



Mills & Boon

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WHITE HUNTER

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He would hardly speak to her!

The sudden, unexpected assignment to go on a government safari in Tanganyika was the chance and challenge of a lifetime for Brenda Somers.

But an even greater challenge was her task of convincing the unconventional, independent Keith Derrington to lead the expedition. Frankly, Brenda was terrified because she had been unnecessarily rude to Keith Derrington the first time they met. Now he looked right through her.

CHAPTER I

FOGGY and chill with frost at its finger-tips, the November twilight touched the great windows of the Airways Terminal, sending its icy breath through the busy swing doorways that poured forth an endless stream of travellers and officials. But in the warm, brightly-lighted interior, it seemed to Brenda, the threat of winter had already been left behind. A winter which would trouble her not at all. This time tomorrow she would have arrived at Nairobi! It didn't seem real. She drew in a long, quivering breath.

Here she was waiting to be whisked through the sky to Africa ... that amazing journey with the unknown, the exotic, the unimaginable at the other end of it! Ever since the staggering moment a fortnight ago when Professor Nairn had called her into his office to tell her she had been chosen by the Royal Research Institute to replace Miss Brookes who had fallen ill while doing a tour of duty at the Institute's Kenya headquarters, she had lived in a daze; enduring inoculations, packing summery garments, saying farewells ...

There had been difficulty with the family at first; five thousand miles can still shock the heart as an unbridgeable gulf in space, even if giant jets do play their fabulous tricks with time. But on the whole, Brenda could congratulate herself, her parents had been reasonable. She was to be away six months, and they had been suitably impressed by the promotion the assignment implied. To be raised from the office rank and file at the Institute and appointed personal secretary to the brilliant Dr. Drayton had seemed to them an honour indeed, though they wished Brenda's initiation did not include an expedition into the wilds of Tanzania, where Dr. Drayton planned to investigate the agricultural possibilities of jungle soil.

Modestly Brenda had pointed out that she was the obvious person to send to Drayton in this crisis. She had, under 'Brooksey's' watchful eye, been doing occasional typing for him throughout her four years

at the Institute; she knew all his fussy little ways. If poor old Brooksey, his long-established assistant, had discovered herself to be the possessor of a heart that wouldn't stand up to the periodic work in tropical climates, she was the only possible alternative.

But her parents, brushing these arguments aside, remained convinced it was because of her outstanding merit that she had been chosen for the promotion and they were openly proud of her. Sharing in her excited anticipation of the adventures ahead, they had pored over large-scale maps with her to find on the expanse of nameless bush the dot that was the Institute's Kenya settlement: Mahamba, five hundred miles north of Nairobi, whole worlds away from the comfortable London suburb which bounded their horizon. They had been brave to let her go.

All the same, Brenda thought now as she walked restlessly up and down, too excited to sit still, it was just as well she had persuaded them not to come to the Terminal this afternoon. These last moments of hanging about waiting for the airport bus might well have strained their resolute cheerfulness to breaking point. Tears of sudden young homesickness swelled in her throat and were sternly repressed. Pacing that ante-room to destiny she held her head high; a tall, slim, chestnut-haired girl with courage in her warm grey eyes, character in the blunt, determined chin. A little anxiously she watched the swinging doors. Time was running on.

Nairn had phoned last night to say he would be at the Terminal to see her off. It was the threat of his official presence that had clinched her arguments against family farewells ... and for that she was grateful to him. Drayton, it appeared, had cabled some last-minute instructions which must be conveyed to her. But if Nairn didn't hurry himself she would be away without them.

Turning in her stride she found herself looking, not for the first time, into a pair of disconcertingly direct eyes. Instantly she forgot Nairn,

aware now only of the vague sense of disturbance which pierced her preoccupation. This man who stared, not boldly or offensively, but with a curiously cold and somehow impersonal concentration, was, she had already gathered, to travel on the same plane as herself. She had noticed him a few moments earlier when the passengers for East Africa had presented themselves to be weighed. Middle-aged business executives mostly, huddled in winter great-coats, pouch-eyed and wan with cold—not a female in the entire collection. So that she was to be the only woman aboard. Mums wouldn't have liked that. Once more, it was as well her mother had not come.

And this man with the cool hard gaze—not middle-aged, nor huddled: standing by the weighing scales Brenda had been uncomfortably conscious of his scrutiny, which was silly of her. A chance fellow-traveller who couldn't matter to her one way or the other. Men did stare sometimes, she was quite used to it; the warm quick glances of homage in passing which the tribute to any girl's youth—and desirability. But this man was different; there was something not quite human about those fixed golden pupils ... like the eyes of a lion, she thought now, with an inward tremor of amusement for the melodramatic exaggeration. Possibly he was simply short-sighted or absently staring, not thinking about her at all.

With an odd nervous flutter of her pulses she watched him walk to the bookstall at the farther end of the hall. Tall, loose-limbed, hatless like herself; in this place of muffled-up humanity his carelessly worn thin dust-coat flung defiance at a climate quite clearly not his own. He was burned dark with sun; the fair hair, the lined and weathered skin, the queer agate-centred eyes all of the same gold tawinness. Once more she thought irresistibly of lions ... and turned to find Professor Nairn at her elbow.

His suburban train had been held up. He had had to wait ten minutes in the icy fog before finding a taxi.

'What a day!' he grumbled, quite clearly blaming Brenda for the inclement weather and the fact that he had to be out in it.

There was so much to say to her, so little time left in which to say it. Bustling her over to a convenient couch, he dragged cables from his pocket. Drayton was in difficulties—and being voluble about it.

'You're not to entrain for Mahamba when you get to Nairobi, as originally planned,' Nairn puffed. 'Entrain' indeed; as though she were a regiment of soldiers. Why could he say simply she wasn't to take the train? But scientists were like that.

'Drayton wants you to wait at a Nairobi hotel—I've got the name of it here somewhere.' He shuffled his papers about. 'He'll meet you there. It may take him a day or two to get there; he can't rush things. He's bringing a wounded man to hospital. Simson, the hunter; it seems he's had a bit of a set-to with a rhino.'

Brenda made a small shocked sound and turned a little pale. Simson was the big-game hunter who had been engaged to conduct Drayton and his party on safari into the depths of the Tanzania bush country, where Drayton was to collect, examine and classify samples of soil and plant life. They would travel by car, or on foot where no car track existed, camping by the way, with a retinue of African bearers to look after them. Perhaps it was the thought of this protracted and improbable picnic which had proved the last straw to the middle-aged Miss Brookes' failing heart. The expedition had already been delayed by her collapse; now Simson, whose function was to protect the party from the attentions of all the wild beasts Brenda hadn't really yet had the courage to think about, had himself been laid low by a charging rhino.

'Please don't get the impression that such accidents are inevitable, or frequent,' Nairn hurried on, avoiding her startled glance. 'It's simply a matter of unlucky, or unskilful, shooting. Sort of thing that would

never happen if you had a man like Derrington along. Drayton wants you to contact him the moment you arrive.'

'But we wrote to him in the autumn, before Dr. Drayton left England,' Brenda recalled. 'He turned the job down flat; said he never touched Government contracts.'

'I know, I know!' Nairn threw in testily. 'I've got the correspondence here for you to take out with you. The fact that Derrington refused our offer some weeks ago doesn't necessarily mean he isn't open now to a little persuasion, especially if it is made to him personally. Find him. Talk him into it.'

'It isn't going to be easy to find him. We only had a post-office box number as his address.'

'Well, go to the post office, to the editor of some local newspaper; anyone you can think of who would be likely to help you locate him. Use initiative, if you've got such a thing! This is the sort of job Drayton wants you for, not merely hours of mechanical typing.' The impatient look he shot at her reminded her uncomfortably that he was the one member of the Research Institute appointments committee who had suggested that she was too young for the Tanzania assignment. She coloured defensively as he rumbled on, saying a little more kindly that in all probability she'd find Derrington without much trouble. 'After all, he's not the type who hides his light under a bushel. The whole population of Kenya I expect keep an interested eye on his whereabouts.'

The legendary Keith Derrington! Thrusting the correspondence file into her over-night bag, Brenda found herself remembering vividly the dusty September afternoon when she had typed out the precis of his record—collected by Brooksey from newspaper files. Son of a coffee-planting pioneer, born and bred in the wilds of a Kenya scarcely yet developed, he had wandered as a child with the blood-

drinking Masai warriors, and at the age of thirteen alone in the bush had killed his first lion with what had apocryphally become a rabbit gun! This feat had fixed his star; the Africans worshipped him, a ipan-child beloved of the gods, touched with the power of the supernatural. His wanderings became more spectacular, his fearless hunting a myth. When, some years later, he had been involved in a tribal quarrel which threatened to spread to ugly dimensions, and succeeded in reconciling the two hostile chieftains, his name hit the London headlines. He became the rage with the fashionable few who had the wealth and the time to indulge in big-game hunting ... the king of guides, a man who gave orders and never took them. Titles kow-towed to him, royalty followed meekly in his wake through the trackless places his superb bush-craft laid open. It had been a blow to Drayton that this paragon among hunters had in a brief and strongly inked scrawl refused to lead the research expedition.

'I am,' he had written, 'allergic to anything that smacks of a Government appointment and cannot undertake to act even in the most temporary capacity as a Civil Servant, being by nature neither particularly civil—nor a servant!' The Institute had tittered at Drayton's rebuff, and Brenda filing away the inky declaration of independence had felt a thrill of sympathy. This bushranger with mutiny in his blood; in a world of ever-increasing regimentation some instinct within her had warmed to him. Idly she had pictured him, a colourful ghost from the pages of a boyish adventure tale; a man, hardly to be considered young—for the later newspaper cuttings had placed him in the middle thirties. But unquenchable youth, she had decided, would look out of his fearless gaze. In fringed buckskins she had dressed him, hung bandoliers stuffed with cartridges about his massive chest, placed a cowboy hat upon his slightly grizzled head ... and promptly forgotten him; a momentary phantasy of heroism to light a dreary office day. And now here she was, not only being ordered to bring him to life, clothe him in flesh instead of shadows, but tone him down into the bargain, to the prim dimensions of scientific research.

'I'll do my best,' she murmured doubtfully and heard the voice over the loudspeaker order passengers for Athens and Nairobi to take their places in the airport bus awaiting them.

Hurrying out into the forecourt she listened in a daze to the professor's mumbled good wishes for the trip:- Her incredible journey had begun. She was on her way to Africa and for the first time in her life she would fly! Already it was as though the wings of her spirit lifted her far above the greasy London streets where unfortunate workers scurried through the fog to their dull offices or shops. Elation sparkled in her grey eyes, glowed in her pink cheeks; glancing round the bus she marvelled at the boredom of her companions—the business executives slumped in their seats like so many stuffed owls, the lion- coloured man, almost invisible at this twilight hour in his neutral-coloured dust-coat, his head buried in a book. Having located him, Brenda lost interest in him, turning to the window at her side. Rubbing a section of its glass clear of frosty vapour she peered with a sense of unreality at small shops, many of them just closing for the day. They had reached some vague and shabby suburb now, where housewives hurried over last-minute shopping, children ran home from school and a policeman on point duty signalled the airport bus on its way.

It was impossible to imagine that these humble lives would continue to function while the bus raced towards unlimited horizons. The children would spend the evening doing their homework, the policeman would go home to his tea, while she, Brenda Somers, took off into the night sky on the first lap of her five-thousand-mile journey. It was as though everything familiar had suddenly come to an end, and she was about to step off the world she knew into utter nothingness. 'To say goodbye is to die a little,' declares the French proverb. But to say goodbye not only to one's friends and family, but to one's country, to every known and customary landmark, is to die a great deal. She was the ghost of Brenda Somers. It was she who was unreal, not these streets, these hurrying shabby, workaday folk!

A little wildly she glanced round the bus, as though to reassure herself her fellow-ghosts still existed. When she turned to the window again she saw that they were approaching the airport and, as they raced through the underpass, her mood swung with an almost violent precipitation, so that everything suddenly became focused to reality again, so clear, so sharp, so wonderful; it was as if she had stepped not into nothingness after all but into a fresh world. There was a shining newness about the big reception hall into which they filed, even the woodwork and paint smelled a little raw, and the carpets and deep lounge chairs still retained the acrid odour of furniture set out for sale in a department store. The air-hostess who came forward to guide her through the mazes of customs, exchange formalities and medical clearance might have been a doll out of the same department store, so trim and golden-haired and pink-cheeked she was in her smart uniform.

After that, Brenda went from one state of private intoxication to another. There was her first glimpse of the great silver airliner shining on the tarmac, the moment when with engines roaring they turned into the wind for the take-off, the sudden uncanny smoothness when the runway slid away from them and she could see the roofs of the lighted airport buildings revolving slowly like an immense turntable: ^ leaning close to the strip of window at her side She watched the panorama of ever-changing sky. They had climbed almost at once above the fog into an unbelievably clear evening. The close-packed floor of cumulus beneath them looked so solid that you felt you could get out and walk on it.

And there was no sensation of speed for all that they were travelling at something like three hundred miles an hour ^, almost no sensation of motion. This discovery surprised Brenda so much that she longed to share it with somebody. The twinge of homesickness returned. She felt suddenly very young and very much alone, awed by that vista of bland impersonal sky.

Turning from the window she saw that the lion- coloured man had taken possession of the seat the other side of the aisle from where she sat. She had in her excitement forgotten about him and rediscovered him now with that odd stirring of her pulses, for the cool agate eyes were still watching her. Uncomfortably she felt her colour mount, and, as though her half-furtive glance was a signal for which he had been waiting, he stood up and crossed the little space between them.

He said, in the casual tone an acquaintance might have used, 'You've been so engrossed with the scenery! I've been wondering if I might borrow your newspaper for a few moments?'

Brenda picked up the flimsy picture daily at which in the airport bus she had already glanced, finding nothing to hold her attention; there had been a Cabinet meeting, a dock strike, and Elsa Darnley, London's loveliest and most publicized actress, had had an ovation at the closing performance of her latest success the night before. Little enough in the way of news; she said so with the graciousness of apology in her tone. He was very welcome to the newspaper, she assured him.

Taking it from her hand without the murmur of thanks the moment seemed to demand, he stood in a strange, abstracted quietness looking down at Elsa Darnley's pictured face; it filled the entire front page and it was a very beautiful face, but Brenda had the feeling he was not really thinking about it. She wished he would move away. There was something overpowering in his nearness, the bulk and the height of him filling the narrow confines of the little aisle. Once more that odd tingling at her nerves! Turning away from him she picked up a magazine. A gesture of dismissal—but he was not dismissed!

He said, 'I ought to have bought this paper— quite a Darnley edition! But I didn't spot it on the Terminal bookstall. I was too busy laying in a stock of heavier literature—heavy in every sense of the word.' The ghost of a smile touched the thin, well- cut lips. 'The kind that takes

ages to wade through in our dark evenings, and comes in handy afterwards for throwing at bats. Things like store catalogues and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. You know our East African bats?'

So he was bound for East Africa, not getting off at Athens; Brenda found herself seizing on this completely unimportant piece of information with unaccountable interest, while she answered that she was entirely unacquainted with East African bats and hoped she might remain so, bats being one of her pet aversions.

'It is my first trip to Nairobi,' she ended, and thought that in honesty she might have added that it was her first trip anywhere, but he seemed to have lost interest in her again and was once more absorbed by Elsa Darnley's face. This time his silence lasted so long that it became embarrassing. Brenda flicked through the pages of her magazine, looked out of the window, coughed a little, fidgeted a little—and still he stood there.

'Miss Darnley is extraordinarily beautiful, isn't she?' she found herself bursting forth at last with an edge of impatience to her tone that made it sound as though Miss Darnley's beauty were an affliction of some kind.

'Yes, she's a lovely creature—if you care for that icily regular type. I was at her show last night and found it all a bit mystifying. A lousy play that ran twelve months, and came to an end with the audience, mostly women, standing on the seats of the auditorium screaming for more.'

'It wasn't a good play,' Brenda agreed, recalling her visit to the Darnley triumph one summer evening, now lost in the mists of her receding past, so that it seemed to be something that had happened aeons ago. She had gone with her parents, for a birthday treat, and they had had supper afterwards in a large and showy popular restaurant which, in spite of its air of grandeur, had smelled of fried

fish and chips. *Black Orchids*, the play was called, and it had dealt in three unevenly written acts with the emotions of a divorcee who lived in the exotic atmosphere of Miami's luxury hotels and beaches. Elsa Darnley was the divorcee, of course, and she wore exquisitely revealing garments in the beach scenes and still more exquisite negligees and dinner gowns in her hotel, while three men, including her ex-husband, got themselves all worked up about her; until in the third act the field was thinned out by a little shooting, the ex-husband dying in Elsa's arms. Brenda had wept over that bit, which seemed quite incredible to her now, so that she said defensively, 'But even if it was a rather sloppy play, Miss Darnley handled it superbly. Her acting is really amazing!'

'It always was,' the lion-coloured man murmured to himself rather peculiarly, and without another word returned to his own seat.

Brenda opened her magazine and read through an entire short story without taking in one word of its meaning. The behaviour of the man the other side of the aisle was far more extraordinary than anything the most ingenious of magazine stories could supply. The paper he had so eagerly borrowed lay on the small table before him, unopened. For moments at a time he would appear to be studying that luscious front page, then he would slump forward, his head buried in his hands, and finally slewing round on one elbow he transferred his cool agate gaze to Brenda again. Whenever her glance strayed unwillingly in his direction, there he was watching her. It was horrible, like some sort of refined torture. And yet there was something so impersonal about the whole thing that it was silly to let it get on one's nerves. That haunted faraway look on the lean, strong face, as though he were thinking of anything on earth but the stranger who happened to be in his range of vision. A lost, unhappy look.

Resolutely Brenda turned her back and devoted herself to her strip of window. She watched the moon arise until dinner was served and as soon as her tray had been whisked away by the pleasant young

hostess she lay back in her deep luxurious armchair and tried to sleep. It had been a broken, emotional night at home last night. She thought of her mother's drawn and anxious face this afternoon as they kissed 'goodbye' in the small familiar hall with its shabby linoleum and laden hat-stand. Presently she would begin her first letter home. She thought of Nairobi and for the first time realized how much she was going to hate the enforced wait there, hanging about in a strange hotel; remembered with a small surge of panic that she was supposed to find and interview the formidable Derrington. But it was no use, she couldn't really concentrate on her thoughts, couldn't escape from that odd pull at her nerves— as though the watchful eyes of the man the other side of the aisle were compelling her to offer some response. Which of course was absurd. She was over- stimulated today, strung up, imagining situations that didn't exist. It wasn't like her to be so self- conscious ... this queer sense of an almost tangible force closing in on her! Perhaps it was the effect of being shut up in so enclosed a space. Blotted completely from sight by the deep high-back armchairs the business executives might not have existed. It was as though she were quite alone in the wilderness of the night sky with this man who so clearly conveyed to her his inarticulate urgency.

Turning on her side she took refuge in moonlight once more, watching the great silver wing beneath her. Listening to the hypnotic hum of the mighty engines, ease came to her and presently she drifted into a doze.

When she wakened from an unexpectedly deep sleep the lion-coloured man was sitting calmly beside her—in the extra seat which had been tacitly allotted to her because the plane wasn't carrying its full complement of passengers. She had used it as a parking place for her wraps, her books; and he had quite coolly moved these things to take possession of it. Panic stampeded through her nerves as she sat up, flushed and dishevelled.

He said in his off-hand way, 'Sorry if I awakened you. I was just returning your paper.'

'But you needn't have troubled. I didn't want it.' Her voice was rasping, unsure, as she met his clear intent look. He had, she thought, the clearest eyes she had ever seen, direct as the eyes of an animal... or a savage; some quality of ordinary human reserve missing. Frightening eyes that ignored the accepted barriers! Somehow he gave the impression that there *were* no barriers; it was that which made him so disconcerting. Nervously she put a hand to her tumbled hair.

'Don't!' he protested softly. 'It looks so right the way it is!'

The angry colour flooded her cheeks. How dared he speak to her like this! But even while she searched for the crushing phrase which would end this strange encounter he was leaning over her, towards the strip of window, pointing to the tangle of bright, lights into which they seemed to be rapidly descending. They were running into Athens, he said. She could feel the light, firm pressure of his shoulder against her own—a momentary contact, yet it sent her pulses racing, clouded her anger.

The loss of altitude was doing queer things to her ears now, making them ache acutely. Through a blur of pain she heard her companion announce that they would have an hour at the airport. 'I've had an invitation from the chief pilot to go along to the pilots' mess for a drink,' the quietly assured voice went on. 'Perhaps you'd like to come along, too, and meet him. He's a good bloke; friend of mine --'

The pain in her ears was agonizing now, the confusion of her senses so overwhelming that she could only take refuge in retreat from a situation which baffled her more and more. This man's cool assumption of friendliness—her own exaggeratedly intense reaction to his every word and look.

She said coldly, 'Thanks, but I don't drink.'

'You could have tea.'

'I prefer to have tea alone, thank you.'

For an instant he looked startled, curiously hurt.

'You aren't being very neighbourly, are you?' he said. Some hint of desolation in his tone tugged at her heart, but she met his level glance squarely, every instinct of defensiveness on the alert. 'Is there any reason why I should be neighbourly?' she countered stiffly.

'None at all.' He shrugged, seemingly suddenly bored with the whole thing. 'Only,' he said as he turned away, 'that it's a long, dull journey, and I thought you might care to meet the skipper; people usually do.'

Like being invited to the captain's table at sea, Brenda thought later, as she drank a solitary coffee in the airport restaurant. The thought of returning to the plane nagged at her; the rest of the long night ahead and the lion-coloured man sitting but a hand's breadth away! This vague sense of disturbance; like an intimation of destiny. Brenda shrugged the thought away. The whole trip was a challenge to destiny. Silly to allow a complete stranger to become mixed up with an emotionalism for which a momentous journey was responsible. Perhaps flying affected her nerves, made one a little crazy, she reflected; and on a sudden impulse decided to give in to her inward trepidation, and ask the steward to allow her to change her seat. As the plane was half- empty it ought to be easy enough. It was. With a minimum of fuss she found herself installed in a comfortable corner well forward; so far away from the troublesome stranger that she need not think about him any more.

Firmly she settled down to begin her first letter home; grew satisfactorily absorbed in it and slept afterwards through an endless night in which she dreamed she was throwing books at a charging

rhino with wings like a bat. The oddest rhino with lost golden eyes. She woke with tears on her lashes to find the sun shining. There was desert beneath the silver wing-tip now. She was travel-weary, a little dazed. The vast swamps that succeeded the desert, the stretches of tawny bush country, the flash of stripes as a herd of zebra galloped away from the noise of the plane, were things seen in a dream.

They were flying low then, over densely packed blue-green forest, and all at once she saw the cluster of airport buildings that was Nairobi. They had arrived.

Stiff from the long hours of inaction she stumbled from the plane, feeling lonely and lost. If only there had been someone from the Research outfit to meet her! This cool grey day that might have been an English day; she had been told she would not encounter tropical heat until she got to Mahamba, but somehow she hadn't believed it. Africa ought to be blazing ... exotic. The only touch of the exotic so far, however, was the superb young Negro who carried her luggage, speaking to her in soft pidgin English, calling her 'Memsahib'.

With a nervous plunge of her heart, which she tried to ignore, she saw the lion-coloured man some distance ahead of her, disappearing into the Customs building. She herself was bound for the Immigration Office, and by the time she reached the Customs department the stranger, finished with formalities, was disappearing once more through the ultimate exit of the airport, followed by an African bearer who carried his one small suitcase and a canvas- wrapped object which might have been a rifle.

So that, she told herself firmly, was that. He had gone—vanished out of her life as fellow-travellers do; irrelevant as the clouds she had watched as they flew, and as vaporous a memory. This sense of anticlimax, of curious desolation, could have nothing to do with the thought of her strange encounter; she was tired, quite hazy with

fatigue, a little homesick again perhaps. Five thousand miles was a long way!

Unlocking her bags she waited for the uniformed official to attend to her; only that he seemed in no hurry, gazing after the lion-coloured man's retreating form. Turning to a second official she heard him say, 'Nifty job of work that Rigby 475 rifle Derrington picked up in London; set him back a hundred quid; he's just shown me the receipt.' He turned to Brenda; saw a girl with wide, startled grey eyes. 'Anything to declare?' he demanded with the routine smile he used to put female travellers at their ease.

'No, nothing.' Brenda gulped. 'Excuse my asking, but did you say that was Mr. Derrington ... *the* Mr. Derrington who went out just now?'

'Yes, miss, that was Keith Derrington, the hunter.' The young man's voice held a note of boyish reverence.

CHAPTER II

CASUALLY he glanced through the contents of her cases, passing her through with his little markings of green chalk. Mechanically, Brenda snapped locks, fastened straps in place. Keith Derrington miraculously delivered into her hands, offering courtesies, friendliness ... and she had snubbed him! In that first moment of cold horror it did not occur to her that there could be any retrieving of the situation. But as she turned to follow the African porter a fresh thought assailed her and she stood still, the colour whipping into her cheeks. Something like relief was pounding in her heart now ... relief mingled with a trepidation which made her feel faintly sick. No matter how great a fool she had made of herself on the plane it was still her duty to seek Derrington out and try to get him for the safari. She would see him again!

Going back to the barrier she asked the young Customs officer if he could tell her where the famous hunter lived and, seeing him hesitate, added that she had a message to convey from Dr. Drayton of the Research station at Mahamba.

Mr. Derrington, it seemed, lived in the district of Mehetmbe, some twenty miles distant. 'But he's staying at Root's for the next couple of days, I believe,' the young man ended.

Murmuring her thanks, Brenda departed. In the taxi which carried her into the town she sat limp and unseeing. Root's. That was the hotel at which she also was to stay while waiting for Drayton. Once more Fate was playing into her hands, but she was too distraught to be grateful. The thought of the apologetic approach she would have to make to this man, who had ceased to be anonymous and loomed before her now in the aura of his legendary renown, filled her with cold apprehension. At the imposing entrance to the hotel presently she stood hesitant. If she were to walk straight into Derrington in that glittering foyer she would ... die! Just to be given time to wash,

change her frock, rest a little before facing the ordeal that awaited her. Sending up foolish, wordless little prayers she forced herself on.

The foyer, however, was mercifully empty save for the kindly English manager who welcomed her. Dr. Drayton, he said, had telegraphed, booking a room for her. She signed her name in the register directly beneath the strongly inked signature already familiar. Keith Derrington. How insignificant her schoolgirl script seemed beneath that dominant scrawl! With a hunted feeling she followed the grave servant to her room, a haven of refuge with its white-curtained bed, soft carpet and inviting armchairs. There was, she saw with a pang of pleasure, a private bathroom attached.

She spent the next hour or two in a hiatus of false peace, unpacking the things she would need for her brief stay, having a long leisurely bath, finishing the letter home. She had lunch in her room, dozed the afternoon away on her comfortable bed, still feeling the fatigue of the flight and her broken night. When the sudden dusk of Africa turned into an even more sudden darkness at an unexpectedly early hour, for it was not much more than six o'clock, she began to dress slowly, reluctantly and yet with extraordinary care. Lingered before the perfectly lit mirror she saw herself young and wide-eyed, her glance brittle, keyed-up, the line of her soft red mouth too tightly compressed. It was the thought of going downstairs into some vast and brilliant restaurant, to have dinner alone, that was making her nervous, she told herself—this being a stranger in a very strange land.

Crossing the foyer presently, she entered tentatively the first public room she came upon; a tall, slim girl in a clinging sapphire frock, her head held high. No one must guess how lost and alone she felt in this lounge filled with gay and chattering groups. Her grey eyes, raking the scene a little wildly, found Derrington—standing at a distant chromium bar counter. With a sickening lurch of her heart she sank down on to a nearby couch, and, watching him in a sort of agonized fascination, tried to imagine what she would say when she

approached him with her stumbling apologies. Then suddenly he was moving in her direction, crossing the wide room with his odd loose-limbed stride. Drawing level with her couch he looked full at her—in blank unrecognition—and passed on, disappearing into the dining-room where presently she must follow him and choke her way through her solitary meal. So that was it. He wasn't going to acknowledge her. Naturally he wasn't going to acknowledge her. What else did she expect? Hadn't she made it clear enough on the plane that she didn't want to have anything to do with him? And yet, somehow, in planning "her miserable little apologies she hadn't reckoned with this cut direct. A dreadful sense of desolation swept over her, tears pricked in her throat. Simply because she had muffed the first important job Dr. Drayton had given her to do. This exaggerated emotion, this personal drag to a situation that, awkward as it was, could never be personal. Oh, she was being absurd again ... crazy. She'd better go and eat and get it over and if Derrington evaded her tonight she would track him down tomorrow, force herself upon his lofty attention, swallow her humble pie --

Standing up to find her knees trembling beneath her, she saw the English manager approaching her, a small plump woman at his side; a woman in a fussy out-of-date frock patterned with the most awful roses. The mousy hair piled up on her head in thick plaits was even more out of date than the frock, and yet there was something instantly appealing about the round, kindly face. She looks like somebody's mother, Brenda thought with a homesick pang, and heard the manager say with the triumph of a man who has come to the end of a troublesome search, 'Ah, here you are, Miss Somers. This is Mrs. Trayner, who wants to meet you.'

Mrs. Trayner put out a square, substantial hand. 'I'm from the Mahamba Research Station, Miss Somejs, my husband is the Veterinary Officer there. Dr. Drayton wired me yesterday that you would be arriving ... asked me to look out for you ...'

'But how kind of Dr. Drayton . . . and how kind of you,' Brenda cried, the dreadful load of loneliness and shyness slipping away from her as she looked into Mrs. Traynor's smiling blue eyes.

I'd have been at the airport this morning, only that I had to take the children to the dentist; that's what we're here for, that and a spell of shopping.' Mrs. Trayner tucked a friendly hand under her arm. 'Let's go and find some dinner before all the best things are eaten! The food is such a joy here after our rather monotonous diet in the wilds ...' She chattered on happily as they entered the great dining-room, already well filled; so that it wasn't possible at first to spot Derrington; for which Brenda was thankful. She could almost forget about him, listening to Mrs. Trayner's delightfully spontaneous account of herself and her doings. She came to Nairobi only once or twice a year and it was obviously a momentous occasion in her quiet existence. The children, who were in bed now, had needed braces for their front teeth. Gay was eight and Peter seven. 'Why they should both have uneven second teeth when their milk teeth were quite straight, I can't imagine,' she chatted on. 'But in any case they wanted footwear for the rainy season and I simply had to have a new mackintosh this year, in spite of the ghastly price they are, out here. If only I'd known you well enough to have asked you to bring me one out from England...'

'Oh, but I wish you had!' Brenda put in eagerly.

They talked shopping with feminine enthusiasm for a while, comparing prices at home and abroad. Brenda poured out questions about life in Mahamba —there were so many things she wanted to know. Miss Brookes' occasional letters hadn't been very illuminating. Poor dull conscientious Brooksey. 'Did you know her?' Brenda asked.

Mrs. Trayner laughed. 'Did I know her! My dear, as you'll soon discover, we live in one another's pockets at Mahamba. Brooksey was in and out of Laholo, that's our bungalow, all the time. The last week before she sailed, when she really needed nursing, I tucked her up in

my spare room bed and kept her there.' The plump face shone with good nature and Brenda felt herself growing more and more at ease. What a darling this round, shabby little woman was!

She was speaking of Simson's accident then. Dr. Drayton had wired asking her to go to the Kenyatta hospital and make arrangements for the wounded man's reception. 'That's another reason I had to let you arrive this morning unmet,' she explained.

'Odd, isn't it, that the moment I turn my back on Mahamba something catastrophic has to happen! It isn't going to be an easy journey for them, bringing a wounded man five hundred miles in an improvised ambulance.'

'How badly wounded is Mr. Simson?' Brenda asked with an inward tremor.

'I haven't been able to get many details, but I gather somebody with a pretty quick trigger finger must have been standing close by when that rhino charged, otherwise there wouldn't be any need for this journey to hospital at all! A charging rhino isn't easy to dodge—heavy as they are they can move at lightning speed when roused.'

Brenda shuddered and her eyes grew wide. 'Do they ^.. often make these attacks on people?' she asked, her lips dry. Nairn had spoken reassuringly of the whole affair, but after all it was easy enough to take a light-hearted attitude towards the wild beasts of the African bush from the safety of a London office.

'Wounded rhinos always attack,' Mrs. Trayner said. 'But with a really first-class hunter there would never be such a thing as a wounded rhino—merely a dead rhino. They are the sort of creature one must never shoot at except to kill. Simson was unlucky ... and, if the truth must be told, not a hundred per cent skilful, I suppose.'

The sort of thing, Nairn had said of the accident, that would never happen with a hunter of Derrington's class. And, remembering this, Brenda said, 'Dr. Drayton wants me to try to get Keith Derrington to take on the safari.' As she spoke his name her heart stirred in her breast and the slow, bright colour stained her cheeks.

'Derrington?' Mrs. Trayner's eyebrows went up. 'He's marvellous, of course, but not easy to rope in; famous enough to be choosy and he rather shies away from anything that smacks of officialdom; prefers private clients every time. But if there's anything I can do to help you ... I've known him since he was my Peter's age.' She glanced round the crowded room. 'He's staying here, by the way, though I haven't run into him yet. We'll find him after dinner and I'll introduce you to him.'

Brenda gave her a despairing glance. 'He was on the plane coming out from England,' she began, and found it quite impossible to go on with the shaming little story.

Mrs. Trayner nodded. 'Oh yes, I suppose he would be. I heard he'd just got back from a ten-day trip—taking a pair of baby antelopes of a rare species to some American zoologist who was to meet him in London.' She laughed. 'We all know one another's business in Kenya, as you'll very soon discover ! Didn't you get a chance to ask him about the safari on the plane?'

'I had no idea who he was,' Brenda murmured evasively, keeping her eyes fixed in wretchedness on the delectable sweet before her, so that she entirely missed the frenziedly beckoning gestures Mrs. Trayner was making, and it was with a sense of the profoundest shock that she discovered Derrington presently standing at her elbow.

'Derry, how nice to see you! Have you had coffee yet? If not, do join us. This is Miss Somers who is going out to the Mahamba Research Station.'

In dull agony Brenda listened to Mrs. Trayner's bright voice chirping so confidently the conventional words of introduction. She watched Keith Derrington's lean face go hard and closed as he slid into the chair at Mrs. Trayner's side. 'How do you do?' he murmured formally.

'How do you do?' Brenda echoed desolately, forced for the second time to accept the blankness which ignored so unmistakably their earlier encounter. Almost at once he had turned back to Mrs. Trayner and together they plunged into the sort of old friends' gossip which so effectively excludes the newcomer. Choking down the exquisite raspberry and cream dessert Brenda felt as though she were eating dust and ashes.

They had got around to Simson's accident then, Mrs. Trayner saying in her nice helpful way, 'Dr. Drayton is hoping you'll be persuaded to step into the breach, Derry. Miss Somers will tell you'

He didn't so much as glance at her as she began to falter out the feeble beginning of a sentence which trailed away. It was to Mrs. Trayner he said, with an imperious tilt of his tawny head, 'But Drayton has already had my refusal to take on his safari.' His tone held a finality which seemed to close the discussion before it had had a chance to begin.

Brenda felt her spirit rise. She wasn't going to be treated like this! Her grey eyes flashed as she leaned across the table, impelling his attention. 'We were hoping you might reconsider your decision, Mr. Derrington.' Above the heavy beating of her heart, her voice was steady and curiously sweet, touched with conciliation, with pleading, with all that she must try to convey in this oblique encounter which left, so untidily, so much unsaid. Too difficult now to embark on apologies which Mrs. Trayner would not understand, and which Derrington himself had made impossible. This unexpected introduction which was proving to be so unhelpful after all. It would have been better if she had tackled the great man alone.

'Dr. Drayton will be meeting me here in a day or two,' she persisted against his stony silence. 'So that if you feel like talking it over with him.'

'I don't. And I probably shan't be here when he arrives.' He stood up, his hand laid in a gesture of long familiarity on Mrs. Trayner's shoulder. 'Sorry I can't stay for coffee, Meg, but I've got a poker date with the lads.' He nodded curtly to Brenda and strode away.

In an awkward pause which followed she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She felt curiously empty and inert, as though not only the difficult conversation but everything in her life had come to a full stop. Across the table Mrs. Trayner's eyes conveyed commiseration. 'He might have been more polite about it,' she said quietly. 'But never mind, my dear, Derry is like that. Temperamental as a box of firecrackers! And he seems to be at his unapproachable worst in female society --'

Brenda picked up her coffee cup with a shaking hand. He hadn't been unapproachable on the plane.

'There's a streak of cruelty in him,' Meg Trayner went on, speaking slowly, reflectively. 'The cruelty that comes perhaps from having been rather badly hurt.' Her round kindly face lifted to Brenda imploringly. 'I'm fond of Derry and I hate seeing him show himself to you in this unfavourable light. He can be so charming.'

'I know,' Brenda whispered dully, and at Mrs. Trayner's questioning glance added hastily, 'I mean he was so different when he was just chatting to you as though I were not here.'

'Life does things to people,' Mrs. Trayner said. 'Twists them, changes them. He wasn't always like this.' She hesitated a moment and then went on: 'There was, you see, a woman in his life once. He was very young and it mattered to him a good deal. She treated him

abominably. It was as though he turned his back then on all thoughts of ... that sort of happiness. I don't think he ever really loved again and without love the heart can grow very bitter.'

She smiled apologetically. 'I'm making all this sound very portentous, I'm afraid. And it's really nothing to do with his behaviour tonight. It's just that... I don't want you to feel too badly over his rudeness. He is a really grand person in his own odd way.'

'I'm sure he is,' Brenda agreed in a small hurt voice.

When they spoke again it was of plans for the next day. As soon as they were finished with the dentist in the morning it would be rather fun to drive out to Blue Posts Hotel, Mrs. Trayner suggested; Nairobi's most glamorous play-spot, thirty miles out into the bush. 'Something you ought not to miss,' she insisted kindly. 'The food is wonderful, there's a super swim-pool, the most amazing flower gardens and the wild Thikka Falls thrown in. There's a cave behind the falls where you can stand and watch the water pour down—the children adore it,' she ended in motherly content, Keith Derrington's bad manners quite forgotten.

But the thought of him haunted Brenda all through the day that followed, spoiling what might have been so memorable an excursion. East Africa at its most exotic and beautiful. But she was seeing it through a mist of painful preoccupation, the urge to get back to Root's hotel overwhelming her. She ought not to have come on this expedition. If she had stayed around the hotel lounges she would surely have run into Keith Derrington again, and there might have been another chance to talk to him about the Research safari. There *had* to be another chance. It was the first important task which had been given to her and the way she had mishandled it filled her with shame.

Dressing for dinner that evening she found her hands shaking with nervousness and haste. 'I don't suppose I shall be here when Drayton arrives,' Derrington had said last night. Supposing he had already left! The possibility left her with a sick sense of loss. If she were never to see him again. Was it only her zest for her job which made the prospect so strangely disturbing? A man whose urgent glance in their very first encounter at the London terminal had pierced through the defences of her self-possession. That sense of his nearness in the plane, the vibration of some sympathetic chord which seemed to have trembled between them. Oh, but she was imagining things again, building up whole edifices of emotional significance on the flimsiest evidence. He had been casually friendly and she had snubbed him. It probably mattered to him little enough, arousing no more than the flash of ill-temper to which he had treated her last night. What a fool she was to make any more of it than that! He would go his way forgetting her ... had perhaps already gone.

The thought sent her hurrying in breathlessness to the brightly lit lounge. Root's was working up for its evening gaiety—and surely more stridently gay tonight than it had been the night before. When she saw Keith Derrington standing in his familiar corner of the bar, tall, tawny-headed, endearingly untidy in that conventionally dressed crowd, relief, warm and irrational, swept through her.

Then at a second glance she realized that he was not alone. Standing by his side, so close that her head might have rested against his heart, was a woman whose deceptively simple black frock made every other female in the room look provincial and frumpy. That familiar heart-shaped face with its studied impassiveness, its hint of damped-down fires; the large deep eyes under the sweeping black lashes, brilliantly green as the emeralds which swung from the small white ears ... Elsa Darnley!

Incredulously Brenda stared, while the English manager, his coat-tails flying, went tearing past her. Magnesium flared somewhere as a press camera clicked.

'You never saw such a to-do!' panted Meg Trayner at her elbow. 'Come over to this corner couch where I've parked our drinks and let me tell all! That's Elsa Darnley with Derry.'

'I know; I recognized her,' Brenda murmured, dazed. Air travel that could whisk people across the world in a space of hours ... nothing really surprising in *that*. But Keith Derrington and Elsa Darnley!

'The hotel has been in an uproar ever since she arrived on the noon plane,' Meg was relaying with relish for the sensation. 'London newspapers cabling, press men coming in by air from all over the country. Seems she has taken everyone by surprise dropping in all unannounced like this ... her first visit home for something like fifteen years.'

'Home!' Brenda echoed stupidly. Somehow one never thought of the glittering Elsa as having anything so domestic as a home; vaguely one knew she had hailed from somewhere overseas ... in some dim and distant past long since swallowed up: by the rising tide of her successes.

'Her people had a coffee shamba right next to the Derrington estate,' Meg offered, giving Brenda rather a wild glance, as though in that simply stated fact depths of significance lurked. For a moment or two she sat silent, her lips tightly pursed, her cheeks puffing themselves out as if she might be about to burst. So clearly holding back the details her bald announcement had left untold, that Brenda stared at her, waiting and expectant. Keith Derrington and Elsa Darnley! she thought in strange unease, and she could see again Derrington standing in the aisle of the plane, a picture paper held in his lean, tense hand...

'The woman in his life!' Meg Trayner exploded, indiscretion apparently triumphing. 'The girl I told you about last night... who had wrecked his life so romantically --Well, there she is standing by his side at the bar as coolly as if she hadn't walked out on him on their wedding eve, fifteen years ago, to run off with some film magnate or other. Oh, it was all quite respectable, there was a Mrs. Film-magnate in the party to chaperone her and a film contract already signed and tucked away in Elsa's nice new 'going-away' handbag. She had, it turned out, been spotted by a wandering talent scout when she was playing in an amateur dramatic club performance at Nairobi. There had been a screen test, she said, but she had forgotten all about it in the excitement of her approaching marriage. Then ... bang on the eve of her wedding day this film magnate turns up, offering her a Hollywood contract. She couldn't be quick enough grabbing it, throwing Derry and her wedding to the winds without a qualm. They were to have spent their honeymoon at Thikka Falls— where we went today.'

Brenda picked up her sherry glass with an unsteady hand. 'Blue Posts!' she echoed in a thick voice as though that final detail were somehow the climax of the whole cruel story. 'But how awful,' she murmured tritely.

'And now she suddenly decides to turn up again,' Mrs. Trayner went on, half in horror, half in the delight of any normal woman biting into a good juicy slice of scandal. 'Says she has a month to spare between theatre engagements and wants to do a bit of shooting. She was a keen hunter as a girl... went everywhere with young Keith. Seems to think she can pick up the threads just where she let them drop and is asking him to take her on safari. But he's not having any, or so Hortington the manager tells me. He doesn't seem safari-minded at the moment ... though he'll have a job to side-track our Elsa if she has really made up her mind!' Mrs. Trayner laughed ruefully. 'I know! I had her in my kindergarten in the dim long-ago when I was a very shy teenage

pupil-teacher and Elsa was six years old -- Good heavens!' She broke off. 'They've seen us. He's bringing her over --'

Jerkily, Brenda put down her glass of untasted sherry, saw unheededly the liquid slop over on the glass-topped table, on to her sapphire frock. How beautiful a thing they could make of the mere crossing of the room, these two; the big sunburned man with his proud head and easy hunter's tread; the small-boned dark woman, trained to the control of every muscle in her perfect body—lissom as a birch tree in the wind she moved, the gaping onlookers making way for her, as slowly and with queenly dignity she advanced.

'Meg, my dear!' That low-pitched, husky, world-famous voice! With a gesture too beautifully timed for real warmth Elsa was kissing the flustered Mrs. Trayner. Somehow they were all sitting down together then. There was Mr. Hortington himself at their side, taking orders for fresh drinks.

'Plain lime juice for me, Keith darling,' Elsa fluted sweetly. Smiling she turned to Brenda. 'Keith tells me you and he came out on the same plane yesterday.'

'Why, yes ... we did,' Brenda murmured, quite unable to keep the astonishment out of her tone, or the puzzlement out of her wide grey eyes as she turned to Derrington. Why this candour suddenly? Why on earth in this moment of shattering reunions should he have mentioned her existence at all?

Steadily, compellingly, he returned her glance. 'Miss Somers,' he began in a tone that held both imperiousness and the strangest note of pleading, 'I'm in a bit of a jam and you've got to help me out!' No mistaking the warning now silently telegraphed by his urgent expression. 'Miss Darnley wants me to arrange a safari for her and I've had to tell her it's impossible because I've already decided to conduct Dr. Drayton's research expedition. Will you back me up?

Help me to explain to Miss Darnley just what an A1 priority this jungle agricultural scheme rates? As it is he thinks I'm merely being difficult.' He spread out his hands in a little gesture eloquent of defeat, and watching him, wide-eyed, Brenda felt as though the big bright lounge were revolving slowly about her while her pulses hammered in her ears.

Vaguely, as though from a great distance, came the sound of Elsa's silvery, mocking laugh. 'Only that you'll be wasting your time, my poor Miss Somers! I'm having my safari with Derry if I have to move heaven and earth!' It was as though she had not spoken. Looking up into the tired and stony face of the man before her Brenda could only hear the beating of her own triumphant heart.

CHAPTER III

AN exclamation of astonishment from Meg Trayner brought her back to earth, to the sense of a request unanswered; Keith Derrington had asked for her help. That it was to be help in avoiding the exigent Elsa ... that to avoid Elsa he would come to Mahamba, were heady details she could gloat over later on. For the moment there was her part in the little game to be played.

Before she could speak, however, Meg had broken in. 'But, Derry ... !' she was beginning in a tone of such protest that it was obvious she was about to exclaim at his change of front, having entirely missed his unspoken plea for their conspiratorial support.

'Don't say it, Meg!' He held up a warning hand. 'Don't remind me that I shall probably be a most hopeless flop trying to work under a Research boss.' He swung round to Brenda, his glance uneasy, still supplicating. 'I don't know if you saw the rather tactless letter I sent to your people last September, in which I declaimed my distaste for all things bureaucratic? Pretty big of Drayton after what I said to give me another chance!'

x She flashed him a reassuring smile, mischief in her wide grey eyes now, a dancing jubilation which wouldn't be quenched. She said, 'I did see your letter; Mr. Derrington. Personally, I thought it one of the most stimulating documents our dull department has ever received!' Was she being too naive, too girlishly gushing? On a quieter note she went on, 'As for a second chance, Dr. Drayton will be only too thankful to hear that you've decided to come in with us, after all.'

'A decision,' Elsa's beautifully modulated voice put in, 'taken, Keith tells me, only yesterday.' The green eyes narrowed. 'So that I was just twenty-four hours too late.' She glanced significantly at Derrington. 'I missed my opportunity, didn't I? If only I'd had the presence of mind

to pin you down to some kind of promise when you came to my dressing- room after the show last Thursday night.'

'Oh! So you two have been meeting in London!' Meg marvelled ingenuously. 'Derry might have told us... *and* that you'd decided to pay us a visit!'

'He didn't know. I didn't know myself that I was coming until ...'—the silken voice dropped to a skilfully produced undertone—'until ten minutes after he'd left me; and it was too late to call him back!' That perceptibly throbbing pause in the middle of the sentence, the downward flutter of the long lashes as the last words came, soft as a caress, gave to the simple statement an emotional significance quite lost on the forthright Meg. But not on Derrington. Brenda saw the flicker of response in his impassive face; pain, impatience? She could not tell. Scorn or exasperation in the cool yellow eyes now as they rested on Elsa's loveliness. But he had sought her out in London, fought his way through a mob of hysterical farewell-performance fans to reach her dressing-room. Leaning back into the depths of the engulfing couch, Brenda found her hands clenched together, the fingernails biting into her palms.

'Anyway, why wait for Derry to remind you that we still exist?' Meg was saying disapprovingly. 'You ought to have paid your home town a visit long ago. I remember our disappointment when your company was playing in Cape Town some years ago. We were all so proud of your triumphs, hoping to see you. Your mother was so disappointed ...'

'I would have come home then if I could,' Elsa put in quickly, harshly, if that beautiful artificially produced voice could ever be harsh. But Meg's reproach had clearly stung her. 'One isn't one's own mistress in theatreland,' she continued. 'We had to hurry on to our next stand ... it was in Melbourne, if I remember rightly. For a long time after that I was too frantically busy to think of visits home, when home meant

travelling half-way across the world. Honestly, Meg, this is the first breathing space I've had in years. And I couldn't have come now if my agent hadn't wanted me to appear briefly at a theatre festival in Tokyo of all places. I turned the idea down in the end, but not before I had had all the tiresome inoculations one has to endure before coming out East.'

'Which meant you could rush out here on a sudden impulse,' Meg put in drily, with a significant glance at the enigmatically dead-pan face of Derrington.

'''You're not being very welcoming, are you?' Elsa said plaintively.

'I'm only saying fifteen years is a long time.'

'Don't!' Elsa shuddered. 'I hate having years thrown at my head. It's so ageing.' She stood up, beautiful, serene, her flawless face untouched by the years she repudiated. 'Derry is rescuing me from half a dozen local invitations to resplendent dinner parties and running me out to Blue Posts to eat,' she said. 'I'm going to spend the evening trying to make him change, his mind about that safari!' She gave Brenda a charmingly impish smile and turned back to Meg. 'You'll still be here tomorrow, won't you, Meg? We'll get together for a really long chat. Lunch with me, will you? In my suite, which is about the only place I can be sure of being undisturbed by the ubiquitous newspapermen who seem to take such a fantastic interest in my doings.'

Possessively she laid one exquisite hand on Derrington's arm, but ignoring her haste to be off he stood firm, his glance on Brenda. 'And will you lunch with me, Miss Somers?' he demanded. 'There are a good many things we've got to settle.' Something like gratitude flashed for an instant across the strong, hard face. 'You've been very forbearing with my—er—fluctuations, but I promise you I'll keep on the dotted line from now on. When do you expect Drayton?'

'Mrs Trayner thinks he'll probably get here the day after tomorrow,' Brenda told him.

'Good. That means we can have our talk before he arrives. I'll expect you here in the lounge tomorrow about twelve-thirty ... if that suits you?'

'It does,' she breathed faintly, and saw him nod in final confirmation as he moved away; Elsa at his side making her perfect exit. Haughtily as a queen she moved, proud to be escorted by the shabbiest yet most distinguished-looking man in the room, her hand possessively on his arm.

Limply Meg lay back in her cushioned corner. 'We...ll!' she exhaled slowly. 'Blue Posts! Now which of them suggested *that* as a rendezvous, I wonder? The honeymoon hotel! Just fifteen years too late. Either Derry still cares as much as ever he did, or he doesn't give a hoot. I'd love to know just what they're up to, the two of them, though whatever the game is, they are well matched.' She gave Brenda a bright glance full of mischief, but singularly free from malice.

'The way he checkmated her about her safari!' She laughed in soft, chuckling amusement. 'Just for a moment I didn't catch on; almost put my two big feet into it. You were simply marvellous, the way you rose to the occasion!'

Brenda dropped her lashes, and heard herself say quietly, 'I was so relieved to realize he'd changed his mind. Though it was done so oddly. And of course the things you'd told me about him ... and Elsa Darnley helped to prepare me for the oddness. And then you'd said he didn't want to have to take her on safari.'

'But why couldn't he have told her so outright?' Meg said. 'I suppose he was afraid of her pleadings and arguings or, having already heard

them *ad nauseam*, was weary of them; wanted to tie himself unsafely out of her reach. And yet he goes off like a lamb to Blue Posts with her tonight! Oh, well, there's nought so odd as men! Fancy him looking her up in London!

'L don't see that it is so very extraordinary,' Brenda offered with a kind of shrill brightness. 'Elsa is very beautiful, very alluring.'

But Meg didn't seem to be listening to this carefully enunciated little speech.

'I wonder what she felt like when she saw him stalking into her dressing-room?' she mused. 'The man she had jilted fifteen years before, slipping away the night before the wedding without even having the decency to face up to him and tell him why she had changed her plans. I was with the poor mother, Elsa's mother, when she telephoned Derry to tell him Elsa had gone --' Meg gazed mournfully into space as though she were living again that painful moment.

'It must have been frightful for him,' Brenda murmured automatically out of her dull, queer pain. The whole story left her with a sort of empty feeling—as though it couldn't be true. Keith Derrington didn't in the least fit into the invidious role of bridegroom jilted at the altar. He seemed so hard, so sure, so self-contained.

'He cleared off,' Meg's relentless voice went on. 'Lived in the wilds in some Masai village for months. When he came back he seemed years older ... quite changed. Elsa Darnley has something to answer for. It wasn't only Keith who had to suffer. Her mother felt it dreadfully, too; was never quite the same again.'

'Do they still live in Nairobi, her family?' Brenda asked, trying to fit the dazzling world-famous Elsa into this background of coffee shambas, discarded sweethearts and sorrowing parents. A woman

remote from her own humdrum world as a distant flashing planet; a woman of fabulous beauty, not quite flesh and blood, whom one saw only on rare occasions the other side of the footlights' glare. It didn't seem possible that she'd been actually here, sitting with them, talking to them a few moments ago ... behaving quite shamelessly, openly pursuing a man who might not want her, who could at all events look with cool detachment on her beauty. But everything this evening was like a play gone wrong, hopelessly miscast, with a dreadfully muddled plot that conceded none of the accepted rules. A play of nightmare contradictions.

'Her father died when she was quite small,' Meg Trayner was saying. 'Her mother took over the coffee growing then, but she wasn't very successful, poor darling. And after Elsa ran away—she was the only child—Mrs. Darnley didn't seem to care much what happened and let the estate go to pieces. Elsa hardly ever wrote to her. She used to dream of saving enough money to take a trip to London to see Elsa act, but it was a pretty thin dream as bankruptcy crept closer and closer. She died five years ago—of a heart disease nobody knew she had. There was scarcely enough money for her funeral when it came to settling up her affairs.'

Somehow that last item, spoken in Meg's hushed shocked voice, brought Brenda down to earth, scattering all phantasy, all glamour ... reducing dream to harsh and cruel reality. 'But how disgusting!' she burst out in healthy anger. 'Elsa must be so rich!'

'I dare say she is,' Meg agreed dryly. 'But it just wouldn't occur to her that her mother was in need. To do her justice, she was so out of touch that she probably hadn't a notion how bad things were; even we who lived close to Mrs. Darnley didn't know. If we had known ...' She broke off with a sigh for tragedy that is, after all, common enough—poverty lurking behind the facade of appearances too gallantly maintained. Exhaustion crumpled her plump face as she stood up. 'Let's go and eat,' she urged.

She spoke only once more of Elsa that evening when in Brenda's comfortable bedroom, she said her last good night. It was as though deliberately she had avoided a return to the subject in that downstairs restaurant where so many avid tongues were busy with speculation and legend. Elsa Darnley and Keith Derrington; Root's H6tel rang with their names as their story was hashed and rehashed. Kenya gossips were having a heyday, cruel as hounds on the scent with slaver's fangs.

'But it's like that out here, as you'll soon discover,' Meg said from her companionable perch on the end of Brenda's white-curtained bed. 'If I've told you rather a lot about Elsa and Keith tonight, it's because you'd be bound to hear it anyway, and not so charitably relayed! It's not going to be altogether easy for Elsa out here—she must have foreseen that. In a way it was brave of her to come back ... to try to pick up the pieces. If that indeed is what she wants to do! Though what she would do with them if she did succeed in picking them up, I don't know. I can't see her fitting Derry into her career. He's not what you'd call exactly a flexible person!'

Brenda twisted over on her piled pillows, adjusting the bedside light unnecessarily. 'You think she's still in love with him, then?' she asked in a carefully controlled voice.

'It looks a bit that way. She's never married again, has she? Keith isn't a lover I should imagine it would be easy to forget—not even for Elsa Darnley with the world at her feet.' Meg stood up, suppressing a yawn. 'I wonder if she'll succeed in persuading him to take her on safari after all?' she hazarded as she went off to her own room across the corridor.

A remark which kept Brenda turning and twisting in her comfortable bed for a sleepless hour. Surely Keith Derrington couldn't back out on her now! He had given his word, if not his written word, that he would join the Research expedition. Dr. Drayton's important work

was depending upon him—so in a way was her own unimportant reputation. It would be such a feather in her cap to have roped in the elusive Keith Derrington. But supposing the lovely Miss Darnley spoiled it all!

It was simply because of the threatened Research expedition she was worrying, Brenda assured herself. But there were tears on her lashes when at last she fell asleep.

She was on tenterhooks all through the next morning. Time had never dragged so slowly.

Sunshine lay in rich pools of gold on the parquet floor as she crossed the lounge at half-past twelve exactly. Flowers banked against a wall were purple and scarlet, unfamiliar African flowers. In a vast baroque mirror she could see herself tall and slim in 'a grey-green frock which had the colour and texture of young apple leaves. A demure frock. Sunlight shone on her proudly tilted head, tipping each feathery curl with auburn. Her eyes were dark—all pupils. She looked very young and solemn—and a little scared.

Then Derrington was greeting her; serious, unsmiling. In the strong noon light she could see in his thick tawny hair flashes of gold, but where at the temples it lay close and short the tawinness had faded to grey. She thought, fifteen years ago it must have been all gold and very bright.

Fifteen years ago on the day that he stood with a telephone receiver mumbling doom in his ear she herself had been no more than a leggy little girl of seven wheeling her first treasured doll's pram about a suburban park. This seemed to her so extraordinary a discovery that it carried her through their first moments together on a wave of remoteness that lent her a dazed composure. Sipping the iced orange juice she had chosen, it came to her that time is an elastic dimension. If Derrington was in his mid- thirties that meant there was about

thirteen years between them, but the older she became the more that thirteen years would shrink, the less it would matter as a separating factor. Some implication she did not care to pursue made her bundle this peculiar mathematical calculation away, while the feint pink in her cheeks deepened.

He said, 'You have such lovely English colouring. I hope the Tanzania sun will not be too unkind. You must be careful to wear the right sort of hats.' It was spoken with such detachment that it hardly sounded personal.

So that she could answer, in her most matter-of- fact way. 'That's something I must ask Mrs. Trayner to advise me about next time we go shopping. I brought no hats with me, meaning to pick up what-ever it is one wears out here in Nairobi.'

'Any good straw,' he suggested, 'wide-brimmed, light but closely woven, lined with green if you like, but don't let anyone persuade you into buying a topee. You'd hate it and it isn't really necessary.'

They were finishing their drinks then, moving towards the dining-room. It wasn't until the first course had been set before them that he said, 'I owe you an explanation, Miss Somers. May I say right away how grateful I am to you for helping me out of an awkward corner last night ... when I assumed you to be a mind-reader and spoke as though you were already aware of my decision to take on Drayton's safari.' His voice was gentle, almost caressing; approving of her because she had helped him evade Elsa Darnley! Brenda's spirits rose on a wild foolish upsurge, which she deliberately and, with immense control, resisted.

Her smile was carefully tepid. 'It *was* rather mystifying for a moment, but I seized on the essential fact and let the mystery slide. I was so relieved to hear you say you would come to Mahamba after all that I wouldn't for the world have spoiled it with the questions you so

obviously didn't want me to ask just then.' She dropped her long lashes. He must never know how much Meg Trayner had told her ... how simple it had been for her to guess at the reason for his subterfuge. 'You will come, won't you? To Mahamba?' she asked softly. 'I mean, your announcement last night wasn't merely a way out of the awkward corner, whatever it was?'

'Of course not! I don't do business like that!' He sounded a little shocked at the very idea, but after a moment's pause went on in the lightest and most casual way to say that Miss Darnley's notion of a safari was a pretty crazy one, but there had been no persuading her out of it. 'Until I had a brainwave and decided to tell her I was already irrevocably committed elsewhere. She's completely out of training for the discomforts of bush life; fragile, exotic, totally unfitted for roughing it. Also she is a pretty important personage, the greatest actress of our time—or so some of the critics would have us believe. Imagine my responsibility to the great British public who adore her! Anything can happen on safari, illness ... accident, and she is headstrong, not easy to handle. I've hunted with her before. She is wilful, erratic, and there are moments on any safari when an irrational action may cost a life. All this I pointed out to her, but characteristically she refused to listen to me.'

How calmly he speaks of her, Brenda thought, her heart hurrying a little as she met his level glance.

He smiled. 'So there we were at deadlock, until I settled everything by announcing that I was due to set off with Drayton in a couple of days and that by the time I was free she'd be back in London busy rehearsing for her next play.'

Once more that soaring jubilation! An Elsa returning to London, vanquished, finished with. The prospect was enough to set Brenda's pulses hurrying. So much for the strange rendezvous last night at the hotel of a lost honeymoon, she thought.

'As long as you really want to come with us,' she said. 'It would be awful to feel that it wasn't the kind of assignment you'd have chosen; that you'd been more or less trapped into it—and would hate every minute of it.'

'I don't think I'm going to hate *any* minute of it,' he answered steadily, and there was something now in the forceful agate eyes that made Brenda turn hurriedly away.

CHAPTER IV

THEY talked shop for the remainder of the meal, Derrington asking swift incisive questions about equipment, bearers, petrol-storage, mileage to be covered—questions it wasn't always easy to answer, but mentally dipping into the files of correspondence she had been handling all through the summer, Brenda came out of it pretty well.

His allergy to English Research schemes, he was explaining then, wasn't lack of patriotism for the old country so much as love of an Africa he understood far better than what he called muddle-headed bureaucrats.

'They've only recently realised that the desert areas are spreading, as the bushland that holds the rains is opened up. You can't turn bush into farmland in this climate without creating a dust bowl; if your Dr. Drayton is honest enough to admit *that* as a conclusion to his investigations, I'll be glad to help him on his travels.'

She liked his clear-headed, knowledgeable reasoning, listened in fascination to statistics which on paper would have been dead and dull. 'It's the black man's country,' he ended. 'The white man's too, but only if he's wise enough to play fair and accept his own share of the struggle to live in a land singularly poor in natural resources.'

Wide-eyed, attentive, Brenda felt as if great breaths of masculine fresh air were blowing all the silly emotional nonsense out of her head. This man with his broad enthusiasms, his brilliance of mind wasn't the kind of person you could imagine wasting his life in regrets over a silly woman who had behaved like a spoiled child, even if she was the exquisite Miss Darnley! Just being with him through this interesting hour made Brenda feel strong, adult, sure of herself. By the time they had reached the coffee stage she was able to say without a trace of self-consciousness, that she, too, owed an apology. 'I wasn't

very polite to you on the plane coming out from England, Mr. Derrington. I just wanted to say I'm sorry about that.'

He laughed wholeheartedly, spontaneously, as she had never heard him laugh before. 'Weren't you? I'd almost forgotten. But you did rather snub me, didn't you? No doubt you were perfectly right.' The agate eyes were warm with mischief. 'Like a nice little Jane Austen heroine waiting to be correctly introduced! Well, now that we have been correctly introduced, you're being very charming to me, so you may consider yourself forgiven.'

That, 'I'd almost forgotten,' left her a little deflated, but she deserved it, she thought. Why on earth expect him to take a trivial matter more seriously? Once more she felt hotly ashamed of the exaggerated significance she had given to his tentative advances on the journey; those oddly insistent glances that had so disturbed her, and which no doubt had been no more than an abstracted trick which had something to do with being shut up in the narrow confines of an airliner cabin. As it was, he had, it seemed, hardly been aware of her and her silly little withdrawals. How could he be in his brilliant self-sufficiency? Disappointment struggled with a soft, throbbing happiness as she remembered that for the next few weeks they would be thrown together. And in the end it was the foolish happiness that conquered, carried her through the curiously empty hour after she had left him.

Meg Trayner had gone off with Elsa to see Mrs. Darnley's grave. Brenda had shared in the surreptitious preparations for this expedition, had witnessed the dramatic exit by a staff entrance, made to avoid the hawk-eyed press men who still haunted the foyer. Elsa, Meg had confided in a breathless aside, didn't want this sacred occasion to be the subject of a newspaper sob-story. 'She's really dreadfully upset, poor girl, over all that I've been telling her during lunch about her mother's lonely years of struggle.'

She didn't look particularly upset, Brenda couldn't help thinking, as she watched the perfectly gowned figure gliding serenely along the humble kitchen corridor, escorted by Mr. Hortington, the manager, closely followed by two Indians bearing immense wreaths of white lilies and roses. Merely bored and condescending she appeared, as though she were playing a not very interesting part in some rather stupid play. Once more she seemed to Brenda not quite flesh and blood—a little ghostly without her footlights and cardboard scenery. The very perfection of her beauty and of her flawless make-up contributed to this impression of unreality. Somehow, you could no more imagine her weeping over her mother's grave than you could see her rolling up her sleeves to scrub a scullery floor! It was MegTrayner's warm-heartedness that had swept her into this filial expedition, Brenda couldn't help feeling, and was instantly ashamed of her own cynicism.

She spent the rest of the afternoon with the Trayner children. Their mother had asked her, in the light-hearted way mothers have, to 'keep an eye' on them. 'They'll be no bother to you; they'll play all the time in the hotel garden,' she had urged. 'You write your letters, or do your shopping, or whatever it is you've planned, and don't let them hinder you. So long as you have a peep at them every now and then to see that Peter isn't climbing over the railings into the busy roadway, or digging up Mr. Hortington's beautiful flower-beds.'

With these mixed injunctions ringing in her ears, it had seemed simplest in the end to Brenda to abandon the shopping expedition she had decided upon and take the too-active Peter and his sister for a walk. They didn't get much farther than Kenyatta Avenue with its array of fascinating shops, the children straight from the wilds, crying out in delight at the sight of the most ordinary objects. Peter wanted to count the big handsome cars flashing along in the sunlight, while Gay lingered in little-girl rapture before the windows of a toy-shop where an enormous baby doll lay in state in a real cradle, surrounded by the luxurious items of its layette.

And presently there was a large, cool restaurant into which they drifted for tea, over which Brenda made mental notes for her next letter home. Such cakes, such clotted cream with the big luscious strawberries, in November! Ices made from fresh- crushed pineapple! And the children's eyes were as wide as her own.

'Do you think your mother would allow you to eat ice-cream as well as strawberries?' she asked Gay, an earnest, conscientious little girl, who watched over her brother with a quaintly maternal eye, that Brenda found very endearing and rather pathetic, for Peter was a naughty little boy, and it was clear that Gay's self-imposed role was not an easy one!

'We don't never have ices at all in Laholo!' he was saying now in a loud and desperate tone that threatened tears.

'If we had just one ice, perhaps, *on top* of our strawberries,' Gay conceded. 'That way it won't seem like two things, will it?'

Brenda laughed at this sophistry, gave the rash order, and hoped for the best.

Back at the hotel, they found Meg awaiting them, exhausted by her emotional trip to the cemetery and ready to bundle her children off to an early bed. 'You can have a little soup and toast and fruit for supper, in your room,' she arranged, as she heard the detailed account of all they had eaten at tea-time. 'I'll ask Mr. Hortington to send it up to you about seven. No, Peter, I *shan't* be here to give it to you myself, I'm going to a party,' she broke off to silence the little boy's objections to supper in bed. 'Miss Somers has taken you out for a most lovely afternoon walk and we're all most thankful to her. Buying you that simply delicious tea, spending all her money on you! You really shouldn't have spoiled them so!' She flashed Brenda a grateful glance.

'Couldn't Miss Somers stay with us while we eat our supper?' Peter persisted.

'No, she couldn't. She's coming to the party, too.' Peter, tired out by his long afternoon, over-excited by too many big shining motor-cars and all the noises and sights of the gay city, burst into a loud wail and Meg picked him up under her arm and hurried upstairs, Brenda following more calmly with the well-behaved Gay.

In the quietness of her own room presently, she spread out the sapphire blue dinner dress she had worn the previous evening and studied it reflectively. Would it be grand enough for tonight? There was to be a reception for Elsa Darnley in the Town Hall ... arranged by some civic body or other. Brenda hadn't listened particularly to Meg's confused mutter of details, given after lunch as they hurried along the conspiratorial kitchen corridor bound for the enclosed yard in which the car, which would take Elsa to the cemetery, had been concealed from the watchful newspapermen's eyes.

'I've been given tickets for two,' Meg-had whispered, not liking to speak aloud at this solemn moment, which was really only one degree removed from the importance of a real funeral. 'Do come with me,' she had urged. 'There will be dancing, and I can introduce you to lots of Nairobi-ites. It might be fun.'

Dancing, Brenda thought now. Would Keith Derrington be present at this jamboree? And as though the" very possibility were enough to decide her, she thrust the sapphire dress back into her wardrobe again and dived into the bottom of her trunk for a yellow chiffon which she felt to be much more becoming. It was much too dressy really for Mahamba, but she had included it in her outfit because it was the thinnest garment she possessed and Brooksey had written that there *were* occasions when one dressed.

Now she stood with the soft golden folds of the dress against the curve of her cheek, her grey eyes dark with dreams. Elsa tonight with her emeralds in her ears ... and Derry perhaps beside her. How could he help it? But in Mahamba there would be no Elsa with her sly and sultry charm. Only Derry as he had been at the lunch table today, a man full of a man's work to be done, clear of all woman-nonsense. That was how she would see him in the weeks ahead, that was how she wanted to see him; sharing his work, his forthright clear-headed opinions.

Somehow, this reflection reduced the prospect of tonight's party to very small beer indeed. What happened, or did not happen, in this gathering that was to be Elsa Darnley's brief triumph, could scarcely touch her. Slipping into the yellow chiffon dress, Brenda felt almost bored, curiously disinclined for the whole affair.

Her spirits lifted, however, at Meg Trayner's gasp of naive and honest admiration when they met in the foyer. 'My dear, you look marvellous! What a lovely and unusual dress that is ... like something out of a Grecian frieze; it makes you look all sort of classical and other-worldly, and most frightfully distinguished.' There was a hint of wistfulness in her tone as she glanced down at her own fussy, frilled skirts.

The reception was, in its first half-hour, as boring as Brenda had anticipated and the little glow left by Meg's generous tribute soon faded. In an immense and ornate room, crowds milled about, eating, drinking, chattering; it was inevitable that Meg, her promise of introductions apparently forgotten, should be carried off first by one group of old acquaintances, then by another, while Brenda stood feeling shy and neglected against a darkly curtained doorway—which, though it was not intentional, was the perfect foil for her gleaming frock and bronze-lit hair.

At the far end of the vast hall she could see Elsa Darnley, lifted on a flower-filled dais above the hurly-burly, graciously queening it in white satin, her long green eyes ablaze in her pale, still face. Only her lips were vividly scarlet and her hair under the strong illumination held the sheen of a raven's wing. Now and then, Brenda noticed, she would rake the entire assembly with a swift, almost hungry glance. She's looking for Keith Derrington! Brenda thought, with a queer, hurtful pang; and, turning at the sound of a movement behind her, found him coming through the darkly-curtained door.

'Oh, hullo!' he greeted her with a companionable grin. 'This is terrible, isn't it?' His comically rueful glance indicated the smartly dressed throng. 'Every man-jack in tails and white tie! I've crept in the back way hoping I'd found some other Philistine in tweeds to keep me company—but it looks as though I shall, have to go home and dig my one and only dinner jacket out of its moth-balls.' He was wearing, she saw, the same shabby neutral-coloured lounge suit he had worn under the dust-coat on the plane. His tawny hair stood up in rebellious turmoil and his collar was not particularly fresh.

'Home?' she enquired. 'Do you mean to Mehetmbe?'

He nodded. 'Awful bind, isn't it? But I've got the car outside.' He turned to her with a fixed and purposeful air. 'Look! Why don't you come with me? It's a marvellous evening for a run and the whole thing won't take us much more than an hour. You'll be back before you're missed—and, anyhow, this thing is going to go on all night.'

It was casually offered, but Brenda drew in a sharp breath and her colour mounted.

He said, as though it were already settled, 'I can show you my lone hunter's lair—and we can look out whichever of my credentials you think will impress Drayton most.'

'He won't need credentials,' Brenda fenced above the turbulent pounding of her heart.

'He probably will. These scientific types always have to have masses of papers to back up every least little thing they do. You ought to know that!' He drew the curtain back for her, and with a curiously hypnotized feeling she walked through the door before him.

In the deserted lobby in which they now found themselves there was a commissionaire. Brenda stopped and said to the man: 'Will you please go to Mrs. Trayner and tell her that Miss Somers has had to slip out to see to some work for Dr. Drayton and that she will be back in about an hour?'

They were out in the street then, Keith Derrington laughed softly. 'That covers us nicely, doesn't it?' he mocked gently. 'Good old Jane Austen!'

Brenda got into the car beside him, her cheeks hot. 'There's nothing Jane Austenish about it,' she said stiffly. 'Mrs. Trayner would naturally be a little worried if I were to disappear into thin air for an indefinite period without some word of explanation.'

'She needn't be worried. I'll take good care of you.' His voice wasn't mocking any more. Reaching into the back of the car he dragged out a large fleecy rug. 'To begin with you'd better put this over that lovely flimsy thing you're wearing if you don't want to catch cold.' He leaned over her, expertly tucking the rug about her shoulders before she could protest.

It was an open car; powerful, low-slung, silent. He drove, she discovered, with a sort of reckless efficiency that was exciting and at the same time reassuring. At this rate they'd cover the distance to Mehetmbe and back almost in the optimistic time he had promised. In a feverish way, she clung to that; steadying her foolish heart. It was

the most natural thing in the world that he should have asked her to his home, she assured herself. Dr. Drayton was arriving tomorrow and he wanted her help over this business of the credentials. Leaning back in the deep bucket seat she looked up at the vast velvet canopy of sky, studded with brilliant, unfamiliar stars. Last night it was Elsa Darnley who had sat in this seat! What had they talked about on their way to a hotel that mocked their lost love?

There were hills now, black against the paler horizon and the road climbed between vaguely seen undergrowth where prowling creatures lurked. Once the headlights picked up the yellow gleam of some hunting animal's eyes. A night-hawk caught in the glare went fluttering blindly before them. And presently there was a group of Africans, padding along the grass verge in single file, moving in a rhythmical trot. Lion skins draped their splendid naked shoulders, red paint-streaked brows and cheekbones and their heads were anointed with ochre-coloured clay. They were carrying spears, Brenda saw, the leader of the file raising his in salute as the car passed.

'Wandering Masai,' Derrington explained, as he lifted a hand in response to the greeting.

Brenda felt a small thrill of terror.

The Masai! The untameable blood-drinking tribesmen with whom the child Keith Derrington had roamed. That dreadful day that was to have been his wedding day, it was to the Masai he had gone for his strange comfort. Covertly she glanced at the strongly cut profile beside her, the ruthless thrust of the chin, the shapely cynical mouth.

'Tell me about the Masai?' she demanded.

'The aristocrats of East Africa,' Derrington answered. 'A nomadic tribe, proud, unconquerable, calling no man master.'

'They're so different from the Africans one sees in Nairobi,' Brenda put in. 'Where everyone wears European dress and all the races mix freely. It's all so cosmopolitan.'

'Because it's our great urban centre,' Keith Derrington told her. 'And we are justly proud of it. But in the remote areas Africans still often live in a primitive way, tending their goats and cattle, going barefoot, carrying bows and arrows ... and the spears you saw with our Masai friends just now. Though civilization is catching up on the Masai. Once hunters on a grand scale they now look after one of the largest game reserves in the country. Poachers turned gamekeepers. However, they still maintain much of their old way of life, clinging to their traditional customs. Some of them hardly fit to discuss with a nice-minded Jane.'

'My name is not Jane,' Brenda protested heatedly, hurt by this descent into flippancy.

'But I like you as Jane. Please be Jane!' he pleaded ridiculously. 'You look like a Jane—all earnest and conscientious and loyal.'

'It sounds deadly!'

'It's not,' he said softly. 'Not your sort of Jane-ish-ness.'

They were bumping over a rough cart-track then, the headlights suddenly revealing the long, low grass-roofed house which stood before them.

'I'll run along in first and light up,' Keith Derrington said.

Getting out of the car Brenda hugged the fleecy rug closer about her slim shoulders. This was mountain air, fresh and sharp, fragrant as spiced wine. Standing on the inky dark verandah she could feel the silence all about her a palpable force, vast, mysterious, the brooding spirit of a wild and lonely land. Light bloomed in the interior of the

house then and, crossing the threshold towards the welcome glow,—she found herself in a long, lofty room, sombre and shadowy save for the corner where an old-fashioned paraffin lamp stood on a small table set against one whitewashed wall. There were crossed spears high on the wall—Masai spears! And above them the head of some slaughtered bush animal with a long, white, sheep-like face surmounted by a pair of immense black curling horns. A kudu, Derrington told her. The spears, he explained, were native dancing spears, ivory-handled, cruel and slender as icicles; used in an earlier time in the dances which sometimes ended in death.

With a shiver Brenda glanced about her. There seemed to be very little furniture in the vast dim room; a low divan covered with a cheap Indian cotton quilt, an Indian carved teakwood table holding glasses and a bottle of whisky. On the floor at her feet a lion-skin rug lay stretched, the great lolling head with its tortured, grinning death mask seemed to waver and move in the uncertain light. A couple of cheap bentwood chairs completed the concessions to comfort.

'Well, this,' Derrington announced cheerfully, 'is the ancestral home. Peaceful little hideout, isn't it? Sit yourself down, Jane, while I nip along and change.' He indicated the least decrepit of the chairs. 'The smokes and drinks are there on the table beside you and this cigar box is my filing cabinet. If you dig into it you'll find letters of appreciation from my more recent clients—an American pork millionaire, a couple of hoary peers of the British realm. Pick out what you think will impress Drayton.' He moved towards a curtained archway, hesitated, glanced back. 'You look rather nice there in the lamplight with that woolly shawl thing slipping off your shoulders,' he said in the reflective, almost impersonal tone he could use so easily to make of his flattering a simple thing. 'Know something, Jane? You're the first woman to sit in that chair; it's a pretty exclusively male establishment.'

'Ought I to be honoured?' she asked, trying to speak with a mockery that died on her lips.

'No. I'm the honoured one.' The deep strong voice was grave. 'You make the old room look quite different... pretty good.'

She couldn't see his face in the shadows, but the warmth of his words reached her, disturbing as a caress. 'The light on your hair, it's ... kind of cosy,' he ended with an ineptitude that made him sound oddly boyish and young. 'I like your short hair, Jane. It's just right. But then everything about you is just right; that's what struck me straight away that day I saw you in the Airways Terminal.'

With a flick of the curtain he was gone through the archway then, and with a hand that shook, Brenda picked up the box of letters. She wished her heart wouldn't behave so foolishly. Something about this vast dim lonely room made her want to cry ... a room where a man sat through long solitary evenings reading through store catalogues, throwing things at bats!

She could hear them, rustling in the dry grass of the roof above the uncovered rafters disturbed by the light. And suddenly the room was filled with their small soft bodies, their dreadful soundless wings. Endlessly they wheeled and circled, stirring the air about her head, so that she shrank back in her chair, faint with a mounting terror. All the legendary horrors of bat-lore came crowding in on her; details she had heard, or read; vampire bats that sucked your blood, talons that fastened in your hair only to be loosened by death! When something soft and pulpy struck her brow, half-blinding her, she stood up and screamed, her nerve utterly deserting her.

Just what happened afterwards wasn't very clear, only that she could hear her wild voice rising, rising and there were bats everywhere ... and suddenly Derry was in the room. She was far too distraught to notice the gun in his hand, so that the flash and concussion and

thunder of sound sent her reeling into a nightmare blackness which would have engulfed her in that finality of horror and noise, only for the strong arms which caught her and held her close. Somehow her head was resting very comfortably then against a stiff shirt front, while a gentle hand stroked the curls back from her wet brow. It all seemed surprisingly natural, almost matter-of-fact. She felt limp and peaceful and quite unreal ... as though it were happening in a hazy dream; the quiet voice murmuring above her head, 'Dear Jane, darling Jane, I frightened you!' She felt no surprise at this tender mode of address.

She said in a polite little shaker^ voice, 'I'm sorry to have been such an idiot, but I never have been able to stand bats and there were so many of them. I'm not usually such a coward.'

'I know you're not,' Derry agreed, still holding her closely ... perhaps because she was still shaking. 'No girl who was a coward would come five thousand miles across the world alone to take on a job in the Mahamba bush.'

That somehow brought her back to earth a little, forced objectivity into her haziness. Awareness of herself, of the man in whose arms she rested crept like a bright intoxication through her blood. She stirred, sighed, the wild swift sweetness possessing her. He was explaining that it had been no more than a blank cartridge in the gun, that a blank cartridge fired at close range was the only effective method of sending the bats back to their nests behind the rafters; she scarcely listened, lifting to him her quivering, wondering face as she whispered his name.

She saw his eyes light up, flash triumph. Then his mouth came down on her own and the world and her heart stood still. How long the moment lasted she could not tell. Beyond time and all volition she soared, her lips in innocent abandon giving so much more than she knew.

He let her go then and they stood in quietness regarding each other. She could see his face, lean and strong, hollowed by the lamp shadows so that his eyes seemed all darkness now and strangely sad. An odd, half-rueful smile he gave her at last. 'We ...ll!' he breathed out slowly. 'Really, Jane! This ... this doesn't fit into the picture, does it? I promised to return you safely to Mrs. Trayner.' His voice wasn't quite steady. 'I think we'd better get back to the sobering atmosphere of the old Town Hall.'

Abruptly he turned out the lamp and in the darkness found her hand, guiding her out of the house to the car. She was so happy she could not think clearly, nor did thought seem to matter. He had, she saw in the light of the car lamps, had the presence of mind to retrieve the shawl which long ago had slipped unheeded from her shoulders. She was glad of it now, leaning back in the bucket seat submissive as a child while he wrapped it about her.

They were moving then, the cool wind whipping her cheeks, singing in her ears. Not an easy car for conversation—but there was, she felt now, so little need for words.

In the kisses they had exchanged all barriers between them seemed to have vanished. And her heart had gone from her keeping. She knew that now, openly and without reserve. That she had fallen in love with Keith Derrington she could no longer conceal from herself. She didn't want to conceal it. And, joyfully, she could almost believe that her love was returned.

Then, incredibly, he was confirming this. Or so *it* seemed: speaking slowly, musingly as though he were summing up something he had been turning over in his mind. He said, 'That place of mine must have struck you as pretty scruffy, Jane, but there's quite a lot that could be done with it. There's a gorgeous view from my hilltop in daylight and a garden that could turn into something pretty good if anyone took a

little trouble with it. 'Are you,' he ended with a kind of wistful tentativeness, 'interested in gardens, by any chance, Jane?'

She laughed, the heady assurance his words conveyed pouring like life into her veins. For answer she nestled nearer to him, the small confiding gesture more eloquent than words. And suddenly they were sweeping into Kenyatta Avenue, the lights and the bustle of the city like a hand laid on her lips, binding her inviolably now to the sweet secrecy of their unspoken love.

There was the Town Hall again then, the throngs, the noise, the music. Dancing had begun. Voices of greeting hailed Derrington as they crossed the entrance lobby, men's voices. With a swift shy smile of farewell, Brenda slipped away to the powder-room to comb out her wind-blown hair. She found Meg Trayner there, pinning up a torn and dreadful flounce, her kind face beaming with the evening's fun—and a flash of relief at Brenda's reappearance.

'Whatever happened to you? I got the oddest message from the commissionaire; something about Dr. Drayton. Has he arrived?' she burst out indistinctly through a mouthful of pins.

Brenda, tugging at her curls before a mirror, murmured a dreamy 'Oh no!' Her eyes in the mirror were shining stars; her lips tremulous with happiness. Heartbreakingly young she looked, heart-breakingly vulnerable. 'It was just that I went with Mr. Derrington to sort out some papers and credentials he wanted to put together before Dr. Drayton gets here tomorrow.'

'Papers? Where? At Root's?'

'No, at his home.'

'You mean you've been all the way out to Mehetmbe?' Meg gave her a quick astonished glance which turned into a fixed and troubled stare. Brenda's vivid, sensitive face was more tell-tale than she knew, and

Meg Trayner liked not at all what she saw, as the girl turned to her with a drugged and lingering smile.

'Derry is a devil ...' she said slowly, deliberately. 'And a pretty cruel devil at times. You be careful of him, Brenda, my dear; this smoke screen he's putting up to protect his dealings with Elsa Is all very well—but not when he uses *you* to help things along.'

The comb clattered from Brenda's hand on to the glass-topped dressing-table. 'What an extraordinary thing to say!' she brought out blankly, her heart even then continuing to sing its secret, endless song.

Meg turned away as though she couldn't bear to look at her any longer. 'He's in love with Elsa,' she said. 'And she's in love with him. I've been listening to her pouring her heart out all afternoon. It flared up again between them that night they met in London ... completely, absolutely. Straight to each other's arms they went—just, she said, as though there had been no interval. Then ... well, being Derry, he turned and stalked out and left her. He wasn't, I suppose, going to forgive everything as easily as that—after the first moment's betrayal of the way he really felt.'

There was a dreadful silence in the bright little room while Meg busied herself with her flounce. 'She followed him out here,' she went on. 'He is flattered ... more than that, much more. But still inclined to be difficult. Last night they went to Blue Posts Hotel. . . ' Meg broke off. 'Listen, Brenda dear,' she urged with a sudden desperate earnestness. 'They're committed to each other, those two. I know. I've seen people in love before and I happen to know these two particular people rather more than well—I saw them grow up, remember. I can read Derry like a book—the good and the bad in him. Elsa has come out here after him, blindly following her destiny. Something that is more im-portant to her than all the hollow successes of her theatrical career. She wants to put things right with Derry—and I've promised

to help her. She's coming to Mahamba with us when we go back tomorrow.'

'Does that mean she's coming on safari with us after all?' Brenda asked, and with breath held back waited for Meg's answer.

Bending low over her torn flounce she uttered a muffled, unhappy, 'It looks that way. From what Elsa says it is all settled and she has overcome all Derry's misgivings about the wisdom of taking her. She seems to have persuaded him that she won't be an impossible responsibility, that she won't take any needless risks and will do all she's told. So there it is. Romantic, isn't it?' she ended with calculated cruelty. Being cruel to be kind. If Keith Derrington had been filling this child's head with dreams this evening, the sooner she woke up the better.

Turning back to the mirror, Brenda looked unseeingly at a face from which all life and animation had drained.

CHAPTER V

THE three-day journey to Mahamba held for Brenda the quality of a dream that is neither good nor bad, but simply and exhaustingly unreal. She travelled by train with Meg Trayner and the children and there was ample time in the long bright morning, the glaringly dusty afternoon, for reflection, while beyond the windows of their carriage the fantastic landscape unfolded. Nairobi lay behind them now, like the memory of another life; something that had happened in cool, sweet sanity before this bedlam of heat and noise and motion, of shaking coaches and rattling wheels that took possession of the senses.

That incredible night drive to Mehetmbe with mountain air fresh as spring water laid on the lips ... a long dim lamplit room where fear and rapture had blended; a man's voice whispering, 'Jane, darling Jane ...' All so *remote* now, so impossible that sometimes Brenda would find herself wondering if it had ever happened at all. Painfully, with Peter and Gay scrambling tirelessly from one end of the carriage to the other to point out objects of interest beyond the white-hot windows, she would go over each detail of that lost and lovely hour, looking back in dull misery at the pinnacle of foolish happiness from which Meg Trayner's cloakroom confidences had sent her crashing. A Derry cannily arranging for Elsa Darnley to have her safari after all ... making sure in this way of keeping her near him, without giving away too much. 'Working her into the Drayton expedition is such a perfect compromise that it's quite natural he should have thought of it,' Meg had pointed out. 'He's not going to make it as easy a conquest for her as a safari on their own would indicate. But this way he won't be losing sight of her ... will have the chance, I suppose he thinks, of proving her a bit. Anyway, there it is. He suggested, she tells me, that she should ask me if she might come back to Mahamba with me ... knowing I'd agree at once. And Dr. Drayton won't make any bones about having so attractive a member added to his party. It

doesn't really matter when there *is* a safari going on how many people come along; in fact the more the merrier.'

'He's playing his game with Elsa in a characteristically complicated and tortuous fashion,' Meg had gone on. 'But it's quite clear just what the game is. Only don't let him make you a pawn in it, my dear!' she had ended.

Just what she had managed to answer to this rather melodramatic warning, how she had got out of that hot bright powder-room and back into the ballroom, Brenda couldn't remember. Like a scar hardening across her heart lay the thought of the blank and empty hours which had followed. Because, even then, she hadn't quite believed that all that happened so naturally, so beautifully at Mehetmbe had been no more than a part in some Machiavellian scheme for humiliating and titillating another woman. How could it be just that? But as the evening went by without a sign of a Derry who wanted to dance with her she was compelled to admit that a kiss given to a frightened girl could easily enough be accounted for. An impulse of pity, of tenderness tinged with amusement perhaps ... no more. She had, oh, she could see it now in shame, *asked* for that kiss! And it had meant so little to Keith Derrington that he had spent the rest of the evening in the bar with his men friends, drinking, presumably, and playing poker.

That Elsa Darnley, too, had been quite openly annoyed by his absence from the dance floor was small consolation. She had made up for it the next day by monopolizing him on the pretence of seeking his advice in the purchasing of her safari outfit, while Brenda was engaged by the arrival of the fussy and demanding scientist who was her employer; Dr. Drayton in one of his most difficult moods, tired out after his long cross-country trip with the wounded Simson, missing his paragon Miss Brookes, obviously filled with doubts as to the ability of the youngster the London Institute had foisted upon him. Barely thanking her for her success in getting Derrington to join

them, he had sent her on a series of errands ... to the hospital, to the shops, kept her running hither and thither on one pretext or another all day. It hadn't been easy to come back to the hotel in the dusk to find him smiling, rested, completely transformed because the glittering and famous Elsa Darnley had invited him to cocktails in her suite.

They had all had dinner together afterwards and the cocktails and the glamour had already achieved with magical ease their purpose. The solemn little Dr. Drayton was enchanted at the idea of Miss Darnley coming along to Mahamba with them, it appeared; still more enchanted that she should wish to share their safari. Nor would he hear of her putting up at the Trayners' bungalow. The best accommodation the Research headquarters had to offer was at her disposal.

Glancing across the dinner table, Brenda had caught Keith's quizzical glance as the little scientist pressed this urgent invitation; the glimmer of a mocking smile that might have sought to share with her some exquisite and private joke, the lift of a sardonic eyebrow that could so easily have sent her soaring again to the dizzy pinnacle of their secret understanding. Only that she had remembered in time there was no secret understanding, that Elsa Darnley, too, could see this pantomime of glances exchanged and that they were designed in fact for that purpose, a flirtation of eyes to introduce the spice of jealousy into a relationship too complacently possessive. Meg's remark about pawns echoed hollowly as Brenda steeled her foolish heart. She had hurried away to her room as soon as dinner was ended.

The next morning, having had a satisfactory report of Simson's condition from the hospital, Dr. Drayton and Elsa and Keith had set out for Mahamba by car, leaving Brenda to follow by rail with the Trayners, and here she was now, suspended in the mindless vacuum which any long railway journey can create, hearing Meg Trayner announce that in a few moments' time they would arrive at Kisumu

where they were to board the steamer which would take them via Lake Victoria to the final stage of their railway journey.

Water! It sounded cool. Twenty-six thousand square miles of it. But on the heat-blistered deck of the lake steamer Brenda lay limp in a lounge chair watching the rock-strewn burned-up shores, dead as some landscape thrown up from the earth's fiery crater. 'We're right bang on the Equator, here,' Peter told her with triumph. She could well believe it. Even the thoughts in her unhappy head seemed to be frying, her very brain sizzling. Somewhere in this deadly heat on the road which bordered the lake, Drayton and Elsa Darnley and Keith Derrington would be well on their way to Mahamba. The lake trip was a diversion—undertaken as a special treat for the children. Listening to the rush of water against the bows, Brenda hugged to herself the illusion of coolness and wiped the perspiration out of her eyes. Or at least one could pretend to oneself it was perspiration—for why should there be tears? This hollow emptiness of heart could have nothing to do with the thought of a man and a woman driving in intimacy through a golden, brazen land. A man she had known for less than one brief week! The thought came to her with a stab of sheer astonishment.

Turning to Meg in the lounge chair beside her, she said, 'It's Wednesday, Meg; this time last Wednesday I was at home . . . packing to come away!' Her voice was wild with indefinable pain. That tranquil far-off Wednesday, which she had not even known was tranquil; fussing with luggage and farewells, the future a vague blur of silver aeroplanes and sundrenched tropics, not a hint anywhere of the disturbing encounter which awaited her. And every aspect of that encounter now, every detail of its development, engraved on her heart, a part of herself which she must carry as long as she lived. For the second time her hand went shakily to her eyes, wiping away the salty bitterness.

Meg covertly noticing the pathetic little gesture was instantly all sympathy. 'You're homesick, you poor kid!'

Brenda shook her head. 'I'm not really. It's just ...' her voice broke, 'that too much seems to have happened in too short a time. Maybe that's what air travel does to you. Your body is whisked thousands of miles through space and you seem to ... live too quickly.' She laughed unsteadily. 'I feel as if I'd lived at least a hundred years during this past week!'

'Never mind!' Meg patted her bare arm with a hot clammy palm. 'You'll soon settle down when you get to Mahamba ... and you'll visit us at Laholo, in fact you can stay with us altogether if you like. Dr. Drayton's bungalow will probably be crowded out if he's putting Elsa up as well as Derry.'

'Oh, Meg, thank you! I'd love to stay with you,' Brenda returned with such desperation in her young voice that Meg turned uneasily away, remembering with sudden discomfort the suspicion she had tried to thrust away from her on the evening the child had returned, all glowing and radiant, from her drive to Mehetmbe. Had Derry really been cruel enough to make love to her that night? That cold and calculating philandering in which he occasionally indulged! She'd seen him hurt other women, could almost have hated him for his light and easily forgotten encounters if she had not known the reason for his twisted approach to anything that concerned love. But this girl was so young, so vulnerable, so much too fine to be wasted on Keith Derrington's whims!

Indignation swelled in Meg's generous heart and there was a fiercely protective glitter in her blue eyes as she said; 'Then it's as good as settled. I'll tell Dr. Drayton as soon as we get in that we'll be delighted to have you as our guest at Laholo.'

Two days later they arrived at Mahamba Halt in the late afternoon, a tin-covered shack on the edge of the railway line, a pin-point of life lost amidst flat wastes of half-burned scrub and nightmare thorn trees with black twisted stems. Just at first it seemed as though no one existed in this hiatus, save the Indian station-master and a cluster of inquisitive little black boys; then Val Trayner appeared from behind a capacious, shabby car and there was a rapturous family reunion.

Standing apart, Brenda felt lonely and lost. The ugliness of the landscape, under a lowering sky, leaden with heat, appalled her. She had expected she didn't quite know what—splashes of tropical exuberance, flowers, blue skies. This place looked as though it had been blasted by some unimaginable catastrophe.

Then Meg was introducing her husband, and Brenda found herself being welcomed with such genuine pleasure by the big man in khaki bush shirt and shorts that her spirits lifted. There was nothing half-hearted about East African hospitality, she discovered. That Meg had brought a total stranger back to stay with them was, to Val Trayner, it seemed, the ultimate triumph of the trip to Nairobi. Piling children and luggage into the car, he oozed perspiration and good nature, promising in his booming voice that they'd make things right with Dr. Drayton and see that Miss Somers had a good time as well as plenty of work during her six months at Mahamba.

'You don't have to be told the way Dr. Drayton drives his staff,' he said, as he installed Brenda in the place of honour by his side. 'But you be firm with him from the beginning and stick to office hours—it'll be easier for you if you're not living at the Research H.Q. and we'll find plenty to amuse you in your spare time.' They'd got a social club going in the little settlement, he boasted ... dancing, tennis, an improvised squash court.

Turning abruptly the road plunged into a thicket of emerald green acacia thorn and emerged into a new world. A rolling plain, golden in

the late sunlight, stretched away to a line of blue mountains. Low thorn bushes held shadows of the same intense plum blue, and here and there weird euphorbia trees held up their candelabra branches. From the tawny grasses of the foreground startled animals looked up at the passing car. Antelopes and reed-buck mostly, Val Trayner explained for Brenda's benefit.

'We've got a baby reed-buck of our own at home,' Gay Contributed; adding a little anxiously, 'Is Bimba all right, Daddy?'

All the pets were flourishing, Val assured his small daughter, and the grey cat had had five kittens. Everything indeed had gone smoothly during their absence excepting that one of the kitchen boys had had to be dismissed for pilfering, and a leopard had taken to prowling the compound at night and on one occasion had rifled the chicken run.

Meg, dismissing the leopard story with what seemed to Brenda the most amazing casualness, plunged into her own snippets of news from Nairobi. Simson was making good progress. 'Lacerations, broken ribs and shock,' she enumerated with a cheeriness which might have sounded heartless if it had not been tinged with obvious relief. An escape from an infuriated rhino is a miracle to be related with joy in the language of any hunter. 'He'll be as right as rain after a couple of weeks in hospital,' she ended. 'In the meantime, we've got ... who do you think to take on the safari in his place?'

'I know; Derrington!' Val returned, robbing her of her moment of sensation. 'They got in yesterday complete with lady!' He laughed. 'Elsa Darnley at this day and age; you could have knocked me over with a hippopotamus!'

'It's terrific, isn't it?' Meg agreed. 'And they're as much in love as ever they were, if you ask me!'

'Who, Mummy?' piped Gay shrilly. 'Who is in love?'

'Never mind,' Meg snapped rather faintly. 'I was talking to Daddy.'

'But I know,' Gay exulted with little-girl obstinacy and the eternal romanticism of her sex. 'It's Uncle Derry you mean ... and the pretty new lady with lovely pink nails. Even her mouth has perfume on it; I know because she kissed me the day we came away ... and then Uncle Derry put his arm around her....'

'He did not,' came Peter's indignant contribution to the discussion. 'He was only helping her into the car. Uncle Derry is a hunter; he doesn't bower his' head with silly things like wimmin.'

'Wimmin aren't silly things!'

'They are.'

'They are not!'

'Be quiet, children,' Meg cried in exasperation, and fortunately for the tense moment the car just then turned through an opening in the thorn and cactus hedge and they were home. With a thrill of pleasure Brenda saw the long low bungalow with its deeply overhanging thatched roof shading a spacious verandah. Trees grouped about the building made coolness and beauty; the thick dark foliage of figs, the flowering loveliness of frangipani, the blue drift of jacaranda. Here the grass was green, short, almost like a well-tended English lawn.

'Journey's end!' sighed Meg Trayner on a note of deep content as the car drew up at her own beloved front door, and with the rest of the quotation singing of lovers' meetings in her foolish heart, Brenda looked up to see Keith Derrington standing before them. Tall, rangy, more lion-coloured than ever in his faded tan bush shirt and shorts, his agate eyes smiled down at her.

'Thought I'd run over and make sure you'd all survived the railway journey,' he explained, and though his hand was held out to the

effusively welcoming Val, his glance was still for Brenda. As she met his long and searching look her heart gave a lurch of senseless and quite uncontrollable joy.

Now it was her own hand he was holding; the firm pressure of his lean fingers bringing an illogical sense of comfort. 'I've been detailed to collect you and take you back to H.Q.,' he told her.

'She's staying with us,' Meg threw in. 'I don't suppose Dr. Drayton will make any difficulties about it, as he's only got two spare rooms and you and Elsa will be using them.'

'Why, Jane! You're not deserting us, are you?' Keith's tone was softly intimate—and he was holding her hand much too long for the conventional gesture. Colouring, Brenda tugged her fingers free.

'Mrs. Trayner is being so kind about it ... I'd like to stay here,' she offered with a diffidence that made her sound young and unsure. But it was Keith's manner that was taking the ground from under her feet. How could he stand there looking at her so ardently and with so much unspoken disappointment in his eyes? As though he'd really been counting on having her under the same roof as himself during the short interval of preparation for the safari!

'As it seems to be all arranged there's nothing, more I can say,' he conceded grudgingly.

The screened door to the house opened then and Elsa Darnley appeared. 'Hullo, everybody! Keith and I have been half asleep on your comfortable living-room settee waiting for you.' She yawned daintily. 'That awful car trip on your awful dirt roads! I feel as if I haven't an unshaken bone in my body. But this heat is lovely ... soaks the fatigue right out of you, doesn't it?'

'Not the sort of heat we had in the train,' Meg returned dryly. Elsa's "bandbox" freshness was enough to make any dusty, travel-stained

woman annoyed. Dressed in an up-to-the-moment white pleated sports frock, she looked as cool as a snowdrift, her vivid mouth a challenge in her pale lovely face.

The silly little flame of happiness that had been warming Brenda's heart flickered and went out. He couldn't even come over from H.Q. to collect me without bringing her along, she thought. She had a swift, mental picture of the two of them waiting in the Trayner living-room. 'Half asleep on the settee'; drowsy and intimate and utterly at ease with each other. The way lovers are. Happy lovers. After their day and night of driving and camping together that's how it would be. These long leisurely hours round the camp-fire, the African servants singing as they prepared the chief meal of the day; stars overhead, the silence of the bush all around; the cool beautiful darkness when the glare of the day could be forgotten. 'Just like being on safari; Elsa will enjoy every moment of it,' Meg had said, describing the trek by road with envy one particularly stifling night when the railway carriage berths were too unbearably hot for sleep.

'Tea!' Meg was saying now. 'Oceans of it! That's what we need. Sit down, everybody. Omari,' she called, and as though he had been concealed close by, awaiting the summons, a tall, slender young Negro in a dazzling *kanza* instantly appeared, followed by three other young Africans who, with giggles and grins of welcome, ran down the verandah steps to help Val Trayner unload the car. Floods of Swahili followed. 'I'm telling them I've brought them all presents from Nairobi,' Meg explained to Brenda. 'Golo the cook-boy who is very religious is to have a New Testament with coloured pictures, there's a tin of toffees for Miambu the kitchen-toto and silk handkerchiefs for Omari who is half Arab and very dandified.'

'And extraordinarily handsome!' added Elsa, eyeing Omari who had reappeared with the tea-tray. In her liquid, lovely voice she murmured a sentence or two in Swahili. Omari's face lit up with pleasure as he replied, bowing low to the beautiful memsahib.

'Quite an exchange of compliments,' laughed Val Trayner. 'You haven't forgotten your Swahili then, Elsa!'

'I haven't forgotten anything about the old days,' Elsa replied softly, significantly, her green eyes going in lazy assurance to Keith in the wicker chair at her side. It might have been a challenging thing to say if she had not been so obviously sure of its reception. Keith, holding the sugar bowl out to her, made no comment, but the unruffled way in which he met that alluring glance held nothing of the momentary awkwardness which seemed to afflict the Trayners. In the heavy silence which fell on the group then, Brenda found herself remembering, as though she, too, had had some indefinable part in it, the wedding day fifteen years ago that had brought no wedding. Could passion blossom again after so cruel an interval? Apparently it could. Elsa's return was so clearly a gesture of surrender. And now every word she spoke to Keith, every look she gave him as the tea-time hour progressed, was so full of surrender that it might have been embarrassing if it had not been so exquisitely conveyed. Elsa Darnley, playing the most difficult, the most heartbreakingly appealing role of her career! Any man would have been moved by it. And Keith Derrington, Brenda reminded herself in bitterness, wasn't any man, but the lover who had been faithful to her memory for fifteen long years.

And for herself, Brenda thought, she would remember this evening hour as long as she was capable of remembering human pain; the brief light of the sinking sun, turning grass and trees to flames of living gold, the mountains melting in violet mist under that opaline sky, the ghost of a cool breeze stirring in the air, bringing a faint unearthly fragrance from the frangipani flowers. She would remember the children bringing out the basket of new kittens and the household cats sitting in gravity on the verandah steps lapping their saucers of tea-time milk; the wraith-like baby reed-buck, Bimba, that came pattering on dainty feet to nibble cake from Meg's hands.

'Val found her lost in the bush when she was no larger than a toy terrier,' Meg explained. 'Her mother must have been taken by a leopard or a lion. It's marvellous how happily she's settled down with us.'

'She dances on the lawn in the moonlight,' Gay contributed proudly, 'leaping right up in the air like a ballet lady.'

'Her eyes,' mused Elsa dreamily, 'are pure violet ... Mjg, she's wonderful! But everything here is wonderful; this house, your beautiful children with their adorable cats and kittens ... the peace, the quietness. I envy you. You make my life seem so pointless.' Her voice broke. 'I can't go back to London after this!' she whispered. For an instant there was something like panic in the green eyes.

It was Keith who spoke then and in the rapidly gathering dusk it seemed to Brenda that his lean strong face had a sad and hungry look. 'You with your world of glittering lights and adulation,' he said. 'What would you do with a bungalow in the wilds? Just because Meg has dazzled you for a moment with her genius for home-making. Children,' he said with sudden harshness, 'kittens and baby reed-bucks that look pretty enough to eat; you'd be bored stiff with the lot of them after a week or so.'

'I wouldn't, Keith dear. I promise you!' It was as though the soft voice whispered its vows now in a twilight which excluded all the other members of the little group. Brenda felt herself grow hot with anguish for her own intrusion into this intimate atmosphere. For one crazy moment she felt as though she were sitting in ghostly stalls somewhere, listening to the inimitable Darnley working up one of her famous love scenes, in which, inevitably, Keith Derrington had been cast to play the hero's part.

Then Meg's breezy, 'But, Elsa, surely you wouldn't really dream of giving up your career and settling down in Africa?' reduced the moment to its even more painful reality.

'My career!' Elsa mocked. 'Have you any idea what a hard and gruelling life I have to lead? How empty it all is in the end. I don't know!' She sighed pathetically. 'Just lately it seems to have been one disappointment after another. I've had to play in rotten plays because there aren't any good ones being written.'

'What about Shakespeare?' boomed Val helpfully.

'I'm not a Shakespearean actress. No; good modern drama is my medium; and there aren't any good modern dramas any more.'

'Well, there are your films, then?'

'With the film world rocking to ruin on the tides of taxation. And one's own income, whatever it is, going the same way, England isn't a comfortable place any longer.'

'And Tanzania is?' prompted Keith.

'Kenya is,' she temporized.

Her green eyes glinted strangely in the thickening twilight. Like a cat's eyes watching him, Brenda thought with a shiver—a tiger cat. There was something terrifying about the ruthless intensity of that pointed pale face under its night-black wings of hair. 'I'd like a house somewhere outside Nairobi ... up in the hills,' she was saying.

'At Mehetmbe, for instance?' suggested Derrington.

'At Mehetmbe,' she echoed softly. 'Where else?'

Derrington threw back his head and laughed. 'Really, Elsa, you are amazing!' he exclaimed.

'And you,' replied Elsa angrily, as she stood up abruptly, 'are a beast!'

'Why, Elsa!' the good-natured Val put in protestingly. 'What a way to talk to a man who, it seems to me, is getting as near to popping the question as a man may in a roomful of people! Really, Elsa, I'm ashamed of you.'

There was a dreadful silence while the colour flared up in Meg's plump, shocked countenance. 'Val, *dear!*' she could be heard to murmur in wifely horror, her significant glance crying out, as clearly as though she had spoken it, her reproach at a tactlessness that could so easily forget the uneasy relationship of these two. To speak of 'popping the question' just as though there had been no tragic interlude of fifteen years, no foundered wedding day, no broken hearts!

Not that Keith looked particularly brokenhearted at that moment. It was Elsa who turned white around the lips, her green eyes flashing, as he laughed easily, said largely. 'It's all right, Val old man. I wasn't seriously offering Elsa bed and board in my tumbledown shack. I was merely ... sounding the depths so to speak. Elsa knows my oblique attacks for what they're worth, don't you, Elsa?'

'I know that you can be quite abominably offensive,' she returned icily, and stalked into the living-room, banging the screen door behind her.

Val rubbed his head, looking ruefully after her. 'Sorry if I put my foot into it,' he murmured remorsefully. 'I'm a clumsy chap ... jumping to conclusions. Bit of a shock having Elsa show up this afternoon ... pleasant shock, of course. Thinking of her coming all this way to see you again made me begin to imagine things, I suppose.'

Keith laughed again, and his light shrug was noncommittal as Brenda watched him, hoping against hope for the ultimate denial that did not come.

'You've got to give people *time*,' Meg could be heard to say softly, significantly, 'and meanwhile, Val darling, for heaven's sake don't just blurt out everything that comes into your foolish head. Elsa is so sensitive, so easy to hurt.'

Val looked deflated. 'Seems as if I'm in the doghouse all round,' he deplored. 'Oh well!' His rubicund face cleared as though hope somewhere, suddenly, dawned. 'Let's all go in and find ourselves a drink before we are eaten alive by mosquitoes,' he said.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a general movement indoors to the large shabbily comfortable living-room where Omari lighted the pearly-globed oil-lamp on the central table while Val rummaged in a sideboard for bottle and glasses. In the little pool of light made by the single lamp Elsa stood, her petulance apparently forgotten, instinctively and as usual in the centre of the picture, a tortoiseshell kitten in her arms. Gay, at her side, gazed up into her lovely face, entranced. Somewhere in the shadows beyond the lamp's orbit the bulk that was Keith Derrington loomed, his face a half-seen blur, only the strange deep eyes alive ... fixed on Elsa. It was, Brenda felt, as though in some strange way she was the only person in the lamplit room; her beauty, her arrogant and seemingly unconscious grace, her sheer force of personality reducing the rest of them to colourless neutrality. Even fidgety young Peter seemed caught in her spell, listening to her tender voice murmuring endearments to the kitten.

With a stifled sensation Brenda put her hand to her throat. The heat indoors was intense after the momentary coolness of the brief sunset hour. Meg said, 'Wouldn't you like to see your room, Brenda, and perhaps have a bath before supper? We've only got the one bathroom, but I can get the children through their tubbing quickly while you have your sherry.'

'Oughtn't I to do something about Dr. Drayton before I settle in?' Brenda returned uneasily. 'I mean, I'm not exactly a free agent, am I? I ought to consult him before accepting your lovely invitation.'

'I'll run you over to H.Q. in my car if you like,' said Keith out of the shadows. Brenda turned to him, startled, aware of Elsa's slanting green eyes watching her.

'What a good conscientious little secretary you are!' she mocked.

'But of course I must let Dr. Drayton know where I am,' Brenda insisted in answer to Elsa's jibe. 'Only,' she added uncertainly, 'I don't want to trouble Mr. Derrington to drive me over. Isn't the Research Bungalow near enough for me to walk?'

'Three miles of bush track in the darkness! Don't be crazy, Jane. I'm at your disposal, complete with small but willing car; and I enjoy being troubled ... *by you!*' The last emphatically whispered words dropped into a silence suddenly electrical. Then Val, with an ostentatious siphoning of soda, held up a glass in which slices of lemon floated invitingly. 'Here's our Mahamba special for you, Elsa,' he boomed genially. 'Bet you won't find its equal in all the fleshpots of luxury London!'

'Luxury London! I never want to see the place again.' Maybe the hatred rasping in her words wasn't all for a London which seemed to have gone sour on her. Her eyes flashed green fire as she watched Keith Derrington move to the door.

'C'mon, Jane,' he ordered equably.

'But why Jane, when her name is Brenda?' Meg Trayner asked a trifle sharply. She didn't in the least care for the prompt way Derry had offered his escort, nor the half-frightened, half-thrilled way the girl had responded. As though he could still have power over her, in spite of the warnings she, Meg, had so carefully implanted.

'Ah, that's our secret. Isn't it, Jane?' he was saying in a softly confidential tone which Meg felt to be in the worst possible taste.

'So you have secrets, you two, how interesting!' Elsa drawled in mockery from the couch where she had thrown herself.

'Derry is just being silly,' Meg answered for him, as though he had been Peter. 'Val will drive you over to the Research H.Q., Brenda,' she announced firmly. With an audible sigh of reluctance Val put his

scarcely touched drink on the sideboard. Derrington picked it up and handed it back to him.

'I'm taking Brenda,' he said in a tone of ominous quiet, temper flashing in his glance as he looked across at Meg. 'What *is* all this fuss about?' he shot at her.

'Nothing, really,' Meg answered, crumpling up at once under that baleful glare. 'I just thought you might be tired after all the driving you've been doing.'

'I'm not at all tired, thank you,' Derry returned stiffly and, stalking over to the screen door, threw it open with a backward look at Brenda.

'Let's get cracking,' he said in a tone that so clearly conveyed an order rather than a suggestion, that Brenda found herself, with a mesmerized feeling, hurrying to obey. With burning cheeks she followed him into the darkness beyond the lighted room, a darkness already so impenetrable that her feet faltered on the verandah steps. Instantly his hand was on her arm, guiding her.

'The car is just here. Half a tick, while I switch on and give you some light,' he said, as he led her across the drive. The headlamps came on and she climbed in beside him, her heart thudding uncomfortably, angry with him for his odd behaviour, angry with herself for so weakly having given in to him. She didn't want to drive three miles in this pitch-black African night beside him, and the recollection of the somehow cheaply significant things he had said in the Trayners' living-room made her inwardly squirm. That stupid air of false gallantry so clearly laid on for the sole purpose of baiting Elsa Darnley! Trivial as it all might be there was a sting of cruelty about it that was pretty horrible. 'The cruelty that comes from having been badly hurt.' Meg Trayner's words echoed in Brenda's ears with new force. Years ago it was Elsa who had done the hurting; now it was her

turn to be humiliated, cajoled and rebuffed alternately. That reference to his house at Mehetmbe had been, plainly enough, for all his repudiation of it, an invitation; so had the lingering note in his voice when he spoke of a home ... children. And how humble the great Elsa Darnley had sounded, whispering, 'I wouldn't be bored, Keith. I promise you!'

The muscles of Brenda's throat contracted painfully, tears pricked at her eyes. This cat-and-mouse game between two people who had been lovers here in this lush and tropic land, when she herself was no more than a leggy child wheeling a doll's pram about a London park. It was all nothing to her ... less than nothing; silly to let herself get all worked up about it. She was here in Mahamba for a serious purpose, and the sooner she started her work with Dr. Drayton and forgot her silly vapourings, the better.

'Never let yourself turn into a managing woman.' Keith's voice came to her softly out of the rich, warm darkness. The headlights picked out the mounting walls of the enveloping bush; great shining leaves, unnaturally green, leaves with thick, pale fleshy stems, faintly obscene. A small animal with a flash of flaming yellow eyes streaked across the track just ahead of them and disappeared into the dense vegetation.

'Cervalcat,' Keith murmured automatically. 'Meg is a wonderful woman,' he went on. 'I like her ... admire her immensely, but she does enjoy bossing a chap around. Bosses old Val the entire time. For some reason,' he ended ingenuously, 'she didn't want me to take you over to H.Q. just now. Oh well!' His tone dismissed the whole thing as too unimportant to be worth any further discussion.

'I expect she thought you'd rather have your evening drink in peace ... with Miss Darnley,' Brenda offered in a small cold voice.

'But, hell's bells!' cried Keith. 'I've seen nothing but Miss Darnley for the past couple of days! It's you I want to see now.' And with that he switched off the engine and the car stood still.

The silence of the night came down on them; bush silence, vast, velvety, mysterious ... smothering. Somewhere a hyena uttered its hideous cry, a reedbuck whistled softly in alarm and doves, waking in a nearby fig tree, mourned drowsily together. 'Ah ...! Ah ...!' went their sad, sweet voices, like love crying in its sleep.

'Dear Jane!' Keith said in a tone of quiet satisfaction. 'It has been a very long time. How much did you miss me?'

She laughed in spite of herself, a harsh, unhappy laugh. It was all so silly. How much did you miss me! The kind of thing a man leaning over a bar counter might say to a pretty barmaid.

'Was I expected to miss you?' she countered lightly.

Tentatively his hand came over her own. She moved sharply away from him, her anger rising afresh. Sharp as a sword-thrust there came to her the humiliating memory of that dreadful night in Nairobi, when she had waited and waited, watching doors every time they opened, scanning the newly entering faces, hoping against hope that he would come to her, dance with her, tell her by every word and look that the things Meg had uttered in that terrible, glaringly bright powder-room were untrue. With his kisses fresh on her lips she had gone on believing in him all through that awful evening, until in the end she had gone back to the hotel with nothing but her tears left to her. And the next day she had seen him drive away with Elsa Darnley by his side, without so much as a backward glance. He had not cared that she was to make the long journey by rail, for it he *had* cared, if he had wanted to have that overland trek with all its possibilities of intimacy in her company rather than in Elsa's, why had he made no sign? And now he talked of missing her.

She felt his arm slide along the seat-top behind her. His hand touched her shoulder and she shrank away. 'Please!' she murmured in protest, and heard herself go on to say in a hard, remote voice that didn't seem to belong to her, 'I'm sorry if I've given you the wrong impression, but I don't really enjoy ... this sort of thing. That night at Mehetmbe when I was frightened of bats I was being silly, unnerved.'

There was silence for a moment, then Keith said softly, 'Do you really mean that, Jane?'

'Yes. I... I...' There were tears in her eyes now. She fought them back. 'I know I behaved peculiarly that night. I was so scared I didn't know what I was doing. I'd be glad if you would forget all about it.'

'But, hang it all, Jane, you didn't seem to object to being kissed that night. In fact, if it isn't an ungallant reminder, you were extremely co-operative!'

She might have been angrier than ever at that, if he hadn't sounded so genuinely puzzled. 'I know,' she agreed in a small, shamed voice. 'I was pretty clinging, wasn't I? But really, it would have been the same whoever had been there; it was just that you seemed somebody strong and comforting to hold on to. It didn't mean a thing.'

'I see.' His voice seemed to come from a very long way off. In the darkness she could not see his face, but she could feel that he was hurt. He had been hurt by her stand-off attitude on the plane coming out from England, too, and in less than no time had forgotten all about it. Men didn't like being snubbed, she told herself, not even by people who hardly mattered to them at all. Rebuffs from the least of women could wound male vanity.

'Do you mind if we get on now?' she asked in chilly politeness. 'I'm anxious to report to Dr. Drayton before it's too late; though I suppose it isn't really late. This early darkness all mixed up with the hot,

summery climate confuses me. It's really rather uncanny until you get used to it... night tumbling down on you out of that June-blue sky just after tea- time.' She hardly knew what she was saying; rambling on wildly, while he started the car with a savage grinding of gears.

He did not speak again, and in a blessedly short space of time the lights of the Research Settlement appeared. There was a white gate in the headlights, lawns, flowers, a large bungalow with the inevitable deep verandah. When they drew up at the verandah steps she got out of the car feeling lost, unhappy, oppressed by an illogical sense of guilt.

'Thank you very much for bringing me over,' she faltered. In the light streaming from the bungalow she could see his face, tired, even haggard. He looked ill; almost *old*! she thought, with a faint sense of shock.

'Not at all,' he was saying lightly. 'Nothing to thank me for. I was coming over anyway. I've got an appointment with an old native chief, whom I'm trying to rope in as my head pathfinder for the safari.'

So that was it. He hadn't put himself out one iota by his seemingly friendly offer of escort. He had been ^coming over anyway'. All that fatuous show of gallantry he had made in the Trayners' living- room had been as empty as the rest of his dealings with her. How right she had been in her estimate of him, and how glad she was now of the dignified stand she had taken. Her lips quivered childishly as she went into a bright hallway ... she didn't look in the least glad as she caught sight of her small, hurt face in a wall mirror. She straightened her shoulders firmly, threw back her head and walked into a spacious office that opened before her, where Dr. Drayton, mopping his perspiring brow, was scrabbling wildly in the depths of a filing-cabinet. Papers lay scattered on the floor, folders disgorging their contents strewn the tables, the chairs.

'Ah, there you are!' With a sigh of relief the little doctor turned to greet her, accepting her sudden appearance without comment, as though she had been created by some beneficent Providence to walk in upon him precisely at this moment when he needed her. He did not enquire how she had got there, nor ask how she had fared on her long tiring railway journey. It was enough that she had at last materialized, and he began at once in his testy way to grumble at Miss Brookes' system of filing, which he could not be expected to understand.

'Just where do you suppose she would keep my notes on "Erosion in Tropical Rainfall"?' he demanded irately.

Brenda went to the filing-cabinet and expertly produced the dossier he sought. After that, she worked for the best part of an hour clearing up the chaos he had made, going from the rifled filing-cabinet to his desk, his cupboards; all in a state of havoc, eloquent of the weeks the harassed scientist had had to do without a secretary. Seated at a small table apart, absorbed in the freakish behaviour of tropical rain, he appeared to have forgotten all about her.

It was very quiet. Keith Derrington did not reappear. It was Dr. Drayton who drove her back to Laholo with an alacrity that was surprising, unless it had something to do with the fact that Elsa Darnley was the other end of the three-mile bush track. As they bumped over the potholes, he talked of her with a naive reverence which Brenda found rather touching. The little doctor of science was fifty and a confirmed bachelor, but Elsa's vivid personality seemed to have pierced the clouds of his abstract world.

'How extraordinary that she should have turned up here in the wilds,' he exulted, 'and what a delightfully simple and natural girl she is when one gets to know her; so utterly unspoiled by all her successes.'

Simple and natural were the last two adjectives Brenda herself would have applied to the glittering Darnley. They found her hovering on

the Trayner verandah listening for the sound of the returning car, and she was clearly dismayed to find it was Drayton driving. 'Where's Derry?' she asked with a directness that might almost have earned her for once Dr. Drayton's description.

The little doctor looked round vaguely. 'Was he supposed to have been in the car?' he asked in his absent-minded fashion.

'He drove me over to the Research Bungalow,' Brenda explained. 'He was going to meet some chief he wanted to see about the safari.'

'Ah yes, I remember now. The house-boy did say something as I came out about his having driven off to some distant village and that we were not to wait dinner for him,' recollected Dr. Drayton.

'But you must dine with us now you are here,' the hospitable Meg insisted. Dr. Drayton, Brenda gathered as the evening progressed, was a frequent visitor at the Laholo bungalow, and listening to his easy chatter over the pleasant meal she was amazed to find how human and sociable the great man of science could be ... under the spell of Elsa Darnley's green eyes, Val's excellent Cape Burgundy and Meg's motherly charm.

It was when they were having coffee in the big shabby lounge that Keith Derrington turned up, making his entrance a trifle unsteadily, his tawny hair ruffled, his eyes all dark pupils and rather fixed. As though aware of the odd little hush that greeted him, he smiled apologetically, looking at that moment so boyish, so appealingly an outlaw that Brenda's heart stung. Sitting down on the arm of Meg's chair he offered gently, 'Sorry, Meg, old girl ... ought not to have shown up like this; the fact is I'm a little tight! I must ask you to forgive me.'

Meg patted his knee equably. 'I'll pour you some strong black coffee.' Her voice held just the right touch of affectionate concern quite

unmixed with censure. It was Elsa who went all shrewish. 'You've been down in that low Indian place in the village drinking sugar-cane spirit!' she accused.

Keith shook his head. 'I've been walking with ghosts,' he whispered. 'Finding out for one more time in my life what a fool a man can be.' He raised the cup of coffee Meg had just given him as though to propose a toast. It might have been Elsa at whom he glanced then, or it might have been Brenda, for they were seated side by side on the couch before him.

'To a dream,' he said almost inaudibly. 'Hail ... and farewell!'

Brenda stood up on legs that weren't quite steady, and a mist blurred her vision as she moved towards the door murmuring her perfunctory good nights, saying she was tired and that she thought she would go to bed. It had been a long day.

Meg, ignoring her protests that she could find her way to her room quite well alone, rose at once to accompany her, fussing with the solicitude of a hostess when they had reached the bedroom, making sure the bedside pitcher had been filled with drinking water, the mosquito net fastened into place.

'Poor Derry,' she mused as she fiddled presently with the rather inadequate latch on the screen door that led to the verandah. 'He doesn't often hit the bottle to any extent. Something has upset him—a quarrel with Elsa, perhaps. They've probably been chewing over the past ... all that hail and farewell business, and saying he'd been walking with ghosts. Look, Brenda dear,' her voice became brisk. 'Keep this door latched. We don't have locks and keys out here in the wilds—no need for them, for the Africans are as honest as the day. But it's just as well to keep your door well fastened if there's a leopard about. You remember, Val told us about it stealing the chickens, when we were driving from the station.'

Her voice was calm and easy. How coolly they took their leopards in Mahamba, Brenda thought with a shiver of fear as she hurried into bed. But almost it was a relief to think of leopards ... anything rather than the pain which churned in her tired brain. Derrington's anger this evening; an anger that had turned to indifference so easily as he strode away from her in the Research compound. Going off to get drunk; proudly and dignifiedly drunk the way no other man could ever be, because of the ghosts of fifteen years ago. Or so Meg had said, and she must be right; Meg who had known him all his life and could read his moods. So that it was madness to imagine there could be any other cause for his drinking and despair, any other dream but the old, old dream. How lovely Elsa had looked standing beside him on the verandah this afternoon, triumphant and possessive, smiling up in witchery at the man whom for fifteen years she had cheated of happiness ... and perhaps still cheated. Why had they quarrelled today? And was it the quarrel, as much as the search for the safari pathfinder, that had sent him off in his car to offer his casual advances to a girl who couldn't matter to him at all?

With a dragging sigh Brenda turned on her hot pillow. Somewhere far off in the darkness a wild creature cried out in anguish sharp and sudden. Death out there in the dense night jungle. Death and pain ... and a leopard prowling. Listening, she lay tense, but there were no more cries and all at once weariness like a drug quietened her nerves. In the abandon of healthy young exhaustion she slept.

She did not know what time it was that she awoke in terror, hearing the small stealthy sound on the verandah just outside her door ... somebody ... or something fumbling at the latch. The leopard, she thought in suffocating panic, her heart pounding so violently that it shook her whole body. Only that leopards didn't close doors behind them ... didn't carry electric torches. In the darkness behind the torch it was the bulk of a man coming towards her, and it was a voice still blurred a little, still gentle with drink, saying, softly, secretly, 'Jane ... it's me ... it's Keith Derrington. Are you awake?'

CHAPTER VII

HER mind empty of everything save confused panic, Brenda sat up, fumbling for the candle and matches Meg had left on her bedside table. 'Don't strike a light!' Keith ordered sharply. For a split second his torch played on her, so that, like a picture in colour thrown upon a dark screen, she was revealed, a sleep-tousled child in blue pyjamas, her short hair a tangle of amber curls about her head, her eyes wide with fear.

'I've scared you!' Keith reproached himself. 'I'm sorry. But it was done with the best of intentions.' The torch was switched off and, in the thick, hot darkness, she could feel him standing there, so close to her that she could have put out a hand and touched him.

'What do you want ?' she asked in a wisp of a voice, asking it without expression, almost without astonishment. It was all so unexpected that she was too stunned to think clearly; Keith Derrington here in her room in the small hours of the morning

He said, 'I'm spending the night out there on the verandah with my gun at the ready. A couple of the servants are with me. We're trying to get that leopard that has been worrying Meg's chickens. It occurred to me just now I ought to tell you. I was sitting there on the steps thinking about that night at my house in Mehetmbe. You don't like unexpected shots, do you? And this one, when it comes, is going to be pretty close. I've laid a trap Of raw meat on the lawn just beneath the verandah.'

'Oh!' she breathed softly, her heart faltering painfully at his mention of the Mehetmbe episode ... the terror that was bats then instead of leopards, the thunder of gun-fire rocking a lamplit room ... and Keith's arms about her. Suddenly she was remembering with such vividness the kisses they had exchanged that it was as though once

more the rapture of the moment possessed her. In the darkness her cheeks flamed.

He said, 'Meg ought to have told you there might be a bit of a racket, but we didn't think of warning you before she went to bed, and I didn't like to rouse her later, so I decided to do the warning myself. Bit of a nerve barging into your room like this, but there was nothing else for it.'

'That's all right,' Brenda murmured in a small, polite voice. 'It was very thoughtful of you.'

'Well, I'd better be getting back to the doings. Don't light your candle or make any sudden sounds if you can help it. We have to keep as quiet as the dead out there if we're not going to scare the big cat off.'

He was gone then, as stealthily as he had come. Lying in the suffocating blackness Brenda strained her ears, but there wasn't as much as the creak of a board under his panther tread as he crossed the verandah. He had called her 'Jane'! He had thought of her as he sat through the hours of the long night waiting for the leopard, had wanted to save her from her tenderfoot terror of guns that went off under her nose. He had remembered her collapse at Mehetmbe. What else had he remembered of that disturbing hour? Once more her cheeks grew hot while she fought back the waves of tenderness which assailed her. How absurd she was! Just because Derry had come into her room to warn her of the leopard hunt ... because he had used the foolish little name he had in amusement invented for her, here she was getting herself all worked up! What, after all, did it amount to? Nothing, save that he had not even felt the degree of resentment she had imagined when in the car this afternoon she had offered him her poor little snub.

The crack and roar of a rifle shot shattered her musings, sending her cowering, her hands over her ears. A second shot followed. The acrid

smell of cordite drifted into the room. She could hear the African boys laughing softly, jubilantly, and in her imagination she could see the lovely, shining leopard who had died without a moan. Presently there was the sound of Keith's car being driven away and, listening to it, a vague sense of anti-climax came to her, like the echo of an old tired sorrow. There were tears on her lashes as presently she drifted off to sleep.

When she woke again it was morning, Omari at her side with a tray of tea things. Beyond the screened windows the sun shone invitingly and the air was gay with the chatter of strange birds. Suddenly it was good to be alive! Flinging back the bed covers, Brenda groped for slippers, remembering to knock them against the floor before putting them on to dislodge possible lurking scorpions. She padded across to the verandah, drinking in the hour's freshloveliness.

How beautiful it all was, how far from the foggy chill of a November morning at home! She drew in a deep ecstatic breath. Here she was in Tanzania with the most wonderful six months of her life in front of her and she was, she resolved with a new fierceness of purpose, going to enjoy it undisturbed by the vagaries of Keith Derrington! When presently Meg called to her, 'Did you hear the *shauri* last night, Brenda? Come out and see our vanquished leopard!' she ran forth into the brilliance of the new day feeling more happily sane and herself than she had since she left home.

In the week that followed she was busy and absorbed. Superbly healthy, the heat soon ceased to bother her. She liked the big white-washed office at the Research bungalow, with its cool straw mats and dark window shades through which the light filtered green and translucent as the green deeps of the sea. Drayton, too, his prim soul expanding in the tropic atmosphere, was easier to work with than she had expected. Excited as a boy over the prospect of the coming safari, he would pore over maps with Derrington, whose occasional presence in the office Brenda resolutely ignored as she rattled away at

her typewriter. And it was most heartening to discover in the end how little he could disturb her. Steeling herself to her new mood of detachment she would watch him drive away with Elsa Darnley at his side, making for some distant village from which a pathfinder or hunter had to be rounded up. These expeditions quite often took the best part of a day and Elsa would return, her face pale and lovely under her shady hat, her green eyes dreamy with content. There were other days when she enlisted Keith to take her shooting, so that she might recover her old skill.

Brenda hardened her heart to it all. When she had occasion to speak to Keith she contrived to be natural and easy with him, and he, on his side, treated her with the same cheery equable friendship which he offered to the Trayners and their children. There were no undercurrents, she felt. Quite clearly he had forgotten his foolish impulse to treat her flirtatiously, had accepted her repudiation of his light-hearted advances as the unimportant matter it was. And he was just as busy as she was, absorbed in preparations for the safari. She did not have to see him very often—for which she was glad.

Life, during those waiting days, fell into a pleasant enough pattern; the work at the office with the sun forever beating behind the thick green blinds, the morning and evening hours on the big airy verandah at Laholo. There was something endlessly reassuring about the Trayner household; good-naturedly clumsy Val, the lively Peter and Gay, the soft-footed houseboys, the cats, the dogs, even Bimba, the baby reed-buck, all revolving about the calm, central presence that was Meg. Brenda, observing her day after day, liked her more and more. There was something satisfying about her—as there is about all motherly women.

'But that was the first thing I thought about her when I saw her in Root's Hotel that lonely evening ... that she looked like somebody's mother,' Brenda remembered, as she watched Meg each morning after breakfast dealing with the patient little queue of villagers who

always awaited her at this hour in the kitchen compound. They came from the huddle of huts near the railway halt; old men, their rheumy eyes half-blinded by conjunctivitis, young men with cuts and bruises, with 'jigger' sores on their bare hard feet, women with babies in their arms, toddlers clinging to their sketchy pretence at skirts, naked, scraggy little creatures, their stomachs swollen by the starchy mealie porridge upon which they lived.

Meg, with Brenda a willing assistant, would bathe the eyes, bind up the cuts, lecture the mothers on the necessity of including fresh vegetables and fruit in their children's diet, while Epsom salts, liquid paraffin and quinine were doled out.

'They're so helpless and foolish and sweet,' she would say to Brenda, 'like lost children.' And her eyes would rest in love on the ebony, lifted faces, the shyly seeking eyes, the neat woolly heads. 'The nastier the medicine is, the more thankfully they drink it. They imagine it is some kind of magic, I'm afraid, for magic is the only thing they can understand when it comes to illness. I can talk to these mothers until I'm hoarse about the need for a more varied diet, but they still go on stuffing their children with *posho*, accepting the inevitable symptoms of malnutrition that result as some kind of natural fate. It's all a bit discouraging. But I keep on! They're here on one's doorstep, so to speak, it isn't possible to see them in trouble without wanting to help them.'

'I don't believe it's everybody who feels like that,' Brenda put in admiringly. 'If they did,' she added, 'more would be done to help these poor people.'

'A great deal *is* being done,' Meg told her. 'There are hospitals and clinics, maternity and child welfare centres in the large urban areas. Round about Nairobi, for instance. There are some wonderful hospitals in Nairobi. But here in this remote part of Tanzania all such aids are too far away. There are the mission hospitals, of course,

which do all they can. But still there are inevitably hundreds of small villages beyond the reach of the missionary doctors. It's all a question of time and distances, of complicated things like population control and economics.'

'Things,' Meg sighed, 'I'm afraid I'm not clever enough to understand. I only understand feeding babies when they're hungry and binding up wounds when they're thrust under my nose.'

'Well, that,' Brenda mused, 'is quite a lot to be going on with, I should say, and if there were more of that spirit about, I'm sure the politics and economics would sort themselves out.'

For some reason she always remembered that conversation. Perhaps because it took place the day before the safari was due to start and it would be some time before she would see again this homely make-shift clinic under the trees. That was the day, too, that Val and Derrington joined them, appearing suddenly and unexpectedly, two leggy figures in khaki shorts loping across the sun-dried grasses of the kitchen compound. There was a vista of clear blue sky flung up behind them and the morning light had a crystal quality so that every leaf and twig and touch of colour in the foreground stood out as though etched in gold.

With photographic sharpness the scene was to remain stamped on the retina of memory long after much else had become blurred, and for ever Brenda was to see the little group of natives squatting on the ground, the bangles glittering on the thin arms of the women, the whiteness of the kitchen boy's clean kanza and the vivid scarlet of the fez on his woolly head. He was standing by Meg's side holding a bright tin basin which winked in the sunshine. There was a bush of frangipani behind them, the pale flowers open and wide, showing their yellow centres, filling the air with their subtle fragrance.

Brenda herself, seated on a low stool in the shade of a fig tree, was holding a small brown baby on her lap, spooning condensed milk into its little sucking mouth. The dark eyes of the baby looked up at her in an adoring, mindless stare, as it drank the sweet creamy stuff down, its tiny fists curling and uncurling in ecstasy. It was one of those happy, utterly satisfying moments that do occasionally occur in an imperfect world ... the sunshine, the baby, the flowers; absorbed in her task, making foolish little sounds of love to the child, Brenda was content.

Then she looked up and saw the two men. 'Val has forgotten the keys of his surgery store again, I expect,' Meg hazarded. He had. Miambu, the kitchen toto, was despatched to find them. Bimba, the baby reed-buck, trotting hopefully after him, while Val took over the basin and Derrington flung himself down in the black shade of the fig tree by Brenda's side. Leaning on his elbow, he watched her so closely that her hand holding the spoonfuls of milk was suddenly not quite steady.

'You do it very nicely, Jane,' he said softly. 'As to the manner born!' He leaned over and took one of the baby's small perfect feet into his big hand. 'Cute little beggar!'

'He certainly is,' Brenda agreed, laughing. 'For all he's so young he knows perfectly well now when he comes here in the morning that he is going to get this milk he loves, and he holds out his arm and gurgles with joy when he sees me coming with the tin. I call that clever at three months old, don't you?'

'Very clever,' Keith confirmed solemnly.

'Brenda is graduating,' Val put in, nodding confidently over the tin basin, while Meg wrung out a final swab for the dressing she was doing on a troublesome boil.

'Graduating?' Derrington echoed.

'The White Settler's Wife diploma,' teased Val, as Brenda coloured. 'She's not going back to London, are you, Brenda?'

Brenda laughed. 'I can think of worse places than Mahamba in which to spend the rest of my days,' she agreed, making her voice casual, carefully avoiding Derrington's glance.

'You mean you could really be happy doing this sort of thing ... living in the wilds, bothering over Africans and their kids, the way Meg does?' His voice came to her with a quiet sort of breathlessness.

'Of course she'd be happy. It's the best life imaginable,' Val answered for her robustly. 'And as soon as we're back from that safari we're going to find a husband for her; introduce her to the hungry bachelor throng at the social club. There's O'Connor and Varley in the Red Cross office, young Crifton who looks after my accounts for me, the Dringwell boys with that great ranch of theirs over on the Masambi river and not a white woman within miles of them. I tell you, Derry, old man, we're not going to let our bonny Brenda slip away back to England so easily. She can have her pick of husbands here, and a jolly lucky man he'll be who gets her!'

'Very nice of you to say so, Val,' Brenda managed to bring out lightly.

'Terry O'Connor,' mused Meg, rolling a bandage deftly. 'I think Terry is the boy I'd choose for her. Near her own age, and full of that Irish charm of his. All the rest are too old, Val; every one of them well over thirty. Brenda doesn't want anyone who is practically middle-aged and probably cynical into the bargain. A nice fresh boy like Terry,' she said, 'who hasn't wasted his heart on having silly affairs. It might have been quite accidental that she should have glanced in Derrington's direction as she spoke.'

He got up abruptly, a towering figure. Standing in the shade of the fig tree, he looked down at Brenda with the brown baby in her lap. 'Nice for you having it all arranged so comfortably,' he said dryly. 'My felicitations to Mr. Terry O'Connor!' And turning, he walked away over the burned-up grass, announcing that he had come to spend the morning with Meg checking over the list of stores she had prepared for them to take on safari.

Brenda did not see him again all day. There was a rush of last-minute work at the office and the weather seemed unusually close and airless, so that she toiled on with a feeling of oppression at her heart, an odd listlessness taking the place of the eagerness with which she had been looking forward to tomorrow's adventure.

It was late when she had finished and, glancing out of the office window, she saw Elsa Darnley drive into the compound, a bearer seated at her side. Evidently she had been hunting without Keith Derrington today, and hunting successfully, for a slaughtered antelope lolled in the back of the box- body car, blood still dripping from its tender, dove- coloured throat. When the servants ran forward, falling upon its carcass with cries of excitement, beginning right away the hideous operation of skinning and dismembering, Elsa stood over them, the triumph of the huntress in her green eyes.

Turning from the scene with a shiver of distaste, Brenda covered her typewriter and, leaving the bungalow by the front entrance so that she could avoid the gory mess that filled the yard, she got into the rather ancient runabout which had been detailed for her use in the journeys to and from Laholo.

As she touched the ignition switch, Keith appeared, seemingly springing up from nowhere and, opening the off-side door, asked if he might have a lift. Something had cropped up in connection with tomorrow's expedition which had to be discussed with Val Trayner, he offered, in an explanation hardly necessary, for in their

closely-knit little community all cars were public property, lifts taken for granted. And without waiting for her murmured response he slid into the seat at her side.

With hands that shook, Brenda fumbled at the gears. Not since that rather disastrous night ride, when he had taken her from Laholo to the Research Settlement, had she found herself alone with him— save for that strange moment when he had come into her bedroom to warn her about the shooting of the leopard. And all through the week she had rigorously and sternly been engaged in thrusting the thought of him out of her mind. With marked success. Only this morning under the fig tree, when she had held the baby in her arms, his presence had disturbed her. She had found herself thinking of him far too often as she typed and filed and took Dr. Drayton's dictated notes all through the hot day.

And now here she was faced with the prospect of his company as they drove through the lonely bush, already lit with the brief glow of a sunset that would so soon give way to darkness. Ashamed of the rush of emotion that so traitorously assailed her, and still feeling slightly sick at the memory of the scene in the compound, she found herself saying in a shaken voice that she supposed beautiful creatures like antelopes had to be killed for food, but it seemed all wrong for a woman to do the killing.

'And the dreadful way the boys began hacking at it with their horrible curved knives before it was even cold!' she shuddered.

'So you don't approve of blood sports for women,' Keith remarked in what might have been mockery for a squeamishness he did not understand.

'I'm not saying I don't approve ... only that I couldn't go in for that sort of thing myself.'

'No,' he agreed more gently, rather contemplatively, 'I don't suppose you could. All the same you ought to carry a gun and learn to use it if you are going to run about the bush tracks alone, even in a stout car. Rhinos have been known to charge cars before now.'

'But there is a gun in the back of the car,' Brenda assured him. 'And I usually have a bearer with me. I didn't wait for him tonight. He was shouting and dancing with the rest round that poor antelope. I couldn't stand it... so I hurried away.'

'Well, promise me you won't make the trip alone again,' Keith insisted. The warm concern in his tone was probably no more than the trained and responsible hunter's natural caution, but it brought a quiver to Brenda's voice as she answered softly, 'I promise.*

He said then, abruptly, almost angrily, 'If you want to know, it was seeing you were alone made me decide to go over to the Trayners' tonight. I've no real business with Val. It was simply that my conscience wouldn't allow me to watch you setting out in the dusk in your greenhorn way --'

'I'm sorry,' Her cheeks were crimson. 'You ought not to have bothered. I'd have been all right.'

'Probably. But there's no room for foolhardy risks in bush life. Try to remember that when we are on safari.'

Feeling snubbed, Brenda drove on in silence and Keith, too, was silent, puffing away at his old and odorous pipe for the remainder of the short drive.

Meg called to them in greeting from the verandah as they drew up at the bungalow. Peter had fallen into a water-hole, which, at this season before the rains, was mostly mud, and she was in the middle of trying to get him clean again.

'Take Derry into the living-room, Brenda dear, and give him a drink,' she ordered hospitably. 'I'll come along and join you as soon as I can.' Waving a soapy hand she disappeared in the direction of the bathroom, where Peter's wails could be heard.

Brenda, who had been planning to slip away to her own room in escape, found herself faced with the awkward task of playing hostess to the taciturn figure who followed her into the living-room. It was with a surge of relief that she saw Gay, seated at the central table, eating her supper from a tray, her small face scrubbed and pink above her shrunken blue pyjamas, her tow-coloured hair sticking out in two small damp plaits from either side of her head. 'I've had my barf,' she announced with a virtuous air, 'and Peter is cryng 'cos he fell into the water-hole at the bottom of the garden. He was trying to catch a frog. He's all dirty. I never fall into water-holes.'

'Well, don't be so smug about it,' Keith snapped, moving a tangle of cats from his favourite armchair.

'What is smug?' Gay enquired, as the cats with incredulous and affronted expressions on their faces stalked from the room.

'It's the way all women feel when men fall into muddy water-holes,' Keith explained gravely.

'Do men fall into water-holes, then?'

'Frequently. It affords their women friends a great deal of quiet satisfaction.'

'What horrible women you must have known in your life!' Brenda couldn't help interjecting.

Keith gave her an odd look. 'Well, I haven't been all that lucky up to date,' he said quietly, as he took the glass with its measure of whisky from her hands.

She pushed the siphon of soda water along the sideboard towards him. 'Let me mix you something?' he offered.

'I really ought to go and wash the office ink off my hands.'

'Oh, sit down and be sociable a moment,' he ordered edgily. 'Have a neat lime juice or something equally daring. Relax for once, and let your hair down.'

With a sigh of exasperation he threw himself into the chair from which he had evicted the cat family, and Brenda, having poured a small sherry for herself, took a corner of the couch, sitting on the edge rather gingerly as though she were ready to fly off at any moment. There was a volcanic air about Keith that wasn't reassuring; a smouldering of temper that might go up in flames at a touch. What was the matter with him? He didn't usually snap at the children ... or throw cats out of chairs. It's because he had to come over here with me to save me from charging rhinos, Brenda thought bleakly. He'd much rather have stayed over at H.Q. helping Elsa to gloat over her antelope.

'Brenda can't let her hair down,' said Gay, who had evidently been pondering Derrington's last remark. 'It's nearly as short as yours. When I grow up I'm going to have long black hair, just like Auntie Elsa's, and I'm going to paint my fingernails and toenails the way she does.'

Keith laughed—not very pleasantly; and Gay looked offended. 'Aunt Elsa is beautiful,' she asserted fiercely.

'Very,' Keith agreed.

'That's why you're in love with her, isn't it?' Gay pursued with romantic fervour, her milk mug poised half-way to her mouth.

Brenda heard Keith's muffled exclamation of astonishment. 'Who says I'm in love with her?' he thundered so ferociously that Gay dropped her milk mug in alarm. 'Now look what you've made me do!' She pointed tremulously as a stream of milk oozed over her supper tray. Her plaits quivered indignantly, as she and Keith glared at each other. 'Mummy says you're in love with her,' she went on stoutly. 'That's why Auntie Elsa came out here to marry you ... because you've been in love with her for the last fifty years.'

This was too much even for Brenda's gravity and Keith's great roar of laughter filled the room.

With a withering glance at them, Gay slid off her chair. 'Now you're both just being silly,' she said in exact imitation of Meg at her most maternally disapproving. She marched from the room, a small outraged figure in faded blue pyjamas.

'Well!' breathed Keith on a long, incredulous sigh. His agate eyes went burningly to Brenda. He looked dazed. 'So that's what old Meg has had in her head all these days!' he marvelled. 'And Elsa has come out here to marry me!' He leaned forward eagerly. 'Is that what they've been telling you as well as Gay, Jane?'

Her little foolish name! He hadn't used it since that first night at Mahamba. Her heart beat thickly as she answered diffidently, 'Meg did rather give me that injpression; but it's all rather obvious, isn't it?'

'What's obvious?'

'That you ... that Miss Darnley ...' She broke off in distress. 'Meg hasn't gossiped ... or anything like that, but she did tell me how it used to be between you and Elsa in the old days.'

He stared at her blankly. 'That rehash!' he gasped. 'So they handed you that, too! A story fifteen years old ... and might be Gay's fifty for all it matters to me.'

With one swift movement he was on the couch beside her. She saw his face lean and haggard in the gathering dusk, his fiercely direct glance fixed on her with an intensity that made her senses swim. 'Listen, Jane,' he said urgently. 'It's important that you of all people should know the truth. I don't know if it will make any difference to you or not. I don't understand how your mind works. I don't understand how any woman's mind works. Women baffle me. But for what it's worth to you, you may as well know that Elsa Darnley means nothing to me at all. Less than nothing. That she has chosen to come out here for a couple of weeks' hunting, that she employs me to take her out on an odd shoot or two while we're waiting to go on safari, has no significance of any kind. She is no more to me than any other client I've ever had, and if I could have avoided having her as a client, I would.'

It must have been some movement, some stir, the swift indrawing of that shocked breath in the shadows which made them both turn then. The verandah door was open and on its threshold Elsa Darnley stood still as a statue, her face ashen and drawn, her green eyes blazing.

CHAPTER VIII

It was, without doubt, the training of a lifetime that came to her aid. After that one moment of sharp, unhappy hesitation, she advanced into the room, her smile as ready as ever, baffling, artificial, a veil drawn over her lovely features. This way she might have stepped from the wings on to a stage set for her, the subsidiary characters in the scene awaiting her, everything about them a little diminished by her entry. She said lightly, 'It's true then ... the old tag concerning listeners who never hear any good of themselves?'

Keith, who had risen formally at her approach, waved her to a chair. 'You heard nothing I haven't already said to your face,' he asserted coolly. 'You're not the type of safari client I care to accept.'

How could he be so calm? Brenda wondered, while her own heart hammered. How much had Elsa really heard? How long had she been lurking in the doorway? Had she listened while Keith's troubled voice repudiated their friendship? 'For what it's worth to you, you may as well know that Elsa Darn- ley means nothing to me at all.' The implication of his words made Brenda catch her breath. It was important, he had gone on, that she of all people should know the truth. What exactly had he intended to convey by that? And what else might he have said if they had not been interrupted? Here on the couch he had sat by her side, such truth and entreaty in his eyes that the thought of it now set the wildest hopes fluttering in her heart, while Elsa, ignoring the offered chair, took her place deliberately on the couch which Keith had vacated. At all events she was making sure he would not resume his seat by Brenda's side. She will fight me to the last trivial detail, Brenda thought grimly, and heard Elsa say that she had slipped over to ask Meg if she had a spare pair of sun-glasses she might borrow. 'I lost mine today in the bush and I daren't face safari without them,' she confessed.

'But there are lots of spare pairs lying about at headquarters,' Brenda put in; something Elsa surely knew perfectly well. She had, it was clear, followed Keith, having seen him depart in the Laholo car. There was a moment's awkward silence after Brenda had spoken and she was aware of the look of pure hatred the green eyes flashed at her. Then Gay came in, breathing laboriously, carrying a damp kitchen swab with which she began to mop at the milk-flooded tray.

'Why didn't you tell Omari to come in and clear up?' Keith asked gently, taking the swab from the child's hands and dabbing helplessly at the milky flood until, laughing, Brenda came to the rescue.

'It seems fantastic to me,' murmured Elsa from the couch, 'that those children are to be dragged on safari with us. If you're really keen on having only tough clients, Keith...'

'Meg's got to come to see to the catering,' he reminded her, 'and she can't leave the kids behind. Besides, why should she?' He tweaked one of Gay's plaits. 'Don't you remember going on safari when you wore pinafores?' he asked Elsa dryly. 'It's the best time for safaris, if it comes to that.'

Elsa shrugged. 'I remember lots of things that happened when I wore pinafores,' she told him with a sidelong glance. 'I remember when you tried to lose me in the bush near home because you wanted to go bow-and-arrow shooting with a couple of Masai totos.'

'Well, there you are! Even then I was trying to shake you off,' he reminded her with light ungallantry, the twinkle in his eyes taking the sting from his words. 'Hunters don't really want women around.'

'They only want to marry them,' Gay put in, being a child of one idea, and when they all laughed she felt she had said something very clever indeed. It was odd, Brenda thought, how quickly the atmosphere had

cleared; as though Elsa's awkward entrance had never happened. How thick-skinned she was!

And just then Meg came into the room followed by Omari with the pearly-globed oil-lamp.

She said, 'I'm glad you came over, Derry dear; I want to check over the last lot of stores once more with you.' She caught sight of Elsa and made a small welcoming sound. 'Maybe,' she suggested, '*you* ought to come and check the stores, too. If Derry were married'—she broke off with a small significant laugh—'it's his wife who would have to see to all these details for his safaris. As he *isn't* married, I have to take on the job. A hunter ought to be married, it makes the whole business of safari so much more comfortable all round.'

Lightly Derry put an arm about her shoulder.

'How right you are!' he agreed mockingly. 'Well, let's go and count tins of bully beef and you can give me some more matrimonial advice. I surely need it.'

'You surely do!' Meg agreed, linking her arm in his. 'And you trot off to bed now, Gay,' she called back over her shoulder.

Gay groaned. 'Go on,' warned Meg, 'or there'll be no safari for you tomorrow!'

With a sigh of resignation, Gay departed. Leaning back on the couch Elsa gave Brenda a long, considering look. They were alone now, the room a pool of silence, lit by the big creamy lamp. Insects buzzed hotly beyond the netted windows; somewhere a jackal screamed.

'Would you like a drink?' Brenda asked, to break the somehow disturbing silence in which those slanting green eyes regarded her.

'No. I want to talk to you. Come and sit down.' Elsa patted the cushions beside her and a little reluctantly Brenda found herself complying with the curt request.

'It's about Derry,' Elsa began at once. 'He's trying to make you, isn't he? He's been trying ever since you arrived. I've seen it... I know his methods so well.'

Trying to 'make' her! The vulgarity of the term jarred and Brenda coloured defensively. 'Is it anything to do with you whether he is or not?' she countered, and felt the reply to be as tasteless in its way as Elsa's attack. As though this woman had somehow reduced the discussion at its outset to her own vulgar level. For she is vulgar, Brenda decided angrily. Vulgar and hard and insensitive.

'It has quite a lot to do with me,' Elsa was answering steadily. 'Why do you think I came out here? Because Derry asked me to come; because he swept into my dressing-room like a tornado that last night of my play in London and'—she laughed softly, reminiscently—'made love to me in no uncertain fashion. Fifteen years ago we were to have been married.'

'I know,' Brenda breathed, her lips white with pain. Just what was Elsa getting at with her terrifying air of assurance? Unhappily Brenda met the hard green glance.

'A friend of mine was to have been bridesmaid. She was young... sixteen and impressionable. Derry even at that all-important moment couldn't resist the flattery of her devotion. He never can resist females who offer themselves up to him. I found her in his arms on our wedding eve. I ran away.'

This impulsively concocted story! It was almost pitiable. 'I don't believe you,' Brenda declared stoutly.

'All right, don't believe me,' Elsa returned quietly. 'And don't blame me when you get hurt. You're in love with Derry, aren't you?'

She did not answer.

'And he knows it,' the relentless voice went on. 'He feeds his vanity on girls like you. Ask Meg; she'll tell you the same thing. There've been so many women in his life. I've heard of his escapades even in London. These stories get about. Ask Meg to tell you about Arlette Brown and young Mrs. Trevennick, the District Commissioner's bride. Ask Derry about them if you like. He's a bit of a wolf you know, when it comes to these easy conquests ... a hunter of hearts as well of beasts, with a hunter's appetite for the thrill of the kill.'

'And yet you ... want him,' Brenda brought out through dry lips.

'Yes, I want him. We love each other and hate each other in a way that isn't easy to get out of the blood. This flirting with you even ... it's something laid on for my torment as much as anything; and to that extent I can I suppose consider it flattering.' She laughed softly, sensuously. 'Leave him alone, my dear,' she advised. 'He's no good to you. I doubt if he's any good to any woman; but I can take that risk. He's my sort, if it comes to that. My tastes are sophisticated. A good, dull, loyal man wouldn't interest me at all. But you go and find yourself some nice simple boy who'll be kind to you, *Jane*!' She laughed as she spoke the little name. 'Why do you suppose it amuses him to call you that? A sneer for your innocence, that's all it is.' She yawned, easy and relaxed as a cat, lying back on the cushions of the couch.

Brenda stood up abruptly, two bright spots of colour on her cheeks. 'If you've quite finished,' she said, 'I've things to do in my room.'

Elsa nodded. 'I'm finished, my dear ... save for one last word. Don't try to fight me on my own ground. I'm a dangerous person to cross. That's all.'

'Thanks for the warning,' Brenda said lightly. But in the privacy of her own room, her pulses fluttered unevenly and there were tears in her eyes. Elsa was horrible; smirching everything she touched, even her own relationship to Keith Derrington. The man she had spoken of loving ... and hating! Glimpses of the sultry and unwholesome seemed to hover in the quiet room as Brenda tugged at flimsy bamboo drawers and absently picked out things to be packed for tomorrow's trek. Arlette Brown ... and a girl who had been a bride; what had Derry been to them? All this mystery; something that might have been dismissed as Elsa's unscrupulous nonsense if Meg Trayner hadn't hinted at very much the same kind of background whenever she talked of Derry's past. Brenda remembered that rather odd moment this morning under the fig tree when she had spoken of men who were thirtyish and cynical, having wasted their hearts on the foolishness of passing affairs. She had looked straight at Keith Derrington in her forthright way, her plump face set in lines of disapproval. A hunter of hearts with the hunter's instinct to kill!

With hands that shook, Brenda stuffed garments into a suitcase. She felt unnerved ... destroyed. Just for a moment, sitting by Derry's side on the couch listening to his earnest pleading, everything had seemed simple and wonderful again. But nothing was simple. If he had really asked Elsa to come out to Kenya ... if that night in London he had made love to her ... if indeed in the endless hours they spent together he still found himself swayed by her undeniable charm, why did he bother when the occasion presented itself to work up these odd, disturbing little scenes with herself? It was all so baffling. Elsa's crude warnings, Brenda had to admit to herself j had only roused once more the uneasiness she had felt about Keith Derrington all along. Site was in love with him, no good pretending to herself that she was not, but she mistrusted him. And to love without trust is hell! Even Elsa

Darnley didn't trust him, and perversely fed her passion on the misery he caused her. 'A good, dull, loyal man wouldn't interest me at all,' she had said horribly.

The truth is I'm too unsophisticated to be a match for either of them, Brenda told herself bitterly, and was careful to potter about her room until the banging of a car door, the sound of voices calling 'good night,' told her that Keith and Elsa had gone. She spent the rest of the evening, tight-lipped and abstracted, helping Meg with the final preparations for the morning's departure.

The household turned in early and Brenda lay tossing for hours under her mosquito-net before sleep came. It was still dark when Omari brought her morning tea, and more dead than alive she struggled out of bed, her head heavy with the sleep which had come too late in the night for real refreshment.

The start of the safari took place in a haze of weariness which lent a dream-like unreality to the scene. In its way a beautiful dream, poignant as distantly heard music. As long as she lived Brenda would remember the thinning stars overhead, dawn faint as a sigh touching the mountain line on the pale horizon, the cool sweet air that wiped out all memory of the hot and airless night. Swinging their hurricane lamps the black boys ran laughing like children from the house to the courtyard, loading the waiting cars. In the frangipani trees the birds woke and chattered. Bundled in woollen sweaters, which would be discarded in unimaginable heat long before breakfast time, the children clattered about the wooden verandah while Meg served hot coffee, gave last-minute instructions for the care of the household pets to Omari, and at the same time kept her eagle eye on the packages the boys were loading into the cars, seeing that nothing was left behind.

At last the little procession set out, Meg and Val and Gay in the leading car, Brenda next, driving her runabout with Peter for

company, their bearer on the back seat, his loaded gun on his knees. Two car-loads of African servants followed, then the box- body car carrying tents, bedding. A lorry piled with tins of petrol, with guns and ammunition brought up the rear. At an arranged meeting-place along the highway a similar collection of cars joined them from the Research headquarters, and in the first silver lance of the sun's thin light Brenda glimpsed Elsa, fragile as a lily in a white woollen coat with a hood drawn over her dark hair, seated by Keith's side in his low-slung open car. They were to lead the way, it seemed, with the ancient, grey-haired Negro, who was to act as pathfinder, in the seat behind them.

For what seemed endless hours the long line of cars went rumbling over the highway. It grew hot as the sun climbed into the brassy bell of the sky. The highway was powdered with dust which floated in clouds about the crawling, clanking cars. Dust and perspiration half-blinding her, Brenda drove with dogged endurance. If this was safari it was dull, terrible ... disappointing. This monotonous plain, strung across with ugly black thorn trees, carpeted with burned-up grasses from which all life seemed to have departed. Peter fidgeted, yawned, grew naughty and mischievous, teasing Wanyanga the bearer by pretending to see lions in the scrub.

Then suddenly the highway dwindled to a narrow track and plunged into forest; cool, richly dark, green and tawny as an old tapestry. The fungus creepers were like long grey beards, hanging from trees so thickly branched that they shut out the hard bright sky. Here monkeys chattered high overhead, their small wise faces peering down at the intruders as they leaped with screams of alarm from cover to cover. Once a rhino went crashing away into the undergrowth.

It was in this forest the first halt was made for a meal that would be breakfast and lunch combined. As she switched off her engine Brenda found Keith opening the door of her car, his hand held out to help her alight. Unthinkingly she responded to the casual gesture, but holding

her fingers in his great crushing grasp he did not at once release her. 'How are you making out with driving in convoy?' he asked.

'It's slow work,' she told him, 'and very dusty.'

'That's because you are well back in the line. I wish I could have you in my car in the lead. We raise all the dust that blows back on you.' As he spoke he was still imprisoning her hand and her colour rose as she met his steady and searching glance.

He said, 'Elsa will have to take her turn in some other part of the column. When we drive again will you come in my car?' Her senses swam. This direct approach was so unexpected that she couldn't for an instant think how to deal with it. Rigidly she resisted the mindless joy flooding her. Derry wanting her ... asking her to drive with him while Elsa was deposed! But the poison of mistrust stirred in her blood. 'He feeds his vanity on girls like you.' The whispered words came back, barbed, cruel.

'I expect I shall have to ride mostly in the laboratory car once we begin collecting specimens,' she said stiffly. She was conscious of Elsa in her lily-pale coat, watching them, the tigerish green eyes intent; and as though compelled by that inimical glance she withdrew her fingers from Keith's grasp.

He smiled down at her, easy, assured. He said, 'There'll be lots of driving before we're through with this safari. Drayton won't keep you working on specimens all the time.'

After breakfast he went off into the forest with a handful of boys to round up a buck or two for the party's meat supply. Drayton, armed with secateurs and trowel, called to Brenda that they might as well employ the interval in gathering some fronds of the strange fungus which hung from the trees and bushes.

'And don't wander far without a guide,' warned Val Trayner. As he spoke, old Karo, the path-finder, rose from the sun-hot stone upon which he had been ruminating. 'I go with the memsahib,' he announced, attaching himself to Brenda with a proprietorial air. 'The Bwana Derry-ton tell me stay all times by memsahib if she walks in forest,' he elucidated.

Val nodded approvingly. 'Derry certainly is taking no chances of losing you!' he told Brenda. 'I was wondering why he'd left old Karo out of the hunting party.'

Elsa, lounging by the littered breakfast table, made a small sneering sound. 'Quite touching!' she breathed softly. 'Any objection if I come along and share the protection of the wonderful Karo?' she asked, then. 'I might be able to help with the moss gathering.'

'Why, thanks very much,' Brenda could only return politely, and Dr. Drayton was clearly delighted to have the lovely Elsa along. She chattered entertainingly as they worked and her knowledge of the bush plants was helpful. Wandering from clearing to clearing they filled their baskets, Brenda halting from time to time, lost in wonder at the vistas of blue-green mystery opening up before them: the towering majestic trees, the spreading mangoes, the delicate acacia thorns fragile as ferns with their flaming scarlet flowers. And all the time, like a crooked black shadow, old Karo hovered behind her.

It was just as they were on the point of returning from their successful harvesting that Elsa pointed out a trailing sticky-looking ivy-like creeper that might be of some interest. But almost before Brenda had time to touch the plant Karo had darted forward, his thin voice rising in a wail of protest. 'Bad leaf, ju-ju leaf, memsahib not take it!' he warned. 'Make poison in the blood!' He shot at Elsa a malevolent glance. 'All memsahibs born in Africa know this,' he declared angrily.

Elsa shrugged and laughed. 'Just one of their native superstitions,' she explained to Brenda with a withering look at the old African. 'But we'd best not bother with the creeper, I suppose, if it's going to upset his highness, Mr. Karo!' In an odd little silence they returned to the camp to find that Derry and his hunters had just got in, bringing two lolling, blood-stained antelopes and a small limp reed-buck.

Brenda tried not to look while the skinning and dismemberment was in progress and was relieved when Drayton hurried her away to the rear of his box-body laboratory car where he kept her busy sorting the specimens they had collected and making notes in her log-book even after the caravan had started once more on its way.

The journey through the forest lasted all day. In the dusk they halted close to a water-hole where thirsty creatures crowded, making an easy mark for Derry's gun. Two more deer-like creatures fell, staining the water with their blood before the rest of the herd took fright and vanished. A rare leopard was glimpsed, throwing all the bearers into a frenzy of excitement; somewhere a lion roared, and the darkness in that place of thick trees came down so swiftly that there was hardly time to get the protective ring of fires going before the black curtain of night had fallen. In the clearing by the water-hole the bearers worked rapidly, setting up tents, building a small lean-to of tree-trunks, thatched cleverly with branches, for a kitchen place. The air was filled with the odours of the roasting meat, and into the tent which Brenda found to her dismay she was to share with Elsa, came a canvas bath, filled with steaming water ..Elsa said laughingly, 'We have to toss up for who baths first. Water is scarce.'

Brenda said in some embarrassment, 'Please don't let's bother about tossing. You bath first. I'll wait.' She went out into the glow of the firelight and stood hesitant. Sounds of hilarity from Meg's tent indicated that the children were enjoying the novelty of bedtime rites under canvas. Loud splashings from another direction, accompanied by a tuneless bass humming, suggested a bath being taken by one of

the men shamelessly in the open. Val Trayner most likely, for he was given to tuneless humming.

Flustered at the prospect of stumbling upon him at his ablutions, Brenda plunged for a path leading away from the camp into the forest. The light from the leaping fires behind her threw their wavering, crimson reflection after her, and as long as she remained in their glow she would be safe from prowling wild animals. But she must not go too far. Fascinated by the glimpses of tangled vegetation, luridly green in the firelight; breathing the strange, moist scent of the giant ferns, the leafy earth and unseen flowers, she crept forward cautiously, feeling, for the first time, away from the chattering companionship of the daytime, the immensity and loneliness of the bush all about her. Here she was alone in the depths of a Tanzania forest, a world primitive in its luxuriant disorder as the swamps in which prehistoric man had roamed. The steamy, hot darkness, she felt might have been the beginning of darkness itself, before light had been created. Awe touched her spirit. She stood still, listening to the tiny sounds of which the silence was compounded, the strange creaking of branches high overhead, the soft stirrings and rustlings that could have been monkeys or wild cats watching her from the matted foliage.

Then a sharper, more definite movement in the undergrowth beside her halted her heart and in frozen terror she saw the branches of a laurel-like bush divide and a black wizened face thrust itself out.

'It is Karo,' the apparition whispered in an old cracked voice, like the echo of living speech. 'Mem- sahib not fear. Karo is good. Karo is wise. The memsahib walk in the forest because old Karo call for her in his heart.'

Gnome-like he stood before her now, his hands crossed on his naked shrivelled breast, his small face puckered and sad, his dark eyes bright and compelling, so that looking into their brightness Brenda

felt her own gaze caught and held and she was unable to move or speak.

'The paths of life and of death,' the old man said, 'these Karo see plain before him and for the mem- sahib there is danger, even death; that is why the spirit of Karo call her here. If the memsahib will but step a moment into Karo's house ...' Sweeping aside the laurel-like branches, he revealed the little lean-to of bamboo leaves and plaited foliage from which he had apparently emerged. 'Enter, memsahib !' he ordered imperiously, and as though impelled by some mysterious force Brenda moved forward into the depths of the green and hidden hut.

CHAPTER IX

JUST why she should have been so meekly acquiescent, Brenda couldn't have explained to herself when she thought about it all later. The whole thing was like a dream, the sort of thing that might happen under the influence of hypnosis. Was it possible that that was what the old native chieftain had really done? Hypnotized her. It seemed, on reflection, the only possible explanation; for how, otherwise, could she have moved so trustingly into that cave of green, leafy walls where a tiny oil-lamp burned on an upturned wooden box? There was a pile of dried leaves and grasses for a bed in one corner, and another upturned box covered with a cervel cat skin to which the old man waved her with a courtly air. Seating herself on the striped cat skin, she saw with the first tremor of misgiving that Karo, squatting before her, had blocked the only exit the structure offered. Here she was trapped with this strange old creature! Fear, waking sluggishly in her drugged senses, began to stir.

'Show me your hands, memsahib,' Karo demanded now in urgency, spreading out his own pinkish palms—as a professional palmist might have done. If he were simply a crazy fortune-teller, Brenda thought, best humour him and get it over as quickly as possible. She held out her upturned hands a little unsteadily and, not touching them, kneeling respectfully a little distance away from her, Karo peered at them.

For a few moments he was silent. Then all at once he seemed to become inhuman, terrible, his eyes rolling frenziedly, his lips turning back over his pointed, wolf-fang teeth. Like a medium going into a trance. Nervously Brenda glanced at the inaccessible exit, wishing she were out of this awful little hut and safely back at the camp. Supposing Karo were as mad as he looked!

'See, memsahib!' he was saying in a shocked undertone, pointing at her right palm upon which, to Brenda's amazement, a faint pink weal

began to rise. Certainly she had not seen, nor felt, any such blemish there before.

'What is it, Karo?' she asked in a scared whisper.

'The evil of the ju-ju leaf you touched this morning, memsahib. Already it works its poison.' And even as he spoke the pain began, a sudden stinging fire that shot up Brenda's arm until it seemed to reach her very heart.

'But it hurts, Karo!' she cried in alarm.

'It is death,' Karo muttered. 'It is the curse of the witch woman who hates you, the memsahib with milk-white skin and hair of night ... the green eyes filled with the wisdom of devils. Old Karo see, old Karo know when she put ju-ju on you this morning in the forest.'

Dimly, through the mounting waves of pain, Brenda heard the sinister words. It was all quite incredible. The solid ground of reason slipped away from under her feet. She had a feeling of having been wafted into some nether world, inherent in this dark and fathomless African forest. Vaguely remembered tales of voodoo and black magic stirred in her mind.

'But this is ridiculous!' she cried, pushing the slimy sense of horror away from her. 'If the creeping plant I touched this morning had been poison, why did it not affect me sooner?'

'Because,' Karo returned with an air of simple good faith, 'the poison is not in the plant, but in the mind of the evil memsahib. The plant is the sign only, the ju-ju. In itself it is without badness, but with her thoughts the milk-white memsahib make evil come. There are many such things in this country. There are stones and beads and seeds that can be used in the binding of spells. The milk-white one is of Africa. She knows ju-ju. This I have seen in her eyes. This I have felt in my blood when I sit behind her in the bwana's car, seeing the spell she

puts upon my bwana; for her beauty is great and can turn the heart of a man to water.'

So even old Karo had sensed the strange wild love that stormed between Keith Derrington and Elsa, Brenda reflected through the fumes of her pain and confusion. Just one more witness—and so unexpected a witness—to make assurance doubly sure. Dizzily she put her head down between her hands, wondering that she could, even now at this moment of danger and horror, ache for her poor lost dream. Was there no end to the tenacity of the human heart?

Rousing herself with an effort, she got shakily to her feet. 'I must go, Karo. My hand hurts. The Memsahib Trayner will give me something to soothe it.'

Karo turned and groped in his bed of leaves. 'I will give you the only soothing,' he murmured, and with a deep shudder she saw him draw forth the limp body of a small black snake.

'Fear not; it is dead,' he assured her. With a swift movement of a knife produced from the pocket of his bush shirt he cut the snake across, holding it over the sandy soil in which its dripping blood formed a small pool. Gathering the blood-moistened earth in his palm, he kneaded it into a soft dough, to which he added a powder that might have been pounded herbs, taken from a battered mustard tin he apparently kept in the same capacious pocket for such emergencies.

Handing the resultant mess to Brenda, he said earnestly, 'Keep this tightly in your hand as you , return to your tent, memsahib. Bathe the sore palm in hot water at the time of the evening cleansing, then smear a little of this salve upon the aching place and all will be well.'

Thanking him hurriedly, Brenda took the sticky mess, bent only now on making her escape, meaning to throw the disgusting lump of earth and snake's blood away at the first opportunity. But Karo insisted

upon escorting her to the tent and she had not the heart to hurt his feelings by ridding herself of his remedy in front of him. Also, she was more than a little afraid of the strange old man! So, gingerly, she "held on to the doubtful lump, and miraculously, as she walked, she felt the pain clear from her hand and arm ... blissfully, utterly, like a black cloud dispersing. A curious sense of well-being, almost of intoxication, followed the vanishing of the pain.

'But I'm cured, Karo!' she exclaimed in a wondering tone.

He gave her an earnest and piercing look. 'Maybe,' he said, 'old Karo let evil come, to you tonight that good may come later. If I have permitted this pain, memsahib, forgive me!'

'You mean,' she cried out indignantly, 'it wasn't a real pain; that you've tricked me in some horrible magical way?'

He shook his woolly grey head, and now when he spoke it was slowly, patiently, as though to a child. 'The milk-white memsahib tell you this morning to touch ju-ju leaf, and old Karo feel at that moment the death-wish she have for you because you are young, while her own body withers. All day I hold back with my thoughts this ju-ju she make on you. But tonight I let ju-ju work a little so that you may feel it and take warning.'

His skinny forefinger pointed accusingly at the tent door behind Brenda. 'Take care at all times!' he whispered. 'Trust not the woman with eyes of green fire who longs for your death. Trust only in God,' he ended with a touch of orthodoxy that came incongruously from his pagan mouth.

With a bewildered nod of farewell, Brenda dismissed him and, lifting the flap of the tent door, she entered, feeling as though she had been on a journey to the wildest cloud-cuckoo land. Blankly she stared at the scene before her; Elsa enveloped in clouds of steam and perfume,

a creamy, exotic nymph smiling rosily from the folds of a large soft towel.

'For heaven's sake,' she protested mockingly, 'why did you run away just because I was having a bath? There's no need to go all modest and suburban in the heart of a Tanzania forest, my poor child.'

Ignoring the implied sneer, Brenda sat down on her bed, still clutching the lump of horrible moist earth. Slowly she uncurled her hand and examined the palm. The red weal had gone ... if indeed it had ever existed! She said, because something had to be said if life wasn't to become utterly insane and untenable, 'I have been talking to that funny old boy, Karo. My hand began to hurt terribly where it had been brushed by that poison leaf this morning.'

Elsa looked up sharply. 'But it wasn't a poison leaf, Brenda! I've plucked it hundreds of times myself and used it for table decoration. I know the Africans have weird theories about it and fear it.'

Brenda placed the lump of earth and blood on the upturned packing case which served them as a dressing-table. 'Well, something started my hand and arm aching almost unbearably and old Karo stopped the pain ... with this!' She indicated the lump of earth, but somehow could not bring herself to say anything of its ingredients.

Elsa shrugged. 'Old Karo is working up for a nice fat baksheesh,' she suggested cynically. 'Or he may genuinely have believed you would be hurt by the creeper this morning and got himself and you into a flap over it by sheer suggestion. They *can* do that sort of thing, you know. And there's more than a touch" of the witch doctor about the old boy, Derry tells me.'

She was slipping on a gleaming silken hostess gown as she spoke, an incongruously luxuriant garment in this primitive setting. Never had she looked more lovely. 'If it was really the plant that affected your

skin, why didn't it begin to irritate this morning?' she demanded reasonably. 'It just doesn't make sense.'

'That's rather what I thought myself,' Brenda agreed, remembering with a pang of annoyance that old Karo had actually confessed that he had 'permitted' the strange pain to afflict her. The whole thing was a mystery. There were things about the African mentality that were too much for her and in future she would be careful to keep out of old Karo's way. He was more than a little mad, as likely as not, and his hatred for Elsa Darnley and his fear of the ju-ju leaf had done the rest. If she hadn't strayed away into the forest so recklessly none of this need have happened. As for all the melodramatic warnings about death-wishes and Elsa's witchcraft powers, they were too fantastic to be considered even for a moment. With a sense of release from the incalculable, Brenda picked up the lump of blood-soaked earth and hurled it through the tent flap away into the darkness.

In the light of the hurricane lamp she then began her hurried toilet; Elsa busy with make-up, chatting away in the confidential tones of the intimacy the hour so easily fostered.

How charming she could be when she chose!

Watching her fasten the small pearl clasps in her perfect ears, Brenda felt her heart weaken into something that was almost liking. No wonder Derry was fascinated by her! Beautiful, alluring, Elsa smiled at herself in the mirror, speaking of Keith Derrington now with sudden disarming candour. 'What I'm going to enjoy most about this safari,' she said, 'is seeing him in his natural element ... a king of a man with the wilds for his kingdom, the bearers his willing slaves. How they adore him!'

That, too! Brenda thought, on a wave of somehow bleak revelation; it could well be that old Karo, adoring Derrington, hated Elsa for her

power to win the bwana's love. There were after all so many explanations for the old man's fantasies.

'Even to watch Derry walking,' Elsa mused dreamily into her mirror. 'That loping, easy stride that doesn't disturb as much as one twig, like a young Masai warrior walking, and of course it was from the Masai that he learned it, for no white man could produce that leaf-light footfall out of his clumsy inherited civilized instincts. But then Derry *isn't* quite civilized. That's what I find so devastating about him. Perhaps because I'm not quite civilized myself.' She sighed softly, sensuously, moistening her red lips with the tip of a small pink tongue.

'And his piercing eyes,' she went on. 'Hunter's eyes ... seeing everything, taking in every patch of light and shadow in the bush as we travel, so that not even the slyest of wild creatures could ever catch him unawares.'

'It certainly makes one feel safe having him around,' Brenda contributed, rather less poetically.

'Income ways ... yes!' Elsa laughed. 'But he isn't a safe person exactly.'

The warning note again! thought Brenda grimly, as they went out into the firelit forest to find lounge chairs set up under a canvas roof, tables, white linen, glasses; Simba, the chief kitchen help, waiting with a tray of perfectly mixed cocktails. Dinner was a festive meal, beautifully cooked and served.

'Lucullus in the jungle could have done no better,' Keith congratulated Meg who had planned so cleverly for their comfort. After the long day's trek they ate slowly and luxuriously, and meeting Derry's steady, seeking glance in the firelight Brenda felt her heart ache with its intolerable and tangled pain.

But as the evening went on she forgot herself, enchanted by the strange, exotic scene. In the clearing beyond the fires the Africans had gathered, their ebony bodies gleaming as with chanting and hand-clapping they began a slow and rhythmic dance. Drums throbbed soft as hurrying pulses, filling the air with their dark mysterious appeal.

'A Ngoma!' Elsa exclaimed in delight. 'We're to have a Ngoma! How wonderful!'

'A traditional dance,' Meg explained to the wide-eyed, fascinated Brenda. 'And I suspect it's in honour of Derry.'

He laughed, seeming boyishly pleased at the tribute and, leaning forward to watch the spectacle, his lean face glowed.

'It's the day's hunting they're praising; listen I' he said, as the song swelled in volume.

'The day's hunting under the land's greatest hunter,' whispered Elsa.

'What do the words mean?' Brenda asked eagerly.

'To the great bwana, the meat-bringer,' Elsa translated. 'They're telling a story about a bwana with eyes the colour of the sun, and the heart of a lion; who goes single-handed into combat with the beasts of the forest, sending arrows of flame from his rifle.'

Bwana means "white master," but the special name they have for Derry means the white master who brings meat.' Her voice was tense, vibrant as the throbbing drums.

'The name they have for me,' Dr. Drayton put in ruefully, 'is the little white master who scratches in the soil, like a hen.' At which everybody laughed and somehow the tension was broken, the magic of the moment dispelled.

Now the drums and the hand-clapping grew louder and excitement mounted as the dancers leaped higher and higher, vaulting the flames of the fire. Sometimes a dancer more daring than the rest would snatch a burning branch from the fire and wave it torch-like in the air. The throaty cries rose in their strange rhythm; a savage and primitive sound in the orange glow of the fires, and beyond the circle of light the blackness of the forest enclosed the scene, dense as a wall of velvet.

Watching the scene Brenda felt her throat ache with emotion. The bwana with eyes like the sun! How perfectly at home he looked here in this mysterious forest with its glow of flames, its pungent woodsmoke and leaping, yelling dancers.

Elsa, leaning back in her chair, was watching him, too, her face pale, her eyes shadowy and brooding, her scarlet mouth softly drooping, the lips a little apart, ^sensuous, inviting; every line of her lovely body outlined in the fire-glow under its thin sheathing of silk.

It was Meg who yawned audibly at last, breaking the spell. 'They'll dance all night, darling,' she said to her husband, 'unless we break it up. Can't you let them have some of their beer?'

Derry and Val rose then to fetch from one of the lorries a case of the thin native beer, brewed from fermented matama seeds. With exclamations of delight the dancers fell upon it and there was a general stir among the white folk, a movement towards the tents with their comfortable camp-beds.

CHAPTER X

AFTER that, the days of the safari went by very much after the same pattern, only that the Ngoma was not repeated. But each evening, after the long day's trek, brought its miracle of comfort and luxury, its circle of camp-fires, its odours of roasting meat mingling with the hot, forest scents. Kept hard at work by Drayton, Brenda found it easy enough to avoid much contact with Keith, and now when he went off for the morning's shoot Elsa often accompanied him. She was an excellent shot, and after all it was for the shooting she had joined them. Brenda, concentrating on her digging and grubbing in the dry and burning soil, tried not to think about the two of them away in the forest together, and it was easy enough to fill the mind with the small and novel happenings of each day. There were the children, too, to distract her, and Meg was also a distraction with her housekeeping problems, her concern for Val who would leave them for a couple of days at a time while he visited remote bush villages where the cattle had to be examined, the owners coached on points of breeding and feeding. Everyone in the little community was kept busy. Nightfall found them healthily weary, pleasantly relaxed. Romance and its fretting jealousies seemed altogether in abeyance.

Even Elsa became somehow less exotic and intrusive, sunburned and almost sturdy in her thin shirts and shorts, her dark hair growing a little tousled and neglected, her fingers slightly roughened, stripped of their varnish. In their tent at nights she would murmur companionably to Brenda of the small doings of the day.

As for death wishes and witchcraft, Brenda could now have laughed aloud at the recollection of the horror with which she had listened to old Karo's gloomy predictions. Looking back on it, the whole incident of the ju-ju leaf and Karo's panicking became more and more fantastic. A piece of nonsense that might have happened in a dream. Nor did old Karo appear any longer to have any occult powers; a poor old Negro in the background, following his bwana with the devotion

of a dog. Carefully avoiding the odd old man, Brenda ceased to endow him with any special significance.

Working hard, eating heartily, sleeping like a log at nights, she felt herself saved not only from the dark foolishness of occultism, but from the more intimate and homely foolishness of her own unhappy heart. It was impossible to be unhappy on safari, where every day brought so much of novelty, so many things that were wholesome and good. Life in the wilds, she thought to herself, makes people sane. Having to find and kill your food before you can eat, having to track down the rare water-holes before you can drink ... the guns and the hunters and the ring of fires at nights which kept the prowling beasts of the forest at bay; it was all so right down to earth, so simple and somehow logical a way of life that there was little room in it for the nagging worries, the silly heartaches which people at leisure and in more artificial surroundings so easily invent for themselves.

Lulled by these sensible reflections, Brenda could almost persuade herself that she was cured of her unhappy love. Until the moonlight night when after dinner Keith beckoned her away from the group in the ring of lounge chairs. The deliberate signal, catching her unawares, sent her pulses racing. What now? she wondered, answering the summons in spite of herself, all thought of resistance forgotten as she slipped away from the chattering circle into the smoky shadows beyond the radius of the camp's glow.

His hand was on her arm, guiding her along the narrow path which showed pale in the light of an almost full moon. He said. 'There's something I want to show you ... at the water-hole.'

'Walk softly, Jane, softly, darling!' he whispered. And there was the polished pewter of the water before them, the edges muddied and trampled. Like a mirror the little pool lay in the shadow of an acacia thorn and on the farther side of its shining surface a lion stood,

motionless as stone, its agate eyes regarding them with a strange gentleness.

The hand on her arm held Brenda firmly now, conveying in its light pressure the need for utter quiet, and, motionless as the regal animal who watched them, they stood in silence.

Afterwards Brenda could remember how odd it was that there had been no fear in her heart, only wonder and an utter confidence in the man at her side.

'He's magnificent!' she whispered at last. 'You ...

oh, Derry, you aren't going to shoot him, are you?' For his gun, as always, lay in the crook of his arm.

He said, 'One doesn't shoot lions for the fun of it ... and they seem to know it. They are hunters, too, members of the brotherhood. We respect one another.' He laughed softly. 'See how quietly he moves away! No fear, no fuss.'

Soundlessly the great beast melted into the shadows and was gone.

Brenda drew in a long breath. 'They never attack ... like rhinos?' she asked.

'Never. Only an old lion, cast out by the herd, is dangerous; otherwise they keep their truce with humans, concentrating on their own affairs.'

'He wasn't afraid of us!' she marvelled. Those deep agate eyes, she thought, proud, self-contained. 'He's like you,' she said, the words slipping out foolishly without the context of her unspoken thoughts. 'I mean,' she went on in some embarrassment, 'that day at the airport in London when I first saw you, I thought of ... lions ... I don't know

why. You have the same kind of colouring, the same aloof and noble look.'

He laughed. 'That's one of the nicest things I've ever had said to me.' His arm came about her shoulder. 'My brave Jane—not a quiver out of you with a lion five yards away! Shall I tell you what I thought that day at the airport?'

'No. Please! We ought to be getting back to the others.' Uneasily she moved in his embrace, her hands pushing him away.

'What is it, Jane?' he asked, and she could see his face grim and taut in the moonlight. 'Why is it I can never get near to you when I love you so? Am I so very clumsy in my approaches? Or is it that I have misread what sometimes I seem to have seen so clearly in your eyes?'

'What you have read most often in my eyes must have been bewilderment,' she answered out of a sudden surge of bitterness that robbed her of all caution. 'Love!' she cried out, blind with her own pain. 'What do you know of it, I wonder, with your Elsa Darnleys, your Arlette Browns and a bride called Trevennick? Do you think Meg hasn't talked to me for my own good, warned me against this thing that you feel for the foolish women who are so easy to win ... and to hurt?'

'Jane!' he said softly, his eyes black pools in the cavernous structure of his moon-shadowed face. Like a fleshless skull looking down at her now ... only the pain in the eyes left alive. Arlette and the Trevennick woman: it seemed impossible that she had really uttered their names aloud, letting them escape from the secret place in her consciousness where for days they had lain corrosive as burning acid. She covered her face with her hands. 'I'm sorry, Derry. I ought not to have spoken to you like this. But it's no good. *I'm* ... no good. I have no trust left in me for whatever it is you are offering me. There have

been too many other things in your life ... things I could never understand.'

He said gently, 'Then let's forget about it. Dear Jane!' His hand touched her bowed head lightly, a gesture perhaps of farewell. There were tears on her face as she went by his side along the ribbon of path between the heavy tangled undergrowth.

'But, Meg,' he was marvelling in quiet misery; 'that Meg should talk against me to you! That is something I find difficult to understand.'

'It wasn't Meg who told me about Arlette and the Trevennick bride,' Brenda admitted in a small shamed voice.

'Elsa?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Meg simply warned me not to make a fool of myself. Said you were a little erratic where women were concerned and loved only Elsa.'

'I see.' His voice was dry, completely non-committal. It was as though he had, in spite of his presence at her side, already left her, slipping away as silently and as proudly as the lion had melted into the impenetrable bush. He had, she felt with an illogical pang of loss, gone to a place within himself where she could never follow him. And already they were back in the circle of the lounge chairs again where Val Trayner thrummed on an old guitar and sang with incompetent satisfaction the simple ballads which comprised his repertoire, his singing as tuneless as usual, though the chords on the guitar were true and sweet. Away on the far side of the camp the Africans chanted their wilder music as they made their final preparations for the night.

Sitting limp in her chair, drinking the tea which was the camp's habitual night-cap, Brenda presently missed Elsa from the shadowy circle and saw that Keith, too, had disappeared. Neither of them were

seen again as the party broke up and, going into her tent alone, Brenda undressed and crept under her mosquito-net. Weak and defeated she lay there, tears stinging her eyelids; tears she would not allow herself to shed. It was good that she had talked openly to Derry this evening. Honesty was always good and if she had hurt him how much greater was her own hurt! For he had come back from their talk, with its hint of tenderness, to go off in the moonlight with Elsa Darnley. As though if he couldn't have one woman at his beck and call, another would do. Oh, she would never understand him as long as she lived, Brenda thought bitterly. The tears oozed out on to the hot pillow.

Through the open flap of the tent she could see the bright moonlight falling on the great fig trees beyond the clearing. The sky was a shrill, electric blue with heat in it even at this hour. Stifling heat, and the stifling silence of a jungle night. It was like lying in a vacuum, a dreadful emptiness from which all life had departed. For what seemed hours she tossed on her narrow bed, caught in the vice of her endless pain. When at last Elsa came in, not even glancing at the humped form on the other side of the tent. In the moonlight her face seemed mask-like and yet strangely distorted, all shadowed and hollowed-out, so that she looked old ... strangely malevolent, her dark hair hanging in witch-locks about her gleaming, naked shoulder. This woman who knew the evil arts of ju-ju! For the first time, old Karo's wild warnings took on a touch of conviction. Pulling the sheet up her head with a shiver, Brenda resisted the ridiculous fear which crawled in her nerves, and dozing thereafter in snatches waited for daylight and sanity, for the movement and light that would bring this restless night to a close.

They struck camp before dawn, moving about drowsily, abstractedly, in an atmosphere of early morning grumpiness. Even the natives were quiet, folding the tents away, packing the cars and lorries. Stealing quick glances at Elsa and Keith, Brenda found their faces inscrutable. Whatever of emotion their midnight rendezvous had brought them

seemed wiped out now in the bustle of departure, as usual trying to be in several places at the same time, rounding up his hunters, planning the route with Karo, seeing that guns were loaded, ammunition and the inflammable tins of petrol safely stored away.

Dr. Drayton fussed with his packages of specimens, giving Brenda endless orders and then contradicting them. They were leaving the forest-bush today and heading for a great barren plain. It was important that everything they had collected from the forest soil should be carefully packed, as they would not strike a similar terrain again. Brenda had checked and re-checked the labelled roots and tins of soil and files of notes with such patient accuracy that she was faintly surprised when Elsa Darnley appeared at the door of the car just before the convoy was due to start, to say that Dr. Drayton had left a case of graphs on the top of a boulder on the outskirts of the camp.

'What graphs? Brenda asked, puzzled. 'I've got everything here. I'm sure I have.'

'My dear, I don't know what graphs he might be talking about, but he's all fussed and edgy, arguing with Derry over something or other, and he simply said would you pick up these graphs which he left on that big limestone boulder where the Research tent used to be.'

It was all just a little odd, but then everything was a bit chaotic this morning owing to the early start. People were sleepily short-tempered. Even Meg, who usually took calm and efficient charge of so many details when camp was struck, was not her placid self, distracted by the children who both had a touch of malaria and were fretful and dopey after their doses of Atebrin. As for Brenda herself, her wakeful night had left her feeling so half-alive and thick-headed that she moved off automatically now at Elsa's behest, leaving the track on which the cars had assembled in line, to plunge

back into the forest to the place, some yards away, where the camp had existed.

There was the old familiar limestone boulder, which had so often served them as a table on which to work out their graphs; but no file of papers lay on its smooth, flat top. Perhaps the doctor had meant some other boulder. There was a ring of these monoliths in the clearing and, in the light of the rising sun, Brenda moved from one to the other, continuing her search.

When she heard the first of the cars in the convoy start up, the sound brought her no alarm. Dr. Drayton and the box-body car would be waiting for her; Dr. Drayton no doubt having fits about his missing graphs. How annoyed he would be if she failed to produce them!

Sleepily, she searched on for a few moments and, finally overcome by the increasing heat of the sun, and by her befogged brain, decided to give up and confess she had been unable to locate the missing graphs.

Coming out from the ring of boulders into the clearing where the camp-fires still smouldered, she stared in astonishment at an empty world. Not a car or lorry to be seen anywhere. Just at first she did not take in the significance of the silence all about her, then slowly and in awful horror it dawned on her that the convoy had moved on and left her behind. Putting her hands to her heart as though to stem the deadly panic rising there, she told herself to keep calm. They would miss her before they had travelled very far. Someone would come back for her. Perhaps even now Dr. Drayton's car was hurrying towards her. She strained her ears to listen for the sound, but the bush swallowed up every vestige of the noise made by the smoothly speeding convoy.

Standing stone still, every sense painfully alert, Brenda waited in mounting terror for the reassuring sound that did not come. But this

was impossible, she told herself with a last comforting surge of disbelief. Every morning at the start of a safari Derry went through a kind of roll-call, satisfying himself that no member of the large straggling party was unaccounted for. Surely he had not forgotten that necessary formality today?

CHAPTER XI

BRENDA was right. Keith did not, that hectic morning, omit his check-up on the members of his party, before the string of cars and lorries got under way. It was Elsa who assured him that Brenda was in the back of the box-body car, busy with her filing and cataloguing. Brenda was never one of the last-minute stragglers on these occasions, and he had seen her himself only a few moments earlier go in the direction of the laboratory car. So that there were no qualms in his mind, as he got into the leading car and gave the convoy the signal to pull away from the camp, Elsa seating herself, uninvited, beside him.

Her presence surprised—and irritated—him, but he set his jaw grimly and gave himself over to his driving, quietly ignoring her. The memory of then- talk last night in the moonlit forest still jarred his nerves and he could not understand the insensitiv- ity with which she had now thrust herself upon him. After last night's recriminations and humiliations any normal woman would have kept out of his way. But Elsa wasn't normal. She had the egotism of a monster, he told himself, the hide of a rhinoceros! In words of the most unmistakable directness and finality he had told her, under the moon-silvered trees only a few hours before, that he had no love left for her, that her hope of patching up their old relationship was futile. He had been utterly ruthless, a ruthlessness for which Elsa had only herself to thank, for she had steadily ignored all the earlier indications of his attitude. With an obstinacy that might have been pathetic if it had not been so overbearing, she had pursued, pestered and cajoled him with her wiles ever since she had arrived in Africa.

But there could be no warming up of the dead ashes between them. This he had known from the moment he had set eyes on her in the dressing-room of her London theatre a month before. Walking away from her, down the wide slope of the Haymarket that November

night, he had found himself cured of a bitterness which had haunted him for fifteen wasted years.

The next day he had seen, under the strip-lighting of a bustling air terminal, a girl with a cloud of chestnut hair, a face fresh and lovely as an English hedgerose. It was not the beauty of that face, however, which had arrested his idle glance, but the courage of the gallantly tilted chin, the obvious control which stamped the vulnerable, sensitive mouth. Here, challenged by some critical moment of destiny at which he could only guess, she had walked, a brave and solitary child. She was to travel on the same plane as himself, he had gathered, from the desk at which she had queued to have her baggage weighed. She was to travel alone... across the world. And applauding, inwardly, her pluck he had looked into a pair of wide grey eyes, so warm and generous with youth, that, for him, too, youth had stirred again.

This also he had told Elsa Darnley last night, bringing about his head such a flood of cheap invective that he could only marvel at the woman's lack of dignity, her cold and horrible vulgarity. She had been angry enough to kill him!

And yet here she was this morning, all meek and mild at his side, as though in her sorry repertoire of tricks she still held some ace untrumped! But what her next move in the dreary game might be he could not imagine. Only he knew that there was triumph, evil as the flicking tongue of a snake, in the sly glances that came to him from her slanting green eyes.

The convoy nosed cautiously along the narrow tracks under the overhanging branches with their weird festoons of grey moss. The sun shone in startling sword-thrusts through the matted tree-tops, monkeys chattered, coloured birds flew screaming before the intruding cars, a half-glimpsed rhino went crashing through the undergrowth. It was all just as usual, only that Derrington and Elsa sat

in stiff silence and Elsa's face, as the morning went on, grew strangely pale, her eyes black-centred and fixed, as though in fear.

The terrible impulse which had prompted her to manoeuvre the abandonment of Brenda Somers had already begun to wither away, like a dying flame, leaving her heart cold with foreboding. All night her mind had seethed with hatred, living and re-living that agonizing conversation with Derry in the moon-lit forest, when, making a last plea for his love, she had to listen to the story of his hopeless allegiance to this chit of a girl... this typist-nobody! That she had, by her spiteful gossiping, hindered his incomprehensible wooing was the one gleam of twisted satisfaction their talk had yielded. But the knowledge that she herself had lost Keith had sent her a little mad. At last he had succeeded in piercing her egotism, with brutal directness made her understand that she meant less than nothing to him. It was Brenda Somers he loved.

The sight of Brenda's young and innocent loveliness that morning had tipped the balance of Elsa's sanity. To do what she had done she *must* have been mad 1 she now told herself.

She was, she realized, even as she sat there, in the process of committing a murder of the most subtle and horrible kind, for no one could survive many hours of wandering in this sun-scorched forest with its lurking beasts of prey, its deadly snakes. Every aspect of the scene through which they now drove seemed to cry out to her in blood-stained violence; these grey-black thickets which could conceal the ravening jaws of leopards, the blindly lethal terror of plunging rhinos, the flickering tongues of puff adders and black mambas. Already, perhaps, Brenda, stumbling forward in an effort to follow the convoy, had lost the indefinite track and, hopelessly adrift, going deeper and deeper into the forest, was beyond all human aid. Even now with the adder poison in her veins she might by lying in her last agonies under this merciless sky.

In spite of the heat of the morning the beads of sweat that stood out on Elsa's ivory smooth brow were ice-cold, and her whole body trembled as though with chill. How *could* she have schemed so wickedly that Brenda might be left alone in the forest, she asked herself in growing horror, and for the first time in her life glimpsed the black morass of utter self-love which filled her soul. Everything she had ever wanted she had with ruthless efficiency achieved ... and what she had wanted had always but the one purpose, the building up of the monstrous self-love upon which her spirit thrived. So she had lived ... on the adulation of the multitude, the flattery of her friends, the hopeless passions of the men with whom she had fed her insatiable vanity. She had never for one single instant considered the feelings of those upon whom she preyed. Until now, when sitting at the side of the one man she had failed to bend to her will, the armour of her self-complacency cracked, and out of the breach poured the revelation of an evil which left her weak with fear. No human life was sacred to her. In her cold self-love lurked the instincts of the killer. She was shocked at the discovery, but even now it was not of Brenda she thought, but of herself. It was the glimpse of her own destroyed soul that dismayed - her, the shattered picture of the perfection she had imagined to be hers.

Why did she have to come out here, that wretched little typist? stormed her heart then. She could have borne anything, Elsa told herself at that moment, but the humiliation of being supplanted in Derry's heart by so insignificant a creature.

And while she thought these things, the miles went by that left the insignificant creature to her fate. Clenching her hands together, Elsa battled with the conflict within her, resisting the impulse to cry to the convoy that it must halt ... turn back. They would stop of their own accord at the lunch hour, she calculated, persuading herself that it would be time enough then for Brenda's absence to be discovered. In the meantime, let her cool her heels in the forest behind them. She would be safe enough for an hour or so... serve her right if she were

scared half out of her wits. They would go back for her in the afternoon and there would be awkwardness, explanations—if the girl still lived and any explanations were necessary! But it would be simple enough, Elsa decided, to convince the poor absent-minded little scientist (who hung on her every word with awe) that he had, in fact, murmured of graphs left behind in the deserted camp; still more simple to assert; to swear, if need be, that by some trick of vision she had seen Brenda enter the laboratory car. Planning, persuading herself almost to the point where her lies could seem to her own twisted heart the truth, Elsa Darnley stared out into the blinding, searing sunlight, all unaware of old Karo crouched on the seat behind her, his face rigid with a strange animal concentration, the sweat rolling from his brow.

When he cried out at last, she started in terror, as though it were her own soul that uttered from its dark depths the arresting words.

'Bwana, oh, bwana!' came the voice of the old man, broken and raw with its nameless strain. 'Stop! for there is no road ahead of you ... only the blackness ... the fear ... the death. Turn back, bwana, turn back ... before it is too late!'

During the long hours of the afternoon and night during which Keith and old Karo searched for Brenda, the weather changed and the sky filled with immense blue-black clouds which hung over the tree-tops of the forest, shutting in the airless heat.

It was just as dawn was breaking that they saw the thin spiral of smoke that came from the smouldering fire which Brenda had had the presence of mind to light before the last glimmering of consciousness deserted her. For hours before that she had wandered in a merciful haze of exhaustion and then all at once she had known that she was finished, her knees sagging under her. With her last shreds of strength

she had dragged the big heap of brushwood together and set it going with the little flame from her cigarette lighter. Once or twice during the night she must have roused herself sufficiently to replenish the fire, but it had been done quite automatically. There had been the moment that was almost bliss then, when a blackness much more profound than sleep had crept over her senses in an irresistible tide. And after that there had been nothing at all.

The beginning of coming back to life seemed to be a tunnel through which she was crawling with a feeling of suffocation, and at the far end of the tunnel a voice was calling, 'Jane I'

There was a lucid but brief instant when she knew that it was Derry's arms that were holding her. Then the blackness swooped down on her again.

The next time it lifted, everything was a little easier. She saw old Karo squatting by the fire, which was now burning briskly. He was holding a small saucepan in the hot ashes at the fire's edge. She saw the thorn trees behind him and the stormy sky above the trees. Her face was wet, moisture dripping down her neck uncomfortably, and, turning her head, she saw Derry kneeling beside her. He had a pannikin of water and the sort of duster one kept in the locker of a car, and he was wringing out the duster in the water. Then she closed her eyes again and she could hear Derry and Karo whispering together anxiously in Swahili. She was so happy with the relief of having them there that she wanted to cry, but she felt too weak to cry, or even to move her hand to wipe away the trickle of water which was running down her neck. After a moment or two the whispering in Swahili stopped and she could feel Derry lifting her up, pillowing her head against his shoulder. The smooth edge of a cup touched her lips and she heard him say with a sort of desperate distinctness, as though he were calling to her across a great distance, 'Jane, will you try to drink a little of this hot soup?'

She moved her lips against the cup's edge and the soup tasted good. It seemed to flow right through her body, into her very veins, making her feel alive again; so that presently she managed to say in a cracked whisper, 'Do you think I might have something to wipe my face? It's very wet.'

Derry took a big handkerchief that smelled of petrol from his pocket and dried her face very gently. He said, 'I'm sorry! I did rather drown you, didn't I? Probably it was entirely the wrong thing to fling water in your face, but I thought it might be reviving.'

She managed to smile up at him. He looked terrible, she thought. Haggard and worn and thin, as though after a long illness. His eyes were like black holes in his face. She said, 'It was reviving. I haven't seen any water since I got lost.'

'And yet the water-hole wasn't three hundred yards away from you,' he told her. 'You've been travelling round and round the camp in circles ... the way lost people do.'

That seemed to her quite incredible and she pondered on it for a while. Then she said, 'I didn't mean to leave the camp. I thought someone would be bound to come back for me. But I moved a little away, trying to find the track the cars had taken and when I turned back again the camp had simply disappeared.'

'That's what happens in these thick forests,' Derry confirmed grimly.

'It was like being in a dreadful maze.' She shuddered, and Derry held her closely in his arms, smoothing the damp curls back from her forehead. 'Don't talk about it,' he advised. 'Don't even think about it, if you can manage to keep it out of your mind. Some time you can tell me all about it, but not yet. Just now I want you to rest.'

His voice was heavenly kind. She shut her eyes, sinking down into the cushions of relief again, into a white and mindless bliss. Derry

was here. She was safe. Dear Derry! She wondered if she had spoken his name aloud, and marvelled in a vague and sleepy way at the strange certainty within her that here was journey's end, and doubting's end, the end of all her poor heart's torment, here in Derry's strong arms. There was no sense in it; but that was the way she felt.

He said presently, lifting her as lightly as though she had been a child, 'I'm going to put you in the car now, because we ought to be getting along if you think you can stand it. These clouds are bringing rain and we mustn't be caught in it.'

Her head against his shoulder, she answered drowsily, foolishly, 'I don't want to go back to the convoy; I want to stay here for ever... just like this.' The last words were so softly spoken, so that she told herself he could not possibly have heard them.

They were not going to rejoin the convoy, he told her then, but would make their way back to the Headquarters at Mahamba. The safari, she learned with dismay, had been abandoned.

'Because I got lost?' she asked guiltily.

'Not altogether,' Keith assured her. 'Drayton was naturally very concerned about your having been left behind. Everyone was. It was decided that the convoy should turn back when I set out with Karo to search for you. So that, in the event, they were near enough to be within range of my walkie-talkie radio and I was able to keep in touch with them. There was immense relief when I reported I had found you, but that naturally you were a good deal the worse for your terrifying experience, and wouldn't be fit for work for some days. That was when we decided to call off the safari. In any case the weather was threatening to break, and Drayton said he had achieved quite a lot during the fortnight we have been on the move. So they're well on the way back to Mahamba now, taking a short route. And we must do likewise.'

That was the beginning of their long days of driving, with the thunder-clouds pressing behind them.

If the thunder-clouds broke there would be torrential rain, rain without end, turning the bush tracks into quagmires in which the car would sink axle deep. Limp in her seat by Keith's side, ill with fever, with shock, with all that she had endured, Brenda knew that she must not give in, must not cry out for the cessation of this eternal bumping, over the rough roads, which racked her body with pain. Only briefly could they afford to rest, snatching a few hours of sleep when darkness fell, Brenda stretching out on the seat of the car, Derry and old Karo rolled in ground sheets on the grass at her side.

It was all like a strange dream as, half-delirious with fever, Brenda watched the blue-green bush for ever unfold under the airless grey sky, and there were moments when past and present became so mixed up that she thought she was still wandering in those tangled avenues of dusky foliage. Crying out in her terror, she would cling to Keith while he soothed her back to sanity again.

Then suddenly her fever was gone. Weak but clear-headed, Brenda took stock of her position for the first time and nagging truth awaited her, no longer to be glossed over by a conveniently confused head. She had got herself left behind in the bush, broken up the safari, caused Keith to waste valuable time in searching for her, and now in a certain atmosphere of taciturnity he was taking her back to Mahamba. That was the whole unvarnished story. She had dreamed the rest. Nothing had really changed. The comforting arms that had held her had had no personal significance after all. Oh, it was easy enough now to see the whole situation in its true perspective, for as her health improved so the atmosphere of taciturnity increased. Aloof, silent, watching the clouds with an anxious eye, Keith drove desperately forward, seeming, in his urgency to reach Mahamba, to have forgotten all the questions there were still to ask and answer.

So that it was Brenda at last who had to begin it all, telling falteringly, against the wall of his silence, the story of her time of waiting in that dreadful forest. He listened gravely, his profile stony, as she related how she had blundered about the thickets hour after hour, not really very badly afraid, because the blur of hunger and thirst and exhaustion so soon made everything unreal. He seemed to wince away from that, so that she added quickly, 'I don't think I ever felt quite hopeless ... I was so certain you would come back for me, and that you would keep on looking for me until you found me.'

She saw the line of his jaw whiten, but he did not take his eyes from the track, did not turn to look at her. He would say nothing, if indeed there was anything worth saying, of his own anxiety as he had plodded through the hours of that search!

'Of course I turned back to look for you,' he put in shortly. 'I don't lose members of my safari as simply as that.'

A member of his safari—a responsibility to be accounted for. That was all she was to him, then. But what else had she expected?

'What made you turn back ... when did you miss me?' she asked, in a kind of desperation, dragging the story out of him. Had there been drama, alarm? she was human enough to wonder.

He said, 'We missed you about an hour and a half after the start.' He gave her an odd, hunted look, and for one instant there flashed in his agate eyes anguish that might have been an echo of the agony he had endured. 'It was all pretty odd,' he went on in his quiet way. 'Old Karo stopped me, having one of his soothsaying attacks, shrieking from the back of the car that there was no road ahead for me, no life, no anything; that I must turn back before it was too late. I tried to shut him up, but Elsa Darnley who happened to be in the car with me ...' His glance flicked away from her. Elsa 'happening' to be in his car. Oh well, it was a familiar touch, that, nothing new about it, nothing to

bring the sharp stab of pain that made Brenda, too, turn aside, her eyes resting on the line of hills ahead of them.

'It was Elsa,' he said, 'who seemed inclined to take old Karo's ravings seriously and persuaded me to stop the convoy and have a check-up. Then ... well, then we missed you.'

Brenda glanced nervously over her shoulder at the back seat where the old chieftain nodded in drowsiness, his wrinkled face innocent and blank. 'You mean that old Karo *knew* in some way I had been left behind?'

'I don't think he knew anything as definite as that, but he'd picked up some inkling of catastrophe out of the air ... he does that *sort* of thing; has a telepathic faculty. It isn't unusual with the older Africans, especially when they have dabbled in the occult, as Karo has. And in this case it turned out to be a pretty lucky hunch! For otherwise we shouldn't have missed you until we called a halt to eat, and I hadn't intended to do that until we had covered a- good hundred miles.'

'Hadn't Dr. Drayton realized I wasn't about?' Brenda pursued in some mystification.

'Drayton was half asleep in the front section of the laboratory car when we halted, fully convinced you were in the back, nursing his precious specimens. That's where we all thought you were. Elsa had actually seen you get in. She told me so just before we started, when I was checking up on everybody's whereabouts. And naturally I took her word for it.'

'Elsa!' Brenda choked out the word and stopped short, unable for a moment to go on. Then she took a long, quivering breath. 'But she couldn't have seen me get in,' she cried in bewilderment. 'It was she herself who sent me back to the camp to pick up some graphs Dr.

Drayton left behind. Dr. Drayton, she said, had asked her to get me to do this, just before you all moved off.'

'But Drayton didn't seem to know anything about that,' Keith put in sharply. 'Drayton didn't mention any graphs.' He gave her an odd, sick look. 'Did you find them, by the way?'

Brenda shook her head. 'They were supposed to have been left on that boulder we used to use as an office table ... but they weren't there.'

'They wouldn't be,' Keith muttered under his breath, and they drove on in silence, a grim silence throbbing with something so horrible that neither of them liked to be the first to speak.

It was Keith who spoke at last, slowly, wearily, his voice hollow and harsh as though he laboured under some intolerable strain. 'There were no graphs, of course!'

Crouching in her seat, Brenda sat motionless, her face chalky white suddenly, her grey eyes wide. So that was how much Elsa Darnley hated her! She could hear again the silken voice with its steely undertone saying, 'I'm a dangerous person to cross!' But dangerous to the point of murder; that surely was too fantastic, too horrible to be believed! And yet Elsa must have realized full well how slender the hope of survival could be to anyone lost and wandering in a Tanzania forest.

She was so passionately determined to be rid of me, she didn't care if I died that lonely most hideous death, Brenda thought. 'How could she, oh, how could she have done it!' she heard herself cry out in pain. 'I knew she disliked me ... but to trick me into going away from the convoy just as you were about to leave; to tell you I was safely in the laboratory car --She must have gone crazy!'

'She's jealous of you, and jealousy does drive people mad, I suppose,' Keith said dully. 'You see, she came out here with the idea of

patching things up with me. The night before we left the forest camp I'd told her it was all quite impossible, that I couldn't ever feel anything for her again. I suppose I was clumsy over it... hurt her. I'm a clumsy brute, I know, but there didn't seem anything for it at last but absolutely plain talk. She was upset ... and I rather gathered'—his voice became carefully impersonal—'that she blamed you for the whole situation. Which of course, was nonsense.'

'Of course,' Brenda agreed bleakly, such pain in her tone that Keith shot her a swift, unhappy glance.

'What I mean is that I've been through with Elsa to all intents and purposes FOR the past fifteen years. Maybe I learned as far back as that all I needed to know of her. There isn't much I've got left to discover about the unscrupulous methods she can employ when she's out to get her own way. Truth, honour, loyalty; she'll throw all those overboard as easy as wink, if they happen to get in her way. But I must say, it is a bit of a shock to find that she is capable of ... well, indirect murder, for that's what her deliberate abandonment of you amounted to!'

They drove in silence again, Brenda's thoughts chaotic. Elsa Darnley was evil to an extent it was almost impossible to take in. A killer, a schemer, a liar. And this was the woman whose tale-bearing she had allowed to influence her attitude towards Keith Derrington, who, whatever confusion his past might conceal, was not a light man, nor a shoddy one. This she knew now beyond all doubt. Slowly, indefinably, during these days of driving with him in the wilderness there had grown up in Brenda's consciousness an awareness of his integrity. He was strong and he was straight, there had been in every word and gesture of solicitude he had offered her in her recent miseries a dignity no Don Juan could ever have achieved. And if he had offered no more than that rather aloof solicitude, it was her own fault. In blinding pain, she could see now the quality of the man she had been too timid, too shallow, perhaps, to assess truly. Hastily and

in panic she had flung his friendship back in his face, and that he would ever forgive her was too much now to expect. The dreadful things she had said to him that evening by the water-hole ...!

'Oh, how could I ever have believed the slimy, spiteful stories Elsa told me about you I' she brought out suddenly on a surge of remorse too strong to be controlled. 'Arlette Brown and Mrs. Trevennick .. She stumbled on, tears in her eyes. 'Can you ever forgive me for listening to such lying slanders ... for believing them...'

'There's nothing to forgive,' he returned with a coldness that froze her heart. 'Nor were the two girls you mention altogether figments of Elsa's imagination. They both existed. They were both my friends. In fact, I was engaged to Arlette for a time ... if that's of any interest to you.'

'It's not,' Brenda threw in passionately. 'I mean,' she added hurriedly, 'you don't have to explain Arlette to me:' Whatever the truth of that old story might be, she didn't want to know it now. She wanted to take Derry on trust... unquestioningly.

'You don't have to account to me for anything,' she whispered in anguish. 'I'm ... not worth it. That I should have listened to Elsa Darnley talking against you, even for one moment, fills me with disgust at myself.'

'There are other and more reliable people who haven't got such a hot opinion of my honour where women are concerned,' he reminded her. 'Meg Trayner, for instance.'

'I don't care about Meg ... I don't care what anybody says of you,' Brenda assured him hotly.

'That's very nice of you!' His tone was sardonic. 'All the same it might be as well for you to hear my version of these two rather hoary

scandals in my past. At least it may enliven a few moments of this long and boring drive... even if it doesn't greatly interest you.'

The iciness of his tone cut her to the heart. Sitting beside him, crushed and despairing, she could only submit in silence while his quiet voice ran on. Arlette was the daughter of an American millionaire he had taken on safari; beautiful, spoiled, very young. 'I was crazy enough,' he said, 'conceited enough, if you like, to think that she loved me sufficiently to give up her luxurious background for the privilege of living in a backwoods shack ... which was all I had to offer. You've seen Mehetmbe.' He gave her an odd wistful look. 'It isn't much of a place with its bats and its bareness --'

Before she could contradict him, her heart welling up with incoherent reassurances, he was hurrying on: 'As soon as I realized how impossible it was that Arlette could ever be happy there, how impossible it would be for her to lead my kind of life, I ended our engagement. She was hurt, as I suppose she had every right to be. She would have liked, I imagine, to play at marriage for a little while with me. Indeed she said so. Divorce was to her cynical young outlook so easy a way out. But that wasn't the kind of marriage I wanted. So I got out of it, and a man who gets out of a tangle of that kind is invariably a heel.'

'No, no!' Brenda put in hastily. 'You did perfectly right.' Keith took no notice of the interpolation.

'The Trevennick affair was even worse,' he went on relentlessly. (He would spare her nothing, leave no loop-hole anywhere for the faith she longed to show him.) 'She was a bride, fresh from England. Came out to marry my friend Pete Trevennick who has a coffee shamba in the Ngong Hills. I met Pam Trevennick for the first time on her wedding day. There were other meetings ... at cocktail parties, dances. Perhaps I was unwise, I am a clumsy fool where women are concerned, but I liked her ... in a perfectly innocuous sort of way. So I

danced with her, I suppose, more often than mere politeness demanded, gravitated towards her in any group in which we both found ourselves. It never occurred to me she would find any significance in my behaviour.' There was a hint of lonely bewilderment in his voice and for a moment he was silent, gazing ahead at the winding forest track.

'And she fell in love with you,' Brenda prompted, with a pang of sympathy for the unknown Pam.

'She turned up one night at my place in Mehetmbe, having driven the twenty odd miles from their shamba alone. It was about two o'clock in the small hours when she came stumbling on to my verandah, looking ill and wild. I thought at first she might have had a drink too many at somebody's dinner-party. But it wasn't drink, it was the beginning of a severe nervous breakdown, on top of which she had on that particular night the high fever that goes with malaria. So one way and another she wasn't exactly in control of her tongue. She told me she hated Pete, hated Kenya and that she wanted to live with me. I got her to bed. There was nothing else to be done with her just then. You can't turn a woman with a temperature of a hundred and four out into the wilds. In the morning she was so desperately ill and ... well, unbalanced, that I didn't dare leave her to go for a doctor; nor could I get in touch with Pete, who it turned out was away for a few days on some kind of business. So I nursed her all through that day and through another night and then by good fortune a chap I happen to know stopped by and between us we were able to get her to Nairobi, where we phoned Pete. They put the poor kid into a nursing home where, I gather, she talked a great deal of nonsense about me.' He laughed without mirth. 'Finally she went home to her parents in England, her marriage in ruins. You can imagine what the gossip-mongers contrived to make of that! In fact the whole story was a first-class scandal, and still I believe echoes at the spiciest gab-fests.'

For a moment Brenda was silent, her heart wrung with pity and with its weight of remorse. This simple, circumstantial and perfectly horrible story! 'Oh, Derry, I'm sorry!' she blurted at last in helpless wretchedness. 'What hideously bad luck you've had. I ought to have known...'

'Not at all,' he broke in coldly. 'It is all of very little interest to you, I'm sure, and completely irrelevant at the moment. What we ought to be working out next is just what we do with Elsa. Nothing, I suppose. She can easily swear to it that she thought she saw you come out of the camp clearing and get into the laboratory car ... And, after all, she did in the end back up Karo and urge us to stop the convoy when she might have let us go on all day and be done with it. Women!' he said, grinding his teeth. 'They're an incalculable lot. I'll never understand them as long as I live.'

Only that Elsa Darnley isn't an ordinary woman; you can't judge us all by the things Elsa does! Brenda wanted to cry out in pleading, but he looked so angry she was afraid to speak.

'My work,' he was saying presently, 'trekking around the country with chaps who come out here for a few weeks to escape from the softness of civilization; being with the natives I know and understand, the hunters, the Masai warriors, that's going to be my life from now on.' And to hell with women! the fierceness of his tone implied.

CHAPTER XII

THE rest of the day went by in a strained fashion. When they halted in the dusk for supper, Keith seemed relieved to talk most of the time with Karo, whose wrinkled old face held its own strange wisdom, the dark eyes looking up at his adored 'bwana' with an almost dog-like devotion. Throughout these days of journeying he had in his strange, remote, native way seemed hardly conscious of Brenda's presence. It was for Keith he appeared to live, listening for the least word of command, watching the white man's every movement, anticipating his needs.

When now in the last glimmer of dusk Keith strode off into the bush, armed with his gun and a torch, Brenda found herself for the first time alone with the old man. Anxiously, her eyes followed Derry's tall rangy figure until the darkness and the undergrowth had swallowed him up.

'It's not safe, Karo!' she said tensely, to the squatting, ebony form the other side of the fire. 'Surely the bwana isn't trying to hunt at this hour?'

'The bwana hungry, memsahib,' the old man answered simply in his sad sing-song voice. 'He eat little for many days so that plenty of food is there for the memsahib.'

Brenda stared at him. 'You mean we're short of food?' she asked in horror. With a pang she thought of the tinned soup, the slices of bully beef, the malted milk tablets Keith had pressed upon her at every opportunity. There was the tin of condensed milk he had refused to share this morning, saying he hated condensed milk, but she remembered now he had not hated it during the more normal days of the safari.

'Only little food here,' Karo was answering. 'Bwana when he go look for memsahib bring few tins of food only and much petrol. Petrol more better.'

She could see that. Petrol was all-important ... and the tank of the car was too small to take a generous loading. Sitting there in the gathering darkness she felt remorseful and forlorn, and the ache in her heart became intolerable. Derry starving himself so that she should have enough to eat! It was awful. She couldn't bear it. Tears pricked at her throat.

He came back in half an hour empty-handed. It was too late to hope for a shot, he told old Karo, ignoring Brenda's anxious glances. 'Then we must take time off for hunting in daylight tomorrow,' she pronounced.

He said dully, 'Not on your life. Hunting doesn't matter. What does matter is getting back to Mahamba before the rains break and turn the tracks into the kind of quagmire that would make the car absolutely useless. Being bogged down in the wilderness isn't nice.'

She slept as usual that night in the car, Derry and Karo stretched out by the fire. Somewhere in the small hours she woke to hear the patter of rain on the canvas hood. It was heavy rain and she had a confused impression it had been going on for some time. Rousing herself hurriedly, she put her head out of the window and saw the huddled figures by the hissing embers of the defeated fire.

'Derry!' she called sharply. 'What are you doing out there in that downpour? Come into the car at once.'

He was wet through, she saw, as he got in beside her, but she had been sleeping so peacefully, he said, he hadn't liked to disturb her. 'After what you've been through in the way of nervous strain,' he went on, 'these nights of rest are an absolute essential. And, anyhow, this is

only a preliminary shower, I think—it's not going to last. All the same it might be as well if we pressed on.'

They drove on into the breaking dawn, out of the forest, on to the plain which was the last lap of the way. They would reach Mahamba by nightfall with luck. The rain ceased as Derry predicted, but the sky was ominous and he refused now to halt even for lunch.

'There's a bit of that beef left you could munch to stay the pangs as we drive on ... and the condensed milk. I can wait till we get to Mahamba,' he told Brenda.

She looked at his haggard profile, his grimly thrust out jaw. He'd lost weight perceptibly, she thought, sweating through the bush searching for her, and then refusing to eat so that she might be well fed. The bones of his broad shoulder blades showing through his wet shirt were unbearably sharp. Her eyes filled with tears. 'Why are you so good to me, Derry?' she asked, and at the sound of the sob in her throat he turned to her, his agate eyes startled and suddenly defenceless.

'You don't have to cry about it!' he offered uncomfortably. But the tears streamed down her cheeks. 'Going without food for my sake, sleeping out in the rain ...' she sobbed.

'Well, naturally, I've got to take care of you.'

'Simply because I'm your responsibility as leader of the safari,' she said brokenly. 'That's ... what I can't bear about it—'

'Why, Jane? How else would you want it to be?'

Her heart leaped at the sound of the little intimate name, and she could hardly bear the sudden surge of hope in his tone.

'If only it could be the way it was that night in your house at Mehetmbe!' she whispered. 'Before I'd let myself listen to Elsa's lies. Oh, Derry, can you ever forgive me?'

The hope was in his eyes now, shining, incredulous. 'Jane!' he marvelled softly. The car, swerving dangerously, came to a stop with its bonnet in a thorn thicket. Derry turned to old Karo on the back seat. 'We're going to halt for a few minutes, Karo: like to take the gun and see if you can pick up something for the pot?' he said.

Obediently Karo scrambled out and went rambling off into the bush, glad to stretch his stiff legs.

Left alone, Derry and Brenda looked at each other in a strange throbbing silence. This is my chance, Brenda was thinking nervously. If I bungle it this time, it will be the end! Wildly she groped in her mind *for* the eloquent phrases which would wipe out all misunderstanding. 'I've been such a fool,' she began blunderingly, and then suddenly, just how it happened she couldn't have explained, she was in his arms.

'It all seemed so kind of right that night at Mehetmbe,' he said softly.

'It was right,' Brenda asserted fiercely. 'It was heaven.'

'Then why'—his voice held again that note of lost loneliness—'couldn't we have gone straight on from there?'

'Because,' Brenda said on a flash of subconscious illumination, 'I didn't trust ... *myself*!' Twisting away from his embrace she sat bolt upright, savouring the astonishing quality of her discovery. 'But of course, I can see now; that was the whole trouble!' Her eyes were clear and grey and very young, looking up at him. 'You were so important and ... famous and somehow miles above me... and I loved you so much, it frightened me. I didn't feel it could possibly be true that you were serious over me. It was so easy then for me to fasten on

to the things Meg said in her goodness of heart, and the things Elsa said in her badness of heart... Because I didn't believe in *myself*, it was impossible for me to believe in you.'

She broke off, aware that he wasn't really listening any more, his agate eyes ablaze. 'You loved me so much it frightened you!' he repeated. 'Oh, Jane, what an adorably young and foolish thing to say ... only that I don't like the past tense.'

'It doesn't have to be a past tense,' she whispered, as his mouth came down on her own. After that it was all a little incoherent, and presently they were aware of old Karo coughing discreetly outside the car, a bedraggled guinea fowl in his hand.

'Well, that's better than nothing,' Derry pronounced briskly, as though the need to shoot a guinea fowl had been the sole purpose of their loitering.

Driving through the long afternoon they talked without pauses, breathlessly, wonderingly, as if they would never catch up on all that had to be said now the barriers were down. The dark plain unrolled before them and the black clouds gathered overhead, but they saw only each other and the light that never yet was on land or sea. It was with a shock of surprise they found the familiar gateway of the Laholo estate suddenly before them. Driving between the wet frangipani bushes, Brenda noticed that the white flowers had in the rain opened to show their golden centres. The air was rich with their delicate perfume; the white and golden flowers everywhere like a welcoming light in the stormy evening. Bridal flowers, she thought, like a lovely omen! And her grey eyes were shining as they drew up at the foot of the verandah steps.

Everyone was there at once to welcome them. Meg, who had been wild with anxiety, held Brenda in her arms as though she would never let her go. Even Dr. Drayton became emotional with relief, blowing

his nose with great trumpeting of defiant sonnet as he grasped Brenda's hand.

'But you look wonderful, darling,' Meg was saying, 'almost as though being lost in the bush had been some kind of holiday.'

Brenda and Derry exchanged a significant and intimate glance.

'We look like a couple of ragged tramps,' Brenda protested. 'And being lost in the bush isn't in the least like a holiday, let me tell you ... Though it has its moments!' She broke off to glance again shyly, revealingly, at Derry by her side.

'Where's Elsa?' he was asking in a hard, cold voice.

'Oh, poor Elsa!' Meg sounded a bit confused. 'We've had a really dreadful time with her. She had, you see, the silliest notion it was all her fault Brenda was left behind that morning, because she sent her to find some graphs Dr. Drayton was supposed to have mislaid.'

'Which of course I hadn't,' Dr. Drayton put in crisply. 'I never mislay graphs.'

'I know,' Meg agreed hurriedly. 'But Elsa thought she'd heard you asking one of the servants about a missing file of graphs ... and she mentioned it to Brenda. It was just one of those absolutely unavoidable misunderstandings that do crop up. The less we say about it all now the better.' She gave the little doctor an accusing glance. 'Elsa has been half out of her mind with worry, only, fortunately when we got back, she found lots of mail from London to distract her and something has cropped up which means she has to return to England at once. She's in her room now packing. She leaves tomorrow.'

'She was so anxious about Brenda she wasn't even going to wait to find out what shape she was in after her ordeal!' Derry remarked in a tone of disgust.

There was the sound of a light footstep then, the banging of the screen door and Elsa came out of the house, her beautiful face ashen, her eyes stony ...fixed on Brenda. 'So ... he found you!' she whispered in a hollow voice. And whether she spoke in relief or in pure hatred it would have been hard to define. Swaying a little, she put out a hand to steady herself. It was Meg who caught her, guiding her to a nearby wicker chair, saying robustly: 'But of course he found her. We knew that he had. He told us so on his walkie-talkie.'

She turned to Brenda to add in a whispered aside, 'Poor Elsa! She'll drive herself into a nervous breakdown if she doesn't stop imagining it was her fault you got left behind.'

Keith, overhearing, said in a cold voice, his eyes fixed on Elsa who shrank back in her wicker armchair, 'I wouldn't say it required much imagination to discover how Jane came to be left behind.'

There was a startled silence, and Meg asked sharply, 'What are you implying Keith?'

He shrugged. 'Elsa knows,' he declared. 'Let's leave it at that. Only to add that if she is capable of remorse for the suffering she has caused there may still be some hope for her.'

Elsa covered her face with her hands. But Keith, turning his back on her, was saying now, 'The main thing is that Jane and I have found one another in more senses than one, and she is going to be my wife. Meet the future Mrs. Derrington!'

After that it was all a bit chaotic, and in the outburst of exclamations and congratulations which followed, Elsa sat in her chair quite forgotten, utterly ignored. Perhaps this was the bitterest touch of all in

that bitter moment, but if it were so, nobody noticed, as, trooping into the lighted living- room, Val called for drinks, and Meg, with her hand on Brenda's arm, whispered, 'How blind I've been, how terribly blind! Can you forgive me for the things against Keith I've said to you?'

'Dear Meg, there's nothing to forgive,' Brenda whispered back generously. 'Only,' she added softly, 'my own lack of faith in him.'

Seated on the big shabby couch then by Derry's side, she heard with a pang of joy their coupled names, as toasts were drunk. It was all a little dreamlike; the ring of smiling faces, the hearty, friendly voices. Even Elsa couldn't matter very much, creeping in from the verandah to stand by Meg's side with a glass in her limp hand, her green eyes going in lost and empty despair to Keith Derrington's face, as she raised the drink to her lips.

'And if it isn't striking a discordant note in the proceedings,' Dr. Drayton could be heard to murmur a trifle disconsolately, 'may I hope that the wedding isn't going to rob me of my very efficient secretary until I've finished my Tanzania assignment?'

Brenda laughed. She hadn't, she admitted, had time yet to think about anything so definite as a wedding. 'You see,' she added shyly, 'I didn't even know there was going to be a wedding until Derry announced me just now as the future Mrs. Derrington!'

In the roar of laughter which followed this naive pronouncement, Brenda and Derry looked at each other deeply, seriously, and on the shabby couch their hands met. 'I told you I was clumsy over this kind of thing,' he reminded her humbly. 'I'm sorry, darling, if I forgot the formalities. Will you marry me?' he asked so softly that only she could hear.

She nodded, her eyes bright with sudden tears, her young face tremulous with happiness.

It was nothing to either of them that Elsa Darnley watched their little drama, her face drained of all life, nor did they notice when, turning, she left the room, walking slowly, aimlessly, like an old and weary woman, without destination, without hope.