from Mama's room. I had wanted so much to move in there, but now that would likely never happen, for no attempt had been made to get the suite ready for me. I felt that I was being banished from Montville forever.

My traveling bags were in the storehouse so I couldn't pack, but I did lay out many of my things in preparation for an early morning quick packing and then a fast trip to the railroad depot. If only I could have seen Peter again. I had wanted to talk with him about the poetry and that was now impossible. I would now be compelled to write to him at length.

One thing softened the pain of leaving. In New York I could attend to running down the whereabouts of the two poets and finally determine if they could be Mama and James Brownlee.

If only I knew what was behind this scheme. Why did someone go to all these lengths to force me to leave Montville? I knew nothing that could incriminate anyone. I sought only to know the truth about Mama and that truth appeared almost self-evident, the more I learned about it.

Something struck the outside of my window. Sudden terror filled my heart again and I almost screamed in my fear, for my nerves were on a raw edge and could stand no more. But I maintained enough composure to extinguish my lamp and go to the window and look out. It was fortunate that I did for it was Peter who stood below signaling me to come down. My heart lifted at sight of him.

I sped out of my room, moved silently but swiftly along the corridor and down the steps, careful to open and close the door behind me quietly. Peter awaited me in the shadow of the boxwoods and I flew into his arms. He rained kisses on my cheeks and my brow and then his lips closed over mine. My arms went around his neck and I returned the embrace with fervor.

Peter started to release me, but I clung to him.

"Oh, Peter, I'm so frightened. Everything is happening and none of it good."

"What is it, my love? And why are you trembling?"

"Have you been on the estate long?" I asked. "Did you see me out here a short time ago with Papa?"

"No to both of your questions. What happened?"

"There was a person in the lily pond again," I said.

"I'm certain of it, Peter, just as I was certain before. My eyes have not been playing me tricks, nor has my imagination. Say you believe me, Peter. In heaven's name, say it. I need to hear from your dear lips that you know I speak the truth."

He looked into my eyes as he said, "I believe you, Laura. I have always believed you. You know that."

I nodded. "I just had to hear you saw it. But I didn't become frightened this time and I slipped quietly back to the house and told Papa about it. I thought for a moment he was going to faint, but he quickly recovered and came with me. As usual, there was no one in the pond when he arrived. Papa became upset, brought me back to the house and has just told me he is sending me to New York early on the morrow."

"You can't go," Peter exclaimed with alarm. "You can't go. I love you, my darling. Suppose we leave here and get married at once. Then your father could not order you about."

"That isn't all. What's even worse is that he doesn't be-

lieve me. He will accept none of the stories I have told him.

"I just asked you to marry me, Laura," Peter said intently. "Please say you will."

"Oh, I want to, Peter. I want to marry you," I cried, "but not to run away to marry. We cannot do that. You know why we especially cannot do that."

He nodded. "I suppose you're right. But as it is, I can't guard you properly. I am constantly fearful for your safety."

"At the moment, I'm perfectly safe," I told him, feeling the comfort of his arms. "And I have something important to tell you. Two very important matters I must discuss with you."

"Very well," he said and led me to a bench nearby where we sat down. "But remember, Laura, I still wish to marry you. I can support you for I have a goodly inheritance from my grandmother."

"Peter, there is nothing I would like better than to become your wife. But there are two tilings of grave importance to me. One is proving my mother innocent of the charge or running away with your father. The second is proving that what happened to me and what I saw on this estate is the truth. I've thought of something which may solve the riddle of Mama's disappearance."

"Tell me about it," Peter urged.

"In Mama's room, I found every volume of poetry written by Ravel Mandaray and Ella Savoy. They" are bound in the finest leather and appear to me to be special editions."

"That's interesting," Peter said. "Papa has an identical set in his library."

"That raises my hopes. What I'm about to say may sound like wishful dreaming, something my poor brain has concocted. If you feel it absurd, I wish you to tell me so."

"What is it that disturbs you so much, Laura?"

"I found scraps of paper on which Mama had written poetry. Not complete poems, but snatches of verses. Enough so that the writing reminded me of the poems in the leather-bound volumes. Peter, do you think it could

be possible that Mama is Ella Savoy and your father is Ravel Mandaray?"

He whistled sharply in sheer amazement. "What an idea! Laura, Papa loved to write poetry. You saw the poems he . . . gave to your mother. Cast aside the impropriety of what he did and consider only the poems. They were good. We have others at home—just as good."

"They were lovely, and they too remind me of the writing of Ravel Mandaray."

"You may be right," Peter said thoughtfully. "It may be that they were so in love they were compelled to write this poetry. Perhaps they sent it in to the publisher on a whim and, to their amazement, it was accepted and they have become world-renowned."

"I must find out, Peter. It's a New York publisher."

"We will both find out," he said, his smile tender. "But have you realized that if such is the truth, your belief in your mother's innocence might be destroyed?"

"I shall never believe her guilty," I said. "But even if such should be the case, I might learn of her whereabouts and I could go to her. I shall always love her, for I remember her goodness and gentleness. She gave me so much love. And so much attention—to make up for Papa's lack of it."

"I wish she could hear you say that. She would be very proud of you."

"Peter," I said, and there was a firmness to my voice that surprised me. "I'm going to Papa and tell him of our love. He warned me against falling in love with you, telling me if I found myself doing so, I was to tell him. Well, it has happened and now I must tell him."

"He may forbid you to see me," Peter warned.

"I shall disobey him—just as you did with your mother. It is wrong of them to treat us in such fashion."

"But will you marry me? Right away?"

"I will," I promised. "I will meet you here tomorrow morning at eight o'clock." I paused as a sudden thought occurred to me. "Peter, there is another thing that puzzles me. You said your parents were devoted. If so, and my theory about them writing poetry is correct, why did not your father tell your mother about his writings?"

Peter frowned and then, reluctantly, spoke. "Mama is a

very jealous and possessive woman. She was with Papa and she is with me. However, I rebelled. She has become practically a recluse. She is keeping her door locked, takes her meals in her room and refuses to see me."

"Then you really have no way of keeping track of her," I reasoned.

"Are you still of the opinion my mother is the mysterious woman who is trying to frighten you?" he asked patiently.

"I don't know, Peter," I said tremulously. "I don't know."

"Try not to think about it," he said. "Go now and talk to your father. I will meet you here tomorrow. Do not go to New York City tomorrow."

"I give you my word, I will not."

His arms drew me close once again and our lips met. The embrace was a tender assurance of our love. Still with his arm about me, he escorted me to the house and stood at the foot of the stairs until I closed the door behind me. Yes, I thought, I felt safe with Peter standing guard.

Fortunately, Papa was alone in the library, though he was not, as usual, immersed in papers. Instead, he sat at his desk, his clasped hands resting on it and his eyes stared off into space. I wondered what thoughts were going through his mind.

Without pausing, I entered the room and resumed the chair I had so recently left.

"Papa," I said, "I beg your forgiveness for disturbing you, but I have a confession to make. Peter Brownlee and I are in love. He has asked my hand in marriage."

Papa looked as if I had struck him a blow. "I shall not permit it."

"You cannot forbid me. If you do, I shall marry him against your wishes in New York."

"Then you are not averse to going to New York."

"No, but I shall go with Peter and I will not leave tomorrow morning. I am seeing him tomorrow evening to tell him of my talk with you."

"You are quite determined," my father said, eyeing me worriedly.

"Quite, Papa."

"In that case, I have no alternative but to tell you what I had hoped would never be necessary."

"And what is that, Papa?" I asked.

"Are you still determined to marry Peter?"

"Nothing will change my mind."

He nodded, arose and walked to the rear of the room where he swung a portrait aside to reveal the wall safe. He turned the combination and opened the door. From a shelf inside the safe, he removed a single folded sheet of paper and returned to the desk.

"Laura . . . before I show you this, I wish to state that I wasn't always the cold, stern-faced man you know me to be. No . . . when your mother and I were married, I believed my world was complete. I loved your mother dearly. That is why this," he held up the piece of paper, "hurt me so. I nearly went out of my mind with jealousy and rage."

"If Mama did what you said, then I can understand your losing all control of your emotions. But I don't believe Mama ran away with James Brownlee. I shall never believe it."

"I am not referring to their disappearance. When that happened . . . it was . . . oh, Laura, this is so difficult to tell you."

"If only I knew what you are trying to say," I said, "perhaps I could help you."

He shook his head. "You cannot even guess, but I must tell you. Before you were born, I knew your mother and James were seeing a great deal of one another, though I believed Felicia was always present. I will admit I was jealous for your mother was very beautiful. I will also state that Felicia was jealous, too, and made no secret of it. However, I was away for long periods of time and I

couldn't expect your mother to remain by herself. But one day I returned and found . . ." his lips tightened and his eyes grew hard, "this bit of poetry. I wish you need never have to view it and if you and Peter had not fallen in love, you would never see it, but the situation is now such that I must show it to you."

"I have seen Mr. Brownlee's poems before."

"But not this one. It is from a man to the mother of his unborn child. There can be no question as to the meaning of it. None whatsoever. Now do you understand why you cannot marry Peter Brownlee?"

I was too stunned to answer, but Papa must have thought I did not understand, for he went on to explain in simple terms.

"I am not your father. James Brownlee is. Peter Brownlee is your half-brother. This poem proves it without any doubt whatsoever. Read it!"

I took the sheet of paper mechanically and read the words. They were poignant and beautiful. The words a gifted poet would write to the woman who was to bear his child. Before I could finish the poem, the tears in my eyes blotted out the rest and I placed the paper on the desk while the tears slipped down my cheeks.

Papa gave me no word of sympathy, none of comfort. He just sat and regarded me with a stony stare. There was more and he meant to get it off his conscience now, so that all the hurt would be over at one time. I wiped away the tears, regained my composure and gave him my attention.

"I demanded that your mother explain this. She offered me a tale of two people who were writing poetry with the intention of having it published. The poems of two people in love, and how their love progressed up to this point of parenthood. Would you have been taken in by such a weak lie? I would rather she had told me the truth, that she was in love with Brownlee. But no, she tried to lie her way out of it. I wanted to kill him. I should have."

I said, "Papa, what if it was true? What if they were writing this poetry for the purpose they told you?"

"Nonsense. I didn't believe it then, I don't believe it

now. It no longer makes

her rooms. You returned to them years afterwards and were astute enough to guess I hadn't lived there with her. I remained away as much as possible. I was rising rapidly in the business world. I couldn't afford a scandal. Divorce would have stopped my career."

"Papa, I believe every word that Mama said."

"I don't doubt it. She was devoted to you. She showered love and affection on you. But remember, so far as the world was concerned, I regarded you as my daughter and you lacked for nothing. However, I could not bear the sight of you as a child, for each time I looked at you, I thought of you as the child I should have fathered. That's why I never came near you. That's why Donald visited you, rather than I, except for the times I was sent for when you were ill at school." He paused and his voice softened. "But then you returned and I came here to find you a young lady. Regardless of how I once felt about you, I now find I love you as if you were my own flesh and blood. Please, Laura, I beg of you, let me go on thinking of you as my daughter. I'm all alone. I need you."

"Once I needed you, Papa, but you had no heart for me. Yet I always loved you. However, everything has changed now." I motioned to the piece of paper on the desk. "And that is what has changed it."

"But, Laura, let us pretend we are a family. We don't even have to pretend. We can be a family. Just the two of us—you are so like your mother. Let me do for you. You said you loved me."

"I did. I loved and respected you, even though I feared you. You were so stem and unyielding. However, my feelings toward you now are of little consequence. I shall leave here tomorrow morning, after I have talked with Peter."

"I implore you not to do that. Let me take care of you. I owe it to you and . . . to . . . her."

"You owe me nothing since you aren't my father. As for owing my mother anything—if she sinned as you say she did . . . what do you owe her?"

"Please, Laura, I'm a lonely man. I need you."

"You don't need anyone," I replied coldly. "You're a successful man in the business world. One who is looked up to and envied. But as for being a father—you yourself told me only an hour ago that you didn't believe my stories

of what I had been through since I returned to Montville. You believe no one. You should have searched for my mother after she disappeared . . . at least, made an effort to find her."

"I couldn't."

"You could, but you wouldn't. Your silly pride. Also, you wanted no publicity because of your business connections. You could not have the slightest breath of scandal touch you. Therefore, you kept it as quiet as possible."

"Oh, Laura, you're being heartless."

"No more so than you. I'm going to prove Mama and James Brownlee were writing poetry. You state they were together often. Why not because of their love of poetry? Also, you had turned your back on Mama and poetry may have been a natural outlet for her. The only love she got was from me. And as for Mr. Brownlee, you yourself stated his wife was jealous and, no doubt, very possessive. Perhaps he found Mama's company refreshing. I—I cannot bring myself to believe what you said about her. But since you so obviously believe it, I no longer have a place here. And you do believe it, don't you? *Don't you?*"

"Yes," he said, his voice a hoarse cry. "And I beg of you not to marry Peter Brownlee! That is the only reason I have brought all this to light. I know I have hurt you, but I had to. You cannot marry that young man. He is your half-brother. Had I remained silent and permitted you to go through with your plans, it would have been a worse crime than the other."

"You have no faith or truth in anyone," I said. "Despite what you have told me, I still will not lose faith in my mother. Nor can I forgive you for never seeking her out. You're a cruel, bitter, hate-filled man and if it so happens that you are not my father, then I'm glad."

His face whitened with my words, but his eyes stared at me unflinchingly. "All right, Laura. You've said quite enough. You may go now. Just as you do not wish to see any more of me, I have had all I can take from you."

I fled from the room, not in fear or in anger, but because my heart was heavy with grief. Upstairs, I threw myself upon the bed and sobbed bitterly, until there were no more tears. In the space of seconds, my life had changed. Where could I go now? I had spoken bravely downstairs. But I had

no money, nor would I accept a penny from Papa. The name slipped through my mind easily. I must stop thinking of him as my father. His name was Adam Montville, the man who had housed and clothed and educated me well, through my growing years. I should be deeply indebted to him, but what he had given me, he had given without love. It was his pride that had forced him to do all he had for me.

I thought of Peter and my heart ached. I would have to tell him tomorrow. He would be as shocked as I. Would he believe it? I hoped not. I refused to, but was I deluding myself? I didn't know, but I still felt I must be loyal to the memory of the love Mama bore me.

I slept, but I arose early, impatient to see Peter. Minnie fussed over me as I dawdled with my food at breakfast.

"What's the matter with your appetite, honey?" she asked, her plump hands on her ample hips. "Land sakes, a young girl like you oughtn'ta just pick at her food. Somethin' wrong with it?"

"Not a thing, Minnie," I replied. "I'm just not hungry."

"Somethin' happen?" she asked, her eyes studying me carefully.

"Not a thing," I replied, though keeping my eyes lowered. It was difficult to lie to Minnie and I didn't like the idea of telling her an untruth.

She moved over beside me, tilted my head with her hand. "Somethin' else happen to you honey?"

I nodded. "I saw a woman in the pond last night. I ran to get Papa to see her, but when we arrived, she was gone. Papa didn't believe me. He doesn't believe any of the things I told him."

"I believe you honey," Minnie said firmly, her dark eyes flashing. "So does Efrem and your Uncle Charlie."

"Thank you, Minnie. That helps to make me feel better. I'll be leaving here tonight or tomorrow."

"Oh no, Miss Laura. You just can't do that. Give your Papa another chance. He don't really mean it. That Delphine has got him all mixed up, making those goo-goo eyes at him. Remember, he's a lonely man and she's likely to have quite an influence on him."

"No, Minnie," I replied somberly, "it isn't all Delphine. Papa and I just can't be together any longer."

"That's real sad to hear," she said, shaking her head. "I'd hoped when you come back, your papa'd come down here more often and it would seem more like old times." She paused, then tilting her head sideways, asked, "You and your papa quarrel?"

"Yes, Minnie, but I can't talk about it."

"I understand, honey. But it's real sad all the same."

After I took a few sips of coffee I went outside to meet Peter. He was awaiting me on the bench and he reached out and grasped both my hands.

"Oh, Peter," I exclaimed, "it was horrible."

"At least he didn't forbid you to come out here and talk to me," he said, with an attempt at levity.

"No," I replied. "But I wish I had gone with you last night."

He smiled. "Cheer up, my dearest, I still want to marry you."

"We can never marry." I had been wondering how to tell Peter what I had learned about myself, but his words had given me the opening.

"What are you talking about?"

"Peter, you are my half-brother."

"Laura," he exclaimed incredulously, "what are you saying?"

Slowly, I related to him all of what my father had told me last night. It was difficult for me not to think of him as my father. I felt as if he was, regardless of what I had learned and regardless of the harsh words I had spoken to him. However, I knew I would have to leave Montville. And when I had completed my story, I told Peter so.

"I can't believe it," he exclaimed. "I won't believe it."

"Peter," I said, attempting reason, "you have always believed your father and my mother ran off together. So if

you believe that to be true, why will you not accept me as your half-sister?"

"I don't think of you that way," he said roughly. "I love you. The love I bear you isn't that which a brother would bear a sister."

"But we didn't know before," I said.

He was silent a moment as his brow furrowed in thought. "Laura, do you believe the story?"

"No," I replied, gazing straight into his eyes. "I still believe my mother innocent of any wrongdoing."

"Thank God," he said fervently. "The only evidence we have of our blood relationship is the poem your father showed you last night. The only evidence I had on which to form an opinion were the poems your father brought to my mother at the time of their disappearance."

I nodded, not wishing to speak, for fear I would distract Peter's train of thought.

"Did the poem you read sound like the work of Ravel Mandaray and Ella Savoy?"

"Oh, it did, Peter. Exactly like it. Perhaps it lacked the polish and the smoothness of the poems which were published, but it was good. Peter, I believe our parents wrote their poetry in a deliberate fashion so as to make it appear that they were the work of two people genuinely in love. The poems showed how their love progressed and that was the reason for the popularity of these two poets. But while the world believed these two poets to be in love; in reality, they were not. That is what I want to prove."

"Let me," he implored. "Since I was the doubter, allow me the privilege of undoing the damage I have done to two fine people."

"Oh, Peter," my hands in his, tightened. "Suppose—just suppose we are wrong!"

"We can't be," he exclaimed fervently. "We mustn't be. I shall depart for the city immediately and remain at the telegraph office so that I may keep the wires busy with my inquiries and the answers I seek."

He raised my hands to his lips and kissed each one. "That will have to do for the present," he said. "But I feel in my heart we aren't brother and sister."

"I will pray you are right," I told him fervently. "And

please, as soon as you have any news, whether it is good or bad, come to me."

"Be assured I will," he promised. "Do not leave the estate until I return. Promise?"

"I promise," I told him. "Though I will leave on the morrow."

"Where can you go?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I will take no charity from my father—or rather, from Adam Montville."

"He is your father," Peter stated firmly. "Keep thinking that and believing it. I must leave now. Have no fear. Just have faith, as you have had since first you heard the story of your mother and my father."

Peter bade me farewell and was off at a run to harness a rig and drive quickly to town. I walked slowly around the house to the stables for I wished to speak to Uncle Charlie and I hoped mightily that he was available.

He was seated on a bench, sunning himself, and smoking his heavily blackened pipe.

"Uncle Charlie, I'm leaving Montville tomorrow, but before I left, I wanted to talk with you."

"Reckoned you'd likely leave. They been too much for you, eh?" His pipe stem pointed in the direction of the house.

"What do you mean?"

"Well—maybe I oughtn't to tell, but I got me a feelin' I won't be here long either. Not that it makes any difference. I save my money and I can get along fine. But I hate to see them steal and cheat and lie—and get away with it."

"Do you mean Zella?"

"And Martin Collier."

I sat down beside him. "Just what do you mean by stealing and cheating, Charlie? Tell me!"

"The master—how does he know what goes on here? They add to the bills, they pay out money for things that ain't never done—but they pay the money to themselves. Zella's got lots of money in the bank and so has Martin. They even sold some of the furniture that's been in attic storage. Whoever goes to the attic?"

"You're not making this up, Charlie? I know you don't like them."

"Why'd I do that, eh? What's it to me? I could've had

my share had I wanted to throw in with them. I had many a chance, but I ain't that kind. I been treated fine here and I give value for what's paid me. I don't steal."

"Thank you, Uncle Charlie, for telling me."

"I ain't one to talk. I ain't never talked before, but they got plans—big ones—and if they come off, there won't be any more Montville. This place been my home for near fifty-five years. Got so I like it here and I'm hopin' to stay, please the Lord. No bunch of rascallions goin' to move me out unless they take over Montville and the way that niece of Zella's been actin' around your papa, I'm thinkin' they just might."

I walked back to the house slowly, thinking over what Uncle Charlie had just told me and wondering if this information didn't answer a number of questions. And then, as I looked at the great house which I loved, all of it seemed inconsequential to me, for if the man I had called Papa was right, I had no part in this and no right to interfere in any way. Any motive impelling me to was gone. And yet, how could I stand aside and permit Zella and the others to steal and connive?

I entered the house through the kitchen door. Minnie, seated at the table busily mending an apron, looked up in surprise. I went over to the huge cookie jar, just as I had when I was a child, and I extracted one of her large, round, well-sugared plain cookies.

She laughed that soft laugh of hers. "You ain't forgotten one thing, have you, Laura? That's good. That's the way it oughta be. Things happen so they can be remembered—the good things. The bad ones you just cast out of your mind."

"I wish it was as easy as that," I said. "Minnie, I'm going to wash my hair in a little while and I wish to have it dry quickly. Much more quickly than sitting in the sun. Is there a way?"

"Sun's better's anything else, child, but there are always tricks. You heat towels in the oven and wrap 'em around your head. You keep on doing this and in a spell your hair is nice and dry, but it don't fluff out as good as when it's sun-dried."

"Sounds like a good trick," I said. "Did you think it up?"

"Me? No'm. That's how Zella does it. Been doing it that way for years."

I drifted out of the kitchen, still nibbling on the cookie and my heart felt much lighter. I went up to my rooms and found one of the maids there, dusting out the trunks and bags that had just been brought from storage.

"Who gave the order for my baggage to be brought here?"

"Zella, Ma'am. She said you were going away for a spell."

"I see. I'm not packing immediately. When I'm ready, I'll call you."

"Yes'm." She bobbed a curtsy and left the suite.

I closed the door and walked around one of the bags that was in. I walked idly to the window and looked out upon the Montville estate. It had known much happiness—in the early days of Papa's marriage—and it had known much sorrow.

I had hoped that my return to Montville would be a joyous one. Instead, it had been tragic. It seemed that every bit of information I uncovered or heard was filled with bitterness. I pondered what Uncle Charlie had just told me and while I felt no cause for rejoicing in such news, I felt that there must be a reason for Zella and Martin daring to steal and falsify debts. Surely Papa wasn't so stupid as not to realize what they were up to. And if he took no interest in the goings-on at Montville, certainly his attorneys kept careful check of expenditures. Had he told his attorneys not to dispute any claims which Zella made? And if so, why? Also, I recalled Delphine's purchases which she had made during our trip abroad, all of which she had put on my account. Papa had never argued about it. Did he know, or did he think I was an extravagant daughter?

Suddenly curious, I retraced my steps and entered the corridor. There I called Delphine. When she didn't answer, I raised my voice and she appeared in her doorway, wearing a peignoir.

"Come here, Delphine," I said calmly. "I have something I wish you to do."

I drew back into the parlor before she could refuse. Then I hastened into the bedroom, took out the dress I had been wearing on the previous day. It was wrinkled and

needed a pressing. I returned to the sitting room and placed it across the back of a chair a moment before Delphine entered. There was a faint flush to her cheeks, obviously caused by her annoyance with me.

"Delphine, I wish you to take that dress downstairs and iron it," I said, keeping my tone casual. "I shall want it as soon as you have finished."

"That is work for one of the maids," she said boldly.

"It is, usually," I replied. "But I wish you to do it. Now, Delphine."

Her mouth twisted in what was supposed to be a smile. "I will not do it. I never acted as your personal maid before and I do not intend to do so now."

"You're quite sure about that," I said, smiling.

"Quite," she replied firmly. "You had no right to ask."

"I had no intention of having you do it. I merely wished to see how you would respond. You may go, Delphine."

She hesitated, completely puzzled by my manner. "What is this all about?"

"Are you concerned?"

"Not at all. But I believe you are up to something. I believe you intend to try to make trouble for me and my aunt."

"If you and your aunt are doing your work in a proper manner, how can I make trouble? Or are you afraid I might learn something that I'm not supposed to know?"

"You're speaking in riddles and I do not care for them," she said and flounced out, slamming the door behind her.

I hung up my dress and went down to the library. Papa was there and he looked as if he hadn't slept all night. He gave me a harried look as I entered.

"I'm glad you're still here, Laura."

"I do not intend to stay, though I ask your indulgence for a short time. Last evening I was too upset to explain what was in my mind. I wanted to tell you that, in Mama's rooms, I discovered a set of volumes by Ravel Mandarav and Ella Savoy. They are very popular poets. You may have heard of them."

He shook his head and smiled wanly. "My dear, the sort of business world I move in has little time for poetry."

"These two poets were especially noted for the fact that they wrote these poems to one another—or so it is sup-

posed. Through the books, one may read of their growing love in tender and wonderful words and rhymes. It is the sincerity in these poems which made them so very popular."

"Are you trying to convince me that James Brownlee and your mother wrote them? That they are these famous poets?"

"I feel certain of it, for I also found scraps of poetry Mama had written and the style is the same. Peter showed me the poems you gave his mother and they too are the same. Papa, they wrote ..."

"Just a moment. You called me Papa...."

"I'm sorry. It will take a while to get used to the idea you are not my father. At least, that is what you believe."

"Laura, if you are trying to prove that I am your father, there is no reason to. I told you I regard you as my daughter ..."

"But you don't believe that I am. There's a difference. I believe I am your daughter. I feel sure of it. The poetry about my birth was only a poem James Brownlee wrote as a tribute to Mama."

"Tell me, when were these noted poets first published?"

"Their first volume was published two years after I was born."

"Then how do you account for the fact that this particular poem was written so long before?"

"Because their work had not been accepted then. They were trying to sell it, to get started."

His fingers tapped rapidly and nervously on the desk top. "That's what your mother told me. Those are almost her very words."

"You chose not to believe her?"

"That is how I felt."

"At this very moment," I said, "Peter is trying to prove that this was so."

"You informed Peter . . . about . . . what I told you last night?"

"Yes. It was his right to know."

He nodded. "Just how does he propose to go about proving his father and your mother were in love only through a medium of poetic words? Think, Laura, how inane it sounds—and is."

"We do not choose to think it so. But the time to con-

vince you of that is not now. I came here for a different reason. All these years you let me think you were my father and you did much for me, even if it was done without the benefit of your devotion and love. But the fact remains that you did let me grow up believing I was Laura Montville. For that I owe you a great deal."

"You owe me nothing. I wish no more said about it."

"Then you must consider what I am about to tell you is for my own peace of mind. You chose not to believe my mother when she tried to tell you the truth. Now you have chosen not to believe me when I have come to you with stories of a phantom woman, and a little dog. Of attempts to kill me, to frighten me. Perhaps Mama could not convince you she was telling the truth, but now I can prove I am."

"Laura, whatever are you talking about?"

"Just this, Papa. The stories I told you of what happened to me and what I saw, are the truth. The fact is that certain individuals were trying to frighten me into leaving this estate and this house because the longer I lived here, the more likely I was to discover what's been going on behind your back. In fact, my return spoiled it for certain members of this household."

A slow color started to suffuse my father's face, but all he said was, "Pray go on."

"If you will examine—or have your lawyers examine—the expenses and the books concerned with this estate over the past years, you will discover that you have spent a great deal of money on a place where only servants lived—under the direction of Zella."

"Zella has kept up the property very well."

"But at what cost to you. She has sent in bills which did not exist, ordered repairs which were never made, but which you paid for. She has sold articles that did not belong to her."

He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands tightly until the knuckles showed white.

"You have proof of this?"

"You have the proof. Your bookkeepers can detect her pilfering easily enough, and if you have her bank account examined, as well as that of Martin Collier, who is part and parcel of all this, the evidence will be there. Don't you see?"

They are in league to frighten me away and how better to do it than make a young girl believe her mother haunted the estate. Her mother—and her mother's dog. If I did not go willingly, then would I have told you these stories of the seemingly impossible things that were happening to me. Of someone floating in the lily pond, of someone who seized me and dragged me into the pond. Of yet another time when someone stood in the pond and poked among the lilies. The rock fall—who could have handled it better than Martin Collier who knows every inch of the estate and all the surrounding area? You would think me mad and send me away from here."

The man I called my father spoke slowly and distinctly, as if he might be afraid I wouldn't believe I was hearing correctly.

"It is my wish—if you feel that you owe me anything—that you leave this estate as soon as possible and say nothing to anyone about Zella, nor Delphine or Martin. I will see that you are provided for."

"Do you intend to marry Delphine?" I asked bluntly.

"I do not know."

"Oh, Papa, how can you?" I cried. "They are making a fool of you—and me. Getting rid of me would give Delphine a better opportunity to win you and she intends to do it. Delphine is a wayward woman. She cares naught for any one man, but only for money and power. With you, she will have both."

"Meaning you will go to the authorities with your incredible story?"

"With a witness to my incredible story," I said.

"My dear, who will believe you after all the fanciful things which you claim happened to you on this estate?"

"They were not fanciful, Papa. And with the evidence I now have, I am certain I will be believed."

"Oh, Laura, Laura," Papa cried in an anguished voice.

"Why must we be so far apart? I was enchanted—yes, enchanted the moment I laid eyes on you. You are a lovely young woman—so like your mother."

"The woman you scorned," I said bitterly. "Yet you tolerate Zella and Martin and even Delphine."

"Laura, I did not tell you everything last night," Papa said. "It's another story I had hoped never to tell for it is

a crime far more horrible than anything Zella or Martin might have committed."

"What is it, Papa? What is it? And what could be worse than someone trying to drown me in the lily pond?"

"Who was it in the lily pond?"

"You mean—you actually believe it happened?"

His head moved slowly up and down. "Do you have any suspicion of who it was?"

"I thought it might be Felicia Brownlee, at first. But now I do not. I firmly believe it was Delphine."

"Had she any knowledge you were going there?"

"None. That's why I was sorely puzzled as to who it might have been. I went there on impulse."

"Obviously, Delphine was in the pond and took advantage of an opportunity to either frighten or kill you. I believe she is capable of it."

"And you would marry such a woman?" I asked in amazement.

"I may have to. You see, I am of the opinion she was searching for something. I fear she may have found it."

"But why do you suddenly believe these things happened to me?"

"My child, I never doubted it," he exclaimed in obvious torment. "I merely wanted to get you away from here. I feared for your safety. I still want you to leave Montville."

"And I shall, but not until after I hear from Peter. Now—tell me what it is you fear Delphine may have found."

He covered his face with his hands as if he were trying to shut out something horrible. Slowly, my eyes widened as the pieces of the puzzle snapped into place and I arose slowly.

"The burned-out summerhouse! You never had it removed! You would not allow it to be torn down or rebuilt! Nor would you allow the lily pond to be disturbed! Why, Papa? Why?"

"Oh, my God, have pity on me," he cried. His hands uncovered his face and I could see the years of suffering written on it.

"You killed them! They didn't run away! You murdered them!"

"Yes, I murdered them."

"Oh, Papa, how could you? How could you have done such an awful thing? Poor Mama . . . !"

"If you will bear with me, I'll tell you what happened."

"I know what happened! Delphine . . . she found . . . ?"

He nodded slowly. "She must have. They wouldn't be so sure otherwise—she and Zella. Unless they're bluffing, and I can't take that chance. Now you say Martin's also part of the scheme. Well, I might have expected it."

"But how did they know? How did they find out?"

"It wasn't hard to guess. Not for anyone in this house. Your mother running off—taking nothing with her save the dog . . . the same night the summerhouse burned down."

"Fluffy was also in the summerhouse?"

"Must have been. I don't know. I probably gave it all away myself. The manner in which I acted afterwards and the fact that I never came near the estate if I could avoid it, and I had given definite orders the shell of the summerhouse must not be touched nor the lily pond cared for in any way."

Even the terror of the phantom woman, of the supposed body in the lily pond, had been as nothing compared to the shock of this, and yet I found myself standing up under it because I couldn't afford to give way.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"I can't very well prosecute them. I didn't mean this to happen. I was beside myself with rage, out of my mind. First of all, I'd gone through your birth, knowing you were not my daughter, but accepting you as such. I warned your mother not to see Brownlee again, that I wouldn't be responsible if she did. You were too young to recall what your mother was like. The word I have for her is serene. She merely told me that I was mistaken about her, and about Brownlee, and that there was no reason why she should not see him, and if she chose to, then she would. If I denied her this, she would leave. Laura, I know it is hard for you to believe this, but I loved her madly. There never had been another woman in my life, not before or since. I stayed away as much as possible because I was afraid I might find them together."

"What happened the night you killed them? I said emotionlessly.

"You hate me, Laura. I can't blame you, going through

as much as you have. I came home . . . not unexpectedly. She knew I was coming, but she was in the summerhouse with—him. I went out along the walkway and I could hear them making love—the words they spoke . . ."

"Could it not have been their poetry you heard? Could they not have been giving voice to the poems to learn how they sounded aloud. Poetry is written to be read aloud, you know."

"I don't know. I didn't listen, if that's what you mean. After I heard the first words of endearment, I left. I didn't know what to do. I'd been working very hard and I was on the verge of exhaustion. My mind wasn't functioning properly. All I could think was that my wife was in the summerhouse with the man I'd forbidden her to see. No—not forbidden. I asked her, I begged her and pleaded with her."

"Had you been right, she would have obeyed gladly," I said. "But you must have been wrong."

"I don't know. There was a madness in me that night. I finally decided I could bear it no longer. I seized a lantern and went out to order him off my property. When I was halfway across, I stopped. I could hear nothing. I knew what that meant. I hurled the lantern at the summerhouse. If you recall it had a thatched roof. It was very dry and it caught fire almost instantly. I knew what I had done and then I tried to reach them. I was beaten back by the blaze. I . . ."

He stood up suddenly, pulled up his sleeve and bared his right arm. It was deeply scarred from old burns.

"I tried. It was no use. Then I fled, for I was suddenly afraid because of what I had done. I went away soon afterwards . . . I didn't come back for a long, long time. I had you sent to school. Laura, I wanted you to have every advantage in the world. I killed your mother. I did it in a moment of mad frenzy, but I did it. I knew that one day I'd pay for it. I've paid every day of my life since. Only through you could I atone, but I found it almost impossible to face you."

I closed my eyes. I didn't cry for I was far beyond tears. There was no anger in me, no hatred. Just an awful despair. I looked straight at this man behind the desk.

"Thank you for being honest with me at last. May I go now?"

He nodded. "Just one thing more. If I do marry Delphine, it will only be because I'm forced to. For myself I don't care, but there's you. I will not allow anyone else to hurt you, for I have done enough.

"If you marry Delphine, you will but compound the wrongs you have already done. Yet what you do is no concern of mine. I will leave your house as quickly as I can manage and I shall accept nothing more from you again."

"Very well. I had hoped—in a small way—that you might forgive me . . ."

"You murdered my mother. I say, without a reason. Now you talk to me about forgiveness! Do you believe I am that weak, that dependent upon you and all your money?"

"Please, Laura, if you must go, do it quietly and without causing both of us more hurt. At least, allow me that."

"Yes . . . that much you are entitled to. But this is not ended. It never will be until I prove that my mother and James Brownlee were friends, and that their only interest in one another rested in the fact that they were poets and they worked together to compose some of the most wonderful poems the world has ever known. In so doing, I shall prove likewise that Peter Brownlee is not my half-brother."

His eyes pleaded with me for understanding, but he remained silent. I walked to the door and opened it. Zella and Delphine were standing just outside. Without question they had heard every word.

Papa looked up quickly at the sound of my gasp of surprise. Slowly, a harshness crept into his face.

Zella said, "Well, Miss, you of the high-and-mighty ways, how do you like it, now that the truth's been told? If we had not enough proof before, we have it now for we heard every word. I think it is time we all sat down and came to some important decisions."

I backed into the room for if I hadn't, Zella would have knocked me down. Nor did she stop until she faced Papa whose features evidenced his shock at her brazenness. Delphine had followed and stood a few paces from her aunt. Obviously, Zella was going to do the talking.

"I have no reason to wish you harm, Mr. Montville," she said. "But the fact remains that you murdered two people in cold blood. My niece and I was standing outside the door and heard you admit it. Oh, I suspected it long ago. Your wife and Mr. Brownlee disappeared the night of the fire. She wasn't one to do a thing like that—or if she did, she'd have told you so. And no doubt she'd have taken some of her things with her. And in all the years that have passed, someone would have seen one of them, but nobody did. So it set me to thinking these years back that maybe the high-and-mighty master of Montville had killed them."

"What is it you wish?" Papa asked, his voice stern.

"I haven't finished what I was saying," she retorted brazenly. "You brought suspicion on yourself by giving orders no one was to touch the lily pond or the summer-house. As I said, it set me thinking. Now we just heard you admit you killed them."

"I was a fool to have believed I could buy your silence," he said wearily. "Oh yes, I knew what you and Martin were up to."

Her smile was triumphant. "But you didn't dare do anything about it."

"No." He regarded Delphine curiously. "Did you find what you were looking for in the lily pond?"

Delphine gave her aunt a quick glance.

"What we found we'll keep to ourselves so long as you do as we say," Zella retorted.

"Papa, you don't have to listen to such talk."

Papa's arm extended toward me in a placating gesture.
"Be quiet, my dear. Let Zella speak."

Zella gave me a deriding glance and continued. "You been courting my niece. Oh, maybe you didn't figure it that way, you being an old man and she just a poor girl, but I think it's about time Montville had a new mistress and who would be a better or more attractive one than my niece."

She and Delphine exchanged smiles which left no doubt as to the fact that they had discussed this beforehand.

"So that's what you're after," Papa said, his tone harried.

"Papa," I interjected myself into the discussion, "you told me you hadn't met Delphine when she was chosen as my companion on the journey abroad. Is that true?"

"Yes," he replied. "However, it was really a half-truth. Zella suggested her niece. I was here on a brief visit and she told me she thought it would be nice if Delphine was given such an opportunity. I did have Donald investigate her and what he found was only favorable."

"And why shouldn't it be?" Zella retorted.

"She certainly made the most of it," I replied. "She out-fitted herself at your expense, Papa. And I feel that Donald must have interviewed Delphine and been swayed by her charms. You must admit, Papa, that she is skilled in flattering the opposite sex."

"I do," Papa said. "I have been a fool."

"You'll be a bigger one if you don't marry Delphine," Zella said.

"You mean you'll go to the police," I said, eying her directly.

Zella shrugged. "What else should a poor woman do when she knows such dire facts as these? I might be murdered in my sleep."

"Zella," I said tensely, "if you make any further attempts to force my father to marry Delphine, I shall charge her with attempted murder."

"You'll what?" Zella shouted.

"Delphine tried to drown me my first evening here," I said. "I know now she was searching the lily pond, attempting to find some evidence of... of..."

"The murder of your mother and her lover," Zella said, her smile mocking.

"You can prove nothing," Delphine said, her voice almost a hiss.

I smiled. "I didn't suspect you, Delphine, because I touched your hair later that evening and found it dry. But I learned that Zella has a habit of drying hair by warming towels in the oven. That is undoubtedly how she dried yours and thus allayed any suspicions I might have had that you might have attempted to drown me." I looked at Papa. "I know now why Zella and Martin were so arrogant in their treatment of me and why Delphine practically ignored me when we returned home. She felt quite secure here. Of course, she would have preferred that you fall in love with her, thereby making it easier for her. Are you in love with her, Papa?"

"No," he said, his voice firm. "I will say I found her entertaining. I was not aware that she was working with her aunt."

"They were working closely together," I said. "Along with Martin Collier who undoubtedly started that rock avalanche in his attempt to murder me. And that isn't all, Zella. I shall have bookkeepers go over every bill and receipt you have filed for the last twenty years. It is possible you may send my father to prison, even to his death, but, by heavens, he won't go alone. Now think about that. Think about it well. I can make as much trouble for you as you can for my father."

Zella, who had jumped to her feet in rage, now sat down heavily. "You would do that for him?" Her finger pointed at Papa. "He murdered your mother, the sweet soul. He burned her to death."

"Get out of here," I said. "Both of you. I'll give you until this evening to pack your things and be gone."

"He will hang...." Zella raged.

"And you will spend most of your days in prison. If you think it's worth that, the choice is yours. And included in the banishment from this estate is Martin Collier. You may so inform him."

"You'll change your mind," Zella warned me. "You don't want him to hang and he will, surer'n fate. Besides, we don't take orders from you ..."

"Get out!" Papa roared. "Get out of this room, out of this house, off this estate or, by heaven you will land in jail. I don't care what happens to me, but if anything does, I'll have a great deal of satisfaction in watching you sweat. Out of my sight! You make me ill!"

Zella hesitated for a moment, but Delphine pulled at her arm and they finally fled. I closed the door and then I turned around and walked behind the desk. I put my arms around this man I had called Papa all my life, and I kissed him on the cheek.

"Moments ago I thought I hated you, Papa, but when Zella threatened you, I found something in myself which made me aware that I love you very much. However, I can never forget what you have done. Yet in the face of trouble I would stand at your side, as I did now."

He touched my cheek and smiled. "Thank you, my dear. For your help, and for still calling me Papa."

"I know not what else to call you. Good night."

He was sitting down slowly as I left the room. I knew he had much thinking to do, but mine was already concluded. I would remain long enough to be sure that Zella, Delphine and Martin Collier were gone, and that Uncle Charlie, Efrem and Minnie could take care of Papa and the estate, and then I would leave. I had no plans. Up to now, they had been concerned with Peter Brownlee, but those were, of course, now impossible. I could doubt as strongly as I chose, but the fact remained that there was always the possibility he was my half-brother.

But one good thing had come of all this. The sanctuary which was Montville was restored. The estate was no longer a place to be feared by day and especially by night. No one would slide in ghostly fashion, across the lawn.

I retired to my room, not wishing to see either Zella or Delphine again. It would take them a while to pack and leave and I intended to see that Martin Collier left with them.

I picked up one of the volumes of poetry written by Ella Savoy and Ravel Mandaray and started to read their verse. It served to soothe me and made me forget the anger which I had directed toward Zella and Delphine. Once again I thrilled to the beauty of the words and thoughts which were assembled on the pages before me and I prayed

that my suspicions as to the true identity of the poets were correct. I couldn't wait for Peter to return with the news.

Minnie brought me up a tray of sandwiches and a glass of milk. "They're about ready to leave, honey. I thought you'd be happier not seein' them."

"I am, Minnie. How is Papa?"

"I just brought him a tray to the library. He's a mighty miserable man. He's got a powerful lot of thinkin' to do and I 'spect he's doin' it."

"You know what happened here?" I asked.

She nodded. "That Zella's been shootin' her mouth off, but nobody's payin' her any mind. We're all glad to be rid of her and that gussied-up niece of hers. And Martin too. We're powerful happy to be rid of the three of them."

"So am I, Minnie," I replied quietly. "So am I."

"You believe that story about what your Papa done?" she asked, eying me keenly.

"He says it's so."

Minnie nodded. "You hate him?"

"No, Minnie."

"Then soon's the others go, why don't you go down and talk with him? He needs somebody with him, child."

"I will Minnie. As soon as the others go."

She nodded, satisfied, and with a final warning for me to eat the food she brought up, she left the parlor.

It was three o'clock before Zella, Delphine and Martin were driven from the premises by Uncle Charlie. I immediately left my rooms and went downstairs. Papa, as Minnie had said, was still in the library, his tray of food untouched. He was pacing back and forth the length of the room, but when I entered, he stopped. Strangely, he looked better than when I had left him.

"Thank you, Laura, for coming down. I know I won't be seeing you much longer and I want you to know I will do everything to help you get a situation which will be suitable for you. I realize you will take nothing from me and I understand. As for me, I am going to the police and make a clean breast of what I did twelve years ago."

"Oh, Papa," I cried, "What will they do to you?"

"Arrest me, as they should, for I'm guilty of a heinous crime."

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I felt panic flow through me. "Please don't go until after Peter comes here."

"I would rather not delay any longer. I feel ten years younger since I decided to confess to my crime."

"I beg of you, Papa, to wait."

He eased himself into a chair and I sat down opposite him. The merest trace of a smile touched his face as he regarded me.

"How like your mother you are," he said.

"Tell me about her, Papa," I said. "I mean, your life with her when you were happy."

He was silent for a moment and then slowly, awkwardly, as if the words were difficult to speak, he began to talk. Of his first meeting with her, of the ripening of their romance and the early days of their marriage. As he went on, the words came easier and he grew relaxed. I let him talk, for I could see how he had suffered, how he had tormented himself by holding on to every memory which was dear to him. He had never allowed himself to forget.

It was almost dusk when Minnie came to summon us to the table. Even there, he talked, though more somberly now, for he knew the time was growing near when Peter would return. Whatever news he brought, Papa knew I would leave and I admit I felt a certain regret, for he needed someone with him.

When we had sipped the last of our coffee, I suggested he lie down, for he looked weary.

"Should I drowse, please waken me when Peter comes."

"I promise, Papa."

I walked with him to the stairway and watched him as he went up the stairs. I thought of all that had transpired these last few days. Thank goodness, the parties to the conspiracy were gone—but no! There was the little dog! What had happened to him? He must be somewhere on the estate! I knew it was Delphine who had fooled me by pretending to be my mother. It was Delphine who lay face down in the pond and it was she who was raking along the shallow parts of the pond. I wondered if she had uncovered anything. I doubted it or she would have flaunted such evidence in our faces.

I decided to search the estate in an attempt to find the little dog. I no longer need fear for my safety, nor was I ap-

prehensive about moving around in the dark. I left the house and went blithely to the stable to secure a lantern from Uncle Charlie.

"Want me to go with you?" he asked.

"No, Uncle Charlie. You'd better stay here and look out for the horses. Martin Collier might come back vengeance-bent and vent some of his anger on the animals."

"He might, at that. Sure you're not afraid?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of any more," I replied, giving him a reassuring smile.

How foolishly brave I was, for had I known what horror the minutes ahead held for me, I would never have left the house or if I had, it would have been to leave Montville forever.

I swung the lantern as I walked, and its rays were comforting. I reached a point well beyond the lily pond and I began calling the dog and whistling softly to attract his attention. There had to be a dog somewhere about the estate. He was no phantom, no figment of my imagination, for I had imagined nothing. It was all true. Now I had to find the dog and settle every issue involved.

I kept telling myself this but inwardly I knew what I was doing. I was keeping myself busy, trying not to think. But I couldn't stop thinking that Papa had killed Mama. He admitted it and yet I found myself doubting. Why I should, I had no idea for every scrap of evidence pointed to the truth of what he had said. Suddenly I thought of what I was doing to him. If Peter returned with proof that my mother and his father were the poets, if the evidence proved beyond any doubt that they were not in love, but only friends and collaborators in writing the verse, then Papa had made a tragic mistake. He had accused Mama falsely, saddened her life for seven years, and then murdered her—all because of his jealous nature.

Why didn't I hate him? Perhaps first I had, but that was changed now. I felt great sorrow for him, much pity, and there was in me still the capacity to love him as a daughter. Was I that forgiving? I didn't know, but I wanted to go on calling him Papa, to respect him and honor him. Even in the face of what had happened. Of course it was impossible, but I couldn't deny how I felt about him.

While such thoughts drifted through my mind, I kept

calling the dog and moving further and further away from the house. Then I saw the animal. That little white ball of fluff. He streaked across the light of the lantern and was gone, never uttering a sound. I went after him, but he eluded me. Frantic, now, I pursued him.

For ten minutes I saw no more of the dog but then I spotted him once again. He seemed to be in pain for his head was down and he ran crazily, though he appeared headed for some destination.

I was now climbing the slope close by that part of the hill which had been sheared off for its rock slabs. It was below this spot where I'd almost been killed. I'd never been on this hillside before and I stumbled along on the unfamiliar ground, grateful that I had brought a lantern.

Then, most mysteriously, just as if he were a phantom, the dog vanished. I came to a halt, dismayed and puzzled. After a few moments, I heard a faint whining and I began tracing it. Finally, I reached a tall, thick bush and listened. The sound seemed to come from behind it. I thrust aside some of the branches and found myself looking into the mouth of a cave. Now the whimpering was plain, and when I bent down and held the lantern close to the hole in the ground, I could see the little dog scratching at his head.

There was ample room for me to go inside and I did so slowly, in order that the dog would not be frightened. There was cold air in this cave. I couldn't see how big it was and I didn't care, for now I saw what was wrong with the little dog.

Someone had affixed a muzzle so that the poor animal was unable to bark—or eat for that matter. I raised the lantern slightly and noticed that there was a pan of water and another of food scraps, gone green with decay. There was also a stake driven into the ground and from it was a length of rope, broken off. Apparently he had broken free of it for the other end was tied to his neck.

"Poor Fluffy," I said, calling him by the name of Mama's dog. "They tried to turn you into a ghost and they didn't care how much you suffered."

I stroked his head and got my fingers beneath the muzzle to find the buckle. I loosened it and yanked the torturous thing away. The dog promptly rushed to the pan of water and drank greedily, but he only sniffed of the food.

"It's all right," I said. "You shall have all the food you can hold."

I reached out to pet him, but he backed away, frightened and trembling. Now that he was free of the muzzle, he no longer had a great urgency to trust me and, to him, I was no different than the people who had muzzled him and treated him this way.

"Poor Fluffy," I said, again using the name of Mama's dog because I could think of none other at the moment. "I'm not going to hurt you and nobody ever will again."

I tried to seize him, but he was too quick for me. I knew I must get him to the house and feed him. Besides, Peter would certainly be returning soon. There was nothing for me to do but seize the dog and hold him despite his struggles. I would soon make him understand I was his friend.

I approached him cautiously. We were almost beyond the extent of the lantern light, and I suddenly realized this was a bigger cave than I'd anticipated. The dog was understandably frightened and I knew how he felt, for I too had been full of fears and terrors but a short time ago. I bent down, holding out my hand and then I made a grab—and missed.

He whirled about, barking shrilly in defiance—or maybe he thought I was playing a game. I returned for the lantern and, holding it high, I followed him. I'd been bent down in deference to the low ceiling of the cave, but now I could stand erect. The dog barked again and I moved further into the cave. I held the lantern high and found, to my amazement, that I was in a very big cavern. Distantly I could hear the sounds of the underground brook which had very likely once been a roaring river, and had gouged this cave out of the earth.

The dog was barking again, furiously now. I thought perhaps he was in some sort of trouble so I hurried in that direction. I followed the barking and the whining for fully fifteen minutes without even a glimpse of the dog and then I wondered if he could possibly be in some other passage where I could still hear him but not see him.

I called to him. His barks seemed to be more distant. I adjusted the lantern wick for more light and moved on. When I realized I hadn't heard the little dog bark for at least five minutes, I began to think I should turn back.

I lifted the lantern as high as I could. I seemed to be in some sort of passageway now, and not in the big cavern. I reversed my direction and almost bumped into a wall. Turning about, I called out and my voice seemed to echo back from miles away. There was no longer any sound from the dog.

I checked an urge to run. I was lost and I knew it. I didn't have the faintest idea from what direction I'd come.

If I panicked, I'd likely plunge deeper into this cave. From now on, when I moved, I must make certain to remember where I'd been, so if I returned to the same spot, I'd be aware of it instantly. I listened for the sound of the underground brook again, but that was also lost to me.

Walking slowly, watching ahead so that I would not stumble, nor fall off the edge of some subterranean precipice, I kept moving, but there was a growing hopelessness within me about my chances of getting out.

I thought of conserving the oil in the lantern. Then I shook it and found there was still a fairly ample supply, but I had no matches. My main objective was to be sure the lantern kept on burning, for if I were plunged into the darkness of this cavern, I would be forever lost.

I seemed to be following a sort of corridor now. Rock brushed my shoulders on both sides. I hadn't come this way before, but I felt I had to investigate where this led to and, if necessary, go back and not use this direction again. By trial and error, I had to work my way out of here. It was the only way.

My lantern light made something glisten dully ahead of me. I bent down and looked at a leather collar. A dog collar with a brass plate affixed! Peering closer, I was horrified to see the remnants of the skeleton of a dog. Almost in more fear than I'd so far experienced, I extricated the collar and held it close to the lantern where I brushed the film of dust and erosion away until I could read the name.

"Fluffy," I exclaimed aloud. "This was Fluffy!"

I whirled about, trying to get the lantern light everywhere at the same time. If Fluffy had been trapped in this cave . . . perhaps he hadn't been alone. . . . The thought sent horror through me and for the first time, panic seemed about to take possession of me.

I fought back the tears and moved on. I'd lost count of time. I might have been here for hours for all I knew.'

I had to keep going. If I stopped, it would be to admit defeat and I was not yet prepared for that. But there seemed to be no way out. Each turn I made led to somewhere that seemed new to me. This must be an enormous cave, with branches stretching for miles under that innocent looking hillside.

I was growing so tired. My feet were sore from walking over the rough floor of the cave, my muscles were fatigued from bending, straightening, worming my way through narrow passages. I was in one of those now. If I only had some way to mark where I'd been so that the mark would show in the lantern light. I had nothing. I did try to use one stone to scratch the surface of another, but it was hopeless.

I moved on and suddenly I thought I was back where I started, for this was a huge cavern too, like the one I'd first discovered. I cried out happily and walked faster—until I discovered it was nothing but a blind cavern. The only exit was the way I came in.

I wanted to rest, but I couldn't afford to waste a moment. I had to go on—and on. Then I saw the grisly thing close at hand. A skeleton, seated with its back against the wall, its bony hands crossed on its lap as if it were merely resting for awhile. There were bits of clothing, remnants of shoes, a pair of brass-rimmed glasses.

Brass-rimmed glasses! James Brownlee often wore those! I remembered being intrigued by them as a child. Could it be . . . ? I backed away from the frightening thing before me and covered my mouth with my hand to hold back the scream that wanted to come, but my eyes were glued to the remains of what was once a human being.

I had to know. Perhaps there was something else. Slowly, I forced myself forward until I stood before the skeleton. I moved the lamp and bent forward to scrutinize it. The lamp's glow caught the flash of a ring. A signet ring. I bent down to peer at the initials. JB! And there was further proof. Some keys, a fountain pen and two envelopes addressed to James Brownlee. The dryness and the cold of the cavern had preserved them very well.

I stood up. If Fluffy had died here . . . if James Brownlee had been trapped and died here . . . then Mama must be

here too! That meant . . . I could hardly contain myself until I realized that if they died here, so might I. So very well, indeed, might I.

But if Mama was here, I had to find her. I began looking frantically, no longer caring that I was becoming more and more lost. I even called out her name, to have it ring back in the hollowness of the underground world,

i. And then, suddenly, I came upon her and the same feeling of horror swept through me and I stood, paralyzed, while my eyes stared fixedly at the skeletal form before me. My heart pounded madly and I wished mightily for the safety of Peter's arms.

I wanted to flee and mentally called myself a coward for doing so for the remains of what I now viewed was once a living, breathing creature who had lavished love and affection upon me. Forcing myself to a calmness I didn't feel, I slowly approached the skeleton of my mother which set against a wall. Apparently, in sheer exhaustion she had sat down, while James Brownlee continued to try and find a way out.

Then I saw her cameo. It hung from the bony structure of what was once her neck. Beside her stood a lantern. James had left that for her and gone on in the dark, never to return. My mother and James Brownlee had died in here.

Suddenly I felt very calm and unafraid and I knelt down and said a prayer for both of them. It wasn't until I opened my eyes that I saw the notebook beside the lantern. I reached out, picked it up and opened it. There was writing inside and I held it close to the lantern so that I might read what she had written.

On the first few pages were segments of poems, apparently random ideas she was trying out. But further on, there was the start of a letter. I sat there beside the skeleton of my mother and read it.

"My darling Adam,

James has gone to try and find his way out of this cave. I do not believe he can make it. I am exhausted unto death. We have been here for what seems to be days, without food. It came about when we heard a fox, or a wolf, attack and carry off Fluffy. You will remember I

told you there was a predatory animal loose and it must have a lair nearby.

James and I were in the summerhouse reading the poems which were to go into our next book. I shall explain that later. We seized a lantern and searched for Fluffy and we stumbled into this cave. Fluffy was there, badly hurt. The poor dear died soon afterwards. His cries had drawn us deep into the cave and we soon became hopelessly lost. No matter which way we turned, we were trapped, our search seemed to lead us deeper and deeper into the cavern.

I now know full well that I am about to die. There is no longer any hope. So now, Adam, my dearest, I wish to tell you once more that you have been gravely wrong about James and me. The poem which he wrote when I was with child and which you discovered was written as a part of our book.

The child is yours. Laura is your daughter, Adam. Here in the face of death, I vow that to be the truth. I tried to make you understand, but you were not a man to have his mind changed. I write this in the hope that one day you will find us and know the truth. It may also surprise you to know that James and I have been wonderfully successful as poets. We have had six well-received volumes published under the names of Ravel Mandaray and Ella Savoy. We have kept our real identities secret because I knew you would never approve, and James was sure his wife would strongly disapprove.

You see, James and I have been writing this poetry since we were children. We have always been the best of friends, but never have we been the slightest degree in love. You are the only man I have ever loved—and if I do escape from here—the only one I ever will.

I feel myself grow weaker as I write and there is but little oil left in the lantern. Fortunately, I had my notebook and pencil in my dress pocket so that I could write this in the forlorn hope that one day you may read it.

I tried to make you understand, but I could not reach you, my dearest. You made yourself remote and you wouldn't listen or believe. You always were one who had to have all the facts.

In this case, you have but my word. I expected you home tonight—or how many nights have we been in here—and even though you all but shunned me, I looked forward to seeing your dear face. I do love you. I have been eternally faithful. I have given you a daughter of your blood. At least you have that. I pray that one day you will come to believe it.

An hour has passed since I last wrote and James has not returned. I am unable to cry out any more. The light is failing and I feel that so is my life. God bless you and keep you, and grant you the faith that will help you someday to understand. Bless little Laura and watch over her and give her love. You have hurt her so by your neglect. You will be forever in my heart my darling, unbelieving husband"

The last few words were written so faintly that I could barely make them out. But it was enough. Here was the proof that Papa wanted. Here was the reason why, when I should have hated him, I went to his defense and kissed him and called him Papa again. Somehow I'd known.

I gently disengaged the cameo and hung it around my neck. The pencil mama had used, lay on the floor of the cave. I picked it up and turned the notebook pages carefully that they would not be damaged. It was my turn now.

My turn to write a letter that perhaps, one day, someone would find. And now I could tell Papa how I felt, and I could tell Peter that I loved him truly.

But when I tried to write, I could not, for there seemed to be little for me to say. Mama had said it all. I was sorely tempted to remain here, beside her, until I too, was dead. But I knew she would have cried out against that decision.

I struggled to my feet and stood erect—but I hadn't the faintest idea in which direction to walk.

I found an exit, a narrow ledge winding along the edge of what seemed to be a bottomless pit. The oil remaining in the lantern was being rapidly used up.' Without it, I could never have taken the risk of walking along the ledge.

Then I came to another, smaller cave, and I searched this for a new exit. Presently I was making my way through a tunnel where I had to crouch almost double. I had the satisfying feeling that I was on the right way at last and hope added strength to my flagging steps.

I estimated I must have been walking for half an hour since I'd left the spot where Mama had died. I thought I could hear sounds of the brook now. Perhaps if I followed that...

Then I cried out in despair for I discovered myself standing beside the skeleton of James Brownlee. I'd only gone around in another circle. In an hour, I'd have no more fuel and I'd be in this pitch darkness where no natural light had penetrated in probably thousands of years. Once the flame in my lantern went out, I was doomed. I'd no longer be able to move, for each step could be treacherous.

I began to walk faster, praying desperately that I was going in the direction of the entrance. Then a cry of despair escaped me for I found Mama's skeleton again. There was no direct way out. I threw back my head and screamed for help. It echoed and re-echoed until I clapped my hands over my ears to keep from hearing it.

I had already turned down the lantern wick as far as I dared. When I shook it now, I could barely hear the liquid.

"Help me!" I cried. "Help me!"

Again the echo and nothing else. Dry sobs were wracking my throat. I knew I was on the verge of hysteria. Then, as suddenly, a calmness came over me. If I had to die, I would do so bravely, as Mama and James Brownlee had done. If I were to die, this would be the place I would choose. Beside my mother.

But there was also a strain of my father's stubbornness in me and I resolutely put all such morbid thoughts out of my mind. I left the cave, this time by another exit. There was yet a third, so I was choosing between these two, for the third had already proven to take me only in an endless circle.

This time I came out into another of those huge caverns with ceilings so high I was unable to see them. I knew I must be deep in the earth. Every two or three minutes, I stopped to listen intently. The eerie silence in here frightened me, it was so intense.

But I did hear the brook again. Therefore, I must be somewhere near the entrance to the cave. I kept searching for the skeleton of Fluffy, but my lantern was beginning to go out. I had but moments left and very little hope. Of course, I told myself, I would keep moving so long as I could hear the underground brook and hope I would stumble on the opening. If the way was treacherous, it was no more so than sitting down and waiting for death.

Then I heard it. The voice. It seemed to come from miles away. I shouted and screamed and I held my lantern high and swung it. I even turned up the wick all the way to get as much light as possible from the rapidly dwindling supply of oil. I kept shaking it so if any remnants of fuel remained, they might yet reach the wick.

The flame sputtered, but it stayed alight and the voice calling to me was closer. Then I saw another light and I knew I was saved. I wanted to sink to the earth and kneel in prayer, but I couldn't afford to do that yet. Perhaps my lantern couldn't be seen unless I kept it high, so I stood on tiptoe and swung it while I shouted until there was nothing left of my voice.

And then the lantern flickered once more, threw out a great cloud of black smoke and went out. The darkness which closed around me was like that of the grave, but

not for long. I saw the sliver of yellow light, I heard the voice. I couldn't call back for I was too hoarse to utter a sound so I began hitting the lantern against the cavern wall. It made a great noise, a wonderful noise, and just as my strength gave out and I was starting to crumple to the floor of the cave, strong arms grasped me and helped me up.

"Peter," I managed to say in a croaking voice, "Peter..."

"Don't speak now, my darling. Sit down and rest awhile. I know the way out. Your father's waiting and he will mark the entrance with a light and sound if need be. Everything's all right now."

I leaned against him as he eased me to the ground. I let my head rest on his shoulder and I managed to reach up one hand and touch his dear cheek.

"Oh, Peter, I thought I would never see you again," I whispered hoarsely.

After awhile, I felt stronger and able to rise. Supported by Peter, I walked, and he led me unerringly to the cave entrance. He talked, partly to calm me, partly to apprise me of what had happened while I was lost in the cave.

"Your mother and my father are the poets. I have absolute proof from the publisher. They could have sold many more volumes, but they vanished quite mysteriously."

"They are in the cave, Peter," I said. "They both died here."

He was so amazed that he stopped and brought me around to face him. "Your father confessed to me that he had set fire to the summerhouse . . . that they were in it..."

"They had left it before Papa returned with the lantern. To find Fluffy. He too is here. Mama wrote a letter before she died. It explains everything. I have it. Peter, we are not blood relatives."

"Oh, my darling, I knew we couldn't be," he said fervently. "But thank God, for such news. As for the other, it can wait. Your father is beside himself with anxiety. Not for himself, but for you."

Weak as I was, I couldn't contain my curiosity. "How did you find the cave?"

"We were searching for you and we saw the little dog. It ran into the cave. We could easily guess the rest. I had no idea there was such a cavern here. It must be tremendous."

"It is. Once lost in it, without light, you would die. Your father did and so did my mother. He was trying to get out, Peter. He never gave up."

We finally staggered into the open where Papa, Efrem and Uncle Charlie waited. I went straight into Papa's arms and gladly accepted the comfort they offered me while he spoke my name over and over.

I told him immediately what I had found in the cave so that his own fears would be alleviated, but it wasn't until much later that I told him the whole story. When they got me back to the house Minnie immediately gave me a great bowl of hot, nourishing soup and then put me to bed. I slept for eleven hours, not awakening until late the next day.

* * * * *

When I came downstairs the following afternoon, Peter was the first to greet me. He kissed me tenderly and led me into the formal parlor where Papa awaited me. I went over to him and embraced him and I saw that he was holding the notebook Mama had left.

"I have been an idiot," he said humbly, "but thank heavens, my worst crime was only in my imagination."

"We have arranged to have a party enter the cave tomorrow," Peter said, "and everything will be taken care of as it should be. My mother is now satisfied that she too was mistaken in her suspicions and is most contrite. She wishes to see you at your convenience so that she may apologize."

"There is no need for that," I told him, my heart too filled with love to feel bitterness toward anyone. "I shall look forward to getting acquainted with your mother."

Peter's smile was grateful. "Mama's also going to allow me to bring the farm back to life."

"I suggest you do the same to this one," Papa said, smiling. "My New York office has telegraphed me that

there is a great future in the growing of tobacco. You will marry a most astute and clever young man, my dear daughter."

I looked up at my father and my eyes brimmed. It was the first time he had ever called me "daughter." But there would be many times after that.

* * * * *

Everything has turned out exactly as Peter and my father planned it. We have our family now, Peter and I—three girls and a boy. Papa spends much of his time with us and Montville has once more become a warm, pleasant home to which our guests come often and make our days enjoyable.

Mama and James Brownlee are buried in the graveyard nearby, and the whole world knows they were the two famous poets whose verses were so inspiring and will endure for many years.

As for the little dog who lured me into the cave and then evaded me to find his way out so that he could lead my rescuers to the spot—he is our household pet and a lovable companion for our children. He too, is called Fluffy and no spot in the house is forbidden him for it was he who uncovered the secret of the disappearance of my mother and James Brownlee.

As for Zella, Delphine and Martin, we never heard from them again. Despite what they did, I feel no bitterness toward them, for while their behavior was not to be condoned, they were pitiful creatures who cheated and connived and stole and, in the end, lost everything they had plotted to get.

Peter's mother lives quietly by herself, very proud of the fact that she is the widow of so famous a poet. She frequently gives readings of his poems, a fact that makes Peter wince slightly, but he takes it all in good grace.

The summerhouse has been removed and a new one built. The lily pond, once dark and foreboding, is again alive with flowers.

There are still occasional nights when my dreams are crowded with those terror-filled moments in the cave, but

they grow less and less vivid as I grow older. The horror of that night was worth enduring for it helped to uncover the secret of Montville and it brought a new and wonderful life to Peter, my father and me.