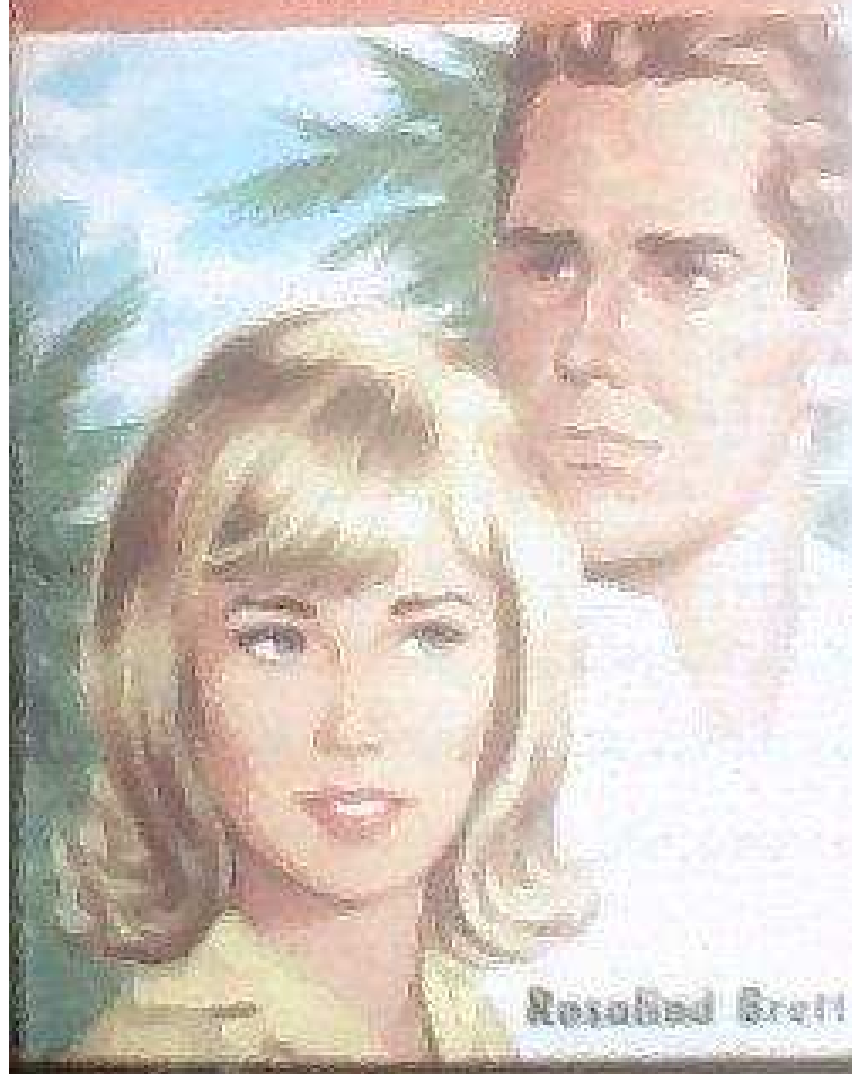




WANT

A HARTFORD AFFAIR

# THE BOLAMBO AFFAIR



Revised Edition

# **THE BOLAMBO AFFAIR**

**Rosalind Brett**

"To get a man really out of your system there's nothing like having an affair with someone else", Nick Brandis advised Vanessa when she told him of her broken engagement --and she got the idea that Nick himself was offering to help her forget. Nick had, no doubt, had innumerable successes with women, she considered, and couldn't imagine his line failing with someone as inexperienced as Vanessa Lane.

Innocent she might be, but one thing Vanessa was sure of -- it would be wise to keep clear of this tall creature with the teak-brown hair and calculating grey eyes. So long as she avoided being alone with him that undeniable magnetism wouldn't be hard to resist. But how long could she avoid him in a place so remote as Bolambo?

## CHAPTER ONE

VANESSA had hoped that Merle would be there with Uncle Owen, to meet her. But Merle, he explained at once, was emerging from a light touch of West Coast fever. "You'll get it too, my dear, but it's nothing - lasts about thirty hours and clears like magic." The equivalent of a cold in England but much less trouble, she gathered.

Vanessa was too relieved to find herself at her destination to care very much about such hazards as West Coast fever. She needed the oppressive warmth and humidity of the West African rain-belt and plenty of good solid work. Not that Uncle Owen believed her, when she told him as much.

As the utility car bowled along the red rutted road between Violent tangles of tropical greenery towards Bolambo, he eyed her critically. "You look pale and peaked to me," he commented. "I hope you took my advice and visited a doctor before you came."

"Oh, yes. He said I'm fit. I feel it, too."

"Well, we won't rush things. In fact, none of us ever do rush out here - except Nick Brandis, and he seems to have a different set of rules from the rest of us. You know, Vanessa," with the kindly smile she had remembered gratefully so many times during the past year, "it gave me a wonderful feeling when you accepted my invitation to come out for a year or two. Even though we're not related, I've always felt for you just as I feel for Merle, and I know she'll be much happier with you in the house."

"Do you mean she hasn't been happy?"

He shrugged this off. "I think she's been needing a woman companion. It's natural, isn't it?" He waved to the right, where oil palms reached skyward like gargantuan weeds from a mass of dense

ground growth. "This is typical of Bolambo. The whole district was like this when we arrived, but a year's work has made some big differences. Team-work, of course."

He talked on, repeating many of the details he had put into his long, flamboyant letters to her father. Vanessa remembered the days those letters had arrived, how much in amusement and interest they had meant to her father, who had been so active till the icy morning when he had slipped and broken bones which had never properly knitted together again. For two years he had been a semi-invalid, and for those two years Vanessa had forgotten the teachers' training college which she had left so abruptly in mid-course and immersed herself in the task of nursing a man who loathed his disability and the periodic operations which aimed at the eventual repair of his hip. There had finally been three long months of getting him thoroughly fit for major surgery; the blow of his death under anaesthetic had left her numb and aimless. Perhaps that was why ... no, she wouldn't think about Keith Fordham. Like one or two other things and people, he had to be forgotten.

She was lucky, she told herself firmly. Within an hour of hearing about her father's death Uncle Owen had cabled a request that she come at once to Bolambo; he could find a job for her. His daughter, Merle, who until her marriage had been as close as a sister to Vanessa Lane, had added her entreaties in a letter. "Please come, darling. Now that you're free I can tell you how terribly much I've needed you since coming to this flaming spot." And at last Vanessa admitted to herself that she had missed Merle abominably; Merle's sparkling smile and breezy, uncaring comments on everything under the sun; her very familiarity.

Vanessa didn't remember her own mother at all, but she remembered Merle's; that tall and comely woman who had airily decided, while Merle was still in her teens, to go off and live permanently with her married son, the offspring of her first marriage, in Canada. There had

been a period after Mrs. Shepton's departure when father and daughter occupied their house alone, just as Mr. Lane and Vanessa occupied theirs. The two men were golfing friends, and seeing that their daughters were always together in one abode or the other, they decided they could all live amicably and more economically in one house. The fact that Richard Lane was a schoolmaster while Owen Shepton was more spectacularly occupied by his interests in tropical development projects only increased the men's liking for each other.

The Bolambo Development Corporation had been tossed about for a long time before the venture was finally put into concrete form. Owen Shepton had somehow acquired the complete development rights for the whole hundred square miles of the Bolambo district, and as soon as he had been promised capital he had formed a group of men who knew the tropics in general and one aspect of them in particular. Vanessa wasn't too clear on the business side of things, but she knew that Paul Charnley had been a surveyor in Africa before Uncle Owen had brought him home ... to fall in love with Merle.

All these things had happened after her father's accident, and their impact had therefore been blunted by Vanessa's private anxieties. She had liked Paul, but considered him rather silent and serious for the volatile Merle. Vanessa had been a pale and smiling but preoccupied bridesmaid at their wedding, and a month later she had said goodbye to them and to Uncle Owen. After that, life had been very quiet, but full of hope. And there had been Keith.

Again, Vanessa's reflections veered rapidly. All of that was left behind in Gloucester.

"So this Bolambo business is a success," she said. "As you started it, you must be very proud, Uncle Owen."

"It's a little early to call it a success," he answered cautiously, "but I've collected the right team of men to make it so. As you know," with

a touch of humour as he swung the wheel of the utility and they entered a straight stretch of road between an expanse of saplings, "my profession is really high finance in tropical companies. If I'd hit upon Bolambo fifteen years ago I might have been able to organise the whole thing myself, but at my age I have to rely on a younger man who does his utmost to needle me and prove me wrong."

"He has a nerve!"

"I enjoy it; it's invigorating. And there's one thing about Nick which fills me with unholy glee. He's keen on Merle."

"But she's married!"

"Exactly." He laughed. "In my opinion it's good for Nick to be in almost daily contact with the one thing he can't have. Keeps him grinding away at the job."

She smiled. "You're still my dear wicked uncle, and I'm glad. And what is the job you have for me - clerical?"

"Well, no." Uncle Owen took an interest in the road ahead. "The office is staffed by Africans, and we've a couple of African teachers for the school. You might do some teaching, though, or even a little nursing. There's no hurry, my dear. You're not to worry about slaving for your living. You're part of our family now!"

Trust Uncle Owen to say the right thing. Vanessa gave him a grateful smile and looked through the windshield at the first signs of habitation. Among the young cacao were thickets here and there hiding huts which sent up an occasional plume of smoke. They crossed a sluggish river banked with dense vegetation and came within sight of the settlement of Bolambo.

Hazily, Vanessa had visualised a few isolated white buildings baking silently in the African sun against a background of forest. But Bolambo was almost a township; first, several rows of reed and mud huts thatched with banana leaves, then a wide expanse of beaten earth where a couple of huge cottonwoods gave shade to market produce and its vendors. To the right of the market spread two rambling white buildings which were heavily thatched, and behind them stretched a string of small white houses which had been built as close as possible to the old shade trees which had been left standing. The effect was sprawling and haphazard but quite pleasing, particularly as many excessively tall thin palms had been spared to wave their emerald fronds above the brown roofs. Owen Shepton drove past the first couple of houses and brought the car close to the front of the third. The only attempt at gardening, Vanessa noticed, was a border below the veranda crowded with sultry red cannas and bush orchid.

"Come along indoors," said Uncle Owen. "The boy will get your luggage. This way."

Vanessa mounted a couple of steps which were of earth faced with narrow logs, and went into a concrete-floored veranda which had been hastily patterned to resemble crazy paving. Then through a doorway into a small living-room where ... where Merle stood, tall and slim, in a white sun-frock, her arms outstretched, her face alight with some of her old vivacity. The two girls hugged and stood back to gaze at each other. In the dim light all Merle could see was large green smiling eyes in a small face. But Vanessa saw more than brown eyes and pallor; she saw shadows and a deepening of the petulant lines at the sweetly curved mouth.

"I wanted to meet you, but Owen wouldn't let me," said Merle. "You don't know how good it is to have you here, Van. It's been ... just deadly."

"Have you been so unwell? You didn't say so in your letters."



"Oh, I've been fairly fit, but ... everything has been getting me down."

"How is Paul?"

Uncle Owen broke in smoothly, "I forgot to tell Vanessa that Paul is away for a while. You two will have lots to talk about and you might prefer to have tea in the bedroom. I'll send it in, if you like."

"I'll go through to see the boy," said Merle languidly. "Be back in a few seconds."

Vanessa ran her fingertips through her hair, stared about her at the plain brown furniture and green print chairs and curtains. A pleasant little room, though as it was also the dining-room it was rather crowded. The chair in which Merle had been resting was surrounded by old fashion magazines and newspapers, but otherwise the room had a detached, impersonal air - quite different from the rooms the two Sheptons had occupied at the Lane house in Gloucester. They had been at Bolambo nearly a year, but in this room it was as though they had merely paused in flight.

"Rather small, isn't it?" commented Uncle Owen. He paused. "How do you think Merle looks?"

"As though she feels the climate. Does she?"

"A little. We all do." He nodded towards the outdoors. "The boy is getting your bags. Have your tea and settle in. And let me tell you once again that we're overjoyed to have you here with us."

He went out, and Vanessa stood there, waiting for Merle, who didn't look very much like the Merle with whom she had shared secrets and laughter. She heard Uncle Owen speak in pidgin to a servant and the shuffle of her suitcases being lugged round the side of the house. Then, quite suddenly, there were two voices out there in the veranda;

Uncle Owen's and a stronger, younger one that sounded insufferably self-assured.

Uncle Owen was saying, in his urbane tones, "It's no use complaining about it all the time, Nick. Everything is as good as we can afford to make it right now - we have to spread the funds as far as they'll go, and then some. When the time comes for replacing the sheds ..."

"But that's so short-sighted," came the other voice forcibly. "I believe in building to last, even out here. When we're properly launched we'll enlarge the sheds, not replace them. I've worked it out that we can ..."

"You've always got it worked out," Uncle Owen said mildly, "and the way you do it calls for cash, and more cash."

"I'm not asking you to unload more of the Company's funds. Let me get at that mahogany and I'll show you some cash from the land that can be ploughed back into it. Do you know what mahogany's fetching today?"

"I'm not so well up in these things as you are, old chap," replied Uncle Owen benignly, "but I daresay I could make a guess. We'll leave the mahogany where it is for the present, though."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"Why do you think?"

"I can make a guess. You've got about as much enterprise as that log over there. When you nailed the Bolambo concession you thought it too big, and living here it looks even bigger. You've always been cagey about the amount of capital at our disposal, but I'll bet we haven't yet spent half of it, simply because you're afraid you'll slip up somewhere, just as you slipped up with the contractors who built the roads and houses. You're hanging on to the mahogany as a sort of

insurance - in case you may need it to boost the balance sheet some time."

"It's not a bad idea."

There came a sigh of good-humoured disgust. "Why don't you use a little vision? Bolambo is going to pay, and pay on a big scale. Copra, palm oil, cocoa, rice, limba wood - we'll have it all; a bad season in one will be offset by better seasons in the others. We can't go wrong."

Vanessa was suddenly aware that Merle was standing a yard away and looking at her with amusement on her lips. She turned from the open window.

"I shouldn't have listened, but the man spoke so tersely that I was afraid Uncle Owen might get angry. Is that autocrat out there your father's assistant?"

"Nick?" Merle shrugged, still smiling. "He's the whole works here, and he knows it. Owen sometimes annoys him deliberately, just for fun, but they're friends. Nick goes ahead too fast and Owen fights to keep down the costs. Nick's clever, and he's known West Africa for ten years, but Owen is a little afraid to give him an entirely free hand. You see, my father is responsible to the board of directors, and they're only interested in seeing a return on the shareholders' money in the quickest possible time. Nick has a wider vision and he's impatient of shackles. He could make the Bolambo district one of the richest and most modern developments of its size in the world."

"He certainly has you persuaded," Vanessa commented. "To me he sounded maddeningly cocksure and conceited."

"Maybe he's both, but in Nick it's not objectionable. Come on, Van, you're sharing my room. I've ordered tea in there and another tray for Owen in here." Her arm slipped across Vanessa's shoulders. "These

are awfully tiny bungalows. After your house you'll feel as if you're boxed in; I did."

It seemed there was the living-room and kitchen on one side of the corridor and two bedrooms and a cubicle bathroom on the other. Both bedrooms were the same size, and in Merle's there was scarcely space to move between the twin beds.

Vanessa looked dubiously at her two cases piled on a chair. "I thought you might find a separate cubby-hole for me. Is Paul due home soon?"

Merle kicked her slippers out of sight under the bed, kept her head lowered. "We're not sure when he's coming. When he does come he can camp in Owen's room."

"But I wouldn't want that!"

Merle picked up a hairbrush and fumbled with its bristles. In a voice gone a little tight she said, "I shan't mind, and I'm sure Paul won't. He liked you - remember?"

"That isn't the point."

"It'll do for now," Merle said in flat tones. She turned and gave Vanessa the faint smile which didn't reach her eyes. "It really is lovely to have you here, Van. You'll find everything very different from England and one never does feel really settled, but it's quite an experience, living on the edge of a jungle that's destined to become civilised." Her lovely face in its frame of rich dark hair became enigmatic as she added, "You don't have the same emotions here, you know. Sometimes you do things you'd hardly imagine were possible."

Vanessa flickered a glance at the face she knew so well, and thought about the changes in it; but she couldn't pinpoint them. She bent and

unlocked her case, drew forth her gifts. The tea-tray was brought by a thickset black boy in white who said nothing and departed. In the restricted space between the small dressing chest and her bed, Merle stood pouring out.

"We were terribly sorry about your father, Van," she said quietly. "You seemed so hopeful just before the operation that the news came as a great blow. You were very brave to go through with everything on your own." She turned, holding out the cup of tea. "I couldn't have done it."

"My aunt and uncle came down from Scotland. But it was ... shattering."

After a silence, Merle said, "I suppose you had plenty of bills to meet. We wanted you to come by air, but didn't like to offer your fare."

"That's all right. I needed the sea trip, and I do have a a couple of hundred pounds left over. I'm hoping to earn a small salary here."

"Owen will fix something." Merle sipped, and said casually, "We were most keen to have you come out here, but I told Owen you'd refuse. I was sure that you'd decide to marry soon, or that at any rate you wouldn't want to leave Keith Fordham. What does he think of your coming out to West Africa?"

Vanessa moistened lips which had gone a little dry. "He doesn't know. As a matter of fact, we ended everything two months ago."

Merle's bright dark eyes gazed at her blankly. "You mean you're no longer engaged? But he was devoted to you - I could tell that from your letters. What happened?"

Vanessa managed a creditable shrug. "We both discovered the engagement was a mistake."

*"Both?"* queried Merle. "You must have been in love with him, and you're not the kind to change. It was he who wanted his freedom, wasn't it?"

It had to be told once; Vanessa knew that. She drew a breath and said quite evenly, "Keith was everything I wrote to you about him; he was there when I needed him most and for that I shall always be grateful. When he asked me to marry him I thought we were in love, and so did he. Then he met someone else and realised that what he felt for me wasn't the right kind of love."

"The heel!"

Vanessa smiled faintly. "Yes, in a way he was; the other girl had money, but I had an ailing father. But he went on helping me and driving us wherever we needed to go, and I didn't guess anything had come between us till after my father had died. Then Keith told me."

"Right then, while you were limp with grief?"

"I wasn't limp - only numb. So ... so what Keith said didn't hurt unbearably. During all those months he'd been seeing, things much more clearly than I. I was shut away from friends, but he was there, the old reliable. I think he proposed to me because there was no other girl he liked at that time, and he pitied me."

"But how dare he? You're worth a hundred of him!"

"Thanks, but you're biased. Keith acted as decently as he could. He decided to wait till after the major operation before being frank with me ... and I thanked him for it."

"She thanked him," Merle told the ceiling. "Why, you idiot. I'd have sliced the ground from under him! I suppose you did a pretty shake-hands and parted the best of friends?"

"You might put it that way. When I do begin to feel again he'll be a long way behind me."

"But even with your emotions blunted, you must have felt dreadfully alone. How did you bear it?"

"It was grim for a bit, but then I received Uncle Owen's invitation to come out here, and I know you both so well that I couldn't possibly resist it. I'd already applied for a job, but cancelled the application. A spell out here will set me up for a new start in England, later on. It'll be a strange interlude, and all the better for that."

While Merle lounged upon her bed and talked, Vanessa unpacked and put her clothes away. The cases were slipped outside the door for the houseboy to dispose of, and the room tidied. Vanessa was hotter than she had ever been in her life before. Her dress was soaked in a six-inch band round her waist and it clung clammily to her shoulders. Her hair was pasted in damp tendrils to her forehead and her hands stuck to everything they touched. Lesson One - tea and an energetic half-hour did not go together.

"You'd better take a shower," Merle advised. "Not cold - lukewarm. And rest a bit before you put on a clean dress."

Vanessa took this advice, and when she returned to the bedroom from the shower she found it empty and the light on. Automatically, she straightened the green bedspread which Merle's long graceful body had crumpled, and then went to the window to feel the cooler air of early darkness.

She leant close to the open window, watching the gathering momentum of the fireflies among the branches of a near-by tree, and thought back to Merle's engagement and the wedding. Till Paul Charnley had entered her orbit, Merle had chosen her escorts from the young men of the district who were of her own age. She was great

fun, was enthusiastic about everything, and she had the priceless knack of seeming to give herself to every occasion; she admitted that it was a well-practised pose, but the fact that it paid off was there for everyone to see. At every social event she had an average of three invitations, and by the time she came of age she could handle every situation a girl could possibly be called upon to face. It had been thought that she would marry one of the attractive young men with dashing sports cars, and Merle herself had been heard to say that she could marry any one of half a dozen different men and be perfectly happy.

Then came Paul, house-guest of Owen Shepton's for the final week of high-powered discussions about Bolambo. And Merle, who knew young irresponsible men through and through, was suddenly and desperately in love with a grave-eyed mystery man of thirty-two. Paul Charnley, rather silent, his slow smile and courteous ways somewhat disconcerting to one as carefree as Merle, was watchful and reticent until it was decided that he should join the new Bolambo Development Corporation as Surveyor. His proposal had left Merle brilliant-eyed and breathless, and she was ecstatically voluble about the future. Her father, who had always been "Pops", now decorously became Owen, and he was included in all her plans. What tremendous luck, declared Merle, that she should fall in love with someone so utterly mature and dependable! Of course, it would be horrible to leave darling Van, but perhaps when Uncle Richard had recovered the use of his legs the two of them could ..come out to West Africa for a visit? In any case, Merle had confidently stated, she and Paul would come home for a couple of months each year.

Shrouded in romantic dreams, Merle had departed with her new husband to make a home in the tropics. And this was that home ... but there was no husband. Surveyors did have to make trips, of course, and the Bolambo concession was extensive and pretty well all virgin forest, so that he would not be able to move with much speed about his job. But they had been here nearly a year, and surely in that time a



good deal of surveying had already been done? Yet Paul must be some distance away at this moment; it seemed that Merle and her father did not know when to expect his return. Which was a disquieting state of affairs.

Vanessa looked perplexedly about the little room. No sign, really, of Paul Charnley. Nothing of his in the wardrobe cupboard, nothing in the least masculine on the dressing chest, and not even a photograph of him beside the bed. Back in Gloucester, Merle had always kept a picture of her latest young man on her bedside table, and it was quite unnerving to discover that she was not even displaying a snapshot of the husband she had professed to adore. Had there been a quarrel before his departure? Merle did flare easily, but she was incapable of sustaining any kind of disagreement. Yet she had stated that Paul would not mind relinquishing his share of the bedroom, which surely meant there was a serious rift between them. Strange that it hadn't seeped into Merle's letters. Even her last letter, written about six weeks ago, had sent "love from my sweet Paul and me." It was most perplexing.

Slowly, Vanessa dressed in a square-necked glazed cotton which was patterned in fresh blue and white. She leant towards the mirror and used a lipstick, was glad to note that her eyes looked a good clear green and that the shine had gone from her skin. Nothing remarkable about her looks, but she did have a good skin and fairly attractive hair.

She trod into a pair of white shoes, snapped off the light and went into the living-room, where Merle and her father were having drinks. Uncle Owen prepared a third tall glass, dropped ice and a slice of lemon on to the liquid and presented the result to Vanessa.

As he and Merle lifted their glasses, he said, "To your stay with us, Vanessa. We'll make it as happy as we can for you."

"I hope I shan't be in the way," she said, "and that I'll be able to help you both. Do you work at all, Merle?"

It was Owen Shepton who answered easily, "I keep the private books myself and Merle helps me out. The tropics aren't easy on a woman, you know. You won't be able to put in eight hours a day at some specific job."

"White women do work here, though. On the ship I met one who lectures on nursing in Ghana and another who runs a school for Africans."

"They must have been old-stagers."

"Yes, but they had to start some time."

"They started gradually, and that's what you'll have to do. Don't worry - we'll arrange something for you." He nodded towards the wire-screened doorway. "Like our nights?"

"They're peculiar. Hot and very dark and somehow full of life. What's the smell?"

"We're so used to it that I couldn't tell you. It's probably a blend of sun-soaked vegetation, freshly-opened coconuts, woodsmoke and curry. We have curry on the menu every night, but you don't have to eat it. The boy likes it."

"You've both lost weight," Vanessa commented. "Is Paul thinner?"

In the brief pause that followed she wondered whether she had mentioned his name deliberately. If so, it meant she was already getting back to a normal interest in the people she cared for; a heartening sign.

Meple replied, rather carefully, "I believe he is, a little, but he's naturally thinnish. Like another drink, Van? Cigarette?"

So Paul was not to be discussed. Vanessa declined both drink and cigarette and asked questions about the little township. The houseboy came in to set the table. He was smooth-faced and dogged-looking, and he appeared to concentrate very hard on what he was doing. But when he had brought the dishes of fish rolls and curried chicken he slid from the room as if washing his hands of the whole business.

The food tasted unfamiliar and spicy, and the iced water had a cloudy look and the tang of chlorine or some such chemical. Not an appetising meal, but Vanessa was not hungry. She doubted whether one ever became hungry in this climate.

After the boy had cleared he brought coffee, and stood back, awaiting orders.

"Finished, Ngomo?" Merle asked him.

"Yas, missus."

"You may go, then. Goodnight."

He shambled away on bare feet, and Merle lifted a brow at Vanessa. "You should hear him jabber with the other boys. He simply won't learn enough English to understand us."

"Then you should learn his language. It's probably quite easy."

"You must hear Owen some time!" Merle's head lifted. "We've a caller. Excuse me."

She got up quickly and went out into the night, letting the wire screen clang shut behind her. Owen Shepton smiled and lifted his hands at Vanessa.

"She's been like that for weeks. She and I aren't nearly as close as we used to be."

Vanessa leaned forward anxiously. "Is it her marriage, Uncle Owen? I thought it was such a success."

He spoke hastily, in low tones. "Marrying Paul Charnley was the silliest thing she ever did, but she won't admit it. I must ask you not to speak to her about it, Vanessa. Just act as if everything were completely normal."

He had no sooner sat back than Merle returned with the visitor. Vanessa gave the man one long stare and knew who he was. You could see it in his lean, intelligent face, the way he carried his head, the lazy half-smile on his lips as he looked at Owen Shepton. Merle looked as if she were suddenly finding life good.

"This is Nick Brandis," she said. "And Nick, this is my very old friend, Vanessa Lane."

The man rested a brief comprehensive glance upon Vanessa, murmured a conventional greeting and addressed the older man. "I dropped in to see if Merle's temperature was down. I've just told her she should have stayed in bed till tomorrow morning."

"It was the mildest dose of fever I've had," Merle told him. "The real reason you came over was to meet Vanessa, wasn't it?"

Again the grey gaze sought the slight figure in blue and white, and this time the regard was less fleeting. His smile deepened. "Could be. I wouldn't be human if I weren't interested in the first unmarried white girl to come to Bolambo."

"Since when did you qualify as a human being?" asked Uncle Owen with a mock-sourish smile. "I think we'd better warn Vanessa at once

that you run on machine oil. You make a great show of coming here to ask after Merle and make the acquaintance of Vanessa, but I'll bet your real purpose was to get at me about those sheds or the landing stage at the river mouth ... or something equally earthy. Well, I'm foiling you, Nick," as he rose from his chair. "I've had a long day and I'm tired. Goodnight."

When he had gone Merle leaned back in her chair, her hands folded behind her head. It was a provocative pose, and her glance lingered on the strong angular features and thick teak-brown hair of the man who was comfortably lounging in a chair near the door.

"I'm afraid you made your first impression on Vanessa earlier this evening, Nick," she drawled. "We overheard one of your fencing bouts with Owen and she decided you're maddeningly cocksure and conceited."

There was a tolerant smile in the grey eyes as he once more looked at Vanessa; no doubt it pleased him that she had gone a little pink. "Cocksure, perhaps," he said agreeably, "but not conceited; I'm too old a hand for that. What's your age, Miss Lane - twenty?"

"Twenty-one." She said it very clearly, as though to assert herself by tone if nothing else. Not for anything would she have apologised for making a snap judgment, or shown vexation with Merle for letting her down. She didn't like the man, or his interest in Paul Charnley's wife.

"Twenty-one," he echoed musingly. "And I suppose you believe you know everything about men and the universe. Think you'll like it here?"

"Yes, so long as I can work."

"Trained for anything?"

"I'm half trained to teach and I can do nursing. I can also type, cook and run a flower and vegetable garden." Her voice was cool as she added, "You're a big noise in Bolambo; can you offer me a job? I'll try anything."

Merle laughed suddenly. "She means it, Nick - you look surprised. Vanessa actually did make a little money on the produce of her garden and she gave lessons in handicrafts twice a week at a local school. She nursed her father, and when Owen and I lived in Gloucester she cooked for the four of us!"

"Well, we don't need an English cook," he said a little abruptly, though the smile lingered about his well-defined mouth, "and we'll have to get by on what the locals grow for us. Miss Lane can be a valuable member of the community without doing a thing. She merely has to exist and stay as pretty as she is now to become a stimulus to the starved male element."

"That isn't in the least funny," said Vanessa steadily. And then she realised that the man's posture, though unchanged, had lost the air of indolence. Without moving in any way he had stiffened and acquired a keen look. So she added, "I'm sorry if that sounded rude, but you were trying to get at me, weren't you?"

"Maybe, but you don't have to rise to it before it hurts. What I said is absolutely true; men get fed up with each other, but they don't tire of a pretty woman, particularly if she's one they can't marry."

"That's true," said Merle, inspecting the toes of her shoes. "Take it from one who knows." She got up quickly. "And now we'll have a drink. I'll get water from the cooler and some ice."

For several seconds after she had gone Vanessa sat straight and still, staring at the mesh door screen, where moths and mantises clustered and fluttered. Though she saw Nick only from the corner of her eye

she knew, instinctively, that he was studying her openly, and right through her being she was aware of the man's vitality and something else in him which could have been hostility or merely sarcasm.

He asked speculatively, "Why did you jump on me when I said you'd be good for the men? Merle told me before you came that you're engaged, and I'll let the others know. They'll just enjoy your being here. Surely you don't object to that?"

Vanessa still gazed past him. "May we talk of something else?" she queried politely.

"Of course - in a minute. Just tell me one thing; what sort of guy is this fiance of yours, to let you roam out here? I wouldn't trust any woman far out of my sight."

"Needless to say," she returned quickly, "he was nothing like..you."

"Was?" he probed. "Has he become history?"

"Yes. And it's no one's business but my own."

"Well, well. He seems to have left a raw spot." A sardonic twist at his mouth he went on, "Let it be a lesson to you. It's what always happens when you give your happiness into someone else's keeping. There may be moments of bliss, but they're far outweighed by one's dependence on another person for everything that matters in life. I once became a little enmeshed myself, but I struggled out of it and swore never to let it happen again. Since then, I've trusted my job more than I'd trust any woman on earth. If you've any sense, it'll work for you too."

She looked at him then, saw the tantalising smile and the cool glint in his eyes. "People aren't very important to you, are they? It's what you get out of them that counts. From men, you get all the co-operation

and hard work they can be forced to give, and from women ..." She hesitated.

"Don't stop at that point," he said. "It was getting interesting. You've known me all of fifteen minutes; what would you say I need from women?"

"Very little. But perhaps that's good in a man who works in places like Bolambo."

He shook his head disparagingly. "You dodged it - just when I'd decided you had the nerve to say almost anything." He leaned back regarding her dispassionately. "It really rocked you, didn't it - that broken engagement? What sort of man was he?"

"I refuse to discuss him."

"Which means you've still quivering from the blow," he said with an annoying judicial nod. "You'll eventually bounce back, but you're probably too young to deal with the thing sanely and objectively."

"Do I have to listen to your advice?" she queried distantly.

"You may as well; it could put you right with yourself and, after all, I'm about a dozen years older than you and I've been around." His grin at her was cool and cynically charming, "Instead of feeling mad with men, why not use them? To get a man really out of your system there's nothing like having an affair with someone else."

"I'll remember that."

"Don't be so uppish; I'm preaching logic. I've never seen a girl of your age so much in need of a full-blooded love affair."

Vexed at the heat which was flooding her face, she said tightly, "You seem to have forgotten how civilised people talk to each other, and



you've probably had your own way for so long that you can't accept the possibility of your tactics failing. Well, they don't come off with me!" He gave a short mocking laugh. "You're daring me, you know. But I've an inkling that you know I'm right. We'll talk about it again some time."

"We won't, Mr. Brandis."

The words sounded a little foolish as soon as she'd spoken them, and the fact that he didn't reply at once left them hanging on the air. Vanessa felt hot and awkward and angry. This assistant of Uncle Owen's was objectionable as only a self-assured, indolent tyrant could be. He'd no doubt had innumerable successes with women and couldn't imagine his line failing with someone as inexperienced as Vanessa Lane. She might be innocent, but one thing she was sure of; it would be wise to keep clear of this tall creature with the teak-brown hair and calculating grey eyes that now looked amused at her expense. So long as she avoided being alone with him that undeniable magnetism of his wouldn't be hard to resist.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, with an air of indifference. "There are some women who can't tackle the light affair at all, let alone terminate it gracefully. You may be one of them. Cigarette?"

As Merle entered the room just then and he took the tray from her, Vanessa could not be sure that he had not ended the exchange between them because he had heard Merle's movements in the passage.

She found herself standing and saying conventionally, "I'd rather not have a drink, Merle. I'm sure you won't mind if I go to bed now."

"Of course not, darling," came the rather too ready reply. "I'll be along soon, but go to sleep if you want to."

"Goodnight, Miss Lane," said Nick Brandis pleasantly. "I hope nothing will disturb your youthful dreams."

She ignored the jibe implicit in the remark, answered him and went to the bedroom. Without pausing, she undressed, slipped into the bathroom, came back and got into bed.

She threw off the light blanket and lay still under the sheet. The night was loud with bull-frogs and cicadas, and there was a faint, spicy, rancid smell on the air. This was Bolambo, where she was to live and work for perhaps a year. She was with Uncle Owen, who hadn't really changed since leaving England, and Merle, who was less bright and effervescent. But there was no Paul, and she had been asked not to mention him to Merle.

And this man, Nick Brandis. Merle liked him, came alive when he appeared and was even at this moment enjoying an hour alone with him. Was it true that he would have married Merle had she been free? Was that the real reason behind his nonchalance about love affairs? Vanessa was not sophisticated enough to analyse such a man, even had she wanted to do so, but he did complicate an already disturbing situation. As if it weren't problem enough just living in this hot and rather frightening jungle in West Africa!

For the climate, the Africans and the teeming forest she had been prepared. Merle's marriage tangle and Nick Brandis were overwhelming complexities which, at the moment, made her feel tired and oddly keyed up. Perhaps the sudden enervating heat had made her needlessly apprehensive and she would laugh at her fears tomorrow. Vanessa hoped so.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was only gradually that Vanessa came to realise the colour and beauty of the Bolambo concession, to enjoy its distant views of looping sandy coastline, the prolific green bounty of hills and ravines, the little villages scattered quietly about valleys and hillsides, the wildflowers gleaming among rich dark foliage and myriads of brilliant butterflies of countless varieties and permutations of colour.

During the first few days the palpable heat and humidity induced a languor she wouldn't have believed possible, and she was as willing as the others to rest after lunch in an atmosphere that vibrated with the humming of insects, the trilling of birds and the occasional rustling of the palms.

Over mid-morning refreshment she met Dr. Ziegen, who was of uncertain nationality but a clever physician; she met Mr. Mangogi, the personnel manager, and a young man named Claude Harrison, who was the agricultural superintendent with a sideline hobby of collecting and classifying some of the rare plant species he met on the job.

Claud was twenty-eight and physically not at all the sort of young man you'd expect to meet in West Africa. He was not much above average height, painfully thin, loose-limbed to the point of looking near collapse and incorrigibly crumpled as to shorts and bush shirt. His sallow face and the dark hollows round his light blue eyes gave him an unhealthy appearance which the lank colourless hair that badly needed a trim did much to support. But, surprisingly, he was absolutely fit and could stand a stretch of ten hours' duty among the new rice and cacao plantations, along the river or at the various sheds, without suffering from anything but normal fatigue. He didn't need the doctor, but he did need looking after. It was rather strange, thought Vanessa, that of the half-dozen white men at Bolambo it should be the youngest who most needed a wife.

When she mentioned this to Merle, the reply was a smiling, "Claud Hewson's a fraud. He eats like a horse, sleeps through the shindy of thunderstorms and goes botanising at the weekends. He probably inherited the frail appearance from one of his parents and his stamina from the other. But I never knew any man who took less trouble with himself. I tried to take him in hand, but it was tough going and wore me out without getting results. He did kindle a little when he saw you, so perhaps he'll remember to get into clean things before he comes to dinner on Friday."

The other two white men in the settlement were temporaries - a pest control expert and a geologist. Both were married with families in England, which placed them in a more ordinary category. But when they came to dinner that Friday they, too, seemed to be absorbed in the Bolambo project; their talk circled round insecticide-spraying from the air and setting up a small plant for handling alluvial gold. The atmosphere of the place seemed to have seeped right through to their marrow.

Vanessa had thought that surely that evening there would be some allusion to Paul Charnley, some mention of his surveying tour and probable return. But no one spoke of Merle's husband; which could mean one of two things - either they were tacitly conspiring to ignore an awkward situation, or Paul's absence was so normal that it called for no comment. In the latter case, though, surely there would have been some humorous asides about Merle's grass-widowhood? All the men liked her and jollied her. Except Claud Hewson, who was too shy to jest with a young woman as poised and knowledgeable as Merle appeared.

Poised and knowledgeable; queer to think of Merle in those terms. Excitable, starry-eyed, impetuous and petulant, fond and hot-tempered, a little careless of the feelings of others and yet very willing to help anyone so long as the chore did not clash with anything else she wanted to do. Merle was the product of a mother

who hadn't cared much for motherhood and a father who loved her unwisely and could refuse her nothing. And yet, in barely a year of marriage to Paul Charnley, she had become quieter, oddly reserved and difficult to approach.

Vanessa found herself watching Nick Brandis and wondering how much he knew about Merle's marriage. Those two had an easy way with each other; nothing really intimate about it, but the familiarity was there. Once again Vanessa recalled Uncle Owen's knowing assertion that Nick had fallen for Merle, and she had to admit it was possible. Had Merle been unmarried Nick would no doubt have had an affair with her and, in his own words, have got her out of his system. As an affair was impossible, his feelings had crystallised into something rather better than a passionate emotion; the two had become close friends and allies. Vanessa didn't know why she should feel a niggling little ache over it.

After dinner that evening the men went on talking while Merle and Vanessa played records. At ten-thirty, they made coffee and snacks and an hour later the men left. All but Nick.

He lounged against a log post in the narrow veranda and looked at the night, said casually to Owen Shepton, "Those piles at the landing stage are still sinking. I measured over the last seven days and they're three-quarters of an inch lower."

The older man puffed at the stump of his cheroot. "That's nothing - they're bound to sink quite a bit. They'll find their level and stay put."

"I still think you should get that contractor out here. He did a shoddy job all round. I've a crack in my bedroom wall you could lose your hand in, and I'll guarantee he treated only half the wood he used for the floors. Dr. Ziegen says there are termites in the isolation cabins."

"They're temporary structures. You leave that side of things to me, Nick. Your job is organisation."

"Even so, I can't walk round with my eyes shut. I know you and the contractors' agent were friends, but the company paid his account - a stiff one, too. The sheds we put up ourselves are a far better job than anything the contractors did for us, and they cost much less than the contractor would have charged."

Owen Shepton sounded a little irritable as he answered, "You think that because you've lived here a few years you know everything. I was warned that the walls would crack in the dry season and let in the damp during the rains. And if a little untreated wood got into the buildings it was a natural error. We rushed him through the job and have to take the consequences."

Nick shrugged. "I'm not sure the directors would be proud of Bolambo township, and I think you should get that agent out here to make an inspection."

"Well, I can't. He's retired."

"Has he, by jove!" Nick plunged his hands into his trousers pockets. "The firm is still responsible, but I suppose it wouldn't be fair to drag the man's successor into it. We'll put through the repairs and sent in our account. Even if they don't pay up, it'll shake' em."

"The accounts are still in my hands," Uncle Owen reminded him tartly. "The development of the land is enough to keep you busy for years. Time enough for you to take over completely when I retire!"

"Don't get sore," replied Nick equably. "You know I'm right about that agent and you're kicking yourself for your own bad judgement. If you'll order up a hundred bags of cement we can prevent the landing stage from sinking further, and while you're about it..." "We'll wait a

while and watch," said Uncle Owen, becoming almost bland. "After all, if I were to act on every instruction you issue I'd never really know how right you are - or how wrong. Your trouble, Nick, is that you're fed up with waiting for the rains. I pity your planting team when the rains do start."

"They're resting up for it now. Well," he straightened, turned his tolerant grin towards the two girls and gave a half-wink, "I'll get along to the shack. Thanks for a good dinner, Merle." Then he seemed to remember something, and paused. "Still wanting a job, Miss Lane?"

"Vanessa," Merle corrected him. "She doesn't need a job yet."

"If you do have one, I'll take it," said Vanessa. "Uncle Owen has promised to arrange something, but it's going to be difficult to get him to do anything about it."

"There's all the time in the world," Owen Shepton said tiredly. "You young people wear me out. Goodnight, everyone."

As the older man went indoors Nick said carelessly, "I'll look into things and let you know, some time tomorrow." And with a wave of his hand he went off.

Merle looked out at the warm starry night. "Monotonous, isn't it?" she commented. "I often wonder how much longer I'll be able to stand this place ... and the people."

"You mean the men?"

"I certainly don't mean the non-existent women. The men are all bores, except Nick."

"You've stood them for a year and they appear to like you."

"In the past it was different. Just recently I've felt almost desperate, and if you hadn't come I believe I'd have done something pretty awful. Sometimes I feel my father shouldn't have come here. He's too old for it."

"He looks well, and I believe the arguments with Nick Brandis keep him on his mettle; he encourages them." Vanessa paused, and then asked casually, "How long have you known Nick Brandis - all the time you've been here?"

"Oh, yes, he was here when we arrived. He'd started the building, but Owen decided to call in a contractor so that Nick could go right ahead with other things. He's cleared roads through the jungle and started several plantations - that was last year, before and during the rains. There are two rains and therefore two planting seasons. This year he plans to get at least half the land under crops of some sort." She laughed a little. "I'm afraid Owen is only the titular head of Bolambo, but he happens also to be a director of the Development Corporation, so he has the last word on everything. Nick doesn't really mind; he's fond of Owen."

"He's quite fond of you, too."

Merle stared at the night. "Nick is the sort of man I should have married," she said in hardened tones. "He understands a woman who's excitable and moody, and he's a man who masters his women. You wouldn't like that kind of treatment from a man, Vanessa, but it's just what I need. If Nick's wife misbehaved he'd punish her in his own forthright fashion, but go on adoring her."

"I wouldn't say that at all," Vanessa stated, to her own surprise. "I think he'd be bitter, and take it out on her in every way he could devise; he never forgives it. It's difficult to imagine him married, though."



"He'll never marry . . . now."

The note of finality in Merle's voice was vaguely distasteful, but Vanessa let it go. She lingered there, aware of the warm damp air and the scents it released. Insects whirred and rasped unnoticed; to Vanessa the night was still and silent and yet somehow ominous of change.

Next morning was like the other four she had experienced at Bolambo. Merle had coffee in bed and went without breakfast, rising at about nine-thirty to take a shower and dawdle over dressing in one of her beautiful flimsy dresses. Vanessa had toast and fruit juice at eight o'clock and took a walk on the hard red earth between the various buildings.

At eleven, Merle would order some sort of refreshment for Vanessa, herself and her father, and half an hour later Uncle Owen would say it was time they got down to the office work, and Vanessa would be left to find some sort of occupation for the rest of the morning. She offered to take Merle's place as her father's secretary, but was told,

"There's not much of it, darling. It's just that Owen and I are slow. We could do the whole lot before lunch, but it's easier to break it up into two sessions, one at eleven- thirty and the other around four-thirty. All told, we don't do more than three hours a day!"

"Well, can't I relieve you for a while?"

"It's not worth it, honey. It's just boring routine that both Owen and I know through and through. Read a book and keep cool."

Vanessa did read a book that morning, but when the four-thirty session came round she felt restless. She had lain down after lunch

then taken a shower and put on a pink and white glazed cotton and presented herself in the living-room for tea. When Merle and her father had gone off to the desk in his room, Vanessa wandered into the veranda and stood looking at the bush thickets topped by palm fronds opposite the row of houses. A road of sorts linked the bungalows, but owing to the groups of wild banana and palms, none of them was entirely visible. The house to the left was occupied by the doctor, who seemed never to be at home, while the geologist lived in the house to the right. Beyond the doctor's was Nick Brandis's house, but all one could see of it was the apex of the brown palm-thatch. Vanessa rather thought that Claud Hewson lived on Nick's left, in the last house of the row. She was conjecturing about that young man when he appeared suddenly, in a Land-Rover driven by Nick. The thing stopped only a couple of yards from the veranda and both men got out.

"Hi," said Nick laconically. "Going somewhere?"

"No." She gave him a brief glance and rested a more kindly one upon Claud's pale but slightly tanned features. "Uncle Owen is working. Did you come to see him?"

Nick shook his head lazily. "Like to help me do a spot of work? Claud was going with me, but he's crocked his wrist and has to see the doc."

"Yes, I'll help." She spoke to Claud, sympathetically: "Is it very bad? I believe Dr. Ziegen is still out." •

Claude stammered slightly. "I'll ... I'll find him. He's bound to be somewhere about."

"Oh, sure," said Nick. "Ziegen's probably in his office in the main building. Go over there now, Claud. See you later."

Claud smiled nervously and nodded. "Sorry to be such a mess. It's ... it's probably nothing."

He moved away, nursing the swollen wrist. Nick swung back the door of the vehicle. "Jump in," he said. "We've only an hour or so before dark."

She sat in and he slammed the door, came round to his own seat and set the Land-Rover moving in a semi-circle, towards the main road out of the settlement. In spite of an odd reluctance, she felt a throb of pleasure at being borne into the jungle. Perhaps because she had already spent a few days imprisoned at Bolambo she found herself more aware of the forest than she had been on the day she had arrived with Uncle Owen. The hood covered the seats of the Land-Rover, but the sides were open to admit the hot wind of speed. The cautious pleasure became a mounting exhilaration, and unthinkingly she turned a bright-eyed smile on Nick.

"This is marvellous ! Where are we going?"

He gave her that tolerant look. "Not far. I have a gang who'll be free tomorrow and I want them to get started on a new track. I have to do some marking so that they can get busy at daybreak."

"What do I have to do?"

"You'll see." Another long glance at her, and this time it was a deliberate survey of her pink cheeks and cloudy brown hair blowing in the wind, and it came to an abrupt halt at the hollow of her throat. "You got Hewson stuttering - notice that? If Doc Ziegen has to wrench that wrist the poor dope won't feel a thing."

"That's something new in the way of insults - to be called an anaesthetic. What I like about you is your frankness."

"You don't like it at all. A second ago your eyes were all flames. Pretty green eyes, if I may say so."

"I'd rather you didn't, in that tone." Pointedly she changed the topic. "How did Claud Hewson hurt his wrist?"

"He was demonstrating some new agricultural machinery we've been unpacking today. He was a bit too earnest with the levers and something unexpectedly sprang out of his grip. Hewson's a good chap, but even when his audience is primitive tribesmen he hates the limelight. There might be something you could do about that particular neurosis, Brownie. Where you're concerned, I'd say Hewson is definitely open to influence."

"I hardly know him," she answered shortly, "and I've no interest at all in the private lives of any of the men here. When you're prodding about in your mind for something to be sarcastic about, you might remember that."

"Who could forget it?" He sounded sincere, but she was pretty sure his tongue was in his cheek. He went on, "You're soured on men - isn't that right? But to be friendly with men you don't have to like them particularly. I'm mostly friendly with women, but that doesn't mean I'm enchanted with the sex. They happen to be different from my own and therefore a little more interesting. But I've discovered that basically all women are the same."

"Really?" she said, in a voice that was meant to convey her lack of interest.

"Yes really," he repeated, ignoring her frigidity, and in fact warming to the subject. "Did you have many girl friends in England?"

"Quite a few, until the last year or so."

"They had different personalities, didn't they? Yet I'll bet all of them had one thing in common; they wanted security for the future, a meal ticket and a roof. The man himself wasn't so very important; what really mattered was his ability to provide the nest and line it well." A shrug of the wide shoulders. "Even Merle, who's never had to earn her living or wonder whether she could afford any particular thing that caught her fancy, had the same idea. She'd been gadding with the lads, but Paul Charnley had a settled career and prospects, and he had a degree of maturity she might never attain herself. So Merle married him, and only discovered she was unsure of how she felt about him afterwards."

"You know a lot about Merle, don't you?"

He grinned. "She's been the only woman around the place for nearly a year, and I happen to like her."

"Do you like ... Paul?"

He gave his whole attention to the road. "Yes, I like Paul," was his succinct reply.

She said negligently, "You don't care to discuss him, either, do you? Are you the one who sent him away?"

"No, I'm not," he said sharply, still looking ahead. "Paul's a surveyor and for the most part he doesn't have to take orders. His job is to survey the whole concession minutely, and that's what he's doing. The fact that he's been away for a fortnight and still gives no sign of returning isn't my business."

"To me, you seem a bit touchy about him."

"Well, I'm not!"

"All right," she said in mild surprise. "I happen to care for Merle and I feel she's a little unhappy about Paul. If I ask another question will you snap my head off?" He was smiling now, the sharpness had gone. "I might tell you why I jumped on you, but you wouldn't understand. What do you want to know?"

"Well... doesn't Paul usually communicate with Merle when he goes off on the job?"

"Yes, he does."

"Do you know why he hasn't done so this time?"

"I could make a guess. He departed quite suddenly, after they'd had an argument. He told Merle he wouldn't come back till he had some message from her - an apology, I take it. She half told me what had happened and then closed up. She did mention they might separate, permanently."

"Oh, no!" The cry was wrung from Vanessa as she turned her head swiftly and looked at him. "I know you're contemptuous of... of love, but Merle really did feel something for Paul that she could never have felt for any other man she knew. It was something deep and genuine and quite beyond her in a way. She can't have lost it in the space of a year. Where is Paul - do you know?"

"I only know he's not in the Bolambo concession."

"Not?" she echoed, startled. "Then where can he have gone?"

"I wouldn't know, without sending a party to find him, and I shan't do that. The first weekend he didn't turn up I made some inquiries and heard he was camping with his assistant near our river boundary, about eight miles from home. When the second weekend came round - last weekend, I rode out there and found he'd crossed the river. On

Monday Paul's assistant showed up - said he's been instructed to return by a certain road and take measurements. So Paul's missing."

"Have you told Merle?"

"I told Owen, and I suppose he passed it on. Merle knows, anyway."

"But how could she get a message to Paul if she doesn't know where he is?"

"I've no idea, child. I imagine he told her to send a message within a certain time. It didn't come, so he lit out."

"It doesn't sound a bit like Paul. What about his work?"

"He's actually due for some leave, and his assistant told us he wants his absence to be regarded as vacation."

"So he may not be back for another two or three weeks!"

"Even longer. He was working here before the company was formed and he was promised three months' leave."

"Good heavens," she said soberly. "Can't we do something?"

He ran the car on to the long tufty grass at the side of the road and braked. "What do you suggest?" he queried, with sarcasm. "That we bring him back and force the whole thing out into the open? Seems to me that if Merle and Paul can part like that after a year of marriage they might as well separate for good."

"That's a cold and uncaring way to look at it," she retorted warmly. "Unless ... unless he wanted Merle to get her freedom. She drew in her lip. "Don't you have the faintest notion as to what they quarrelled about?"

He eyed her speculatively and was apparently weighing up whether he could trust her. The clear green eyes, troubled now, returned his glance without wavering, and he said, "There's been some underhand business going on. Owen hates discussing it because he suspects Paul, I'm sure Paul doesn't know he's suspected, but there it is. Owen has always talked his business over with Merle and I've a feeling that she promised to say nothing to Paul. It must have been something like that, and because she was inwardly worked up about it she must have said a few unforgivable things to Paul."

"To me," said Vanessa slowly, "that sounds a trifle thin."

"It does to me too." he said offhandedly, "but it's all I'm telling you. There's nothing your or anyone else can do about it. Come on, this is where you jot down a few figures while I place markers. Here's a notebook." They were out on the road and he was looking at her feet. "Lord, what shoes! You'd better stay on the verge and I'll shout the figures. If there's ever a next time you'd better wear slacks."

She felt like telling him crossly that there never would be a next time. And yet she rather hoped there would. Nick Brandis was the only man who could make her feel that Keith Fordham had been just an unfortunate episode that were best forgotten, and he did it by being his lazy-eyed, amused and forthright self. You might think, Vanessa reflected, that it would take a new and more real love to oust the old heartache, but it didn't. The prescription was simpler than that. Take a dose or two of someone masterful who didn't believe in marriage and you were practically cured.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked.

"Thoughts - and I'm not sharing them."

"No connection with me?"



"A slight one. Not with you as a person, though."

His eyes narrowed, mockingly. "As an antidote to that cast-off fiancé of yours. Have you decided to have an affair, after all?"

"Not yet."

"Well, before you do, get an objective slant on it. That way, you'll enjoy it and be able to end it without regret. Stay clear of entanglements till you're at least twenty-five; you'll be able to handle them better in two or three affairs' time."

She laughed. "Do you ration yourself to one affair each vacation?"

^No, Brownie." He glinted at her. "I don't even think along those lines till I meet someone who's just right, and I'm afraid they're few and far between. You don't often run into a girl who's just rebounding from a nipped-off engage- ment."

He was getting at her, but she rather liked it; she had never before met a man who changed her mood in lightning strokes from anger to amusement and back to anger again. If he hadn't been so darned sure of himself...

"To work," he said. "Write down what I call out. Width twenty feet. Compass... let me see," he consulted the one he held, "east-north-east. Bush and manyaras to be cleared. Now write these figures - fifteen," he disappeared, "twenty- three, thirty. Got that?"

"Yes," she called. "What are you doing now?"

"Placing the markers. You stay there."

She stood in the shade of an ancient Cottonwood, enjoying the late afternoon breeze. The sun had gone, but the strip of sky above the forest was still blue and brilliant, though darker than at midday. A

heavenly blue, like hyacinths. An eagle swooped, and was gone. Then birds of gaudy plumage began to dip to and fro across the road, exchanging raucous badinage. Between times, there was an eerie silence; the day noises were muted, the evening chorus of cicadas and bull-frogs not yet begun.

Suddenly Nick appeared at her side, big and brown in his bush shirt and shorts. He held out something and automatically she received it into her hands - a tiny African squirrel which looked all eyes and gaping pink mouth. She laughed, and held it more comfortably.

"Its heart is beating frantically," she said. "Was it alone?"

"Seemed so, but I'll bet there's a mother about somewhere." He looked up and said softly. "She's up there, watching us. She's shaking with fury but daren't come down."

"Poor thing. Take her baby back to where you found it."

"She'll come for it. Watch."

He took the little animal from Vanessa and placed it on the ground about eighteen inches from his shoe. The next second, the mother, herself hardly larger than a rat, had dropped to the grass and snatched her infant and shot back into the tree.

Vanessa laughed. "They're sweet. I don't know how people can take baby animals away from their natural surroundings and cage them. You haven't finished your job, have you?"

"As much as is necessary tonight."

"Then you didn't need me along at all!"

"My morale needed you," he said, taking his notebook from her with a smile. "It's a long time since I last had a girl more or less at my

mercy." He glanced up at the golden- hazed evening sky. "Like to have a look at my new bridge? It's only a mile further on."

"Yes, I'd love to, May I drive that little way?"

"Sure, but pull up when I tell you. Know the gears?"

"I watched you when you were driving."

"What a gal," he said admiringly. "I'll bet you're a fast learner in other ways too. That's encouraging!"

She took care to keep her smile to herself.

She drove carefully, ignoring his groan when she ground the gears and had the odd sensation of rousing from a drug. The red laterite road stretched ahead, shaded by tall palms and thick lower growth.

"Back in the nineteen-twenties," Nick was informing her, "the government supplied seedling palms to anyone who cared to ask for them. Every large and small clearing had its quota, and within a few years the jungle, which had been just a vast forest of raffia palms and manyara and lophira trees festooned and strangled by vines, was tufted with coconut and oil-nut palms. Villages died out and were grown over, the palms seeded, and where they're thickest yew find people living near by, existing on river fish and coconuts. There's no big copra trade here yet, but some time we'll start it up ourselves."

"You like these places, don't you?" she said. "I can hear it in your voice. Where were you before you came to Bolambo?"

"I was doing forestry in Nigeria for several years, and before that I had a spell on tropical plant research. That was about the time when you were playing for the second hockey team at school."

"What makes you think I didn't make the first team?"

"You're not the build for hockey, but you probably had a go. Look out for the dips just here. In the dry season they get iron-hard and if you take them at speed you can break a spring. Here we are."

She stopped the Land-Rover and gazed at the narrow log bridge which spanned a dark river. He got out and she did the same, and they walked down to where the bridge began, a horizontal ladder of logs thonged together with miles of rope that was as thick as a man's thumb. Nick waved at the cables which secured the bridge to giant trees on each side of the river.

"See? A suspension bridge, African brand. We used to build them like this when I was in forestry. Best way to see a river is halfway across. Think you have nerve enough to try it?"

"I might have. Does it take much nerve?"

"It sways a bit and there are only ropes for handrails. But if you go first I'll be right behind you, to steady you. The Africans do it barefoot and they lope across with loads on their heads. Those sandals of yours are foolish but they do have flat heels. Game?"

Momentarily, Vanessa wondered why she agreed to everything he suggested. Was it that challenging, provocative gleam in his eye that drove her on, or was she merely submissive to a stronger will? The problem unresolved, she put a wary foot on the first log.

As the two of them came to a halt about midstream, the bridge ceased swaying, but Nick kept his impersonal grip on her elbow. He waved along the tunnel formed by the trees.

"It joins the main river only a mile from the coast. It's quite a sight down there, in the rains." "This isn't your boundary, then?"

"No, that's five miles farther on. We shall start clearing over there on the other bank as soon as we have labour free for it." He looked down at her, enigmatically. "This is your first African waterway. Like it?"

"It's a bit shivery. What are those scarlet flowers high up in that tree?"

"Ashanti Blood - a climber making its way up to the sunshine. Look back, and you'll see more flowers. The purple and lilac are lianas."

"No tree-orchids?"

"I expect there are a few about." He twisted his head, lowered it to the level of hers and pointed upwards. "White and pale green. See them?"

She felt the warmth of his cheek near hers, the strong shoulder at her back, and answered hurriedly, "Oh, yes, I see them clearly."

"Don't fib," he said tolerantly. "It's almost too dark to see them at all. And don't quiver when I get near you - it's tantalising." Then, straightening and shoving his hands into his pockets as if the remark were forgotten: "What about that job you wanted? Like to try something new?"

"Yes, of course." She didn't look at him. "What can you offer?"

"I thought of it before you came, but hadn't anyone I could use. When planting starts here we employ every single worker available. The women are better planters than the men, but they often have to work in the rain, and if they have small children they tie them on their backs - which is hardly good for the offspring. Last season I wouldn't allow them to bring babies along, and the result was that they left them in the charge of other children and there were casualties. Mangogi, the staff manager, has tried to get a couple of the younger women to train as creche nurses, but they won't leave home."

"But do they need to be trained? If the children were put together in one building and there were a couple of women watching them - wouldn't that do?"

"It's not good enough, but it's what I'd decided on - till you came."

"And... now?"

"It seems we might start something permanent for preschool age kids. We can soon shove up a shelter - palm thatch on poles with a three-foot reed wall all round it. Know the kind of thing?"

"I think so. There's an opening of two or three feet all round between the top of the wall and the thatch. Should give plenty of air and yet keep out the rain. It sounds ideal!"

"But there has to be someone in charge. A couple of local women could look after the children, but you'd have to be there, looking trim and official in white." Carelessly he ended, "You'd go on staff, of course, and the uniform would be provided."

Vanessa was silent for a minute. Not for anything would she have allowed her elation to show. She drew a deep breath. "Would I have a free hand?"

"Pretty well, but you'd have to learn a little of the language before you could do much."

"When could I start?"

He laughed briefly. "Almost at once. We can make the shelter about forty feet long and twenty wide, and I'll guarantee to have it finished in a week. I'll send up to a friend of mine in Lagos for your uniforms - size thirty- four?"

"You're an experienced guesser, Mr. Brandis. Yes, thirty- four. Will this man in Lagos be able to buy uniforms there?"

"It's a woman - and for me she'll get anything," he answered in a provocative drawl. "Don't think it's going to be easy, my child. It's hot now; when the rains start you'll feel like wet string and wish to heaven you'd never heard of Bolambo."

"I'm not scared. Merle got through last year."

"She went up to North Africa for the two worst months, and she'll probably do it again this year, and expect you to go with her."

"There's ... Paul."

"Maybe. I haven't frightened you off? You really want to try this nursery idea?"

She looked up at him swiftly, smilingly. "Yes, I do! I hope Uncle Owen will allow it."

"Uncle Owen," said Nick, his tones heavy with satire, "will strongly advise you to beware of any plan devised by Nick Brandis. It's a line he takes - a token protest." His voice changed a little as he added, "You're fond of him, aren't you?"

"Yes - very much so."

"And how, exactly, do you feel about Merle, now that she's estranged herself from Paul Charnley?"

"For her, I still feel as I did; and I don't think she'd cut herself right away from Paul. They may not be suited, but they did love each other. It can't have ended abruptly at the same time, for both of them."

"I'm not so sure," he said sceptically. "Merle could have married almost any man of her own age and made some sort of a go of it. She has looks and vitality and a way of making a man feel that to her he's someone special. But when she left her own age group she was at sea; with a certain type of older man she might have managed a whale of a marriage, but Paul was, and still is, an unknown quantity. No one as volatile as Merle could hope to succeed with a quiet man like Paul."

suppose you think," said Vanessa evenly, "that she'd have done better with someone like you?"

In a voice gone hard and mocking he replied, "You're quite a thinker as well as a fast learner, Brownie. I can see I'll, have to watch my step!"

She smiled vexedly. "I've a feeling that before we're through ..." she began, and broke off, suddenly aware that night had fallen upon the river and the jungle, and she was suspended with him above the deepest part of the thick tropical river. "We'll have to go," she said urgently, and began moving, rather too quickly.

The bridge tilted and she grabbed at the handrope; it swung back the other way and she felt the leather soles of her shoes sliding over the logs towards the other edge. She heard a grunt of laughter and felt herself grabbed firmly about the waist and swung up into strong arms. For perilous moments she was swayed from side to side as he strode, and when he reached the bank her head circled dizzily, so that she still clung to him with her eyes closed. Then it happened; his mouth on hers, pressing her head back hard against his upper arm so that she was imprisoned.

But she awoke again. Kicking savagely, she thrust herself out of his arms so violently that she stumbled as she reached the ground. Her impulse was to run, but there was nowhere to run to. In the darkness she was aware of his smile taunting her as he opened the door of the



Land-Rover. Her teeth tight, her cheeks burning, she got into her seat and squashed herself as far away from him as she could. He reversed and managed to turn on the narrow track, had the vehicle speeding back towards the settlement before giving her a glance. Even then he didn't say anything, but she got the humiliating impression that he was a little bored by the whole business.

He had pulled up outside Uncle Owen's house when he said, "You began a pronouncement out there on the bridge - something about having a feeling that before you and I are through ..."

"I forget what I was going to say," she said distantly. "I must go now."

"Before we're through," he repeated inexorably. "Go on, finish it."

"Very well. I was going to say that we'd probably come to dislike each other. But you'll understand perfectly if I now change the word to detest. Thank you for the ride, Mr. Brandis."

"Not for the kiss?" with sarcasm. "Perhaps you're right. It wasn't very satisfactory, as kisses go, for either of us. To that extent, we've proved something."

She got out of the Land-Rover as he did, and in the same moment a light sprang up in the porch. Merle stood there, her face dark because she backed the glow.

"Nick!" she exclaimed softly. "I've something to tell you." Then she became aware of Vanessa, and altered her voice. "Why, hallo, Van. I thought you must be out with Owen."

Vanessa mounted the steps, smiled and said, "I've been learning about Bolambo and its people. Mr. Brandis was most instructive."

She went into the house and walked through to the tiny bathroom. She washed her hands, tried not to look into the ' mirror and failed. There was a patch of colour high on each cheekbone, a brilliance in the green eyes that made her angry all over again. How dare the man take advantage of his own strength and her dependence out there on the bridge! He was just a barbarian who had gone too long without a woman he could bully and make love to. Perhaps he really did feel something for Merle, something he couldn't satisfy because she was married and still a little in love with her husband. He did have some sort of code, of course; but the brute type often did.

She leaned back against the painted wall and saw him down there by the river in the darkness, a girl in his arms and at his mercy. A kiss. It meant nothing whatever to him, save perhaps as an experiment with someone of a different kind from the women he usually met up with. Yet in Vanessa it had created a tiny, gnawing hunger.

If only she were more sophisticated, she thought despairingly. If only she could wade right into an affair and emerge unscathed!

She shook her head at her reflection, knowing that at this moment Nick had forgotten Vanessa Lane. He was with a woman of experience who understood and admired him; just as, no doubt, that woman in Lagos understood and admired Nick Brandis.

Vanessa leant once more over the wash-basin and made a second attempt to wash the heat from her face.

## CHAPTER THREE

VANESSA had spent a whole week at Bolambo before she became even mildly , curious about the cooking and other domestic arrangements in Owen Shepton's house. In England, she had kept house with only occasional help for the duration of her father's disability, and when there was no longer anyone else to care for she had found herself not bothering what she ate. Even on the ship she had still lacked appetite, and no one arriving in West Africa for the first time has much interest, for a while, in food.

Vanessa 'was roused to an awareness when she discovered that Uncle Owen had spoken the plain truth when he'd asserted that curry was on the menu every night. What he hadn't ipentioned, but equally true, was the fact that the curry was always the same - joints of tough chicken stewed to strings and steeped in a violently hot mixture of boiled spices and peppers. Served in a nauseating heap and surrounded by off-white rice, it was the most unappetising mess one could imagine.

It was only when the same two or three courses were served on the night they entertained the men of the settlement that she began to awaken to the monotony of the revolting diet. Without consulting Merle she made it her business to look into the kitchen a few times one evening, as the dinner was being prepared, and what she found there proved, if nothing else, that no woman had ever taught the boy anything at all about cooking; the only thing he attempted was the curry, and for that he threw handfuls of oddments into the pot in which the chicken stewed and knew that it would turn out more or less as it had turned out yesterday and the day before. Why should he worry?

The real trouble might have been Ngomo's refusal to learn English.

At last, Vanessa did tackle Merle. "I can't think how you've stood it," she said. "A year of that diet is enough to undermine one's whole outlook! Are all the boys like Ngomo?"

"I've never asked. I believe the two married men have instructed their boys in the art of meat puddings and pies and tinned fruit flans, but to be honest we really haven't cared very much. I'd hate to put on weight and it wouldn't be good for Owen to go in for heavy meals."

"And Paul?" asked Vanessa pointedly. "What about him?"

Merle lifted her delicate eyebrows. "He'd lived here before I came. He's said he'd like a steak sometimes or a couple of chops, but very little fresh meat gets through to Bolambo. It can't be a bad diet; the men seem healthy enough."

"Because they're men of stamina! that's how they got out here. They've probably developed the habit of eating whatever is dished up, simply because they're hungry. It keeps up their strength, but that's all. We ought to do something about it, Merle."

Merle shrugged ungraciously. "Well, make some cakes, if you want to."

"That's not the point. The whole kitchen needs reorganising, and though I wouldn't mind having a go at it, I'm not going to usurp your privileges. This is your house."

"It belongs to the company."

"You're quibbling. You don't put up with any old food just because you happen to rent your house instead of owning it. Don't you have any inclination at all towards making a real home of this place?" "Frankly, I don't," said Merle, lifting her lovely pointed chin. "We're all squashed together in three small rooms and I've a feeling

that my father won't stick it for longer than two years. That means we may be on our way out in under a year. Why should we bother to become established?"

"Do you mean that if your father left you'd go with him?"

Merle's dark eyes hardened perceptibly. "I don't know what I'd do. But one thing I do know! I'm sick of being told that I should try to settle and become an ordinary housewife in this red-hot hell. The sort of man who works in these places should be devil-may-care and only too happy to have a wife along as a companion. They'd have good times and they wouldn't care a fig for other people ... and every so often they'd slip off to Lagos or Jamestown and live it up. If I hadn't gone away on my own for a couple of months last year I'd have gone stark mad."

Vanessa nodded slowly. "Yes, I've heard it's pretty awful in the rains." She didn't know what to add to that, because she was afraid some of Merle's words had emerged without her volition. That oblique allusion to what Paul wanted and expected of his wife, for instance. Vanessa smiled. "We've wandered from the point, haven't we? There couldn't be any harm in improving the menu, but I can't do it on my own in your house."

"Fudge," said Merle wearily. "Go right ahead. If my adoring husband were here I might beg you to let me take the credit for any improvements, but as he's not you can have a free hand without provisos. I wish you luck with Ngomo. You'll need it."

The truth of that final remark Vanessa learned almost at once. Ngomo was a clod of the worst kind, a wilful one. For a year he had led a lazy, almost luxurious life between Owen Shepton's kitchen and his own mud hut in the African township. He had helped himself to food for his young wife and baby, had stolen chickens from his neighbours and charged the Boss for them and received all the tobacco he needed

from the store-owner as a commission on the orders he brought. Being thick-headed, Ngomo wasn't quite clever enough to cover all his frauds successfully. One morning, the delivery boy from the store brought his ration of tobacco while Vanessa was in the kitchen, and on another occasion Vanessa found tins of jam and fruit hidden under some kindling outside the back door, ready to be carried away after dark. There was nothing she could do, except show him she had found him out which, candidly, she was afraid to do. A strange untrained boy in the kitchen might be even more of a headache. So she silently battled on with Ngomo.

Vanessa made her first batch of cakes one morning, while Ngomo was cleaning the rooms. The queen cakes and coconut fancies turned out well, and she was looking for a tin which could be scored to take them, when Ngomo came to the kitchen door and mumbled something, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. Vanessa covered the cakes with a clean teacloth and went through to the living-room.

Claud Hewson was there, looking thin and rueful. His right arm was in a plaster cast from the elbow to the middle joints of his fingers, and that drooping look of his was more pronounced, as if the weight of the cast were almost more than he could bear.

"Good heavens," she said. "So it was more than a wrench, after all? You must have broken something."

"Only a small bone in the wrist. I've got to wear this damned thing for three weeks, and after only three days, it's killing me."

"I can see your fingers are swollen," she said, concerned. "Did the doctor tell you what to do about that?"

"He's busy, and I haven't asked him. I don't think the cast is too tight; it's just the heat in my arm. When I cool off at night it's much more comfortable." He shrugged dejectedly. "I hope you won't mind my

coming here to ask a favour. The mail goes out tomorrow and my mother will worry herself silly if there's no letter for her. Would you write to her for me?"

"Yes, of course. Right away?"

"This evening will do." He turned towards the door, looking away from her. "I do hope you don't mind. There's no one else I'd care to ask. If you hadn't been here I'd have got someone to type an envelope and tried to manage a line or two with my left hand."

"And worried your mother in a different way. Are you working as usual?"

"More or less. I can drive all right."

"No time for a cup of coffee? I've just baked my first cakes in Bolambo and I'd like to try them out on you."

He smiled, a faint flush in his cheeks. "I'd like it very much, but ..." He looked about him with shy, light blue eyes. "Is Mr. Shepton here?"

"He's over at the office, but if he were here he wouldn't mind my having a guest for morning coffee. Come into the kitchen and I'll cool those fingers for you while the coffee percolates. Don't be an idiot," as he seemed about to back away. "I want to help."

For quite a long moment he stood there, without moving. He said, at last, "Thanks. I'd like some coffee."

"Come on, then."

When the percolator was bubbling, Vanessa filled a small bowl with water and ice chips and set it near the edge of the kitchen table. "Sit down and put your fingers in it," she said. "We shan't be disturbed."

Except for the boy, I'm the only one who comes to the kitchen. There, does that feel good?"

"It feels wonderful." He was supporting the cast with his other hand, and looked at her with that half-embarrassed admiration she found touching. "When you wear a thing like this you feel awkward and horribly ugly. I've been trying to keep out of the way of you and Mrs. Charnley, but there was the letter home. My mother's the only one I care about in England; I wouldn't want her fretting about me."

Vanessa got out cups and a bowl of soft sugar. "When did you last see her?"

"About fifteen months ago, just before I left England. She's married again - quite a decent chap, but I don't live with them over there. I don't really have a home in England any more."

"Neither do I," she told him. "When I go back I shall have to go into a boarding house until I can find an inexpensive flat. Are you on contract out here?"

"Yes, for three years. After that I get four months' paid leave and the option of renewing. I also get three weeks' local leave every year, which I have to take whether I want it or not. I took mine a couple of months ago and went off collecting fungi."

"Mushrooms?"

He shook his head, smiling. "Not many of that kind. As it's so hot and damp here, there are plenty of tree fungi, some of them most weird. You can't really collect them because they deteriorate so fast, but I did send a crate of them over to England by air."

"What do they do with them?"



"Investigate them at the university research labs. I only sent species I hadn't seen mentioned in any of my books. You'd be surprised how many plants and so on there are that are still unspecified. These fungi, for instance ..."

He spoke quietly and with confidence about things which obviously meant a great deal to him.

"If you're interested," he said as he accepted his coffee, "I'll show you some colour slides I've taken in the forest. I'm sure I could borrow the company's projector for one evening."

"That would be lovely. Have you ever shown them here?"

He gave an embarrassed shake of the head and lowered his glance. "The other men would be bored; they can see it all for themselves, any time. They probably think that botany is a nutty sort of hobby, anyway. I'm glad you don't."

"You make me wish I knew more about it. Do try one of the coconut cakes."

Claude complimented her on them, earnestly, and told her that his boy wasn't much of a cook, either. Various curries and shepherd's pie made from tinned beef, were his only accomplishments, though occasionally, by mistake, he made a good job of ham and eggs for breakfast. After about twenty minutes Claud dried the cold tips of his fingers and said he must go.

"We could have written that letter, couldn't we?" he said. "But I'm glad we didn't - it means I shall see you again later. What time shall we say? I shall be free at five-fifteen."

Vanessa thought for a moment. "I'll come along to your house at five-thirty. It won't take long."

As he said goodbye he gave her one of those hesitant smiles, and after he was gone she remembered it and thought it was rather sweet. No iron in Claud's character, but that made him more likeable than the really strong type. Yes, that was it; you could *like* a man of Claud's kind, and such men, who inspired a genuine liking without something else creeping in, were few and far between.

What a blessing it was, she decided in her innocence, that she had had the experience with Keith Fordham. It was not only helping her to see all men much more clearly, but it had left her free of that vague excitement which seemed to creep into any relationship between a man and a girl. At least, she ... she hoped it had.

When Merle came in to lunch she looked taut and imperious. She flung her wide-brimmed hat on to a chair and poured a whisky and soda, picked up an old newspaper and threw it down again. Then she pushed back the damp black curls which had clung to her forehead and loosened the top button of her white shirtwaister, before taking a gulp of her drink.

"Had a tiring time?" asked Vanessa.

"It's not the work - there's nothing to it." She swung about and faced Vanessa. "I've decided I'm not going to wait till the rains before I go away. Will you stay with Owen while I take a break? He says he can manage the accounts without me."

"Of course I'll stay, but where will you go?"

"I'll get a coaster that's making for Tangier. I know some people there."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do? What about Paul?"

Merle's eyes blazed suddenly . "How many times have you said that to me - what about Paul? Why should you bother about him? I can assure you that I don't. He's spoiled my life and what does he care? I could have come out here with Owen, had good times and no worries. I'd probably have made an exciting marriage with Nick, but instead of that I'm tied to an unfeeling prig who thinks he can wear me down. Well, he can't! I'm going away to think things out. Owen has offered to pay for my divorce...'

"Not divorce, Merle! That's not the answer, I'm sure. You have to see Paul and talk things over with him."

"How can I do that if he won't come back? I'm not going after him, and I've no intention of waiting here till he deigns to return of his own accord. I've had enough!"

She tossed the dark hair, finished her drink and marched through to the bedroom. Vanessa, a little cold with shock, was nevertheless relieved that Merle had said nothing about distrusting Paul, and at the same time she wondered what it was that had sparked her off this morning.

Vanessa was speculating as to whether her own visit to West Africa had influenced the situation in any way, when Uncle Owen came into the house. He looked hot, but walked as erectly as ever until he came to a halt and sank into a chair.

"A drink, Uncle Owen?" she asked him.

"Please, my dear. I've had a trying morning." He was silent till she put the filled glass into his hand. Then he asked, "Merle's here, isn't she? She walked off without me."

Casually, Vanessa answered, "She came in a few minutes ago - said she wants to go away for a break at once."

He swallowed half the drink, sat back and took an interest in the glass he held. "It's wise. You've realised, of course, that she's feeling wretched?"

"It's becoming obvious. Uncle Owen, can't you get in touch with Paul?"

"I daresay he could be found, but you have to see it Merle's way. It wasn't an ordinary quarrel, my dear. The cause of it will always remain a secret between Merle and Paul and me, but I can tell you it was a matter of extreme delicacy which had nothing to do with their marriage. As for her sudden decision to go away - that was the result of a letter received this morning from a couple of people we met in Lagos. They ran into Paul and wrote in all good faith to tell Merle he was looking very well and was happy about his holiday tour of the coastal ports between Lagos and the Cape. He boarded a coaster some days ago."

"Well, he has to do something with his time, doesn't he?" remarked Vanessa rather weakly. Privately, she was half inclined to agree that Paul was behaving abominably and deserved to be divorced. But she still could not reconcile the Paul she had known slightly in England, grave, thoughtful and rather canny, with the irresponsible man who had left his job and gone off on a tour without his young wife. She asked, "Do you think their troubles can be solved by Merle's going north while Paul goes south?"

"No, I'm afraid neither distance nor time can solve them," said Uncle Owen with a sigh. He drained his glass and began to refill it. "We have to face the truth - they are incompatibles in outlook and temperament. Merle's light-hearted and easy-going; Paul is narrow and he has an uncertain temper. The marriage was a fantastic error."

He took down the second drink even more quickly than the first, looked hotter and redder as he dragged himself to his feet. But he

managed the usual affectionate smile as he left Vanessa and went to his room.

She set the table for lunch, thought that perhaps it was just as well that she hadn't had time to try a new type of salad; the other two would have no more appetite than she had herself. They came in late, Merle looking pale and petulant while her father endeavoured to appear his benign self; but the expansive, slightly swashbuckling air had gone. There were one or two bursts of idle conversation while the dishes were handed about but hardly touched, but the meal ended in silence. Owen Shepton went to take his rest, Ngomo cleared the table and Merle asked, offhandedly, if Vanessa would be a sport and iron some of her things this afternoon. She intended to get away to the coast early tomorrow morning.

So, after a brief siesta, Vanessa spent a couple of grilling hours over the ironing board in the kitchen. Then she had a cup of tea, felt limper than ever and took a shower. In a soft green accordion-pleated dress she was renewed, and then it was five-thirty, and time to slip along to Claud Hewson's house.

Claud had apparently prepared for her visit. He wore trim natural-coloured slacks and shirt, and had assembled bottles, siphon, glasses and a jug of ice cubes on the limba wood table.

She accepted iced orange with a dash of gin. "And now let's get down to business. Have you a writing pad?"

He produced one and she set about her task. It was dusk, and he switched on a table lamp and placed it close to her. "Just mention that I've asked you to write because I've injured my wrist - nothing serious. Tell her many thanks for the box of gramophone records - none were broken - and say I'm sorry she lost Trudi." With a smile he elaborated, for. Vanessa, "Trudi was a Viennese home-help and a mixed blessing. A wonderful cook, but terribly keen on telling her

history to my mother's guests. She's married a cockney who has a little business of his own."

There in the small living-room, with the yellow glow of the lamp between them and their eyes smiling across at each other between the sentences, they created a picture of appealing intimacy. With both arms on the table and leaning forward, Claud looked entirely happy and absorbed.

"I think that's the lot," he said. "My mother will be awfully grateful - nearly as grateful as I am myself."

She addressed an envelope as he directed. "Do you ever think much about England and wish you were back there?" she asked.

"No, to both questions. I'm much more occupied here than I was in England, and there's more scope. No one can settle here, of course, but if you can stand it it's a great place to spend a few years. Do you...do you think you'll stay out a whole year?"

Vanessa ignored his slightly halting tone and faint flush. "I hope so," she answered cheerfully. "In years to come I want to be able to brag about the time I spent in West Africa, and for that I'll need at least a year to back me up! I'm still hoping to work."

"If you did work, I don't think you could stick the climate."

"I'd have a good try." She began to fold the letter, then straightened it out again. "Why don't you put a couple of words on the end of this, left-handed? Your mother might like that."

"I did attempt a few notes with my left hand this afternoon, but it wasn't a success."

"You might manage it if I held the paper for you. Come on, let's try." She came round the table and stood beside him, arranged the sheet of paper and held it down, put the pen into his left hand. "Write, 'Left hand, love, Claud.' "

Grinning, he made a creditable attempt. He had just signed his name in a ludicrous squiggle which sent Vanessa into a peal of laughter when the door opened and Nick came in.

It was as though a shaft of frigid air had cut across the room. The laughter died abruptly, the pen clattered on to the plaster cast and rolled across the table; and Vanessa became aware that she was standing very close to Claud with her fingers on his shoulder as he sat at the table.

"Hi," said Nick, in dispassionate tones. "Mind if I come in?"

Seeing that he was already in the question was superfluous, but Claud hurriedly got to his feet and said, "Please do. Like a drink, Nick?"

Nick, of course, had already taken stock of bottles and glasses. "No, thanks, I came to offer you the use of my clerk - didn't know you'd acquired an amanuensis."

Claud stammered, "I ... I only asked Vanessa to write a note to my mother, so that it can go out with the mail tomorrow. I would certainly like to borrow your clerk, Nick, whenever he's free."

"I'll send him over tonight." He was watching Vanessa slip the letter into its envelope. "I'll take that and put it with my mail, if you like."

Claud moved clumsily, opened the drawer of a small writing table and found a stamp, which he handed to Vanessa. His thin face was bright red, his blue eyes looked dark and harassed, but there was a faintly defiant set to his mouth as he said to Vanessa.

"Thank you very much for all you've done. I did intend asking you to stay and have some supper with me. We could send a message to Mr. Shepton."

"Tut-tut," murmured Nick. "We can't have you leading the girl astray, young Claud. In any case, Vanessa has to dine at home tonight because Mrs. Charnley is going away tomorrow morning."

"Oh," said Claud, flushing more furiously than ever. "Oh, well ... perhaps another time, Vanessa. Don't forget that we do have a date for putting on those slides I told you about."

"I won't forget," she said gently. "It was sweet of you to invite me for supper, but I do have to get back. If there's anything else I can do for you while your arm is out of commission, just let me know."

"I'll see you to the house," said Nick offhandedly. "So long, Claud."

For a moment Vanessa was tempted to assert herself. Then she saw that Claud was apprehensive; the poor thing had obviously never handled a scene in his life and it would be refined cruelty to push him into a position in which he might be compelled to deal with Nick Brandis. She had better go out with Nick and keep quiet.

So she said, "Goodnight, Claud," and moved out into the darkness.

On the path Nick came beside her and took her elbow in a firm, impersonal grip. "Not so fast. They're not missing you at home yet, and I want to speak to you."

"Yes?"

"Yes," he said flatly. "Maybe you'd like to be assured at once that I shan't attempt to kiss you."

"It hadn't occurred to me that you might."



"Oh, yes, it had," he said mockingly. "Some time, maybe, we'll analyse our physical chemistry - yours and mine; I predict our deductions will be interesting." They' were slowing outside Dr. Ziegen's house, which was in darkness. "Take your time. I'm sure you're bursting to know what I want to talk to you about."

She halted with him. "I'm not abnormal in any way; I wish you'd realise that, and remember it. It seems that to some people things happen rather quickly in Africa, but they don't happen like that with me. Perhaps I'm only just coming round from the rather bad time I had before leaving England, or it could be that I'm more phlegmatic than most girls ..."

"You're not." He paused. "Do you still think about that ex-fiancé?"

"No."

"Then you two couldn't have been very close." He stood looking down at her in the early darkness. "I've purposely never mentioned your father. Still miss him?"

"Not so much, out here; I suppose it's because I couldn't possibly imagine him in these surroundings."

"Was he typically English countryside?"

She nodded, looking away reminiscently at the dense blackness of the bush which edged the far side of the track. "He always wore old tweeds, even when he was teaching. He owned a collection of disreputable pipes, and was always leaving one of them on the bus that brought him home from school. The conductor would save it and give it to him next day. He was the most contented man imaginable, and he loved our old house in spite of its leaks and draughts."

"What sort of house was it?"

"It was big - much too big for us - and it stood in the middle of three acres of fruit trees and vegetable gardens. My father rented the place soon after he married; I was born there. You see, my mother wanted a large family ..." She stopped, and wound up coolly, "It's a very commonplace story, isn't it?"

"Things that happen to individuals aren't commonplace. To at least one person they're the most important events in the world. Did you hate leaving that house?"

"Not so much as I thought I would." She added, on a brittle note, "There are children in the house now, three of them. I'm glad."

"Poor little Vanessa," he said quietly. "That dogged courage must be the hell of a nuisance sometimes. I'll bet you've hardly cried since you lost your father."

She was pretty near to it now, but he couldn't know that. Why was it, she wondered vexedly, that sympathy from the sarcastic, ruthless kind was more demoralizing than from anyone else? Perhaps because it was out of character and apt to catch one unawares.

She lifted her head to show that she was tearless. "I'm past it now, anyway. Why are you being gentle, all of a sudden?"

His shoulders lifted and he spoke with a smile. "Maybe because you and Claud looked like a couple of babes in the wood. And then maybe not. When he got belligerent just now and asked you to stay for supper I thought he looked astonishingly male. But deep down he's too soft for you, my child. If you two went romantic together you'd make a gooey muddle of it."

In spite of herself, Vanessa laughed briefly. "That sort of remark is more your style. You still haven't told me what you wanted to speak to me about."

"All right, let's get to it," he said, with a cynical inflection. "Been over to the township lately?"

"No nearer than the market."

"Then you haven't seen our creche shelter. It's up, you know."

She looked at him, smiling incredulously. "Really? Then ... then you did mean it? I've been thinking that perhaps ... well..."

"That a kiss on the bridge made our bargain null and void?" Eyes narrowed, he queried, "Do you think my experiment was that important?"

"I thought," she retorted, "that you had probably decided that after such a privilege I'd have a swollen head, and must now be ignored."

"Ouch," he said agreeably. "One of these days you must give me the sweet treatment you give Hewson. I guess I'd buckle under the shock."

"Well, the shelter is up," she reminded him. "How shall we furnish it?"

"I know nothing about babies and toddlers. What will you need?"

"Some cots and small chairs, and there should really be a safely-screened corner where we can keep a small paraffin stove for heating milk and soups. I take it we'll have to keep the babies all day?"

He nodded. "It has to be in operation from sunrise to sundown, so that mothers can do their stint at the time they find most convenient. They're paid for what they plant, or by the hour if they're hoeing, so they need work for only a couple of hours or go on all day, if they wish."

"That's fine. We'll soon get organised."

"Just remember one thing," he said a little sharply. "You're simply the supervisor, and you don't put in more than four or five hours a day. Your salary will probably be about eighty a month ..."

"Good heavens, I'll be rich!"

He smiled caustically. "Don't get too merry about it. If the rains lay you out you may wish you'd never heard of Bolambo."

"Not very encouraging, are you? Or are you trying to put me on my mettle?"

"I'm being realistic, and you'd better be too." He looked up at the dark sky peppered with stars. "I've a hunch the rains will start early this year. If you'd been here longer you'd feel it yourself. The change doesn't affect a community of men very much, but it gets at a woman's nerves. That's probably why Merle's already finding life unbearable."

She said carefully, "So you know about her plans. Did she tell you she heard news about Paul this morning?"

"Yes, she told me. It seems to have settled things; according to Merle they've parted for good."

Still without much expression she queried, "And what's your opinion about that?"

"I don't really have one," he said with a shrug. "In the damp heat a marriage will sometimes get softened up and melt away. That didn't happen to Merle's; they parted angrily because some facts were discovered that were supposed to stay hidden. You know now as much about it as I do."

"I wish I knew more."

"I'm not all that curious, but I'm sorry for Merle. She could make a great success of a grand passion, but marriage is too demanding. However, no doubt she'll get by."

"Helped by Nick Brandis?" she mentioned quietly.

His eyes were small lights in the darkness; a cynical smile sounded in his tones. "Why not? I've told you before that I like Merle very much."

"And you don't believe in marriage, anyway."

He laughed. "I believe in it for you, Vanessa. I could actually describe the guy who'd help you to create the cosy little nook and precious family circle. He wouldn't be anything like that ex-fiance of yours, or Claud Hewson. He'd be manly and protective, quite unsophisticated and terribly proud of you and his children."

"Sounds marvellous," she answered calmly. "I'd probably adore him."

"Oh, sure. You'd be utterly devoted," was his mocking rejoinder. "Of course, you'd miss all the heights in life and some of the depths. Your little shoes would stay firmly planted and you'd grow smug, though secretly you'd envy women who were more adventurous in love."

"I doubt that. Adventures of that kind might be exhausting." She waved towards Owen Shepton's house. "Afraid I'll have to go in now."

"You're being evasive, because you're half frightened," he said softly. "That was why you became engaged in England - the man was willing to be friendly without asking too much of you. And that's why

you cotton to a chap like Claud - someone who's too damned grateful to be noticed to try anything you might find distasteful."

"How clever of you," she said coolly. "Now that you've written me off we may as well move on."

"I haven't written you off, little one. That would be confessing a failure."

She looked at him, startled. "A failure? Are you implying ..."

"Leave it," he said paternally. "A few minutes ago you told me that things don't happen quickly to you. Seems you're a lot different from any other white woman in the tropics. All right, we'll wait and watch." There was a devilish grin on his lips as he added, "I'll make a bet with you - that in three months' time whatever you felt for that chap in England will look a trifle watery compared with what you've felt here in Africa."

Breathing rather faster than usual, she retorted, "You're forgetting that manly and protective husband you provided me with a moment ago!"

"That was later, in England," he jeered softly. "This is the torrid one."

There was a short pulsing silence. Then, with great self-control, Vanessa turned to walk up towards the house. He accompanied her at a lazy stride, was still smiling enigmatically as she turned, in the light from the living-room window, to wish him goodnight.

"You can have a look at the structure tomorrow," he said. "I'll probably drive Merle down to the coast and see her on to a ship, but I should be back by noon." He paused. "I'd invite you along with us, but I'm expecting to pick up some people who are landing from Lagos and the car will be too full for comfort on the return journey."

"People from Lagos?" she echoed, and unaccountably that fast beat of her heart grew heavier. "They're coming to stay here?"

"One of them is a technician who's been away on leave, and the other two are brother and sister - a couple I know rather well. At least I know the man and I've heard about the sister. They'll stay a few days."

"Is... is she the one you were going to contact to get my uniform?"

"No, honey." There was a suggestion of malice in his level tones. "That one is married. This girl isn't." He drew away "Well, so long. Don't let anything keep you awake at night!"

He was gone, a tall, strong-shouldered man who moved with long indolent strides into the darkness. Vanessa mounted the steps, opened the wire screen and entered the living-room. She was about to go straight through to the bedroom when she became aware of raised voices, Merle's and her father's. Uncle Owen sounded more sorrowful than angry, but Merle was in a first-class tantrum. There was a rasp in her tones so that the words came rough and slurred and impossible to separate.

Then, very suddenly, she spoke loudly and distinctly. "All right, I did persuade you to get Vanessa out here so that I could leave you for a few months! We were close friends for years, but in a friendship between girls there's often one who's strong and selfish and one who clings; well, I'm not the clinging type, so I must be the other. Vanessa is the sort of daughter you really needed out here. She'd have watched your health... and other things. All I've done is to help you on the path to ruin. You may as well say it!"

Uncle Owen's voice was placating and tired, the words were lost. And then it was Merle again:

"You're right - I don't have any feeling for anyone - not very much even for you, any more. If I'd been unmarried I could have had a good time with Nick. As things are, I have to go to Tangier for a spot of excitement, and I shan't come back till I'm tired of it. If Paul turns up, you can arrange the separation. I don't want a lot of letters, or ... or anything else."

Further murmurs from Uncle Owen.

Then the reply: "I never have cared what Vanessa might think, so why should I start doing so now?" Merle's tones lowered slightly, and her syllables were more precise. "I may have been only a schoolgirl when we first went to live with the Lanes, but I was no fool and I vividly remember why we did it. You'd stretched your credit so far that we'd have been sunk altogether, if you hadn't grasped at the chance to live cheaply, with Vanessa running the place instead of a housekeeper. All that stuff about missing Mother...'

"I did miss her." Now there was a sharpness in Owen Shepton's tones which etched his words clearly. "And whether you believe it or not, I was fond of Richard Lane."

"And of Vanessa!"

"I really don't understand," said Uncle Owen slowly, "how you can have kept Vanessa's trust in you all these years. During the last year it's never bothered you that she was there alone in Gloucester, looking after her father and trying to make more and more money from the garden. I had to remind you to send her a birthday card, beg you to answer her letters ..."

Vanessa did not linger to hear more. Swiftly, she went outside into the veranda and leaned back against the sun-warmed stucco of the wall. She felt sick and muzzy and full of little pains, as though each nerve had touched a needle-point. She closed her eyes, felt something



run across the top of her head and realised, detachedly, that it must have been a lizard. At any other time the thought of being touched by one of those grotesque little creatures with blue heads would have wrung a cry from her. Now she hadn't a peep left in her; only a sense of vast humiliation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

IT was quiet in the house next morning. Ngomo had given the rooms the usual lick and a promise and had gone out for his routine profitable recreation at the market, and Uncle Owen was across at the offices. Vanessa washed a few things of Merle's, stripped the bed and pushed it close to the wall, for use as a divan. The room seemed to gain a few feet in size and the rearrangement had the added benefit of expelling a little of Merle. Vanessa found she could breathe better.

Strange, how one could get through quite a nightmarish period, so long as the end of it was in sight. She had dined with Merle and Uncle Owen, had helped afterwards with the packing and eventually gone to sleep only a yard away from the girl who had cold-bloodedly admitting to using her over the years. She had risen at seven-thirty, brought coffee and toast to the bedroom, and an hour later gone out to watch the departure.

Merle had got into the car beside Nick, had leaned out to say, "It's good to know that you'll be taking care of Owen, darling. I'd rather have had you with me, but it's a relief to know he'll have you near. Perhaps if he can spare you when the rains begin you can come up to stay with me in Tangier."

"Perhaps," was Vanessa's bare reply.

"I'll write to you, Van, and of course I shall want to hear how you're getting along. Do watch your health, both of you." She had smiled and lifted a hand; and Merle was gone.

It was soothing to be alone in the house, to be at liberty to wander where she liked, to find a few brazen African marigolds at the edge of the clearing and place them in a vase on the dining table, to look about the living-room and note that Merle's careless presence, usually revealed by a clutter of oddments, was conspicuously absent. Not so

soothing, though, to remember the sentiments she had overheard last night, the look in Merle's eyes this morning; a patronising contempt overlaid by a false affection. For the first time she had known that look for what it was, and the pain of knowing had probed right through to her heart.

Just after eleven, Uncle Owen came across for a cup of tea which, inevitably, he laced with whisky. As he explained himself, while topping up the cup: "When you're really past it, as I am, you have to take a stimulant to get you through the warm hours. Even if I did nothing at all I'd need a boost."

"Won't you let me help you over at the office, Uncle Owen?"

"No, my dear. There's not much doing, you know. It's just that I like to keep the financial side of the business to myself. Our accountant manages the accounts very well. But the private ledgers remain in my hands." He smiled the rather appealing smile which had always warmed her heart. "I need work only one day a week, but I like to be in the swim, and watch the mail and read up the reports. That's my job, really, as resident director."

"But can't I do for you what Merle did?"

"It isn't necessary, Vanessa. Merle has always poked into my business - she did it in England, if you remember. Don't tell her this," with a gentle wink, "but she's often been in the way, and I shall enjoy having the office to myself, so that I can snooze occasionally."

At eleven-thirty he put on the lined panama and went out, a trim soldierly figure that defined the sun. Vanessa could understand how he felt; too played out to do very much but keen to keep a finger on the pulse of the whole Bolambo development. Perhaps, in various ways, she might be able to make things easier for him.

Ngomo turned up bearing a flat basket loaded with tired-looking vegetables, a chicken wrapped in newspaper and three cans of milk. Vanessa sorted the vegetables, told him which to prepare for a luncheon salad and made fruit jellies which could be chilled for dinner. She was untying the frilly plastic apron when there came a shout from the front of the house.

"Anybody in?"

Unconsciously, she squared her shoulders and shook back a brown curl before going to the living-room. Nick was taking a couple of letters from his pocket.

"Yours," he said. "I brought all the mail back with me."

"Thanks." She slipped them into the wide hip pocket of her flowery print. "Did everything go smoothly?"

"Sure - why not?"

"Merle hadn't booked her passage."

"The freighters have room for eight or ten passengers and they're seldom full up. Her passport and visas are still valid."

"Did she seem happy to be going?"

His brow lifted and he gave a sidelong glance at the lapel of his linen jacket. "The faint smear is lipstick, and there were a few tears, but they've dried. Emotional scenes are the breath of life to Merle, and I certainly wasn't going to rob her of that one."

"I'm sure you enjoyed it."

His mouth took the mocking slant. "Bitter-sweet, you know, I'll have to be brave for her sake. How will you like being alone with Owen?"

"Fine. We've always been happy together."

He pushed his hands into his pockets and stood back, regarding her.

"The mysteries round this place don't bother you much, do they?"

"They don't seem very important."

"They're important enough to come between your best friend and her husband."

"I don't think so. Feeling so little for each other, they were bound to part on some pretext; the mystery is incidental, a peg to hang things on."

"You could be right, but I don't think you are. It's right for them to separate, anyway." And he dismissed the subject with a shrug.

"Ready to look at our shelter? You'd better bring a hat."

She got the wide-brimmed cream straw and went out with him. They crossed the sun-baked red earth towards the offices, skirted the buildings and entered the shade of the market place, where women in bright cotton frocks of Victorian design and voluminous headcloths were squatting besides heaps of yams and cassava root, pounded corn, fibrous vegetables, coconuts and rice. The conglomeration of smells, in the still heat, was overpowering.

The huge palm-thatch on poles, which was set just above the market and partly screened from the township by wild bananas and lophiras, came as a surprise to Vanessa. The log supports were about four feet apart all round, and the thatch was a foot thick and left raw at the edges because, Nick explained, it would they drain better in the rains. Inside the timber that framed and supported the roof was as solid as the poles. It looked built to last.

But Nick said, "It will need watching and repairing between rains, but should put in good service for a year or two. I'm having lengths of matting made in the village. It will be fastened to the poles to create a wall about four feet high. Matting is best for the floor, too. We'll level the earth, get it hard and cover it. Any suggestions?"

"Not at this stage. Is there anything I can do here?"

"We'll be ready for occupation in three or four days. I'm expecting a crate of stuff from Lagos any day now, and when it comes you can wade in. By the way," slanting her one of his glances, "you were looking a bit pale and pulled-in when I left with Merle this morning. You've a better colour now, but I ought to warn you that at the first sign of wilting, you're out of a job."

"Thanks," she said evenly. "I'll remember that."

"And don't decide that you can go to Owen Shepton about anything behind my back. This happens to be my project."

"I'll remember that too, Mr. Brandis."

He grinned coolly. "You've decided to remain unaffected by anything I may say or do, haven't you? You've weighed me up as a nasty, domineering brute who couldn't genuinely love anyone if he tried. I'm sorry."

"You're not sorry at all. You wouldn't have taken such pains to build up the character unless it was very important to you that people should think of you that way. The trouble is," she ended thoughtfully, "you may have it backfire on you, some time."

"And how do you suppose I'd handle that?" he asked, with tantalising nonchalance.

"I don't know," she replied, as agreeably, "but if it does happen I hope you'll be knocked cold. If I'm still here I shall be the first to say you've asked for it."

He laughed. "You're astringent and refreshing, Brownie. Ever thought about how one reacts towards other people? The thousand facets of the personality? To Owen, you're the dear considerate daughter he'd like Merle to be. To Claud Hewson you probably represent all that's noble and beautiful. To that fiance you had in England ... well, no doubt he first admired you because you were self-sacrificing towards your father and he thought it a good omen in a prospective bride; later on, he discovered you had a little more about you and realised he wasn't equipped to deal with a woman of spirit. And to the other men here you're something different in each case - you're Vanessa Lane reacting to each person."

"It's true of everyone - except you, perhaps. You have only three changes of personality, and I don't have to tell you what they are!"

"I like you, big green eyes and all," he said tolerantly. "But you won't mind if I repeat myself, will you? You still need that affair I prescribed, it would soften those edges the other chap left behind. You know," his eyes half closed in the dimness of the shelter and his voice softly taunting, "a rip-roaring love affair might make you really beautiful. You have the bone structure for it."

"Hooey," she said crossly, and walked out into the meagre shade of the bananas.

"Please yourself," he said indifferently as he joined her. "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks, I have to go back now. It was good of you to show me round."

"Think nothing of it. I'll go with you across the market or you may be persuaded to acquire a few things you don't want. We supply the store from the large shed over there, so if you should want something that doesn't seem to be available, just tell the storeman you'd like to look round, and he'll go with you and take your order."

"Thank you."

They were passing the offices, and Owen Shepton came out, wiping his forehead before reading his panama. "So you're back, Nick?" he said a little wearily. "Merle get away all right?"

"Sure. She said I was to repeat that you're not to worry about her. She'll stay with the Benton-Smiths as long as they'll keep her, and move on to the Hotel Touraine."

"Did you bring Sanders? I haven't seen him about."

"He'll be unpacking - seems to have had a good holiday."

"And what about those friends of yours - Miss Grieves and her brother?"

Nick's tones deepened as he smiled slightly. "They're here, too. My place is going to be a bit crowded, but it's only for a week or so. I'd like you and Vanessa to come over for dinner tonight, to meet them."

"Count me out, if you don't mind," murmured Uncle Owen on a sigh. "I feel whacked. If Vanessa doesn't object, I'll go to bed after lunch and stay there for the rest of the day."

"You said we'd discuss the sale of the mahogany this afternoon."

Owen Shepton waved a hand vaguely, and began to move away. "It will have to wait, Nick. I'm not at all sure about it, and I'd sooner be clear in my mind before we come to a decision."



As Vanessa turned to accompany the older man, she took a quick look at Nick. His expression was both cynical and sceptical; obviously, he thought that Owen's tiredness was a myth created to gain time. She slanted a dark look at the lean arrogant face, was disconcerted when he gave her a grey unsmiling stare in return. He lifted a hand and went into the offices, and after a momentary pause Vanessa accompanied Uncle Owen up to the house.

It was with some reluctance that Vanessa dressed for dinner with Nick Brandis and his friends. The other men would be there, she supposed, so she would have Claud to fall back upon, and as Uncle Owen had kept his word and remained in bed, she would otherwise have been lonely, and perhaps driven to thinking too deeply about Merle. Still, the thought of going to Nick's for dinner was strangely unsettling and she had to admit that he himself was at the root of her disquiet. It wasn't that she felt anything at all for him, she told herself firmly. The trouble was, no one could possibly come closely into contact with Nick Brandis without being altered in some way. To her own dismay, Vanessa felt it actually happening to herself.

She wore off-white, with a deep amber necklace to set off the low square neck. During the afternoon she had washed her hair and now it was a cloudy mid-brown with red lights among the soft waves. For some reason, as she used a lipstick, she recalled Nick's little jeers; she wished she knew what he was thinking when he advised her to have an affair. There was always that glint in his eyes, and yet he never quite implied that he was ready and willing. Oh, bother the man. All he did was to use her as a butt, for his private enjoyment!

Determinedly, she collected Uncle Owen's tray from the kitchen and took it to his room. He was awake and looked a little pathetic as he lay there resting; he was right - you had to be young and vigorous to take the tropics in your stride.

"I've told Ngomo to come for the tray in half an hour," she said softly. "Is there anything else you'd like?"

"No, thank you, my dear." He smiled. "You're a restful person, Vanessa. It's so good to have you here."

"It's wonderful to be here. You won't mind being alone for the evening?"

"It's what I need. There's one good thing about this place - when it's quiet, it's really quiet."

She made some rejoinder and left him. She was hardly back in the living-room when Nick came in and gave her a negligent, "Hi there. Ready?"

"I was just coming," she said. "You didn't have to call for me."

"Part of the service, honey." He looked at her, comprehensively. "You're very pretty tonight. The amber is cunning - makes your eyes quite startling." He sniffed. "You smell good, too. Luckily, we've no romantic gardens. With you about, a chap could easily get tangled up in moonlight that smelled of frangipani."

She said lightly, "Any other chap, but not you. Is there a moon, by the way?"

"Come and see."

They went outside and he pulled the door shut before letting the screen door fall to. He waved a hand, and she saw a white brilliance through the leaves.

"A crescent moon," he said. "A silver boat on a dark sea. Polished leaves, and fuzzy palm tops spectacularly black against a muted radiance."

' 'You're almost a poet; don't make some devastating comment and spoil it. It does smell lovely out here - sort of sweet and heady."

"The mahogany trees, chiefly. There are a few over there in the bush, but our really big ones are several miles from here. I'll take you to see them some time; they're worth a packet."

She laughed to herself. With Nick, you were bound to get back to business with a bump. They walked from the house, past the next one, where Dr. Ziegen was visible, eating his supper while he browsed in a book of some kind, past a tangled hedge and on to Nick's bungalow which, externally, was no different from the others.

There was not much difference inside, either. The only item of character was a capacious and very shabby armchair, and that wasn't open for inspection till a slim man of a little over average height drew himself up from it and bowed. He was about thirty, dressed, like Nick, in tropical cream linen, but so different physically that Vanessa involuntarily found herself noting his points. An indulgent mouth, a smooth Latin nose, brown eyes and thick brows as dark as the sleek hair which was immediately brushed and glossy.

"Donn Grieves," Nick said. "This is Vanessa Lane, Donn. She hasn't been here long, so treat her gently."

"Hallo, Vanessa," said the man, showing good teeth. "You're a most pleasant surprise. I hadn't the faintest idea there was a girl going spare in Bolambo."

"There isn't," she replied amicably. "I understand you live in Lagos?"

"Most of the time," he nodded. "I'm an agent for various companies, and it's through me that you get your materials and foods, cigarettes and liquor."

"He never sees any of it," Nick put in, as he poured drinks. "All Donn does is write a few letters of instructions and sit back soaking whisky while he rakes in the commission. That's what accounts for the depraved look."

Donn shrugged good-humouredly. "Someone has to do it. Where would you development types be without us?" As an afterthought, he added, "'Would you say I looked depraved, Vanessa?"

"Not really. Let's say pleasantly dissipated."

He gave a surprised laugh. Nick handed a tall glass to Vanessa and said, with a smile, "She's like that. Even sets me back sometimes. Stick around, and you'll learn quite a bit about yourself."

No one else arrived, and the houseboy set the table which had been pushed close to the window; set it for four, Vanessa noticed. And then, just as the white-clad boy departed, Nick went to the door and called, "Lorin, come and have a drink with us. I want you to meet Vanessa."

There was a small flurry of movement in the corridor, and she came in. A girl so utterly unlike her brother that Vanessa stared and felt her blood run cold. She was about as tall as Vanessa, but there was rather more of her. She was soft and rounded, had striking golden-yellow hair which reached her shoulders, pink cheeks and sparkling blue eyes. She wore a full green silk skirt with slashed pockets and a tiny white lace blouse over winsome curves. Lorin Grieves looked about twenty, was probably nearer twenty-four, and gave an impression of ripe sweetness and delicious flavour. And she had a look of breathlessness and expectancy that made Vanessa, at twenty-one, feel quite old and wise.

"How do you do," said Lorin, in a light round voice that matched her figure. "Nick told us about you. I think you're awfully brave to come

to Bolambo. I wouldn't have dared to come to West Africa if Donn hadn't been here."

"I do have a sort of uncle here," Vanessa answered. It was odd, but the other girl left her a little witless; that avid, excited brightness of the eyes seemed to belong to neon lights and crowded streets.

"I've been cooking," Lorin explained. "We brought some fresh meat and frozen fruits and vegetables with us in the ship's fridge, so I persuaded Nick to let me get dinner for his friends tonight. But he said I'd find a dinner for four enough of a task for the first night. But we *are* going to put on a party while we're here. You see, I've trained in cookery and home-making. It was wonderful fun in England but out here I really come into my own!"

"Do you?" asked Vanessa, a little weakly. "You don't find the climate upsetting?"

"Sometimes, but then," with a very gay laugh, "I also find the English climate rather disturbing occasionally! Do you cook at all?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." For the life of her Vanessa could think of nothing to add to the bald admission.

"Do you love it? I do. I can think of nothing more thrilling than running a house and cooking just the right foods. I took flower arrangement too, and that can be a rewarding hobby out here. Wait till I bring in the centrepiece for the table!"

Vanessa glanced at Nick, expecting to find amusement in his expression and a half-wink in the grey eyes. But he didn't even return her look. He was wholly intent upon Lorin, smiling as if he were enjoying the sight of those girlish forearms and rounded cheeks, the enthusiasm which spilled from red lips and china-blue eyes. As if he

were enjoying it very much. Another wave of coldness ran through Vanessa and became concentrated round her heart.

Donn Grieves was getting a word in. "Lorin is my half- sister," he told Vanessa. "Not much alike, are we? Her mother is a platinum blonde, but mine was a sallow Cornish woman with Spanish forebears. Lorin has been with me a month."

"Staying for some time?" asked Vanessa politely.

The girl herself replied. "I hope so. I had to beg Donn by telegrams as well as letters to let me come out, but I think he quite likes having me now. Don't you, Donnie?"

He winced from the corruption of his name. "You've certainly transformed my house. I can never find a thing when I want it."

Lorin gave a rippling little laugh. "You're incorrigible, but I'll go on trying. If you'd asked me for what you want, I could tell you in a second."

He lifted a lazy shoulder. "I like to live in a mess; it suits my temperament."

"Well, Nick doesn't," she said reasoningly. "He may not be terribly tidy, but he does keep things more or less where they belong."

"I'm not Nick. By all accounts, I'm a pleasantly dissipated and fairly unscrupulous commission agent."

"Don't be naughty," she said, and turned to Nick, using the big blue eyes shyly. "I'm sure your hand is far steadier than mine. Would you carry in the bowl of flowers for me?"

He did it like a lamb, placed the bowl exactly as she indicated. And Vanessa had to admit that the girl had a flair for making the most of a

few blood-red cannas, a trailer of yellow vine and a couple of lime-green orchid buds. Fatalistically, she knew the dinner would be excellent.

It was. Hons d'ceuvres; stuffed eggs in pastry cups; succulent grilled fillet steak smothered with chopped mushrooms and served in a ring of creamy mashed potatoes, bright green peas and asparagus; and small individual sherry trifles which were decorated with chopped nuts. Nick opened red and white wines, served liqueurs with the coffee, and said it was years since he'd eaten any dinner that was half as good. A compliment which Lorin received with becoming modesty.

"I think a man should always have good food," she said. "Every girl should take a course in cooking and home management. It's only fair."

Her brother lifted his shoulders. "If you'd had to earn your living you might not be so dogmatic about it. In any case, not many men would like a dinner like tonight's every day of the week."

"Of course not. But it's important for a woman to be able to entertain on a proper scale, even in places like this. Don't you agree, Nick?"

"Sure do." He didn't seem to have his tongue in his cheek; on the contrary, he was smiling at the fair girl with charm and affection. "But your greatest asset isn't the good cooking, Lorin - it's the knack of remaining attractive while you do it."

She flushed and smiled. "Thank you. You know," looking down at her fingers as they rested on the edge of the table, "Donn told me you knew too much about women to care about the things they can do in a house. He said you're cynical, but I haven't found you so."

Nick said easily, "You don't rouse cynicism in a man, Lorin. Admiration and the protective instinct - but not cynicism."

The girl drew in her smiling mouth. She was trying to disguise the fact that his compliment made her almost deliriously happy. And yet she could have met Nick only this morning, for the first time. If love at first sight really happened, Vanessa reflected, it had dealt Lorin Grieves a shattering blow. And Nick must be aware of it; he was too seasoned for the blatant fact to pass him by.

Inevitably, at ten-thirty, Lorin produced tea and coffee and a dish of varied, appetising snippets. Of course, Nick had only given her permission to take over the kitchen for tonight, but that was all she had needed. It was still her first night, and tomorrow would be only her second day. And in spite of her too apparent eagerness to please and appear modest and desirable, she did have something.

At a quarter to eleven Vanessa said she must go. "Thank you for a lovely evening," she said conventionally, to both Nick and Lorin. "It was a splendid dinner - proved that one can be highly civilised in the wilderness."

"I can do with a stretch," said Donn Grieves. "I'll walk you home."

Vanessa said her goodnights and fell into step beside Donn. Till they had left the lights of the house behind, they said nothing. Then Donn looked up at the now moonless sky, took a breath and said,

"These jungle places always get me. I wouldn't want to live here, as Nick does, but I do like visiting these spots. Wish I could stay longer." He looked at her and asked, in a humorous tone, "What do you think of my sister?"

"She's very pretty and accomplished."



He nodded. "She'll make a darned good wife for some undeserving male. As a matter of fact, she came out here to find a husband."

"You mean it was a calculated decision?"

"Not on her part. Lorin is warm-hearted and appealing. Her mother wants to marry again and she finds Lorin a bit of a bind. Lorin had plenty of men friends in England - she's the honey-pot kind - but none of them had much money and they lived too near for each other's comfort. So the general idea was that if she came to West Africa she'd be sure to pick up someone in a good position who'd keep her well away from a newly-wed mom. Lorin told me all this when she arrived, but she also said she won't marry unless she falls in love."

"Good for Lorin," said Vanessa automatically.

He was silent for a moment before asking thoughtfully, "Did you notice anything this evening - a sort of magnetism between Nick and my sister?"

"There was something, yes."

"Oh, lord," he said soberly. "She's fool enough to fall heavily for him. The young idiot. You heard her say that I'd warned her against Nick? I did it half jokingly, but left her in no doubt about him - that he's not a marrying man."

"I shouldn't worry yet. Nick's an expert at handling such things."

"But Lorin isn't. She could take a hard crack." He gave her a jaded smile. "Life's hellish, isn't it? Take it seriously and you're done for. And yet, you know, I'd like to get married myself. Surprises you, doesn't it? You thought I was just a West Coast parasite."

"I thought nothing of the kind."

"But you must have made a snap judgement. Everyone does, as soon as they meet a new face. I made one about you. Want to hear it?"

"Not particularly," she answered, smiling faintly. "You'll probably change it."

"I don't think so." His look at her was friendly, and something more. "I'll tell you, anyway. I thought, here's a girl who's well balanced and good to look at, but rather cautious — and in the same moment it struck me forcibly that you'd be awfully good for a knockabout like me. *Too* good for me, of course, but then all nice women are too good for the men they marry."

Pleasant though he was, Donn Grieves had made so little impact upon Vanessa that she took this confession more lightly than he intended it. "You poor thing, you're in defeatist, .mood. I'm afraid in one way you're like Nick Brandis. You've become too self-sufficient, too keen on the life you've chosen, to change into the marrying kind."

"You're wrong about us. Men came to these places because they want *more* from life than those who are willing to plod through one of the usual careers at home. Not less, mind you! We want all they have - including a wife - and something extra. Even Nick will probably shove his neck in the noose one day."

"I doubt it."

"That's because you don't know Nick. He and I have been friends for some years now, and we've often congratulated each other on being free. But I, for one, am beginning to feel the congratulations are wearing thin, and I wouldn't mind betting that Nick sometimes wonders, too. Who knows," with a brief, almost silent laugh, "he may discover that Lorin needs someone like himself to take care of her. In a way I hope he will!"

They had been halted for some moments outside Owen Shepton's house, and now Vanessa made a move to go indoors. But he detained her lightly with his fingers.

"I'm not usually as serious as this; in fact, I can be a most entertaining companion. Like to try me out tomorrow?"

"Are you dating me?"

"Why not? Even here, there are things two people can do together." With the experienced smile he added, "I might take you up the river or down to the sea. There's sure to be a car available."

"You might," she agreed. "We'll wait and let it creep up on us, shall we?"

"If you insist. Must you go in? Well, goodnight."

A minute later, in her bedroom, Vanessa became aware of a headache and a horrible dryness in her throat. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and found that an echo of the smile she had set upon her lips earlier in the evening still lingered there, though her eyes looked heavy and shadowed. She began to undress, but though she moved with resolution there was a resigned lethargy in the way she hung up her dress and slipped other things into a drawer.

By now, Donn Grieves was back at Nick's house. Nick would be hoping aloud that Lorin would sleep well in the spare room, and telling her to take first turn in the bathroom. Intimate friendly sharing, propinquity. And physical attraction; that had been obvious in both of them. But Lorin, thought Vanessa, was not a girl who could manage a light affair. She had a one-track mind, a rigid perspective on her future; a home and a man she could literally smother with flattery and scientific cooking.

Good heavens, why on earth was she speculating along such lines? They'd met today, the girl was a bit sunk already, but a man like Nick didn't suddenly crash into heartwhole love and start contemplating marriage; he'd been opposed to fetters for too long.

And what if he did find Lorin Grieves more attractive than any other woman he knew? What business was it of Vanessa Lane's? The answer was obvious. Feeling bleak and forlorn, Vanessa slipped into bed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**DAWN** was brassy and breathless. By seven, when Vanessa got up, the hot forest mist had gone, but humidity formed a haze and heat shimmered over the white buildings and the beaten red earth of the settlement. This was really Africa, she thought; genuine, lethal heat that beat down so hard it seemed to penetrate into the brain and congeal it.

Vanessa was trying to decide how best to combat the oppressiveness when a boy tapped at the wooden frame of the door screen. She went over to it and pushed it ajar.

"Good morning. Do you want something?"

"Me b'long Mister Hewson. He want you come, please."

Vanessa spared a second to wish Ngomo would make such an effort at English, and then nodded. It was difficult to imagine why Claud should send a servant, unless . . .

"Is Mr. Hewson ill?" she asked.

The black woolly head jerked a negative. "Him sick hand."

She waved him to lead the way and went out after him, into an inferno. The dimness of Claud's living-room was balm, but she had to wait for her eyes to refocus before she saw him lying back in his armchair with the injured arm held against him. His face was pale and sweaty, the colourless hair lank across his brow.

The fingers, she saw at once, were huge and purple, and in a sudden swift rush of pity she went and knelt in front of him and took the plaster cast into her hands.

But she kept her tones level. "This is pretty horrible; it's the heat, of course. You should have sent for Dr. Ziegen."

"He went up the river last night and it may be hours before he's back."

"Have you mentioned it to him - the way the hand swells in the heat?"

"He asked, as a matter of fact. I told him it did get a bit painful and he said that if it became worse I must have the cast sawn off at once and finish out the three weeks with a thin plaster bandage." He moistened his lips. "I sent my boy for you because ... believe it or not, there's no one else. If you weren't here I'd have to try hacking the thing off myself." He swallowed. "Vanessa, you simply must get this thing off."

She jumped up. "But I've never done anything like it! I'll go and persuade one of the nurses to come here. She'll do it and I'll help."

"You won't get one of them to leave the township clinic. They wouldn't disobey orders, even for money."

"They'd obey Nick Brandis. I'll go to him."

"No, please!" Claud started up, staggered a little and grabbed at the table. "Don't go to Nick. The very last thing I want is a fuss that will bring in others. If I knew how to get hold of whatever it is they use, I'd have a go at this thing myself. You can see the fingers; can you imagine what the arm feels like?"

She could imagine it, just from the look in his face; his eyes were as dark and hollow as if he hadn't slept for weeks. She made her decision. "Sit down again and tell your boy to bring a bowl of ice cubes. Keep your fingers among them till I get back."

She ran out, was conscious of the thudding atmosphere, but went on running, across the compound, past the two main buildings and on to the long low hut where outpatients were dealt with. They were seated on the earth in the meagre shade of the thatch, twenty or thirty of them, excluding the babies which lolled sickly against their mothers or scrabbled naked in the dust. Vanessa entered the clinic, where a couple of African men in white coats were dealing with wounds. Everyone stared at her for a moment, and then one of the men left his patient and came politely over.

She explained what she had come for, and the man shook his head.

"The plaster cannot be removed unless Dr. Ziegen is present," he said. "It is one of his rules."

"When will he return?"

"I do not know. There is much work at the villages. Perhaps he will be here tonight."

"But Mr. Hewson's hand is blistered and there may be sepsis!"

Perturbed, the orderly pushed out his thick lips. "He needs an injection of penicillin, perhaps, but that also may not be given without the doctor's instructions."

Vanessa did a little more explaining, but the man, as well as two of the nurses, stood staring at her without speaking. Obviously, none of them had any intention of leaving the clinic. Finally, she asked for the loan of a saw and to be shown how to use it. When they hesitantly refused, she said, "Very well, I must find Mr. Brandis."

And that, to her annoyance but not to her surprise, did it. She was given the rather old-fashioned contraption, told that it must be plugged into a lamp socket and used slowly and carefully ... like so.

Had Vanessa paused to reflect that the spinning saw must go mighty close to human flesh she would probably have hurried out empty-handed. Instead, she quickly promised to bring the saw back as soon as possible, repeated her thanks and departed.

Afterwards, she never did remember the following hour very clearly; it had the ghastly quality which mercifully draws its own veil. She did recall the moment of terror when she first set the saw working on the plaster near the bend of the elbow, and the sweat which dropped regularly from her brow and tip of her nose, but that long gruelling journey from Claud's elbow to wrist, from wrist to knuckles, his faintness from the blanketing atmosphere and the searing heat of the instrument, were somehow obscured almost from the moment when the rugged cleft was completed. She found herself snapping off the current, carefully disconnecting the adaptor and placing the saw in its box before turning to wrench open the plaster cast and remove it.

The sight of his raw blistered arm was anticlimax. She sat down suddenly and closed her eyes, opened them again to see Claud smiling glassily and moving his lips in thanks.

"It's ... done," she said weakly.

"Feels better already," he whispered, "but the blisters are throbbing."

"That's the blood getting through. I don't think there can possibly be any infection, but the skin will be very tender. You mustn't move your wrist, Claud."

"I've no wish to. God ... the relief!"

She managed a faint smile. "For me, too. I'll never try that again as long as I live."



"If you stay in Africa you may have to do worse. It's that sort of country." He lay back with his eyes shut. "What do I do - wear it in a sling?"

"Might be as well. Have you any meths?"

"In the kitchen."

"Bandages - a good wide one?"

"There are some in the chest in the bathroom. Call the boy."

But she went in search of them herself - partly because she was beginning to feel a little sick and headachy. She doused the arm in methylated spirit, bandaged it fairly tightly-and contrived a sling from a piece of sheeting. Then she made tea and gave him a cup.

"I must go now," she said. "See Dr. Ziegen as soon as he gets back, won't you?"

"Yes, of course." He was standing, but still swayed slightly as he said haltingly, "Thanks, Vanessa. I... I wish I could really thank you, but there aren't the words."

"I hope I've done the right thing. Don't use that arm at all till you've seen the doctor, will you? You're not working today?"

"I'll try not to. Vanessa ..."

Her head was tight and pulses knocked all over her body. "Yes?" she asked.

He spoke in a rush, breathily, as if the words were wrung from him. "I think you're the most wonderful girl in the world. I want you to know that."

Again she managed the small smile. "Frankly, I was terrified. You were the brave one - to place yourself in my hands. Now relax."

"Will you call in this afternoon?"

"Probably. So long, Claud."

Feeling like a squeezed dishcloth, she carried the instrument back to the clinic, told the orderly, with an effort at sangfroid, that the operation had been successful, and returned to Owen Shepton's bungalow where everything was as quiet as when she left it. Dazedly, she washed her hands, and she was about to enter the bedroom to change the sweat-soaked dress when a sound drew her towards the living-room.

At the doorway she started violently. A tall, dark-skinned man wearing a soiled white drill suit and a turban smiled widely and bowed. He was right there in the room, had entered without permission. He was a Syrian, Vanessa thought; except that he wore a suit instead of a robe, he looked very like the vendors who had swarmed over her ship at the ports.

His voice was thick, high and ingratiating. "I am most happy to meet the madam. I come with a message for the madam's honoured father. He is here?"

"I'm afraid he is out," she said. "You can find him at the offices."

The shining yellow smile remained fixed. "You will understand that I cannot go to him there. He has told me he trusts you, so I will beg that madam will give him a message. It is very short, please. Next week."

"You mean that's the message - next week?"

The head bowed. "Please - you will tell the master?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." He touched his lips and brow, backed to the door and went out.

Vanessa put a hand to her eyes, drew a deep breath and went along to her room. As she changed into a green print and tidied her hair she noticed that her hands trembled and her wrists ached. The noise of the saw seemed still to reverberate through her head and the wrung-out sensation persisted, even after she had rested for a while. She heard Uncle Owen come in, but it was not till he had closed himself into his room and had time to settle on the bed that she remembered the Syrian. Next week was still several days away, so the message could not be terribly urgent. She would pass it on at lunch time.

At noon she felt sufficiently recovered to wander along to the kitchen. Ngomo was preparing the usual salad, and all he needed was her decision as to whether he should open a tin of tuna fish or one of crayfish. She told him to leave the tins unopened till it was time to serve lunch, that fresh mangoes and bananas would be enough for the second course, and strolled out into the glaring sunshine.

Now there was a vague breeze, but the sky was a molten steel-blue and the clearing like a vast oven. She walked round it, in the shade of the trees, came at last to the new shelter, where a few workmen were levelling the floor and soaking the log uprights with gas-tar. She stood just inside, watching them, and visualising the completed creche.

She turned to go and came face to face with Donn Grieves. He wore shorts and a bush shirt, looked thoroughly at home as he lounged into the shadow of the thick thatch and greeted her.

"I've been trailing you," he said. "That bright houseboy of yours told me you'd come this way. Is this the new kiddies' corner?"

She nodded. "It will start functioning in about a week."

His sallow, handsome face wrinkled slightly with humorous distaste. "What a horrible job for a pretty girl - looking after increasing numbers of brats. Seems a bit odd that Nick should have thought it up for you. Doesn't dislike you, does he?"

She smiled. "Only sporadically. I think he considers the work is more or less what I'm cut out for. He's already ordered a crate of hardware and other stuff."

"I know. I shipped it just before I left. It's on a slow boat, but should be here within a day or two."

"Did he send you a list?" she asked curiously.

"Bless you, sweetie, of course not. It would never occur to Nick that you'd need baby bottles and potties. He dropped a line to an old flame of his, she got out a list and did the ordering, and I did the rest. You'll find yourself with a few of everything, and all you have to do is order up more of any particular article. That way," with his jaded but charming smile, "you and I will be able to keep in touch."

She made a move towards the brilliant outdoors. "You say this woman in Lagos is an old familiar of Nick's," she mentioned casually. "She's married now, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes," as he strolled at her side. "He's a shrewd chap - knows how to drop 'em and yet keep 'em friendly. That's quite difficult, believe me."

"I'm sure it is." A pause, and then, politely, "How is your sister this morning?"

"Blooming. She got up at six-thirty and made breakfast for Nick - said it was a treat to do it, because I'm addicted to coffee and cigarettes - can't eat a thing before lunch."

"Can't you? Why is that?"

He smiled whimsically. "I hate to confess it to a dear little someone like you, but the sort that drinks overnight usually finds the thought of masticating before noon rather nauseating. Of course," with a sidelong glance, "we've been known to change, but never for our own sake - always for someone else's. Would you like to reform me?"

"Heavens, no. I shall have my hands quite full with the babies."

"That's a blow," he returned, still grinning. "Last night I was sure you had the look of a crusader, and this morning I decided to seek you out and show you that I'm practically a lost cause but a very worthwhile one. Don't I appeal to you at all?"

"You're all right," she said, in crushingly normal tones. "Tell me - is there a phrase book I can use to get to know a little of the local language?"

He had brightened vaguely. "I'll teach you a few words. The West Coast language isn't tribal, and they do use a good number of English words. You have to sort them out, but there's a knack to it." He sighed. "If it's the only way to earn your approval I'll have a go at putting you wise. When shall we begin - right now?"

She looked at her watch. "It's almost lunch time. Would you like to come in for tea this afternoon? We'd probably be undisturbed for half an hour."

He shook his head self-pityingly. "I don't know what I'm letting myself in for, but I'll come. I only hope you're not as earnest as you seem!"

"It *is* rather important to me."

"Well, I won't suggest any payment - not yet." They had reached the house and he looked at it consideringly. "You really like it here?"

"Yes, very much."

"Would you come up the coast for a visit while my sister's with me?"

"I might."

"I'll keep you to that." And as she moved towards the steps: "About four o'clock, then." He winked and strolled on.

Smiling slightly, Vanessa went into the house. She washed and came back to the living-room, to find Uncle Owen there, looking fagged but spruce in fresh whites.

"Hallo, my dear," he said. "This weather should be killing you, but you don't look it. It was like this last year before the rains, but I didn't feel it so badly. My resistance is lower."

She saw that he was splashing whisky into a glass which contained a solitary ice cube. "Raw spirit must be rather heating," she commented. "Isn't there a drink that's equally stimulating but more suited to the climate?"

"There's just whisky and gin - you take your choice. Women mostly go for a spot of gin now and then. You may remember that I've always been a whisky man. Will you have a drink now?"

"No, thank you." She was about to pull out her chair when she remembered something. "There was a caller this morning while you were out at the office - a dark man who looked a bit Eastern or Arabic. He mistook me for Merle and asked me to give you a message."

"A message?" Uncle Owen looked dull and desiccated. "What sort of message?"

"Just two words - next week."

Uncle Owen passed a hand over his eyes and forehead. "Next week," he echoed, as though to himself. "Next week?" He lifted a bewildered glance. "Don't know what the man could have been getting at. Are you sure he said the message was for me?"

"He didn't mention you by name, but thinking I was Merle he called you my honoured father. So it had to be you. Do you know what the message means?"

He got behind her chair to seat her before sinking, lethargically into his own. "I've no idea, except that it could have been meant for Paul."

"But the man used the word father."

"Sometimes their English is a little odd - he could have meant husband. Don't worry about it, Vanessa. I'll look into it. But just in case it has something to do with Paul, I'd prefer that you said nothing to anyone else about it. Heaven knows, I'm sorry I ever introduced the man to Merle and I'm glad she's decided to finish with him, but I don't want his actions here to cause a scandal." He paused and added quietly, "Paul could have used my name in one of his transactions. I don't think he would, but it's just possible. So we'll keep it between us, won't we?"

Vanessa nodded, and helped herself to salad. She didn't want to think about Merle - not for some time, anyway. She ate a little, noticed that Uncle Owen made no more than a token attempt at the meal. As he had said several times himself, he had come too late to West Africa, and the climate was exacting its toll. He ought to leave soon, Vanessa thought anxiously. In his case, a spell in the tropics could be damaging.

"Are you going to rest again this afternoon?" she asked.

"Later on. We're about to start work on the northern boundary and I want to look into the plans. I'll be back for tea, but maybe a little late."

He went slowly, tiredly, his panama square on his grey head and with the dapper light jacket neatly buttoned. He looked like a man who has suddenly realised his youth is far behind him; the sad reflection about someone she had always held dear brought a prickle to Vanessa's throat, and she turned to help Ngomo to clear the table.

Having the house to herself that afternoon, she rested in the living-room with a writing pad on her knee. From time to time she made a note about the necessities for the proposed creche, but for the most part she hardly thought at all. The breeze cooled slightly, and she stirred to change into a plain cream dress with strap shoulders.

She prepared a tea-tray for two, and had just carried it into the living-room when Donn Grieves tattooed upon the door and let himself in. In grey slacks and a white nylon shirt he looked very dark and good-looking; and that slightly worn smile of his, Vanessa admitted, was an additional attraction. You felt that here was a man who had experienced everything and yet found you had that indefinable something he hadn't met elsewhere.

Over tea he was amusing. He did not mention his sister, and presently Vanessa lost the urge to question him about her. After all, there was



nothing mysterious or complicated about Lorin Grieves, nothing for him to explain; her aims and outlook were as clear as spring water.

"And now," said Vanessa, when he had refused a second cup of tea, "we must get to work. The West African language, please."

He laughed, and began talking it. "Orit, takum lesson nor. Which means - all right, we'll have a lesson now. Let's start off with shopping. Suppose you want to buy yams. You go to someone who's sitting beside a heap of them and say, "Omos fo dis yams?" They may answer, "Tree for tree coppa", which means they work out at about a penny each."

"But that's distorted English!"

"It comes first - in the markets they all speak it. If you speak English very slowly when you want to buy, they'll understand you. You need pidgin for the servants."

"But what about these babies?"

"For yes and no you'll find a nod and a shake of the head sufficient. Got a sheet of paper? I'll give you the words for mi'k and soup and so on. Ready?"

She wrote, and pronounced the syllables after him. It was fun to concoct a sentence of garbled English and native words, to learn how to make foo-foo chop from raw cassava and Creole bread from rice, brown sugar and ground coconut.

"Teach the kids English," he said. "They'll talk their own tribal tongue at home, but it'll be good for them to know a bit of English when they grow up. And now," as he looked into her face across the table. "I've done my good deed for the day. Let's talk about you."

"I'm the most ordinary person in the world."

"A gross understatement. Bolambo is the world and here you're unique. You know," leaning towards her confidentially, "I've never known any girl so calm and undismayed by a man's shock tactics. What would you do if I kissed you?"

"I wouldn't let you get that close, Donn," she said calmly.

"You might have to - I'm stronger than you are." His white teeth sparkled in the shadowed room. "You make me wonder what it's like to kiss a girl who has green eyes and pretends to be an icicle - emotionally, that is. How did you get that way?"

"Mind if I join in the discussion?"

They both looked up, Vanessa sharply and Donn with a philosophical grin as he got to his feet.

"Well, what do you know?" he drawled. "Here's Nick the slavedriver. I thought you were having tea with my kid sister."

Nick's cool glance had encompassed the tea things on the table, the pad of notes and the unused ashtray. "That was half an hour ago. Lorin is in the house alone at the moment."

Negligently, Donn shoved his hands into his pockets and took a pace towards the door. "Marching orders?" he queried, lifting one black brow. "I came here on business, but I guess we've finished. By the way, Vanessa," with a suggestion of the familiar wink, "it's a date for tomorrow. I'll provide the transport and you can bring a few sandwiches., All right?"

Vanessa did not let him down. "Perhaps. I'll let you know. Thanks very much for the lesson."

"A pleasure," he returned, with a grandiose shrug. And he wandered out into the late afternoon sunshine.

Nick remained standing. He got out a packet of cigarettes, but put it away again without opening it, took another dispassionate glance at the table and said, "Donn never wastes time. Was he supposed to be teaching you pidgin?"

"Yes."

"You might remember that there's only one thing he's interested in teaching a girl, and he'll use any means at his disposal to do it - even pidgin." A pause. "You looked as if you were enjoying it."

"Yes, I was," she answered evenly. "Did you want Uncle Owen?"

"I came to see you."

"To see me?" she said, clasping her hands on the edge of the table. "How nice."

"Yes, isn't it?" But he didn't sound too pleasant. "I've just heard about your exploit of this morning. What made you think you had a right to upset all the regulations at the clinic and ignore the usual procedure of consulting the authorities here?"

"Oh... that." Her voice was flat and dry. "Who told you about it?"

"I called at Hewson's place to find out what was happening in his section. I noticed the cast had gone and questioned him." His smile was even more unpleasant than his voice. "He said he'd begged you to do what you did, that you were simply marvellous, that he'd never be able to thank you enough ... all the rest of it."

"Well, isn't that your answer?" she said, without looking up. "I know I had no right to do what I did, and I intend to go to Dr. Ziegen as soon as he's available. It's for him to reprimand me - not you."

"I'm not reprimanding you, my child," he said abruptly. "I'm merely reminding you that you're a stranger here and have no connection of any sort with the clinic. It was totally wrong to approach an African orderly as you did, and even worse to persuade him to break the rules."

"Would you have had Claud suffering torture all day?"

"If he'd sent for me," said Nick forcibly, "I'd have freed the arm for him without impairing the official routine at the clinic. I'd have taken Claud over there and called someone to help me. But you," with savage emphasis, "you preferred to act independently. I don't know what blandishments you used to get hold of that saw ..."

"I used your name."

This gave him pause, momentarily. "I see. You'd do anything for Claud, wouldn't you?"

"Of that kind - yes. I knew it was wrong, but I thought myself answerable only to Dr. Ziegen, and I felt he'd understand. He'd already told Claud that if the cast became painful it must come off at once."

"Which doesn't excuse you," came the swift reply. "If you hadn't been here Claud would have had to approach me."

She shook her head. "He said he'd have tried to get the thing off himself. He was strongly opposed to making a fuss about it. I actually said that I ought to speak to you, but he wouldn't have it." Nick didn't answer, and she went on, low-voiced, "Claud isn't really as strong as

he seems. I think that physically he could stand as much as any man here, but mentally he's not unlike his looks. He's sensitive and retiring and extravagantly grateful for the smallest favour. You perhaps don't realise ..."

"And I don't want to. The men's private lives are not my business - unless someone starts meddling and their work falls off. Claud was doing fine, till you came."

She raised her head sharply. "That's most unfair! I haven't upset him in any way, and there's nothing . .!"

He gestured suddenly as Owen Shepton pulled open the screen-door and entered the room. Her throat hot and her teeth tight, she stood up and began to put the cups on the tray. Automatically she asked Uncle Owen if he would like some tea.

"No, thank you, Vanessa," he said tiredly. "Glad to see you here, Nick. I'm getting really old. This afternoon I found a letter in the office which I'd mislaid and forgotten. Here it is - from the biggest palm-oil agents in Jamestown. Read it."

Nick did, and looked up. "How in the world did you forget a letter like this? If they'll let us have barges on loan we can start shipping right away. I can't think why you didn't go to see them, as they ask."

"I didn't feel up to it at the time, and I feel less like it now. Will you see them for me, Nick?"

"I certainly will. I'll go tomorrow."

"Not as soon as that. The trip will take two or three days and there are a few things to clear up before you go." He gave his weary smile. "You'll have to apologise for the delay - tell them I'm a sick old man who forgets things."

"Uncle Owen," began Vanessa, distressed.

But Nick broke in roughly, "I told you a holiday every year was imperative. You should have gone up to Tangier with Merle!"

"I've an idea," said Uncle Owen, "that it won't be long before I leave Bolambo for good. After that, I'll buy a Mediterranean villa and live to be a hundred. When I'm gone, Nick," his smile knowledgeable as his glance rested on the lean brown face of the younger man, "you'll be the big boss around here."

"I still think you should take a break," Nick said. "Your colour is bad."

Uncle Owen shrugged, with weary good humour. "Don't wrap things up, do you? That's what I like about you, Nick - you never gloss the unpalatable truth. Well, I'll go and rest till dinner. Vanessa, you might tell Ngomo to bring a drink to my room. Nick will mix it."

He went out, and after a moment Nick opened the cabinet and poured whisky. Vanessa brought some ice and the drink was given to the houseboy. When they were alone again, Nick said,

"Owen needs watching. I'll have a word with Ziegen when he gets back."

"Do you think there's anything I can do to ease things for Uncle Owen?"

"No, it's the climate." Nick stood studying her. "I shouldn't have spoken to you as I did just before he came in. I'd come straight from Hewson and felt a bit raw about your acting doctor this morning. It fed me up that you should break the regulations, but chiefly I was worried on your account. I've never let Merle go to the clinic, and I don't want you to go there, either."

"Why?"

He was still watching her closely as he said, "I've never given Merle a reason - just insisted that she keep clear of the place. You're a little different, so I can tell you why no white people go there unless it's really necessary. Our first few hundred workers were drawn from inland. Dr. Ziegen gave them all a thorough check-up and discovered two cases of leprosy. Since then, there hasn't been a single case, but we do have families arriving from elsewhere, seeking work. They could be disease carriers."

"But in these places that's a risk one has to take."

"Well, you're not taking it," he said curtly. "There'll be no sick children at your creche - not one. And Ziegen will go over you every other week."

"Oh, but look here ..."

"That's an order."

"But it isn't necessary! If I felt the least bit queer I'd go to the doctor."

Nick's face, angular and unsmiling, looked a little leaner as he said, "Do it for my sake, Brownie, for my peace of mind. I can't worry myself silly about you and do my job, too. So take care, won't you? I didn't bring you to Bolambo, but at least I can go a little way to keeping you healthy."

"As you kept... Merle healthy?"

"She's not so difficult to handle as you are." He smiled faintly. "Merle is wilful and independent, but she's not foolhardy."

"And I am? Well I must try not to be. Would you like a drink?"

"I must get back. What about coming along for a drink with us, at my place?"

She quickly declined. "I'd rather stay here. Uncle Owen may need me."

His smile taunted her slightly. "Donn positively leaves on Sunday afternoon. He has to make some calls down the coast. Why miss an evening of his company when you needn't?"

"I can bear it."

"Of course. There's tomorrow to look forward to, isn't there? I believe Donn's quite something on a picnic."

"Good," she said hardily. "It will be my first outing."

"Yes, so it will." He surveyed her, seemed about to suggest something, but instead added, "See that you enjoy it, child, and don't believe more than an eighth of what he tells you. Oh, by the way," as though he had only that second recalled it, "I had a letter from Paul Charnley today. He's resigned from his post here."

"Resigned?" she echoed blankly. "Does that mean he won't come back here at all?"

"His contract calls for three months' notice and his leave will take him to within a fortnight of the end. It's my guess that he'll come back on the due date, hand over to his successor, pack up and leave."

"Oh, dear," she said despondently. "It does look as though he and Merle intend never to meet again, doesn't it?"

"It's their life, little one. I used to think Merle was wasted on a quiet humdrum type like Paul, but then he may have been wasted on her as well. It'll be a relief to have their problem off my plate."



Again that odd tumult within her, as she met his glance.

"Is that how you are with the women you know - out of sight out of mind?"

He said laconically, "I'm a great believer in living in the present."

"With Lorin Grieves?"

The grey eyes glinted, his tone mocked. "Sweet dish, isn't she? Bright and unsophisticated, pretty as paint and curved to match, frantically eager to please ... and she can cook, too!"

Something in him hardened Vanessa; her green glance smiled as mockingly as his, until she made it coy and said, mimicking the light breathless voice of Donn's half-sister, "You know, Nick, Donn told me you know too much about women to care about the things they can do in a house. He said you're cynical, but ... but I haven't found you so."

He laughed and made a feint at her chin with his fist. "I'll make you pay for that some time. Lorin may strive a little for effect, but it's a compliment to me that she takes the trouble. It's more than you'd do for a guy. You're still coddling that girl who lost her boy-friend in England."

It wasn't true, but in refuting it she might unwittingly admit something else. So she shrugged. "Well, have a good time while she's here. I suppose she'll leave with Donn, won't she?"

He gave her the slow, tantalising smile. "I'm not at all sure I can let her go so soon." And with a faint edge to his tones, "You're casting round all the time for someone to take that fiance's place, aren't you? Claud ...: Donn ... they're not quite what you're after, but till something else offers they'll have to do. You're still shy of an honest-to-

goodness affair, still too cautious to give any . part of yourself, even temporarily. What a gal!"

The final disparaging words were uttered as he reached the door. Vanessa took a breath, but decided not to retort. There was a long minute while he waited, looking her over. She stood with her head bent, the mid-brown hair a little cloudy from the fingers she had pushed through it and her lashes dark against pale skin.

"Not rising to it?" he asked with sarcasm. "Maybe that's safer. Well, so long, honey. Keep your toys dusted."

Had he not gone at once she might have been tempted to hurl something at him. She heard him drop down the steps whistling under his breath while his thoughts, no doubt, already moved ahead, to his own house, and the delectable Lorin.

## CHAPTER SIX

**ALMOST** insidiously, the atmosphere at Bolambo was creating a mood of desperation in Vanessa. She had arrived feeling mentally washed out but physically well and keen to pattern her life to fit in with Merle's and Uncle Owen's. She had visualised a household comprising Paul Charnley and Merle, Uncle Owen and herself, jolly times, long discussions and a fine camaraderie which would restore her faith and good feeling.

The first setback had been Paul's absence and the suspicion which shrouded it. Then she had noticed that Uncle Owen was not too fit, that Merle was edgy and offhand, Merle's sudden departure, preceded by the shattering statement that she had never cared very much about Vanessa except as someone she could use, still rankled and fretted at her mind.

As if all this were not enough, there had to be Nick Brandis, who made everyone and everything his business - so long as his own inner being were left intact. Nick, big and broad-shouldered, dark-haired, grey-eyed, an egotist, but a considerate and watchful one, as well as one who sometimes liked to hurt. Why he occasionally found it necessary to wound others was a point she dwelled on' only lightly. Perhaps he really did feel rather deeply for Merle, and took out his frustration on other women. Or perhaps it was only Vanessa, who wouldn't allow herself to capitulate in any way, who came in for most of the bruising. Merle had shown Nick that but for Paul, she would have been his. Lorin Grieves wallowed in sentimental-desires and didn't mind his knowing it. But Vanessa Lane hadn't been floored - not visibly, anyway - and that must have flicked his pride.

It didn't seem possible that such a mess could have accumulated so soon after her arrival, and for the life of her, Vanessa could not see how to deal with it. Perhaps the worst part of it was having to keep a permanently serene composure. And yet the air of control was a help

in her dealings with the men. Lorin, as a transient, could let go, if she wished, but Vanessa was to be a part of Bolambo for a while, and for that reason she had to maintain the cool and undaunted smile. But it was becoming quite a task.

She picnicked with Donn Grieves, drove with him along hard red roads between coconut palms and lazed on a narrow white beach under a mangrove tree whose long, dark green leaves rustled sharply in the breeze. They talked pidgin and smiled a good deal, and Donn promised that one day he'd take her out to some of the islands.

"We might do it when you come up to visit Lorin and me. I won't come back to Bolambo till my sister's gone home to England. She's too impressionable. As a matter of fact, though I'm not too keen to leave on Sunday myself, it's as well that we're moving on. Lorin is as gay as a lark at the moment and I'll try to keep her that way."

"Are you going to send her home without a husband?" asked Vanessa.

He sighed, a little gustily. "Lord knows what will happen, now that she's met Nick. For the time being he's probably spoiled her for other men. If I'd guessed she might fall for him I'd have kept them apart. I thought his type would be more likely to frighten her." He lifted his shoulders. "She can't have fallen far, anyway. Only last night I pointed out to her that Nick treats her as if she were a charming teenager, not as a fascinating woman."

"What did she say?"

He grinned. "That I've become too dulled by drink and the climate to judge other people's emotions and reactions. I think she must have read it somewhere."

Donn, a seasoned Coaster with an eye of his own for women, refused to take his sister seriously, a fact which Vanessa found oddly comforting. On the whole, she enjoyed those few hours with him more than she'd enjoyed anything else since coming to West Africa.

The following evening Lorin gave a buffet party on Nick's behalf. There were only eight guests, of course, and Owen Shepton went home before ten, but the evening was a great success for Lorin. Perhaps the fact that she and her brother had brought unusual foods with them gave her an unfair advantage, but no one could have made savouries and dishes more appetising to look at and delicious to taste.

She looked quite lovely, too. The yellow hair and hazel eyes were enhanced by a slim-fitting willow-green dress in clinging, pleated silk, and she wore a heavy silver bracelet which made her wrist look frail. Actually, she must be as strong as a horse to have spent so much of the day in the stifling kitchen and yet emerged as pretty and cool as a daffodil.

Vanessa wore white and she spent most of the evening with Donn and Claud. Claud thankfully showed the new plaster bandage; hardly any weight to it, he said, and the doctor had kept its edge below the old blisters, so they were now healing nicely.

"Thanks to you," he said softly. "I'll remember that terrible hour you put in on the cast for ever."

"I shall, too," she said, smiling. "I was soaked from head to toe. I'm glad Dr. Ziegen wasn't annoyed."

"He said he's never seen a woman do that job. Normally, it takes about five minutes. Did you know that?"

"I guessed. I wished afterwards that I'd experimented before doing the real thing. You wouldn't have had nearly so much to bear."

"It's not important now - not a bit."

His voice, quiet and sincere, was soothing. They talked a little, leaned back in their chairs near the open french window and looked out at the night. Behind them, Lorin was speaking animatedly with Nick and Sanders, the young man who had recently returned from leave.

"I *adore* West Africa," the girl was saying. "I could settle here for years! A few women can do that, you know, and I'm very thrilled to find that I'm one of them."

"The others who can do it aren't as enthusiastic as you seem to be," Sanders commented. "You'll have to marry out here, Miss Grieves."

Lorin was no doubt blushing becomingly as she answered, "I'd have to be in love first, wouldn't I?"

Nick said, "It's usual, I believe. But you look to me like a girl who might easily be in love at this moment."

"Why, Nick!" Was she being arch, or hiding confusion? "I'm ... I'm happy, that's all."

"It suits you," came the slow, urbane reply. "You're looking even more delicious than the eats you've concocted. That cool, springlike appearance on a tropical night is enough to make the most hardened bachelor think twice."

The girl's voice came less distinctly, sounded shy. "You're awfully sweet to me, Nick. These days have been the most happily exciting of my life. I've loved having the run of your kitchen and being able to decorate this room, and if my efforts have been a little too feminine ..."

"They haven't. They've been you. And I wouldn't have you different. Out here, a happy, clinging woman is the most refreshing creature on earth."

He spoke so deliberately that had Vanessa thought for only a second she would have decided not to move. But she didn't think. She half turned her head and looked up, met his satirical grey glance and wished to heaven her own expression had been taunting. She did muster the cool smile, and turn back without haste, but almost at once she said,

"Shall we go outside for some air, Claud?"

Claud was glad to oblige. They stood in the narrow veranda for a few minutes before sauntering round to the side of the house. Thunder grumbled, distantly, and Vanessa noticed that the breeze had strengthened into a fitful wind.

"Are we still being warned, or will it rain soon?" she asked idly.

"It won't be long now. We get a few short heavy showers before the big storms. If you've never met tropical thunder the storms may frighten you a bit."

"I'm sure they will. I love rain but hate thunder and lightning. Still, I wouldn't want to experience anything less than what's usual out here."

There was a silence and then, in quiet hoarse tones, Claud said, "You wouldn't consider it presumptuous if I... I made you a little gift - just because I'm grateful, would you?"

"Of course not," she answered with a frank smile. "But it isn't a bit necessary. One of these days I shall probably need a favour from you."

"For my own sake, I hope so. But - " he had taken something from his pocket and was showing it to her in the palm of his hand. "It's an aquamarine. I found it three years ago when I was on a different job. An Indian polished it and made it into a pendant, and charged me almost nothing. So ... so I'm not offering you something costly."

Curious about it, she took it by the thin silver chain and let the stone dangle. In the darkness it was impossible to see its colour, but the light from the house caught its facets, showed, it to be nearly an inch square and a quarter of an inch thick.

"It must be worth quite a lot. Why did you have it polished and set?"

"For no reason, really. I have several semi-precious stones that I've found at different times, but I happened to be with an Indian when this one turned up. He was terribly anxious to show me how beautiful it could be, so I let him."

"Haven't you thought of giving it to your mother?"

His smile was a little awkward. "When you've a stepfather you have to be careful. He and I are good friends, but instinct tells me he wouldn't care for me to give her a jewel of any kind."

"I'm afraid you can't give it to me, either," she said. "But I tell you what - I'll buy it from you."

"Never!" He sounded so shocked that she laughed.

"Then you'll have to have it back," she said. "I was only going to offer you the amount you paid for the setting."

In perturbed tones he stammered, "Take it, then. I paid only a pound, but I won't accept money till you've worn the thing and are sure you like it. I... wanted it to be a gift."



"If a genuine aquamarine isn't a gift at a pound, I don't know what is! Maybe I'll take you up on it, Claud. After I've worn it and seen it in daylight I'll probably be only too anxious to make it mine."

"Will you,... wear it now?"

"Why not? Can you clasp it for me?"

His nervous fingers managed it, and she felt the cool weight of the stone just below the hollow of her throat. She fingered the smooth surfaces gently and knew, regretfully, that it must be quite valuable and he would have to have it back. Because it had cost him nothing Claud regarded the aquamarine simply as something rather beautiful that he had found and wanted to pass on. Tomorrow she would point that out to him. He'd understand.

He was silent now, in a happy satisfied way that she had no wish to destroy. Thunder rolled once more, the wind was suddenly still and the night extraordinarily black. And then, before she felt a single spot herself, Vanessa heard the huge raindrops sweeping in over the forest, bouncing upon the tough green leaves of mangroves and rubber weed. Her hand was grasped.

"Run for it - quick!"

It was no more than thirty yards to the house, but by the time they reached the veranda the sky had loosed a torrent. She paused, laughing and breathless, in the veranda turned with shining eyes to watch the sudden downpour.

The others were near by, appreciative but unthrilled.

Lorin said, "We had rain last week in Lagos. I didn't go out for two whole days, but I didn't mind."

No doubt, thought Vanessa, the busy little Lorin had taken advantage of the weather to have a bake-up and cleaning spree. After which reflection, she took herself to task. Cattiness was something new in her make-up.

"Is this likely to last long?" she asked.

"Anything between one hour and three," came Nick's reply.

"It's time I went home, I'm afraid."

"I'll take you," offered Donn.

"You live here - you needn't get wet at all. I'd better go with a neighbour."

"I'm your host," Nick mentioned casually. "I'll take you home. We'll use the car."

"But it's no distance. If you can lend me a coat..."

"The car is much easier. Like a drink before you go?"

"No, thanks." Vanessa turned to Lorin. "Thank you for the wonderful supper. It was the best food I've tasted since I've been here."

Lorin was smiling, large-eyed, excited and blissful. "I'm sure you're a good cook, too. And you probably have a much better brain than mine."

Vanessa made a polite disclaimer and looked round for Nick. He had apparently gone to fetch the car, for it appeared suddenly, just beyond the veranda. He got out and ducked under cover, held a large waterproof for her to slip into and drew a man's sou-wester from the pocket. This he dropped unceremoniously over her hair.

"Right. Dive in," he ordered.

Vanessa waved a voluminous stiff arm at the men and said goodnight, slipped down and into the car. Nick accelerated, the engine roared against the roar of rain and distant thunder, and they moved down on to the road which had become a pair of red rivers created by car tracks.

"You wouldn't think this could happen so swiftly," she said in awed tones. "Imagine a garden that had to stand up to it."

"The rains are the saviour and the curse of the country. All the loose good soil was long ago washed into the rivers and down to the sea. Except in the forests, of course. That's why we have to plant as soon as we clear the land; roots keep the soil in place - but the first year is tricky. That's the real reason for building the creche. We just have to concentrate on planting as quickly as possible. By the way, that case of stuff is down at the port. I'll have it collected on Monday. I'll go down in a truck with a driver when I leave for Jamestown, and he'll be able to bring the crate back with him."

"Are you looking forward to Jamestown?"

"In a way, yes."

"Do you know people there?"

"A few." He swung the wheel gently and headed up towards Owen Shepton's house. "Would you like to see Jamestown, Brownie?"

"Yes." But she took care not to sound eager. "Donn's invited me to spend a few days in Lagos while his sister's with him."

"Really?" Cool and speculative, he glanced at her. "Once you start working you won't be due for leave for six months."

"When do I start on salary?"

"With the rains - right now."

"Does that mean I shan't be allowed to go to Lagos?"

"You could manage a long weekend, by car. Hell of a ride in the rains, but if your happiness depends on it, I'll take you myself."

"Dear, dear. Does the well-being of your staff mean so much to you?"

"Don't mock - it isn't your line." He halted the car near the steps and peered through the rain-scarred window. "Those damned steps! Earth with log supports - for cheapness. You know. Owen should be running a grocer's shop."

"He must know what he's doing."

Nick shrugged. "Chiefly, he's laying up trouble for me. When he retires I'll be responsible for the results of his short-sightedness."

"You'll get through," she said callously. "May I go in now?"

"Stay put for a second. I'll come round."

But by the time he had reached her she was out of the car and slamming the door. He took her about the waist and swung her upwards, past those treacherous steps and into the porch. He opened the door and switched on the light, and Vanessa entered the living-room, took off the sou-wester and shook out her hair.

Because she couldn't endure it for long she became conventional. "Thank you for a lovely evening. I enjoyed it very much."

"Good. You must come again." His smile was sardonic. "Why do you get jittery when you're alone with me?"

"I'm not jittery and I'm not alone with you. Uncle Owen is just along the corridor."

"You're scared, just the same. And if you won't tell me the reason, I'll tell you. To you, I'm the epitome of realism - and you can't live with realism. So, but there it is."

"You're wrong. I've never been afraid of the truth."

"Oh, come now," he scoffed. "You're confusing things. The truth, to a romantic, is glossed by a code. Realism is fact." He grinned, annoyingly. "I'll give you illustrations, if you like. Take that engagement of yours, in England. The truth of it was that you were anxious about your father and very lonely, so you cottoned to this Keith chap - on his terms. You liked him and were grateful, but he knew you weren't in love with him."

A little tightly, she said, "Would I have promised to marry him if I hadn't loved him?"

"Yes," consideringly, "in the circumstances I think you would. Because then you didn't even know what love was."

"You think I know more about it now?"

"Yes, Brownie," with maddening calm, "I'm sure you do."

Inside, Vanessa was hot and flurried, and she felt an idiot standing there in the large waterproof. Yet there was a fascination in speaking with Nick like this.

"All right, that's one example/" she conceded. "But I don't admit there's a difference between plain truth and romantic truth."

"Let's use the word fact. When you arrived in Bolambo you were off men, and I don't blame you. But even you realised it's foolish to miss

a lot of fun simply because one man turned out disappointing. After that, though, you slipped up. Instead of sliding wholeheartedly into a light affair, you teetered on the edge of another of those sticky relationships - with Hewson. And then you met Donn Grieves, and wondered if he might not be safer, in the long run."

"You're guessing. I've never thought seriously about any of the men here!"

His smile hardened. "They've thought about you, and I refuse to believe you're without intuition. Donn's invited you up to Lagos, and Hewson ... well, he's as sunk as any shy young man can be, simply because you did a job on his arm which any man here could have done more efficiently."

Her eyes blazed up at him. "That's a horrid way of putting it! He wouldn't let me call anyone else and I did my best."

"Hey, don't shout at me. I'm trying to set you right."

"Well, don't bother. Take this horrible coat and go!"

She flung it from her clammy shoulders and held it out. He took it, but quite suddenly there was something in his posture that reminded her of a leopard tensed to spring. He was gazing at the base of her throat, where a pulse beat frantically.

In soft, deadly tones he said, "You weren't wearing that thing during the evening."

Her fingers flew to the aquamarine and covered it. Scarlet-cheeked, she answered, "It's not mine. I wore it to ... to please Claud."

"Did he want to give it to you?" he asked tersely.

"He didn't think of it as something valuable. He told me he found it and had had it set more or less by accident."

"I know all about it; it's a perfect stone and unusually large. Did he actually give it to you tonight?"

"I didn't accept."

"But you're wearing it!"

Her hands were moistly clenched at her sides, her green eyes bright and hard. "You wouldn't understand this, but I wore it just for tonight, because I wanted to avoid hurting his feelings. Claud's had no experience of ... of dealing with women. He thought that because the thing cost him nothing I'd have no qualms about accepting it. I didn't want to hurt him, so I hedged a bit and eventually let him clasp it for me."

"Very pretty," in metallic tones. "I suppose you can still feel his kiss on the back of your neck!"

She was trembling now, more angry than she had ever been in her life. "Don't judge other men by your own actions in certain situations. I don't doubt that you exact a toll for every compliment you dole out, and I'm quite sure that you'll suitably reward Lorin Grieves for the magnificent show she put on in your house tonight. That's up to you! But don't..."

"Stop that!" He had gripped her arm and was shaking her. "I'm trying to keep things normal. Claud Hewson is vulnerable; that fine sensitive nature of his that appeals to you so much could easily crack under a certain kind of pressure. If you were genuinely in love with him ..."

"How do you know I'm not?"

His hand dropped and he stared at her. "That's right," he said coolly, "how do I? Something of that kind has happened to you, I'm certain of it - but I didn't somehow think those innocent emotions of yours would light on Claud. He's too much like you."

She turned away. "You've said that before, and I don't care for it."

"Realism again," he said, with a trace of acid. "Give me that pendant - I'll return it to him."

She stood back quickly. "I'll return it myself. It's between Claud and me, and has nothing to do with you."

His gaze was direct, his eyes like chips of grey ice. His voice was quiet and edged. "Claud's welfare has a good deal to do with me. He has a busy time ahead and I won't have him upset."

"Is that all that matters - his work?" When Vanessa became angry either her voice trembled or the words stuck in her throat. This time the tremor had its way, and to her consternation she felt that tears weren't far off. And that made her angrier. She lifted her chin. "You're quite sure you've nothing to learn about human relationships, aren't you? You know every angle and every answer. But there's one thing that seems to have escaped you. There are men and women who couldn't tolerate the thought of living as you do; they need a proper home and companionship - someone who loves and understands them. You feel that deep down every married man is in revolt against the bondage, but it isn't so ..."

"Sure it isn't," he broke in roughly. "If we're still talking about Hewson what I said stands. It would be better for me to give him that pendant and tell him frankly that you're not in the market. Unless ..." with cold watchfulness, "you *are* available?"



She ignored the final question. "You've crashed in on something that concerns only Claud and me. Thank you for bringing me home. Goodnight."

"You're not shedding your obligations that easily," he said grimly. "I'll certainly have a word with Hewson before you see him again."

She stared at him, white-faced. "If you speak to him about me he'll think the whole business is far more important than it is. Nick, please, don't do anything at all about it. I... I'm begging you not to."

For a taut moment he studied her, and poignantly it came to her that the strong masculinity in him made him more handsome and ... and attractive than he had any right to be.

"All right, Brownie," he said with a decisive nod. "This time I'll leave it to you. But take care, my child. You're not equipped to deal carelessly with other people. You couldn't even do it with Merle, and it's a cinch you'd never be able to handle Hewson with anything but silk gloves. Return that pendant to him tomorrow, and don't be sentimental with him about it. Is it a promise?"

She was relieved, but vexed. "It's a promise, though you've no right to demand it. And now," rather tightly, "goodnight!"

"Goodnight, infant," he said coolly.

The door opened on the roar of the rain, closed again and she was alone with her fast-beating heart.

After that it was a quiet weekend. Uncle Owen remained a little unwell and spent most of the time in bed with an electric fan spinning on the table beside him. Grave, hard-working Dr. Ziegen told

Vanessa that Mr. Shepton was enervated by the climate but otherwise in normal health. Exertion at the moment would definitely harm him, but there was no cause for alarm. For safety's sake, he himself would look in each morning..

It was while the doctor was making his call on Sunday morning that Donn Grieves came in to say goodbye. Vanessa was glad that she had time only to shake his hand and wish him a good trip, and only momentarily did she rather regret Lorin had not come with him. Far better, really, to wave goodbye to the eager, breathless young woman as she and her brother drove away to the port with Nick after lunch. But as it happened, Vanessa was sleeping when the Grieves left. Worry over Uncle Owen and a late night or two had depleted her reserves, and when she lay back in the lounge she slipped at once into a sleep which ended, abruptly, at four-thirty, when Ngomo blundered along the corridor with a tea-tray.

Most of that evening she read. Thunder was grumbling in the distance, but it ceased before the rain started. Not a heavy rain this time, but it cooled the air, When Nick came, at about nine-thirty, his hair was damp and dark, his shoulders splodged but not drenched.

He gave his usual greeting. "Hi, there. All right for me to go into the bedroom?"

"Yes, do. Uncle Owen is expecting you."

"Good."

She heard him beat a tattoo with his fingernails on the bedroom door, and then his voice, strong and quiet, as he addressed Uncle Owen. A little restlessly, she got up and went to the window, where the curtain moved in the rainy breeze. She could smell the tall mangoes and breadfruit trees, the sweet drifting perfume of mahogany. With Nick in the house everything became more acute and penetrating, and of

their own volition her nerves tightened up. Why was it that the simple fact of his coming here to see Uncle Owen should create a situation? She didn't know the answer to that; she only knew that wherever Nick and a woman might come together, there a "situation" was bound to exist. His very magnetism and vitality compelled it.

The reflection made her more cool than usual when he came back to the living-room. She took care to be the first to speak, very casually.

"So you're off to Jamestown tomorrow morning. Looking forward to it, still?"

"So-so. If Owen weren't unwell I'd take you along."

"I can wait. I hope your business there will be successful."

"I'm sure it will. Did you get rid of the aquamarine?"

"Yes."

"Good girl." His eyes mocked. "Are you really bored, or only pretending that I bore you?"

"I'm not bored - only being my simple self."

"You're not so simple. Owen says he doesn't want anything more tonight. How about coming over with me, for some coffee?"

"No, thank you. I'll say goodnight, if you don't mind."

He shrugged and his smile sharpened, but all he said was, "Suit yourself. I'll be leaving at about seven in the morning, so I shan't see you again till Wednesday or Thursday. So long."

Next morning the sun dragged the moisture from the earth, shone through wisps of hot mist for a while and then became obscured by a

heavy haze. After she had admitted the chief clerk to Uncle Owen's bedroom, Vanessa decided to go over to the creche. In the burdened heat the surrounding forest smelled of mud and growth and decaying foliage. What would it be like when the rains got into their stride? Appalling, soggy oppressiveness, mosquitoes galore, damp rot... well, they were all part of the tropics, weren't they? Vanessa was beginning to have little patience with people who visit the tropics only during the dry and comparatively temperate season and boast about it. Whatever might happen during her stay in Bolambo, she would leave it knowing the best and the worst about the climate!

To her delight, she found the huge crate of supplies inside the creche shelter, the top already prised open and a rough table set alongside to receive the articles as she extricated them from the packing. And what a selection of items! There were cups, feeding bottles, plates, dishes and spoons in gay plastic ware, towels and teaclothes, bowls, saucepans, a large kettle, a frying pan, a portable paraffin stove, some plastic curtains ready for hanging, a few picture books and alphabet blocks and even, at the bottom of the crate, a dozen thin beige blankets and a large plastic ground-sheet. Nick's woman friend in Lagos certainly knew what was needed to establish a creche.

Till noon, she was busy putting up the curtaining to form a kitchenette in one corner of the shelter. Workmen brought a cupboard, and this was filled with most of the contents of the crate; the crate itself, she learned, would be converted into a chest of drawers to hold the linen and the supply of overalls and rompers which the local store had promised to deliver.

From the foreman of the labourers Vanessa learned that some of the women were already out in the plantations, hoeing between last season's seedlings. Their children were being cared for by other women, but next week the planting would begin.

"And that's when we'll officially open the creche," Vanessa told him, in the slow, careful syllables she invariably used when talking to Africans. "But before then we'll have the few children whose mothers are working, and any mother who wishes may come and help." She saw he understood, and asked, "Can you have everything ready by tonight?"

He nodded. "But there is still some chairs and tables being made, missus. They will take two-three more days."

"That's fine. We shan't need everything at once. Can you make sure that all the women will know we're open from tomorrow for any questions they may have? Do you think they'd all come at about ten o'clock? - if you were here you could translate for me."

This pleased the foreman. He gave a vigorous nod and smiled happily. The missus could depend on him. Cheerfully Vanessa surveyed the long shelter from its doorless opening. The matting lay as flat as if it were on cement, the furniture already installed was bright and shiny with paint, and the plastic curtaining, a vivid white patterned with scarlet berries and green leaves, made the place gay and inviting.

As she went up the steps of the bungalow she was sweating a little, but not too hot. Her hair was tousled, the green eyes preoccupied and her lips faintly smiling as she thought of many things she would like to do out there at the creche. They'd take time, but...

She blinked in the dimness of the living-room, stared for a moment before a sudden icy sensation swept over her skin. She stopped precipitately, felt her smile become fixed.

"Hallo," she managed. "I ... I thought you'd left ... yesterday."

Lorin Grieves was smiling her excited, little-girl smile. Framed by the yellow curly hair, her face Seemed very pretty and round and childlike, and it was only in the hazel eyes that she looked her age. She was wearing a loose white shirt with a green linen skirt, and her arms emerged pink and rounded from the rolled sleeves; perhaps the appealing touch was in her locked fingers.

"I came over before," she said in a rush, "but your servant said you might not be here till lunch time. Didn't you really know that I'd stayed on in Bolambo?"

By now Vanessa had recovered somewhat. Fleetinglly she remembered Nick's inviting her along for coffee last night, and for some reason the recollection made her feel a little sick.

"No, I took it you'd left with Donn. How long are you staying?"

"I don't know." She slid away from the subject. "I didn't want to leave, of course, but I couldn't say so, though I'm afraid I did drop a hint. It was such a relief when Nick suggested I stay; I was so glad he couldn't let me go. He's usually so self-sufficient."

An odd nausea rising in her throat, Vanessa asked, "When did he ask you to stay - only yesterday?"

Lorin gave her eager nod. "It was while we were at breakfast. I thought Donn would have told you when he came over to say goodbye, or that as I wasn't with him, you'd have guessed I was staying on. Nick and I drove with Donn to the port, and we had an early dinner with a friend of Nick's before driving home." She paused. "Didn't he come in to see you last night - Nick?"

"To see Mr. Shepton," Vanessa said, in flat tones. "Would you like an iced drink?"

"No, thank you. It was just a ... a social call. By the way," with a winsome blush, "Nick slept at Mr. Sanders's house last night, I haven't seen him since we said goodnight at about eleven."

A tender goodnight, judging by the high colour. Cold right through, Vanessa nevertheless contrived a smiling calm. "You'll be at a loose end till he comes back, I suppose?"

"In a way, though I'm planning to spring-clean Nick's house. The curtains have been washed this morning, and I intend cleaning out all the cupboards and having the rugs freshened up." The locked fingers were twisting together. "The best thing about Nick is that he notices everything. And that means that he likes a well ordered home." Lorin laughed self-consciously. "Donn tells me, on the quiet, that I work it to death - the home-making. I always say it's the sort of person I am, that I can't suddenly change myself."

"It's a wonderful way to be," Vanessa remarked helpfully, and could think of nothing to add.

But Lorin needed no encouragement. The fact that inwardly she was deliriously happy came through her staccato tones and her movements.

"Have you been over at the new creche this morning? I thought you might have. Nick told me about it - that you're going on the company's staff and will run the place. You'll probably be marvellous in the job; you're so quiet and not a bit excitable. You look wise, too. Don't you think it's strange how very *unwise* some people can be - even old people? You must be two or three years younger than I am, and yet I'm sure you wouldn't get so keyed-up about ... about being in love, as I am. Maybe you couldn't love as deeply as I do, but in a way, don't you think that's all to the good? I mean ... loving someone makes you awfully vulnerable, doesn't it? Not that I'd miss the experience!"

There was more of the same sort of thing. Guff, Vanessa called it to herself, but it got under her skin and remained there, even after Lorin had tripped away to the house she was sprucing up for Nick.

Vanessa ate a salad with Uncle Owen. He was up now, and had had the private accounts books transferred to his room, where he proposed to work at them whenever necessary. That way, he could keep things up to date without exertion. Vanessa conversed normally with him, while her thoughts wandered out towards Nick's bungalow.

Why had Nick kept Lorin at Bolambo? He never did one thing without a good reason, but for the life of her Vanessa could see no reason at all for prolonging Lorin's stay - unless, by her practised womanliness, the girl had made a deep impression. Nick was probably deriving a grim sort of amusement from his present position. Two unmarried young women in the settlement and neither of them affair-minded ! Vanessa Lane he could write off - use her for the company's benefit and bait her whenever he felt that way.

But Lorin Grieves was a different proposition; she wanted a husband, and would be so grateful when she got him that merely being his doormat would give her all the ecstasy she needed. Nick with a doormat wife? Well, Vanessa thought tiredly, nothing was impossible in this world, and who could say that he wouldn't take the girl in hand and sharpen her intellect? He had only to convince Lorin that he loved her, and she would blossom just as he wished. A wife made to order, by Nick himself.

Upon which disheartening reflection Vanessa decided to return to the creche and work.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

**THE** meeting with the African mothers provided enough light relief to keep Vanessa cheerful for hours. After some weeding out, there were about thirty children and twenty mothers squatting on the matting and drinking orange squash from the children's beakers. Vanessa addressed the adults in simple sentences which she had already written out for the purpose and the labourers' foreman translated them into dialect.

There was a pause for questions. Vanessa looked at the black shining faces surmounted by faded turbans, smiled encouragingly and waited. None of the women were old, but sitting there they looked peculiarly wooden, till a whispering broke out among them. Apparently they were urging the more bold among them to put a query. Amidst hushed giggling a young woman in a cotton frock of gay nineties vintage voiced her question.

The foreman elucidated: "This mother says she wants to know why the children must come clean and dressed to the nursery. They will play and become dirty again."

Valiantly, Vanessa attempted a reply that would be comprehensible to the audience. "Dirt on children should never grow old. Washing them often is good for them - it kills germs and prevents illness. Dress helps to keep them clean. If you have no clothes for your children we will provide.-them with overalls."

The next question was: "Will the missus show us what these children will be doing all day?"

It was then that the giggling turned to grunted laughter which, during the following hour or so, became shrieks of merriment. The women saw a piccaninny thoroughly washed, powdered and fed and put to rest in a wooden cot beneath a thin blanket. "Why powder?" they

queried. "The baby is not a cassava loaf to be floured before baking." They saw a lesson in colours and counting, a game of "touch" and solemn-faced toddlers learning to stretch their arms and legs in unison. "All that trouble, for piccans!" they exclaimed.

After that Vanessa herself derived heartwhole enjoyment from an impromptu piece of showmanship by the Africans. The women began to sing and clap their hands, swaying their bodies as they sat, and gracefully and naturally the black children responded. Music and rhythm was in their bones; not one of them lacked it. The tiny bare feet stomped, the shoulders jerked first one way and then the other, the small fists came together and the large dark eyes rolled with bliss. They were lost in an enchantment of primitive sound and poetry. It was gay and moving, and at the end of it Vanessa found herself laughing and yet misty-eyed.

The creche was launched, and blessed by a deluge of rain that lasted from four that afternoon till dawn next morning. Vanessa awoke to find the house moated and full of lizards and red ants with a scorpion and a few bullfrogs thrown in for variety. Lazily, Ngomo flung out the scorpion and swept away some of the other pests, but Vanessa gathered that the livestock would disappear automatically when the waters vanished.

At breakfast Uncle Owen was tetchy. "I'd forgotten these things. I'd even forgotten how wrung-out one feels at this season. I believe I'll go up and join Merle as soon as we hear from her. Would you mind, Vanessa?"

"Of course not. It would be good for you."

"You could go with me, if you liked."

"I'd stay and work - for a while, anyway." She paused. "May I ask you something personal, Uncle Owen?"

"I'll answer it, if I can."

"It's about Paul Charnley." His expression didn't alter, so she went on, "Don't you think you should try and arrange for Merle and Paul to see each other again? They parted in anger, but since then they've had ample time to think things over. It seems such a pity that..."

He broke in, rather brusquely for him. "There's nothing I can do about it, Vanessa. Where men are concerned, Merle has never really been young. She knows how to deal with them, yes, even with a husband. Paul happened to be the wrong man for her, and eventually she came to accept it. You see," hesitantly, "Paul's set of values are different from Merle's. She and I think alike, but Paul... well, we found him rather weak on loyalty towards us. That was what caused the split between those two, and it's what will keep them apart. I hate divorce. Even though Merle's mother left us, I never divorced her - but Merle is young and she has her life ahead. She's bound to find someone more suitable than Paul."

"Nick Brandis?" Vanessa heard herself asking.

"I don't know." With weary humour he added, "The pretty Grieves girl is ready and willing. If Merle had known there was a possibility of an unmarried girl coming to Bolambo she would probably have remained here, on guard!"

Vanessa Lane, it seemed, did not count. Good old Vanessa, who could be used as a housekeeper to Merle's father, and depended upon to remain quiet and unobtrusive as far as Nick was concerned. Vanessa shook herself; it was pointless to think along those lines about Merle.

"So you won't be getting in touch with Paul?" she asked.

"Even if I wanted to contact him, I couldn't. I don't know where he is."

"Do you think he'll come here when his leave is up?"

"It's possible, and that's another reason why it would be better for me to join Merle for a few weeks. He and I haven't anything more to say to each other." He got up from the table. "I think I'll go over to the office this morning, to check up on one or two things. With Nick away ..." He left it there, and went out.

For a few minutes, while she tidied her room and pulled waterproof covers over her shoes, Vanessa conjectured about Uncle Owen's look of defeat. It wasn't entirely due to the climate, she was sure. Perhaps he felt he had failed Merle, and that in a way he had also failed Paul. After all, it had been he who had introduced them to each other, and their marriage had pleased him mightily. He was such a sweet old thing that the break-up of their marriage would, in any case, have hurt him a good deal. But if he was blaming himself his unhappiness over the business must be tremendous. Vanessa couldn't help reminding herself that Merle wasn't really worth all the pain she caused various people.

What could Paul have done, to make both wife and father-in-law ashamed of him? Something that he himself was ashamed of now, it seemed, for he had resigned rather than return to work alongside the other men at Bolambo. It was all most puzzling.

Vanessa put in that day at the creche while the mothers began the planting of rice in the riverside swamps. The two women who had been hired to help her were cheerful and slapdash but willing to learn, though both were afraid of the paraffin stove. As lunch time approached Vanessa, who had been organising some games, caught a strong smell of burning. She ran into the kitchen enclosure and found one of the women there, cross-legged on the floor beside a steaming

pot of soup. Beneath the pot, in a patch burnt out of the beautiful matting, leapt a compact little fire of twigs and split logs. Complacently, the African woman was sprinkling water in a circle round the fire. "Will keep the fire small, missus," she explained blandly.

That day, Vanessa stayed with the children till five o'clock. She had no sooner had a bath and got into a fresh linen dress than Claud Hewson came in, carrying some mail.

"Haven't seen much of you lately," he said in his shy tones. "How are things going?"

"Very well. You're deep in planting, I believe."

"Yes. The land near the river is well covered, so we're pretty safe in going ahead. It's always risky when the rains come early, but each day lessens the chance of a long dry spell."

"Is the mail for Uncle Owen? Do you want to see him?"

"Is he up and about today?"

"He was at the office this morning."

"Oh. I wonder why he didn't pick up this mail? It's been there all day."

"He's not quite himself." She smiled. "Like to have some supper with us, Claud?"

A little colour came into his face. "I'd like it very much, but .. . did you know Nick had warned me against fraternising?"

She hid her vexation. "With me? Why would he do that?"

He looked away, a little awkwardly. "He said I'm impressionable, and I suppose it's true. I know so little about women that I'm bound to let myself fall for the first one who's kind to me."

"Nick isn't always right," she said gently. "You won't fall for me, Claud, but I may have made you more aware of women. Next time you go on leave you'll look at them differently, and I wouldn't mind betting you'll find one who's just right for you. I hope so."

"You don't mind my being frank about it?"

"I like it, because it shows we're friends. And as we're friends, what about staying for supper?"

"Thanks. You've got yourself a guest."

There were two guests, actually, and it was just as well, for Uncle Owen decided to have an omelette in bed. The second guest was Lorin Grieves. She came in to borrow reading matter.

"Nick's books are beyond me, I'm afraid," she confessed, shifting her limpid glance from Claud to Vanessa, "and I thought you might have something a little more feminine. A couple of magazines, perhaps?"

"There's a pile of stuff on the lowest shelf of the bookcase - you can take your choice. Would you like to stay for the evening?"

"You mean it?" Lorin looked delighted and grateful. "Nick did say that if I felt lonely I must come along to you, but I haven't liked to thrust myself on you. You're such a busy person."

"Not too busy to be friendly. Will you excuse me a minute while I chase up the boy?"

It was an ordinary meal, not up to Lorin's standards, but she seemed to enjoy it. In spite of a determination to the contrary, Vanessa caught

herself watching the other girl and assessing her once again. She was completely sunk about Nick; that much was obvious. She wasn't a bit interested in talking about anything or anyone else, and when Claud mentioned his crops a distant look came into her eyes and a smile played about her lips. Crops, trees, the climate, African housing, the creche - none of them quite penetrated in her consciousness. She was away somewhere, perhaps in the future, with Nick.

At about ten Claud rose to go. "I have to be up by five, and it'll be a long day tomorrow. It's been a grand evening, Vanessa."

"Good. You must come again."

"I'll see Miss Grieves up the road, if you like."

But Miss Grieves gave him her round-eyed, childish look and said, "If Vanessa isn't tired I'd like to stay a little longer. I can see myself home - truly."

"I can wait," he murmured.

"No, please."

Claud took the blatant hint and said goodnight. When he had gone Lorin knelt at the bookcase and began to look through Merle's magazines. She didn't look up as she said, "He's rather a dear thing - your Claud. Are you going to marry him?"

"No."

Lorin gave an embarrassed little laugh. "I'm so silly - wanting everyone to get married, just because I'm happy myself." A pause. "I was hoping to find some recipes in the magazines. I do like to work to a cook-book if I can, but there's nothing of that kind in Nick's house."

"I'm sure you know how to prepare hundreds of dishes." Vanessa felt rather dry in the throat as she added, "Do you make all the meals over there now?"

"Oh, no!" with a tinkling laugh. "These recipes I want are for tomorrow night. Nick said he'd be home in time for dinner, and I want to make it a special one, to welcome him. No guests - just Nick and me. Is that selfish?"

"Not particularly." Vanessa felt used up and inadequate to deal with this superlatively optimistic young woman. "Has Nick arranged to go on sleeping at Mr. Sanders' house?"

Lorin kept her head lowered, so that from where she sat, Vanessa could see the yellow crown with waves curling out from the centre.

"He said he's arranged it for a night or two," Lorin said softly. "And .. and that brings me to something I wanted to ask you, Vanessa. I do hope you won't think me too full of myself, but it's terribly important to me. You must see that my-staying in Nick's house while he has to sleep elsewhere places me in an awkward position. You see, I can't turn him out of his own house for more than two or three nights, and yet I desperately want to stay. And Nick wants me to stay," she ended swiftly.

"If he does," Vanessa managed in level tones, "he'll arrange it for you. Leave it to him."

"I... I'd rather not. I've known him only a week or so, and it's too soon for a man to ... to declare himself. During these days, while Nick has been away, I've been trying to gather enough courage to ask you to invite me here." She looked up suddenly, her eyes brilliant, her mouth a little uncontrolled. "Will you do that for me? Let me sleep here? I promise I'd be no trouble at all."



Alarmed at the sudden angry heat within her, Vanessa got up and took her time about finding a cigarette. Her voice was quite cool and measured as she answered, "This is Mr. Shepton's house and there are only two bedrooms, his and mine. I feel that if Nick wants you to stay in Bolambo he'll arrange things for you. He may even ask me what you've asked."

"Yes, he might, mightn't he?" The excited undertone sharpened the light voice. "If he does, will you be able to manage it?"

"Yes, probably."

"And if he doesn't, will you do it... for me?"

Somehow, Vanessa replied, "I might. We'll decide when he gets back."

Clasping an armful of magazines, Lorin leapt to her feet. For a dreadful second Vanessa thought the other girl was going to hug her; faintly, she thought, "If she does, I'll scream." But Lorin waltzed a few steps, shook back the spectacular hair and looked through the window as she let out a happy sigh.

"It's a lovely night and I'm still not sleepy. I'll borrow all these mags if I may, and I'll sit up in bed and compile the most marvellous menu ever. Goodnight, Vanessa, you sweet thing, and thanks a million!"

Twenty minutes later Vanessa slipped into bed. Her teeth were tight, her jaw ached with tension. In her throat was a lumpy rawness she couldn't account for. She must be more tired than she had thought.

Next day, the whole settlement was blanketed in thick dark cloud. It draped itself over the treetops, creating a steaming oven in which it was impossible to move without oozing pints of sweat. Great planting weather, of course, but devitalising to the human body. Even the

native babies and toddlers were willing to lie in the cots or on the matting and doze. Vanessa was thankful she had almost nothing to do.

Uncle Owen kept to his room with the fan whirring. At lunch time, the clerk brought over some accounts.

Politely he said, "Please ask Mr. Owen if he wants the car."

"The car?" echoed Vanessa. "Why should he suddenly want it?"

A pleasant shrug. "He say yesterday he want the car two days. He had it only one day."

"You mean he had the car yesterday?"

The man looked mystified. "Missus not know?"

"No, I didn't. He's been so unwell I didn't think he'd go out driving in this weather. Who went with him?"

"Mr. Owen drive himself."

"Oh." Vanessa did not try to work it out. "Well, I'm sure he won't want the car today. He's in bed. I'll give him the accounts - thank you very much."

She did slip quietly into Uncle Owen's room and place the papers on his desk, but she did not disturb him. He lay with his eyes closed and she looked at him anxiously. Originally, his face had been fine and handsome, and even now that it was decaying a little it had the combination of good bone structure and patrician elegance. But there was also something a little pitiful about it, a look of weakness. He oughtn't to stay here; he must have known that even before Merle left, and no doubt Merle had known it too. Back in England, Merle had always noticed any difference in her father. She might care little

about others, but to every mood or slight ailment in her father she had been hypersensitive. What could have happened to change them both so radically?

Vanessa came out of the room and wedged the door ajar, to allow plenty of air to circulate. She rested for a while in the living-room, had an iced drink and made her way back to the children's centre. It was turning into one of the longest days she had ever known.

The rain began just after she had returned to the house that evening. Thunder, lightning, the smashing roar of the torrent, windows wide to admit the smell of mud and blessedly cool air. She ate alone, from a tray, drank two cups of coffee and smoked a cigarette. And slowly the ache in her mind became dulled, her muscles slackened and her nerves stopped jumping. Now that the storm had made certain that Nick would not call tonight she could go to bed.

She stirred, got into pyjamas, took a look at herself in the mirror and decided her hair looked frightful, lank and dun-coloured with the sweat of the past couple of days. She shampooed it, set it with a few hairpins and decided to sit up till it dried a little. She filled a glass from a bottle of sterilised milk, took a biscuit from the tin, settled herself in an armchair and fitfully studied one of the magazines Lorin had left on a chair.

The steady beat of the rain, the intermittent gurgle and splash from the thatch, the growls of distant thunder, formed a comforting barrier between Vanessa and the rest of Bolambo. In the square-necked, sleeveless pyjamas she felt cool and unrestricted, and it occurred to her that this seclusion forced by the rains each year was probably of immense mental value to the white people here. She lay back and closed her eyes, breathed in the mud-smelling coolness from the open window and dozed a little.

She heard the rap on the door, was startled wide awake. She listened and it came again, peremptorily. She looked about her wildly for a robe that wasn't there, and then went over to the door.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Nick. Open the door."

"I can't. I'm just going to bed."

"Don't be an idiot. I won't keep you a minute. Come on, I'm wet."

"You can't see Uncle Owen. He's asleep."

"All right. He's asleep." Nick sounded exasperated. "I want to leave some papers that cover my visit to Jamestown. I shan't have time to call in before I start work in the morning. Open the door and take them."

Had she thought for a moment she might have realised that Nick could hand her the papers through the window. Both door and window were in the narrow veranda and therefore protected from the worst of the rain. But it became too late for thinking; she had opened the door a few inches and Nick had shoved his foot inside and shouldered his way in. He surveyed her, a mocking glint in his eye.

"Well, well. Two jampots high and full of fight. Missed me?"

"Dreadfully."

"I almost wish you meant it. I thrive on complications."

She nodded pointedly at the bulging manila envelope in his hand. "Shall I take care of it till morning?"

He dropped it on to a dining chair. "They're only signed agreements to lend us some shipping, and a letter or two." He paused. "Lorin tells me you've started up the creche. Why the rush?"

"It seems the right time, with the planting beginning. I was glad to get busy." She indicated the wet shoulders of his raincoat. "Those things never are waterproof. I wouldn't stand about in it if I were you."

"You're right, Brownie," he said equably, and sloughed it. He pushed it out into the porch, where his hat lay, and came in again, to lean against a wall and get out cigarettes. "How is Owen?"

She wished he would go. But he lounged there looking clever, lazy, good-humoured and sharp-eyed, offering her cigarettes and raising a thick eyebrow when she declined.

"Uncle Owen is no better and no worse," she said offhandedly. "Dr. Ziegen won't really commit himself, but he says that at the moment there's no cause for alarm. I wanted to let Merle know about her father, but Uncle Owen won't have it."

"It wouldn't do any good to bring her back here. Far more sensible to send Owen up to her."

"He's realised that. He says he'll go as soon as we have a letter from her."

"And what will you do then - stick it here in the house, alone?"

She nodded, and something prompted her to say carelessly, "Unjess you'd like Lorin to keep me company."

"It's certainly an idea," he conceded, with a narrow-eyed smile. "We must find out if she'll agree to it." Whether he meant it was was

impossible to gauge. "She says you've been very sweet to her. Thanks."

"It was a pleasure."

He smoked for a few seconds in silence. Then, with probing in his level tones: "Do you disapprove of Lorin being my guest?"

In a fair imitation of his coolness she answered, "Why should I? She's a very pretty and charming girl, and I understand you're being very correct. If it's the sort of situation you like - and you said a moment ago that you thrive on complications - I can't see anything wrong with it. Even if I did..."

"Yes? Even if you did?"

"It's not my concern, is it?"

"Almost everything one does in this place becomes the concern of others. The fact that you had Hewson here for dinner last night, for instance." She offered no comment, and he continued, "If Lorin hadn't looked in, uninvited, you two would have dined alone, I suppose?"

"Yes," calmly, "with Uncle Owen just along the passage. Tonight you've no doubt dined alone with Lorin, and she didn't have Donn in the house."

"The difference being," he said with maddening smoothness, "that I'm hardly likely to let the situation go to my head, or get out of hand. Neither you nor Hewson is capable of handling your emotions. He's only just becoming aware that he has any, and you ..." His smile was cynical, "you're so scared of the real thing that you're continually trying to convince yourself that what you felt for the so-and- so in England drained you dry. Sometimes," a savage note creeping into

his voice, "I feel you may be right. But you stand there, your eyes as clear as a child's and yet with a secret brooding expression that ..." He stopped abruptly, but added almost at once, "Mustn't frighten you, must I? You're probably just what you look on the surface - a kid made ready for bed!"

"And very sleepy," she said a little unsteadily, tightening her hands at her sides to prevent the reflex action of touching the pins in her flattened hair. "I think you'd better go now."

"You're right. I have to pick up a few things at the house and go on to Sanders' place. Maybe," with quiet malice, "I shall find Lorin as I found you - all slicked up for bed."

"If you do," she said huskily, "I'm sure you'll manage the scene expertly, and leave her yearning."

With-a vicious movement he flicked his cigarette outside. Teeth closed, he said, "I've never known any woman go out of her way to beg for reprisals as you do. One of these days, my child, you're going to get just what you're asking for!" ..

Trembling, but controlling her voice, she answered, "In the long run we all get what we ask for. You, I believe, are rather desperately needing an affair, and maybe it's because I was unco-operative from the start that everything I do makes you contemptuous or angry. But seeing that you have drive and ingenuity, you may find solace in Lorin Grieves. Good luck to you - but leave me alone."

He was half turned towards the door as he looked at her, a lean, hard-bitten man with purpose in his grey eyes. Vanessa's dark-lashed eyes were hollowed and unnaturally bright, her lips red and sweetly curved, and in the lamplight her skin was honey-tinted with a flush high over the cheekbones. The damp curls were drying and fluffing slightly at her temples and close to the nape of her neck. Perhaps it

was the young, defenceless look which made him draw a quick breath and grip a fistful of the damp hair. It didn't hurt, but instinctively her head went back and she looked straight into his leaping eyes.

It must have been sudden overwhelming fright which made her whisper the unpardonable. "Take your hands off me, Nick ... and don't ever touch me again. I can't ... *bear* to be touched by you !"

His hands dropped as if scorched. He swung about and the door clapped shut. Vanessa could not move. All she was aware of was shock, and blinding, conflicting emotions; and of a sense of finality.

It is a strange but incontrovertible fact that even big crises in one's life are not outwardly world-shaking. During the following couple of days Vanessa felt numb but desperate, yet life went on more or less as before. She spent hours at the nursery centre, made a few light, appetising dishes for Uncle Owen, and did oddments of sewing. It rained, the sun beat down upon the drenched forest and drew the moisture back into the sky, and it rained again. Claud Hewson worked throughout the daylight hours and slept away the darkness; Dr. Ziegen treated a mounting number of cases of West Coast "cough", that strange, chesty ailment which was a concomitant of the rains; and the other men presumably went about their usual tasks. Vanessa did not see Nick, but Lorin came over - to borrow some canned milk and a vase, to beg a couple of the new pink orchids from the front border, to talk with a bewildered mesmerised expression, about Nick and his appreciation of her cooking. Lorin Grieves was living in a heaven of her own making. She sparkled, and walked with a spring in her step.

To Vanessa, she confessed a little feverishly, "I didn't teil you this the other night because I'd put it deliberately right out of my mind, but when Donn left last Sunday it was arranged that he'd make a week's



tour of the agents and that I'd join the boat as it came back, next Sunday, and we'd go on home together. And now I'm in a sort of dilemma."

Vanessa tried to be sympathetic. "You still want to stay? If you like, you can tell Nick we've a spare bed."

"That's a way of appealing to him for an invitation, or ... or even more. I can't do it. I've decided," looking down at her fingertips, "that if he doesn't ask me to stay, I'll go. I do feel that if he lets me go, he'll first tell me just how he feels about me."

Vanessa wouldn't have depended on that, but Lorin knew more about her relationship with him than anyone else. She gave a thin smile. "You'll have to be patient, won't you? Is Donn coming here to Bolambo?"

"I don't think so. You know," rather breathlessly, "I've a terribly strong conviction that Nick won't say a thing till we're on our way to meet Donn. He'll want us to be alone, quite alone without fear of interruptions. People are always coming to the house, and he's been extraordinarily busy since he came back from Jamestown. I'm always so anxious about the meals that we don't talk much at table. But he's so understanding and considerate."

Vanessa forced herself to ask, "Did you have your celebration dinner?"

Lorin glowed. "Yes, and it was a great success. And I followed a couple of hints in one of those magazines. It said that a woman and good food by candlelight were a potent set-up, to any man. And I think they were - to Nick!"

When Lorin had gone and Vanessa looked at her reflection a few minutes later, she was not surprised to find it strained and shadowed.

She could see Nick in his candlelit living-room, smiling and appreciative of Lorin's accomplishments and face and figure. Inwardly, perhaps, he would detach himself and give the whole thing an objective scrutiny. But surely the other girl was becoming more than a mere "entrancing piece" to Nick Brandis? And she would leave an emptiness that reminded him, at every turn, of her cleverness in the home. Vanessa blinked the ache from her eyes. She was only half succeeding in packing away her emotions below the conscious level; it seemed as if they were continually erupting, to torture her.

Saturday, in the planting season, was a working day like the previous five. On that particularly Sunday, Uncle Owen invited Claud Hewson and Sanders, the technician, to lunch, and they talked of crops and maintenance. Owen Shepton was still tired and lacklustre, but he seemed to have come to some sort of decision, for when the guests had gone he said he himself would stroll up to Nick's house.

He looked pale and clammy, and Vanessa said anxiously, "We can get Nick down here. I'll go up and stay with Lorin Grieves so that you two can be alone."

"You do so much, Vanessa," he protested, "and I feel a fraud. I invited you here - but not to work as you do, and run the house. Just let me do this on my own. Nick won't like what I have to say, so I'd better say it up at his place and make a quick get-away." He paused. "I don't mind your knowing, my dear. I'm going to tell Nick that I'm finished here. When I leave it will be for good, and I shall take Merle home to England for a few weeks. There's just one..."

And then Nick appeared in the open doorway.

Uncle Owen coughed, unnecessarily eased his neck in the open-fronted sport shirt and shrugged resignedly. "Hallo, Nick. I was just coming up to see you. Got some news for you - I shall be getting out in a week or two, for good."

Nic's glance slid over Vanessa, came to rest on Uncle Owen's unhealthy pallor. "I'm sorry to hear it, but it's the wise thing to do. Still no word from Merle?"

"A letter takes time, from Tangier. We've no air service. There's something else, Nick. Sit down, won't you?"

"Is it that kind of something else?"

Uncle Owen smiled. "Stop suspecting people; sometimes their intentions are strictly honourable. In this case, mine are. It's about Paul Charnley."

Nick nodded, hitched his trousers and sat on the chair nearest the door. "I thought there must be some special reason for your refusal to see that free-lance surveyor I met in Jamestown. He's a good man."

"I don't doubt it, but in a way I feel responsible in this business. I persuaded Paul to come to the Bolambo development, and I know he was doing an excellent job. He actually liked this hellish place, and would have stayed on the job if ... other things hadn't driven him from it. I want you to promise me something, Nick. When he comes back - and he's bound to, some time before his leave is up - I want you to offer to reinstate him. With Merle and me out of the way he'll have no reason to refuse."

"Except," said Nick laconically, "that we'll all know he couldn't keep his own wife at his side. No man would want to live with that." He sounded thoughtful as he added, "And there's more to it, isn't there? If you didn't trust Charnley, why should I?"

Uncle Owen's eyes became a little glassy and his voice shook. "Just give him the opportunity and tell him I insisted on it. That's all I'm asking of you, Nick."

"Very well. We can talk about it again before you leave us. Have you written to the Board in England?"

"I'll write tomorrow, resigning for health reasons. You're automatically in charge, but," another thin smile, "it won't alter things much, will it? You've been running this place from the start. Some time you may realise that I needed this year in West Africa. The opportunity came a bit too late, that's all."

"You've done a fine job," Nick said abruptly. Then he slanted another glance at Vanessa. "You're very quiet. Feel done in after the week's work?"

"Not a bit."

"I'm taking Lorin down to the port to get the coaster. Like to go along for the ride?"

She hesitated warily. "Yes, I think I would. What time are you going?"

"The ship is due in at three and it leaves again at five, after loading. It's three now and the trip takes about forty- five minutes. If we leave at four we'll have fifteen minutes for farewells. Time enough, wouldn't you say?"

"It ought to be. I'll be ready at four."

He got up lazily. "We'll pick you up. I'll come in and see you again this evening, Owen. In fact, you can ask me to dinner if you like."

"Uncle Owen has been having his supper in bed," Vanessa said.

"Not tonight," the older man put in quickly. "Do come, Nick. I'm starting a new set of accounts and we ought to agree on the system. The old one was too cumbersome."

Nick nodded and strolled out. Uncle Owen went to his room, Vanessa changed into a pink and white figured sundress and made an early cup of tea. She knocked on Uncle Owen's door and was invited to enter.

He was lying fully dressed on the blanket, but sat up as she came in. "That's nice of you, my dear. You'll be going out in a few minutes, I suppose. You needn't hurry back - you deserve a change from this place."

"I like Bolambo," she said. "I'm just terrible sorry that you have to go so soon after my arrival."

"I'm afraid I was heading for it some time before you came, but I still had things to do, and ignored it." He gave her the worn smile. "What's the matter between you and Nick? I had the feeling that he'd have worded his invitation more strongly if I hadn't been there."

"Perhaps. He only asked me to go with them because he doesn't fancy forty-five minutes alone with Lorin Grieves. And I accepted simply because I like driving along jungle roads and the little port is fascinating. So we're not doing each other any favours."

"Is that how it is? I thought you'd get along well with Nick. He's bossy and sarcastic, but he's solid right through. And I'll tell you something; he's never claimed his due as regards the development of the concession. I've done very little and taken all the credit."

"I'm not so sure that you've done little," she said, smiling. "Your restraint in expenditure may have been a good thing, and in any case, it hasn't done Nick any harm to chafe a bit. When he takes sole charge he'll be unbearable."

Uncle Owen laughed softly. "I never imagined a woman reacting to Nick like that. Merle's independent, but she never crossed Nick in any way. They were the best of friends." And more soberly, "That's one

thing I really do feel badly about - getting Merle tied up before she met Nick. I had good intentions - but the thing misfired somehow. When I'm fit again I'll take her to the Mediterranean and get her to find a villa for me."

"Well, coming out here will have done that much for you, Uncle Owen - procured the villa you always talked about. It's wonderful to think that a single year could accomplish so much!"

He looked tired, and sank back. "Thanks for the tea,

Vanessa. Have a good time."

She wedged the door and went to her room, collected a handkerchief, took a detached look at her image and walked through to the living-room. Three minutes later, Nick stopped an estate car just outside the house. Vanessa went down the steps and he met her there. Lorin was in the front seat, and Nick said, with quiet satire,

"I'm sure Vanessa won't mind sitting just behind you, Lorin. She prefers to feel untouched."

To which Vanessa made no reply. She slipped into her seat, said hallo to Lorin and made herself thoroughly comfortable. The car jolted over the gravel and on to the main track, wound round the market square and past the township, putting on speed as the road widened. \_

The sun was westering in the sulphurous haze common to the rainy season, and the sky was blue in the east and purple shot with gold elsewhere. Occasionally there was a view of coconut palms climbing the hillsides or of a distant curve of empty beach, and at one point, where they had to slow down to pass a string of basket-laden Africans, Vanessa caught the powerful aroma of dried fish and rancid coconut oil. She saw cultivation - saplings, rice beside the river, an expanse of ridged red soil where a few Sunday workers were planting

seedlings of some sort. And then came tall mangoes drooping their big strong leaves over the road, breadfruit trees, bananas and dense thickets of bamboo.

She answered remarks, saw Lorin's eager profile as she waited, with lips parted, for every syllable from Nick. And then, because she could no longer stave it off, Vanessa watched the girl. And she knew, intuitively, that Lorin was bubbling with happiness and expectancy, with trepidation and uncertainty. And Nick? He was himself, a tolerant lord-of-creation, looking kindly upon the pretty thing at his side and occasionally offering a pointed comment over his shoulder. Nothing would ever touch him closely. Nothing.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**THE** smaller West African coastal towns run more or less to a pattern. There are the shabby wharves; the long waterfront running out of town which is close to the beach on one side and overhung on the other by old cotton trees and palms, mangoes and casuarinas; the town itself, climbing away from the sea in tiers of stained stucco and corrugated iron; trees and palms between the roofs and a series of lush green mountains as a backcloth. Behind the wharves lie the narrow streets of slummy shacks where there are more people crammed within the few alleys than the numbers housed in all the rest of the town and its suburbs.

The Lagos coaster was anchored alongside the stone jetty which thrust out into the bay beyond the sand bar. A crane was lowering sacks into its hold, and as the car neared the small ship Vanessa could see Donn Grieves talking with another seasoned traveller. Donn saw them and left his companion, came down the gangway on to the jetty just as Nick switched off the engine.

"Expected you at least an hour ago," he said. "I even ordered some drinks in the saloon. Got time for a quick one?" He suddenly became aware that Lorin and Nick were not alone. "Vanessa! Gosh, how good to see you."

Those Latin good looks of his were really something, she admitted to herself. And he made one feel expansive and special. She got out of the car, felt his hand on her wrist.

"Did you come to see me, or for the jaunt?" he asked.

"To see you, of course," she replied. "Have you been doing plenty of business?"



"Enough to keep the ants from the pantry. Come aboard, all of you. I'll send a steward out for Lorin's bags."

The saloon of the coaster was not much larger than a first-class cabin, but there was a cushioned seat all round it, a ventilator roared gently and the drinks were served with ice. They all said "Cheers" and sipped, and Vanessa took care not to look at Lorin. She parried Donn's remarks, glanced covertly at her watch and listened to the creaking of the crane till it ceased working.

Then Lorin spoke, jerkily. "We'll be leaving soon. I ought to check up on my luggage."

"It's not really necessary," her brother remarked. "You have the ladies' cabin to yourself this trip. In fact there are only five passengers from here on."

"Still, I'd better make sure."

"I'll go with you," said Nick, as she had probably hoped he would, "just to see that they've taken everything from the car."

They went off, a tall, wide-shouldered, protective man and a nicely rounded, yellow-haired girl in slim-fitting leaf-green. The eyes of the one stranger in the saloon followed them with a regretful, resigned expression; he was the man Donn had been speaking to on deck.

Cradling his glass affectionately, Donn leaned towards Vanessa. "You may not believe this, but I've thought about you quite a bit. I'll bet you haven't thought of me once."

"I've got you there. I thought of you with gratitude. When I unpacked that crate you sent, I didn't find a single breakage."

"Oh, lord. Who wants to be remembered through plastics and enamelware? Are you still coming to see us in Lagos?"

"I doubt it. I mentioned it to Nick and he wasn't in favour. I'm working now."

"Hang it, I always get the thin end. Well, it was a pleasant prospect while it lasted." He took down the last of his drink. "Been seeing much of Lorin?"

"Quite a lot. She was there alone while Nick was in Jamestown." She met his eyes briefly. "I'm afraid she's a goner."

"Yes, I noticed." He sighed. "I didn't want to leave her there, but the thing came up and was disposed of within minutes. Lorin said she wasn't keen on going down the coast to the agents and I, like a fool, said we'd be coming back this way, and the next thing I knew it was arranged that she stay on in Bolambo till today. I was worried, but with Nick away for three days I thought nothing much could come of it. Today, she's all smiles and excitement. It's a bit tough on Nick, really."

"On Nick!" exclaimed Vanessa. "Nothing is ever tough on Nick. It won't hurt him a scrap to bid her a fond goodbye and leave her hoping."

"Well, that's the best way. It's better than a sudden bump. She'll get over it." His smile was jaded. "No pleasure is ever undiluted, is it? I met you - and maybe even yet I'll persuade you to come up to Lagos for a binge or two. But to give Lorin a thrill I brought her with me, and she had to take a toss for a chap like Nick. It doesn't make sense, but it's the way life goes. Another drink?"

"No, thanks. Was that the warning bell, a moment ago?"

"I hoped you hadn't heard it. I was planning to shanghai you!"

"Not a chance - I'd swim for it. Shall we go on deck?"

They emerged into tar-smelling heat, to meet the other two coming along the short deck from the passenger quarters. Lorin had a wobbly smile and a lace handkerchief wound tightly through her fingers, but she walked as gracefully as ever.

"Well, I'm afraid it's goodbye," said Nick, adding conventionally, "You must bring Lorin to Bolambo again before she leaves West Africa, Donn. She's the prettiest half-sister I've ever seen in my life!"

He shook her hand, shook Donn's. As warmly as she could, Vanessa said her own few words of farewell to Lorin; perhaps Lorin found it a help that no one but Vanessa was aware of the hopes she had pinned to those last few minutes alone with Nick.

Donn was saying, "You needn't think you've seen the last of me, Vanessa. I can always cook up a reason for a visit to Bolambo. For the present, here's something to remember me by."

Smiling, he leaned forward and kissed her full on the mouth. She drew back and laughed, but was vexed for Lorin's sake. A needle shot through her elbow as Nick gripped it.

He spoke agreeably, though. "They're waiting for us to go before they can cast off. So long, you two. Remember me to Lagos."

Casually, in spite of the steel-spring grasp of her arm, he shepherded Vanessa down the gangway and towards the estate car. There he released her, turned and waved up to the couple who stood near the deck rail, and saw Vanessa seated. The coaster had moved barely a foot from the jetty wall when he started the engine and swung the car towards the town.

They were back on the forest road before he spoke, in businesslike tones. "Not in a hurry to reach home, are you? I haven't been able to get out to the boundary of the concession this week, and this is a good opportunity to take a look at the mahogany."

"It's all right with me."

"Why the weak tone?" he asked coolly. "If I hadn't invited you along this afternoon you wouldn't even have seen Donn, let alone been kissed by him. You've nothing to whimper about."

"I'm not whimpering!"

He said something, irritably, and slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The car shot ahead and nothing more was said between them. The atmosphere in the car was chilly and charged. For a minute or two Vanessa tried to analyse Nick's change from the suave charmer of susceptible young females to the lean and coldly uncaring man who had already forgotten Lorin and was busy thinking into the future. But you couldn't weigh up a man like Nick Brandis; he lived by his own set of rules.

She looked out of the window at the speeding trees. Hollowly, she was conscious of the eighteen inches of space between them on the long front seat. Lorin had sat closer, they had smiled at each other; the girl had looked appealing, smelled fragrant. Perhaps Nick was now passing through the inevitable period of regret that rather more hadn't come of his association with Lorin. But somehow Vanessa couldn't believe that. Only people who had hearts were capable of regret.

At the first Bolambo signboard they turned from the road on to a rough trail. After only a few yards Nick slowed considerably, and looked out keenly at the track and its verges. They jogged on, and he began to scan the trees. At the half-mile he stopped the car and got out, strode among the trees out of sight. When he came back, ten

minutes later, his face was taut, his eyes dark and narrow. He slipped into his seat.

"All the big mahogany trees have been cleared," he said grimly. "Heard anything about it?"

"No - nothing at all. Are you sure?"

He flicked his fingers. "They were there just over a week ago, and now they've gone. I noticed fresh lorry tracks on the road and a few newly-broken twigs. I thought Africans might have swiped some mahogany saplings to sell down the coast. But the big fellows have gone - they were power-sawn and floated away. It means that a terrific squad of labourers and some bigish plant have been in operation just this week. While I was in Jamestown, of course." He was reversing the estate car. "I'll see about this!"

"Do you think it was organised stealing by someone who knew you'd be away?"

"I don't know what to think. Owen can't know, or he'd have mentioned it."

"Then, please," she begged him, "keep it from him till you've made your inquiries. Claud may have come across something unusual, or ... or someone else may know a little. Were the trees worth such a lot?"

"Several thousand pounds." Back in impersonal mood, he added, "There's probably an explanation of some sort. Don't you worry about it. I'll handle it without bothering Owen."

And that, for the moment, was all. In the swift darkness he dropped her outside the bungalow and said carelessly that he wouldn't come to dinner, after all. The accounts business with Owen could be settled

tomorrow at the office. His expression withdrawn, he inclined his head to her and drove away.

On the whole, the missing mahogany trees made little impact upon Vanessa's existence. She knew that inquiries were afoot, that the popular explanation was the one she had thought of - that it had been a coup planned in detail by some unscrupulous agent who had learned that Nick Brandis would be away at a certain time while Mr. Shepton was ill. The loss to the company was not shattering, but perhaps it was natural that Nick should seethe against such a blow to his self-esteem. He regarded the Bolambo development as a personal possession. Oh, well, it wouldn't do him any harm to learn a lesson or two.

Vanessa was seething herself, sporadically. It would be a long time before she forgot Lorin Grieves' painful smile and the lace handkerchief woven tightly through her fingers. And much longer, probably, before she would recover from her own heart's stupidity; if she ever did.

It was raining again, and Ngomo went sick. Vanessa noticed that a peculiar soreness came and went in her own throat and the glands at each side were distended and tender to the touch. There was plenty to do at the creche, feeding the children, playing with them, cleaning them up and teaching them a little, but her two helpers were learning fast. The younger one confided that she hoped eventually to go away and train as a nurse.

The awaited letter arrived from Merle. There were only a few lines in subdued tone, but they decided Uncle Owen.

"Merle's never been happy on her own, and this time she feels it more," he said. "I'll get a telegram off to her and prepare to leave at the end of the week. Sure you won't go with me, Vanessa?"

"I can't leave the job so soon after starting it." And in spite of everything, Vanessa knew with despair, she didn't want to leave, not yet. She added brightly, "Let me know when you've chosen your villa. I'll give in my notice and come and see you on my way home."

Uncle Owen nodded absently. Then he said, "I wish I were leaving in a happier frame of mind."

"This mahogany business? You were too unwell to have prevented it, Uncle Owen."

He shrugged dispiritedly. "Nick's been asking me questions about Paul. He thinks Paul might have organised the felling and shipping of the timber we lost, but candidly, I don't think so. If Nick says anything to you about it, please defend Paul. Will you do that, Vanessa?"

"I'll be glad to." She recalled something suddenly. "Uncle Owen, you remember that Syrian who came here with a message we couldn't understand? At the time we thought it possible that he meant it for Merle's husband - and that means it could have been Paul. He said 'Next week' - remember? That was *last* week."

Uncle Owen passed a hand over his face. "This illness of mine seems to have dulled my brain, but I can't believe anything that bad of Paul." He let out a quivery breath. "I'll be so relieved to have done with all this."

As he went back to his room he looked so ill that Vanessa called Dr. Ziegen. Nervous exhaustion, was the verdict, and the heart was tiring, too. Mr. Shepton must be sent away to Tangier as soon as possible.

The rest of that week was depressing. Uncle Owen did not get up at all, and Vanessa had the task of packing his clothes and belongings and destroying his old papers. She found a few bills which she herself had re-addressed from Gloucester, and it look as if they had never been paid. It was Merle's fault, really; luckily, they weren't big amounts and she could deal with them herself. Not for anything would she have Uncle Owen upset any further before he left.

At his request, she did not go down to the port to see him off. Nick drove him and Sanders and Claud went along at their own wish, because they respected and liked him. Vanessa kissed him goodbye, had a last view of his pathetically shrunken figure in the back seat beside Sanders, and went indoors and wept.

Later, she had an early supper of cheese and salad, and sat down to write to Merle. But after two attempts she gave it up. How did one write to someone who for years had professed a friendship she didn't feel? Professed it, moreover, for what she herself could get out of it? It didn't bear thinking about; and yet she ought to write to Merle, if only to make it clear that Uncle Owen's health had deteriorated alarmingly. Tomorrow would do, though.

Lethargically, she went to the kitchen, where a wood fire burned dully, and began to dispose of the last of Uncle Owen's old papers. They burned sluggishly, and the two account books had to be sprinkled with paraffin before they would catch at all. Ngomo came in with his face bound up in a white cloth. He stood with his long arms hanging at his sides, his eyes rolled up so that the whites looked big and shiny.

"Toothache?" she asked, not very sympathetically. Ngomo's lead-swinging was becoming a bore; he hadn't even offered an excuse for not preparing her supper.



"Very sore, missus," he said dolefully. "Must go to bed." It seemed he could find a few English words where his own personal interests were concerned.

"Clean the fire out first," she said, "and bring in the damp wood, or we shan't have any hot water tomorrow. You'd better see the doctor about those teeth."

He moved slowly and heavily, and she left him to it. Her own slight ailment seemed to have passed, thank heaven. Her throat was better and the glands were shrinking back to normal. The sudden excessive heat and dampness were responsible for physical abnormalities in most of the inhabitants of Bolambo.

From the living-room, she heard the boy finish his task in the kitchen and go out, snicking the back door behind him. She felt restless and lonely, and she found it difficult to imagine her life here at Bolambo from now on. No other white woman, no Uncle Owen, and no real friend but Claud, whom she daren't encourage. All the men were likely to be helpful; she knew that in their different ways they would do their best to lessen her loneliness. But there was no ignoring the fact that she *was* alone. And it seemed that even Merle would not be coming back. Uncle Owen had asked her to pack up the rest of Merle's things in readiness for dispatch; he had promised to let her know where to send them.

She stood at the open door clasping her elbows and looking out at the thickly-clouded night. What she wanted more than anything was a feeling of permanence in this tricky, unstable world, but it seemed almost impossible of achievement. A home and a rewarding job - she had them both, but she had to face the knowledge that she wanted more. Not Nick, she told herself hastily. Some untamed part of herself leapt to meet something in him, but that was all. *Positively all.*

She wished she could get rid of the sense of something closing in on her. All life was ahead, and there was no doubt about her being needed here in Bolambo. In fact...

A car swerved up towards the front of the house and Nick got out. Unconsciously, Vanessa's fingers curled a little more tightly about her elbows and she stood her ground, squarely in the open doorway. He came up the steps.

The lean, clever face had a sardonic cast. "Thought you'd like to know that Owen got away without a hitch. He said I was to tell you not to be anxious about him."

"I can't help being anxious, but I'm glad he's gone. It's dry in Tangier, isn't it?"

"Very. The mosquitoes are busy tonight - you'd better get indoors. Mind if I come in for a minute?"

There was no need to answer him; he had followed her and latched the wire screen over the doorway. He turned and looked about him, sank his hands into his pockets and shrugged.

"Well, it's all yours. Things can happen fast, can't they? In no time at all you've become a company employee with a house of your own."

"Won't you be needing the house for a new surveyor?"

"Not yet. There'll have to be some reorganising, but there's no tearing hurry." He paused, allowed his glance to rest on the magazine which lay open on the table, and said casually, "From here on we make a new start. How do you feel about it?"

"I made my start last week," she said evenly. "I'll carry on that way."

"Last week? When you said a fond farewell to Donn Grieves?"

"If your idea of a new start is to sneer at me ..."

His smile hardened. "Sensitive about the kiss from Donn? I got the impression that you were glad he did it for me to see."

"This time your impression was wrong," she responded abruptly. "Lorin was there too, you know!"

"Ah, Lorin." He sounded non-committal. "I thought we might get round to her sometime. Go on, get it said."

Vanessa was unprepared, and she knew that Nick wasn't. So she replied offhandedly, "Lorin has gone. We may as well forget it all."

"I agree. But you won't forget it, Brownie, so let's air it. I was a monster and a brute. I should have married the girl and taken the consequences. That's what you think, isn't it?"

She said coolly, "I quite like Donn's sister. Why should I wish her married to you?"

"Ouch - that was a nasty one." His smile was acid. "I suppose it's woman's logic to blame me for the fact that she went pie-eyed for a while. We all do it, at some stage; you'll admit that, won't you?" with faint malice. "Lorin's got it out of her system and she'll no doubt marry some nice guy and make a success of it."

"So you've glibly put it out of mind. It's easy for you."

"Don't be an idiot," he said sharply. "Lorin's a sweet girl; a bit dumb and devoted to the home, but sound enough." His smile was grim. "Did you really think she was the sort of girl I'd marry?"

"No, I didn't. I've yet to meet the woman who might suit you as a wife. Or the woman you'd suit!"

"Thanks. What else?"

Her chin lifted. "Since you ask, I'll tell you. I think you acted despicably towards Lorin. From the beginning she was obviously deceived into believing you liked her a great deal..."

"Come off it, little one. A few compliments about the meals she prepared could hardly be taken as a sign of deep regard. In these places a man acts differently with women. And I needn't tell you why!"

"We're talking of Lorin," she said in controlled tones. "You encouraged her to think that you felt she was someone special, and when she had the opportunity of staying here while Donn went down the coast, she grabbed at it, because you'd let her think you wanted it."

"I did nothing of the kind," he said in metallic tones. "She didn't want to go with Donn, so I told her she could use the house while I was away. After I got back I had no time to play around, even if I'd wanted to. I could feel she was getting sad and foolish, so I kept out of her way."

"Of course!" she flung at him. "Women are all right so long as they smile and flatter you, but the moment they become a bit of a drag you've no time for them. You led her on..."

"My dear child," he said through his teeth, "will you please get it into your head that I did nothing whatever that any other man wouldn't have done in the same situation. I knew the girl exactly two weeks; she was Donn's sister and I set out to be agreeable to her. As far as I'm concerned, there was nothing more to it than that!"

"You were heartless. You've admitted that you saw how she was feeling!"

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" He dug his hands further into his pockets and took a pace or two. "We're not responsible for the way other people react to us. What about Donn?" in angry disgust. "Fingering you and kissing ..."

"There was a difference. He was never serious for a moment."

"Neither was I. And I didn't do any of the damned kissing and touching, either! Maybe it's a good sign that you're militant for your own sex, but for the love of heaven see this thing reasonably. Lorin was right ready to fall. She's out here for the sole purpose of hitching up with someone, and if I happened to be the first one she lighted on, it's just too bad. She'll have to look elsewhere."

"Why didn't you let her see that from the beginning? You're clever enough to have put it over almost without speaking - if you'd wanted to!"

"How was I to know it would be necessary?" he returned flatly. "To me, she was just a charming girl here for a visit, not some feverish female chasing a mate."

"Now you're being horrible about her!"

He went a little pale about the mouth; the grey eyes shone darkly. "What are you trying to do - make me so mad that I'll do something I'm bound to regret? I wouldn't say anything more if I were you. My mood is a little unpredictable at the moment."

"To me, your mood is always unpredictable," she said swifdy. "I still think you treated Lorin abominably."

"If it gives you satisfaction," he said savagely, "you may go on feeling that way. But you might also reflect upon your own mistakes. If I hadn't told Hewson to keep his mind off you, you'd be wallowing

in a syrupy mess of sentimentality with him and wondering how the hell to climb out of it!"

She stared at him. "You actually told Claud to ... to leave me alone - as though he'd been *forcing* his attentions on me? How dare you do that!"

"I'd dare anything to keep this place intact and working well." He was glittering at her. "Have you said all you've been aching to say?"

She turned away, lifted her shoulders jerkily. "It's made no difference, has it? You still feel you acted towards Lorin with chivalry and finesse. I don't know how you can."

"That's because you don't know me," he said curtly. "Even Lorin, for all her silly hopes, understood me better than you do."

Stung, in spite of herself, Vanessa stood very still and frowned at the rug. She looked slim and hollow-cheeked and very young. "Perhaps she did. But there's one thing I know she didn't know. It was only the fact of her being Donn's sister that saved her from an affair with you."

She was unready for what happened next, felt her head jerk back as he took her by the shoulders and shook her once, violently. Wide green eyes gazed up into brilliant grey ones and she heard a raging breath drawn between his teeth as he said,

"I warned you, Brownie! A man can take just so much..."

Had she fought him then anything might have happened. But she didn't. Perhaps her eyes were still shadowed with sadness for Uncle Owen, or maybe her pallor and the faint trembling in her limbs got through to him. He looked at the erratic beating of the pulse in her throat, a muscle contracted sharply in his jaw and he let her go with a little push.

The screen clacked shut behind him, but Vanessa did not move. She was still standing there, near the table, when thunder began to roll, presaging still another storm.

It rained, on and off, for three days. The earth steps outside the house were washed right away, leaving the logs lying askew in a lake of mud. An African brought a set of newly-constructed wooden steps and placed them in position till good cement steps could be made. Vanessa did not inquire who had sent him. She was spending several hours each day at the children's shelter and running the house without help. Ngomo would turn up once each day, cough sepulchrally, nurse his jaw and fade out. Like the other servants in the settlement he detested the rains, but unlike them he hadn't a vestige of conscience. Some time she would have to replace him - if she stayed.

There were times, during that week, when Vanessa felt as if she couldn't stand another day of teeming rain and swarming ants, of books glued together with mildew and shoes green with it, of walls sweating, the thatch reeking of wet dust and dank moss, of nights inside the mosquito net while the pests clung and buzzed in myriads outside, to disappear at dawn.

The men were busy throughout the daylight hours, and when they had dined they needed sleep. Claud came in one evening, but Vanessa could tell he was tired. She told him about the huge ants and the two-inch ginger cockroaches.

"Everything is bigger and better out here," he said, smiling faintly. "Are you scared of them?"

"There are too many of them - you can't go on being scared all the time. How is your planting going?"

"It's in full swing. After the first couple of weeks we settle into a rhythm, but at the start everyone is anxious to get the extra money, and it wouldn't do to put them off. Nick's been helping us to get organised."

"You stay out all day, don't you? How do you manage about food?"

"There's a village of sorts down the river - a copra trading station and a handful of huts. The head man there sends us coffee occasionally, and if we're near enough we go there for a bite. Otherwise, it's bread and a tube of cheese."

"Don't. Squeezing out cheese like toothpaste sounds revolting."

"I thought it was even done in England these days."

"Not by me. But the stuff is probably nutritious. How's the wrist now?"

He held it out. "Bit thinner, but fine. I never look at it without remembering the frightful time I gave you with the saw." His smile was gentle. "You mustn't mind my telling you that then, when you were sweating and worried and terribly intent... I adored you."

"It was gratitude," she said rather quickly. "Would you like a drink?"

Claud didn't stay long, and though Vanessa was glad when he left, she felt abandoned and lost. She went to bed early, but did not sleep till the small hours. It was like the other nights. She thought of Nick, and wanted him with a need that was pain. But they were further apart than they ever had been, and even if there had been a possibility of forgetting the antagonism between them, there could be no true friendship. Because Vanessa was in love with him, and Nick could never be in love with any woman.



She tortured herself with imagining. There was the woman in Lagos, with whom he had managed to keep in touch after her marriage. Donn had spoken almost enviously of Nick's flair for remaining friendly with former amours. Possibly Nick also knew a woman in Jamestown. Was she married, too, or had he seen her last week, mocked at and made love to her, given her presents and a fond au revoir?

It seemed as though Vanessa's head had been aching for days. By the end of that week she felt so low and despondent that she had actually reached the point of telling Nick that now the creche was working it no longer needed her. At five on Saturday, she wandered into the empty house and took a bath. By six she was in the kitchen, cracking some tiny West African eggs. She wasn't hungry, but meals punctuated the day and provided a very small reason for living.

She had begun to beat up the omelette when a sound along the corridor drew her to the kitchen door. A man stood in the passage between the two bedrooms; a man of just over medium height, aquiline features and a tropic pallor. He wore crumpled khaki drill, and looked out of place in it.

Vanessa gazed at him, drew an audible breath. "Paul!" she exclaimed incredulously. "It *is* Paul, isn't it?"

He didn't smile, but came towards her. She backed into the kitchen to give him room, searched his face for something that wasn't there.

"Hallo, Vanessa," he said politely. "It's nice to see you again. Where are ... the others?"

She moistened her lips. "Of course, you don't know, do you? Merle is in Tangier. They're both there."

A moment's silence. "For how long?" he asked.

"Well ... they're not coming back. You see," she floundered a little, "they didn't hear from you, and Merle was feeling the heat. Uncle Owen became very unwell..." She tailed off.

Still very politely and without expression, he said, "Oh, yes. Are you here alone?"

She nodded. "But this is your house. I can probably fix up for myself over at the creche." She smiled weakly. "That's happened since your time - the children's centre. I'll shift my things."

"Oh, no. We'll arrange something for a couple of nights. Can I smell coffee?"

"Would you like some?" she asked in hasty relief. "I expect you can do with a wash. If you'll go straight into the living-room afterwards I'll bring you an omelette and the coffee."

"No servant?"

"Ngomo is sick."

"Then I'll have the wash and come back here to the kitchen. I am a little hungry - had nothing all day."

His mouth smiled briefly while his eyes remained uncommunicative, and he went out to the bathroom. Vanessa, her mouth dry and her fingers quivering, broke more eggs into the basin, whipped them up and looked for a tablecloth. Paul, she echoed hollowly to herself. Merle's husband, looking as sallow as ever, behaving as quietly as ever, and yet somehow different from the way she remembered him. He had smiled often in Gloucester, had seemed to have no misgivings about the future. All three of them had changed; Merle, Uncle Owen and Paul Charnley. What could have happened to them? Vanessa thought it most unlikely that she would ever know.

She recalled almost her last conversation with Uncle Owen. He had said that Nick thought Paul Charnley had been responsible for the missing mahogany trees. Had Nick managed" to reach him somehow, and bring him back? Or had he come back of his own accord as a blind, to allay suspicion? Or for some other reason? With Paul Charnley it was difficult to tell. Ought she to let Nick know that Paul was here? Perhaps, but how? There was no servant, and if she ran out it would look strange. What was she panicking for, anyway? Paul couldn't get away unobserved from a place like Bolambo; it was no doubt already known that he was here. Except that it was dark and cloudy outside, and a vehicle could easily be camouflaged by some of the new hedge growth.

He came back into the kitchen and she looked away and went on setting the table. He got out bread, took butter from the fridge and opened a can of sterilised milk.

"You mustn't be flurried by my turning up like this, Vanessa," he said in those quiet, unemotional tones. "I had no idea you were alone, but I do think it's a good idea to have a meal before I speak to Nick Brandis. Tell me, what do you think of Bolambo?"

She answered him mechanically, but quite soon felt more at ease. There was nothing masterful about Paul Charnley, but he did have an air of belonging here in this house, and knowing it. He didn't eat much, after all. The omelette, a finger or two of bread, a banana and a dry biscuit. But he drank three cups of coffee and smoked three cigarettes. And if he looked a little incongruous there at the kitchen table, he didn't appear to be aware of it.

Very calmly, he told her of his tour down to the Cape. Too samey to be enjoyable, and he had decided to fly back as far as Jamestown, pick up his car and drive in to Bolambo.

"And you expected to find Merle here," she said, in the same quiet tones. "I'm sorry you were disappointed."

His eyelids flickered, just once. "She wasn't sure where I'd be, so she couldn't let me know she was going. You said the heat was too much for her. Was she well?"

"Oh, yes. She was . . . unhappy, though."

"What about?" he asked evenly. "Did she tell you?"

"Partly."

There was a brief silence. Then he said, "I was most sorry to hear that you lost your father, Vanessa. I didn't get to know him very well, but I liked him very much." The ghost of a smile. "He was rather my sort."

"Yes, he was," said Vanessa with surprise. "Not very talkative, but he thought a good deal and he was companionable." An impulse moved her to add, "I wish I could help you and Merle. I'm sure you wouldn't have left her without a good reason. Before Uncle Owen left he said he thought you should reconsider your resignation from the company. He never has thought badly of you; I think you ought to know that."

A curious expression passed over the thinnish, pointed face. "That's pleasant to hear, but I'm afraid the resignation must stand. As a matter of fact, I had half an idea that both Merle and her father would be gone, but I had to make sure. It'll take me a couple of days to clear up here, and then I shall be off for good, too."

She sighed. "It does seem such a pity. This thing began with Uncle Owen and you and Merle. I know some of the other men were here first, but the Company wasn't formed then. I think perhaps the

separation will have accomplished something that you couldn't have managed otherwise. Please don't do anything irrevocable."

"I'm going up to Tangier," he said, "but however it goes I shall never bring Merle back to Bolambo. Men of all kinds can fit in here, but women have to be of a certain type, and Merle doesn't qualify. When she had to go away because of the heat last year I knew we wouldn't stay in West Africa very long."

"Then ... then you didn't willingly walk out on her a few weeks ago?"

"Did Merle imply that I did?"

She cist around, said lamely, "I did rather gather that impression. But she was miserable. She really was, Paul."

He accepted this, but the blank look of reserve remained in his eyes. He was a man who had thought long and alone, and reluctantly come to the conclusion that his wife was indispensable to him. Inwardly, Vanessa fumed against Merle; she didn't deserve this man. Even if he had done something terribly wrong, Merle still didn't deserve to be loved so much. She seemed to have offered nothing in return, not even loyalty.

He stubbed out his cigarette. "I'd better go up and see Nick. He's in sole charge now, I suppose?"

She nodded, again recalled her last talk with Uncle Owen and the promise that she would stand up for Paul against Nick, and asked hesitantly, "May I go with you?"

He was slightly perturbed and obviously on the point of refusing her before he changed his mind. "Very well. I haven't much to say to Nick. I only want him to know I'm here, and am checking out, permanently." A pause. "Nick and Merle got along well, you know."

"Yes, I do know."

"He probably knows more about her than any of us."

"Don't say that. It was you who made her unhappy, not Nick."

Tiredly, he passed a hand over the back of his head. "Let's get this over. Shall we go?"

She nodded and went out with him, down the new wooden steps and along the track to Nick's bungalow.

## CHAPTER NINE

NICK was alone, sitting at his desk with an empty coffee cup at one side and a loaded ashtray at the other. He looked round as they entered, stood up quickly and held out a hand. Nothing ever really surprised him, thought Vanessa broodingly. He adjusted so swiftly that you felt he was always prepared for almost any happening.

"Well, it's good to see you again, Paul. Sit down, both of you. Had dinner?"

"Yes, we've eaten." Paul didn't take a chair but leant back on the edge of the table. "I won't keep you long, Nick."

Nick glanced across at Vanessa as she settled herself in an armchair, turned towards the cabinet and got out a bottle and glasses. "This calls for a drink. Vanessa?"

"No, thank you."

He poured two whiskies, went out for some ice and gave one of the clinking glasses to Paul. Then he stood back in a characteristic attitude, one shoulder against the wall and one hand in his pocket.

"Had a good tour?" he asked conversationally.

"It helped. Sorry I couldn't give you longer notice of my vacation."

"I knew how you were placed. What made you come back so soon."

"I've had enough of it. I flew back to Jamestown and joined a chap I know there; he had my car. He told me something that ... well, it made my decision for me. I had to come here as soon as possible."

Nick swung his glass gently, watching the amber liquid.

"What was it he told you - that a big consignment of mahogany had been shipped out from Bolambo?"

Vanessa broke in at once, "That's not kind, Nick. Uncle Owen said it was unfair to suspect Paul!"

"What do you know about it?"

"Only what Uncle Owen told me. He said that you were asking questions about Paul - in connection with the missing mahogany."

Paul's mouth was set. "Is that so, Nick?"

"Of course it's so. I checked up on everything, but I couldn't trace you. What did you hear about it?"

"Just what you said - that the consignment had got away without a hitch. A big, concentrated operation, by all accounts."

Nick's oblique glance at the other man was keen. "And that brought you back. Why should it?"

"I suspect that you know why. You're merely trying to find out all you can before showing your hand. But I'm not telling you a thing. You can carry on with the guesswork."

"Thanks for the co-operation," said Nick with irony. "There was a time, not so long ago, when you were as keen for Bolambo to show a quick profit as I am. Things have changed for you, though, haven't they? I wonder if you know how much?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Has our little friend here told you everything? I guess not - she's too soft-hearted. For instance, you don't yet know that Merle is getting a divorce, do you?"



There was a long minute of dead silence. Paul's hand tightened over the edge of the table and his skin took on a clammy whiteness. It was all Vanessa could do to keep seated and speechless. She saw the sharp watchfulness in Nick, and in that moment she learned something about him. He could be appallingly cruel ... to be kind.

"I didn't... know that," Paul said quietly. "Why should she do it?"

Nick straightened. "I'll tell you why, and I warn you I'm not going to gloss anything. Don't go, Vanessa! You'd better hear this."

"Some other time. My presence here isn't fair to Paul."

Nick turned upon her, savagely. "You'll stay. It's time you saw the other side of the picture, too!"

She shrank back into the chair. Paul had his lower lip tightly between his teeth. He nodded for Nick to go on. There was a moment while Nick drained his glass and put it down.

Then he said, "For about ten months you were very happily married, weren't you, Paul? You'd been a little worried because Merle wasn't exactly your type and this wasn't her background, but you did care for each other, and that put the rest into perspective. Then quite suddenly, you found out something, and being the man you are you had to discuss it with your wife. And that started the break-up." He looked at the unresponsive Paul. "I'm not absolutely sure what it was you discovered, but I'd say it was something that showed up in the accounts. A bit of wangling here and there?"

"I refuse to go into details," said Paul doggedly. "You're telling this tale, not I."

"Okay," with a shrug. "I'll give the things I've discovered my own interpretation. Let's go back to the start - the jerry-building of the

offices and houses. The contractor's superintendent who was in charge here has retired, I believe, but it wouldn't be difficult to get facts and figures from the agents. I'll bet the Development Corporation paid half as much again as the buildings were worth, and that the superintendent and Owen Shepton shared the pickings - they were both near retirement and willing to take the risk."

"Are you accusing Uncle Owen?" demanded Vanessa, aghast. "Do you think he'd ever do anything so beastly and dishonest?"

By now, Nick was a bit pale and fed-up-looking himself.

"D'you suppose I'm enjoying this?" he said grimly. "It has to come out into the open - between us three, at least." He took a long breath and continued, "There were other things, smaller than the building contract, but run on the same lines. Slightly crooked agreements with shipping clerks and supplies' agents, a tight rein on expenditure for necessities. That side of the business wasn't my concern, but I did begin to wonder about it. And what about you, Paul? How did you feel when you found that your very likeable father-in-law was not too straight?"

Paul pushed a weary hand along his jaw. "If you know so much, why are you asking me?"

"We have to get things clear. I've been waiting for you to show up so that we could straighten the matter, once and for all. Why can't you be frank? Your loyalty to Merle and Owen isn't in question - you know that."

Paul closed his eyes for a few seconds, opened them and stared dully at Nick. "How far are you going to take things?" "

"I just want the matter cleared up. Owen Shepton is a sick man, and I certainly won't do anything to worsen his health. You have my word, Paul."

"All right." But he hesitated. "You know about the mahogany?"

"Yes."

"Then it's not much use trying to hoodwink you, is it?" he said slowly. "Now it seems impossible that I could have lived over there in the same house with Owen and not learned about his dealings much earlier. But I was happy and not very curious about Owen's part in the business — he seemed to do so little, anyway. Then I came across a letter that puzzled me. It was about the steps outside the bungalows - they'd been quoted for in the specification but never built. I started asking questions about other odd facts, and gradually I discovered what had been happening - the graft, I mean. The moment I had proof I mentioned it to Merle, but she said she didn't want to know; that end of things was her father's business, not mine. We were happy and had enough money - why should we worry? It was such a shock that I straightway tackled the old man."

"And he washed his hands of you, had an attack of West Coast fever and went to bed for a couple of days."

"That's exactly what he did do. But I couldn't let things rest there. I kept on about it, and Merle got angrier. She told me that after the mahogany deal her father would probably retire; we should let it go through because he was old and had chased money unsuccessfully all his life. They're very close - Merle and her father."

"You were properly caught, weren't you?" said Nick with a morose smile. "And in a way, so was I. Some weeks ago, Owen had a letter from agents in Jamestown who could offer us shipping. He should have gone to see them, but instead he kept the thing up his sleeve until

his mahogany scheme was arranged - and it would have taken a good deal of planning, believe me! There must have been hordes of men and a heap of machinery on the job. I went to Jamestown in his place. He took to his bed as an alibi..."

"He really felt ill!" Vanessa put in sharply.

Nick nodded. "With anxiety - it did bring him low. Well, he cashed in on the mahogany, and now he's gone off to buy a villa on Capri, or somewhere."

Paul's expression changed. "You said nothing to him before he left?"

Nick let out an audible breath and lifted his shoulders. "What was there to say? During his year in West Africa he's aged ten or fifteen years. He told me several times that his payment for securing the Bolambo concession had been niggardly, that he'd been made a resident director instead which hadn't been what he wanted. It may have been true the company did drive a pretty hard bargain with him, and he did feel cheated. Thinking it over recently, I've come to understand how the old chap felt. It was his idea, his concession, and yet he was superfluous here. For years and years he'd rounded up various tropical propositions, hoping for the grand rake-off that would make him a man of leisure for the rest of his days. This was a last try, and he had to get something out of it or admit himself a failure."

"It was so wrong-headed," said Paul. "He'd always have been sure of a home with Merle and me."

Nick laughed, without humour. "That's not what he's been seeking all this time - comfortable obscurity. He wanted the pot at the end of the rainbow, to cut a dash, to settle somewhere where he'd never been known and talk grandly about his interests in the tropics. A rich,

leisurely existence. Not so long ago he must have been quite a character."

"He'd changed a lot from when I knew him in England," said Vanessa shakily. "Poor Uncle Owen. If he did all those things you say he did, I'm sure he hated doing them."

And yet, she had to admit, he'd carried them off with sangfroid, ill as he was. That business of the Syrian who had called at the house, for instance; and his bewilderment over the missing mahogany trees; his genuine distress that Nick suspected Paul. And yet, knowing that Merle and Paul loved each other, he had allowed his own dishonesty to part them. But perhaps he had felt that fundamentally they were unsuited, or that no man who disapproved so thoroughly of his father-in-law as Paul did could remain in the family. He might even have been swept along by the circumstances he himself had set in motion; in fact, that was more likely than anything else.

Vanessa couldn't think any further. She heard the two men talking as though at a distance, and eventually their words seeped through to her.

Nick was saying, "I didn't want to suspect the old chap, but in the end it was all too obvious. He destroyed every one of the old accounts books and started new ones, got rid of his old papers. And I'm sure that at the end he knew I knew."

"Did he say so?"

"No, and neither did I. But he knew. When he shook my hand on the deck of the coaster he said, 'I did suffer, Nick, and I haven't finished suffering yet.' "

Sudden tears spilled down Vanessa's cheek. She choked on a sob, got up, flung off a detaining hand and ran back to Uncle Owen's bungalow.

Paul Charnley slept at Nick's house, had breakfast there and came over to his own abode at about nine. He was quite himself again, quiet, self-possessed and unobtrusive. When Vanessa came in for lunch he was sealing a letter which he placed on a pile of about half a dozen. He greeted her with the faint warmth she remembered.

"They're the first letters I've written for weeks - to my people in England and a few others. I've told them all that I had to go away on tour."

"On tour?" she echoed. "Are you staying, after all?"

"I'm not sure. Nick has asked me to, but it depends on Merle. I'm still going up to Tangier, but not for a day or two. I've written to Merle telling her that Nick knows everything and won't take any steps against Owen. I've also told her a few other things," with the faint smile, "and I want to give her time to think them over before I get there."

"Paul, I do hope things will turn out well for you two. Do you think she'll leave Uncle Owen?"

He looked down at his letters. "That's what I have to find out. And when I do, I'll also know just where I stand."

"She ... she does love you, Paul."

"I hope so. It was rotten behaviour, leaving her as I did. Merle has grown up with her father's set of values, and I expected too much at that time. We've both been through it a bit since then, and it will have helped us to understand each other better. In a way she was right and

I was wrong. With Merle, you can't have black and white without all the shades in between. She did believe her father had been robbed by the Company and she desperately wanted him to make a financial success of this final venture. He'd never denied her anything, had run into debt to give her furs and good holidays, and had always contrived a flamboyant elegance in himself. I'm very different," he said it almost apologetically. "My father was an underpaid parson and I worked hard to pay back every penny he'd spent on training me for a career. It's the sort of people we are. Merle and her father happen to be another sort, and I believe the world is a gayer place through them. They certainly have colour and zest."

"As long as there aren't too many of them," she said, as lightly as she could. "Do you think Merle will come back here with you?"

He looked non-committally through the window, but she saw a sinew tighten in his neck. "I'll do my utmost to get her back for about a year. We parted suddenly, in anger. I'll make sure that never happens again. Nick told me last night that Merle often spoke to him about me - not about the reason we parted, but about trivialities we'd shared. And on the trip down to the port when she left for Tangier she told Nick she had even meant to stick out the hot rainy season here, for my sake, that she'd hated being away from me last year."

"I'm glad."

Vanessa had spoken spontaneously, but in the next breath she knew that she could never stay here in this house, with Merle and Paul. It wasn't that she was still hurt by the statements she had overheard; they had gone deep, but had healed over, because she had realised that at the time the words were spoken Merle had been feeling wretched over Paul. The situation had been too much for a girl to whom everything had come easily and abundantly. The shock of Paul's walking out on her had left her unbalanced, so that nothing else mattered. In her anguish, she had forgotten the good times Vanessa

had shared with her during schooldays; she hadn't meant the patronising contempt - it had all been part of a defence barrage.

Still, though Merle would never know she had been overheard, Vanessa was convinced that to attain a true friendliness they would have to start all over again, and candidly, she didn't feel capable of it. She tried to see herself living in quarters alongside the creche, meeting Merle occasionally, dining here as a guest and being tolerated ... no, that was unjust. Once she was settled back with Paul, Merle would be whole and happy again.

But somehow it was impossible for Vanessa to see herself as a working member of this community but without real friends; being careful with Claud Hewson, living outside Merle's and Paul's existence, trying to keep aloof and unscathed where Nick was concerned. Nick ...

She went off to wash and find a clean dress, came back to find the table prepared in a rough-and-ready way; canned meat, a bowl of canned tomatoes, another of sweet corn, a dish of rusks, butter and some fruit.

"No servant again, so I got busy with the tin-opener," Paul said. "Did Ngomo see the doctor?"

"He didn't dare - there was nothing wrong with him."

"Malingering? He was never dependable - we'll get someone else. Like to help yourself?"

She felt a little sick, but managed to eat a few bites. She poured, coffee, before saying tentatively, "I expect you'll stay in Tangier for a short while. You must let me know when you're coming back."



"I'll be happy to do that. If everything turns out as I hope it will, you'll be our guest, of course."

She shook her head. "I'll make some arrangement."

"No, I insist," he said, concerned. "You belong with us till you're ready to return to England. Nick said you won't resign till the end of this month, and after that you'll have another month to work. So we three should have a few weeks together."

The coffee tasted bitter as a peach kernel in her mouth. She sat back. "Nick said that? About my resigning, I mean?"

Paul nodded. "Is it a secret?"

She drew in her lip, prevaricated. "No. No, of course not. I just wondered why he should tell you, that's all. I've only been on the job a couple of weeks, and we hadn't arranged anything."

He gave his slight smile. "Nick has. Seems he's already got your successor lined up. She's sister of a doctor he knows in Jamestown - a trained nurse. If I know Nick, she's a looker - and free!"

It seemed, then, as if every drop of blood had drained from Vanessa's heart. Mechanically, she took one of Paul's cigarettes and let him light it, but the thing smouldered away between her fingers while she tried to whip her numbed senses into action.

Why the dreadful feeling of let-down and shock? Nick had promised her nothing, except that if she became unwell she would find herself out of a job. He couldn't have noticed the swollen glands, but her pallor and the darkness under her eyes wouldn't have escaped him. Still, physically, there had been nothing radically wrong with her; it wasn't anything of that kind which had decided him.

And when had he come to the decision - since their row over Lorin Grieves? Or had it been a natural conclusion to a man like Nick? He was in his thirties and perhaps, through Vanessa Lane and Lorin Grieves, he had become a little harder and more cynical. He was feeling the need of a woman but couldn't get away to seek one. What more natural than that he should bring another one here? Perhaps he thought third time lucky, or perhaps ...

Vanessa had a hysterical desire to go up to his house at this moment and fling her job right in his teeth. She could infuriate him, but deep down he wouldn't really care. There had once been a woman who had made him care a bit, and after that he was cured of wanting anything but a little lighthearted lovemaking now and then. Vanessa, in his scheme of things, was already on her way.

That afternoon she watched the resting children, smiled at their round-eyed appreciation when she gave them drinks at three-thirty, and took them outdoors to play till the rain began. At a quarter to six she got into her waterproof, pulled her hood over her hair and walked across to the bungalow. The house was empty, and after she had changed she sat for a while in the living-room. Moths smacked against the lampshade and a huge grey spider raced across the curtain on to the wall. She watched it, fascinated but devoid of the horror they usually conjured. Perhaps she would never feel anything really deeply again. She wasn't sorry; feeling hurt too much.

Paul came in and got rid of his waterproof. He poured a drink and gave it to Vanessa, mixed another for himself. Don't let him mention Nick again, she thought faintly. But he did, in his first sentence.

"I've been with Nick Brandis all afternoon, working. I'm putting in the whole day tomorrow and slipping off for the north on Saturday morning - round six. It was good to get back on the job."

Then, fatalistically, she knew just what she wanted from Paul. She asked, casually, "Are you driving all the way to Tangier?"

"It's too far, and the roads are inclined to disappear under the desert. I'll drive to Lagos and ship the car."

"How far is it to Lagos?"

"Nearly two hundred miles, and the road will be sticky, but I should make it in six hours."

"Would you take me along?"

He stared at her. "You can't mean that. How would you get back?"

"I know Donn Grieves. He'd drive me back. If you're leaving at six you'll be there by lunch time. I could come back next day. It would be a change, and I feel I need it."

"What's Nick going to say about it?"

"Nothing, because we shan't tell him. I've a right to spend the weekends as I please, and I haven't taken a Saturday off yet."

"It'll look odd if you go off without telling anyone."

"I shan't do that. I'll tell Claud Hewson - just in case anyone wonders. Please take me with you, Paul."

He gave her one of his long quiet glances. "You're not very happy here, are you? I don't think a woman is happy in these places unless she's married, and even marriages can easily go to pieces." He sighed. "Nick's way of life is probably the sanest out here. And yet, you know, even he seems a bit edgy."

"Added responsibilities, perhaps," she suggested. "Will you take me, Paul?"

"If you still want to go when Saturday comes, yes."

She nodded her thanks and got up to find something for supper. The trip to Lagos wasn't really going to help very much, but she had to get away from Bolambo, if only for that one night. And while she was away she would think round Nick's decision to replace her with a nurse. At least she wouldn't think too much, but she would nerve herself to deal with it suavely and without emotion.

"You prefer the idea of having a trained nurse in charge, Nick? Very well. I don't mind at all. Get her here as soon as you can, will you? Yes, I'm quite relieved. I've realised it isn't exactly my sort of job."

He might see through it; he wasn't easily taken in. But he'd be just as keen to keep it light as she was. Vanessa swallowed on the hard roughness in her throat and set her mind to planning the supper.

## CHAPTER TEN

**THROUGHOUT** Friday night a storm beat about the settlement, and at dawn Paul Charnley's weather-beaten vehicle was standing hub-deep in red mud. The concerted heaving and shoving of a gang of labourers freed the car and set it on the road, but it was nearly nine before he could set off, with Vanessa at his side.

"Mid-afternoon before we get there," he commented, "and you'll have the same journey tomorrow in reverse. Still want to go?"

"Yes, please. I've decided to do some shopping, if the shops are open."

"They'll be open. But don't go to the shops alone and don't pay the first figure they ask. It isn't done."

She looked at his face, wondered how he managed that expressionlessness. She knew from the peculiar mistakes he'd made at breakfast and while dealing with the car- pushing Africans that inwardly he was worried and excited. Again she pondered the miracle of Merle's having pierced his guard in a comparatively short time in England, and at length she decided that love must be a remarkable leveller. It had made Paul expressive, toned down Merle's shiny exuberance and infused her with tenderness. Together, they had contrived a relationship on a manageable plane, and, but for Uncle Owen, nothing would have gone wrong with the relationship.

Poor Uncle Owen. Was it wicked to hope we would get his Mediterranean villa and enjoy it? The morning he had left he looked such a sad, defeated, lonely old man, so very different from the buoyant, distinguished adventurer he had been a year ago, when he had sailed away from England with his beautiful daughter and her husband. How would he feel when Paul appeared in Tangier?

Casually she said, "You and Uncle Owen aren't really enemies, are you? You did get on well before you found out what he was doing?"

"We got along fine," Paul said. "I felt he and Merle were *my* people, that I was the luckiest man in the world. Owen's way of treating everything that came his way as his due was wonderfully refreshing. In our family, we've always fought hard and never acquired anything but what we struggled for. I ought to have known that a man of his age who managed to remain so refreshing and individual would be a bit of a rogue, but his behaviour was so moderate. Not much drink really, an occasional game of cards, an honest opinion about most things. I still find it hard to believe that right from the start he was juggling with the accounts. And I don't see how he ever brought himself to tackle the mahogany deal."

"He hated it," she said simply. "You can believe that because I Was with him while it happened. I rather think he must have been unwise enough to mention the idea to someone in Jamestown, perhaps several months ago, and they grabbed at it greedily. After that, it sort of ran away with him. He did let them know when Nick would be away, but that was all. They did the rest."

"And he collected a packet." He drove for a minute in silence. Then he said, "I suppose Merle cleared out when she did so that she wouldn't be implicated if there was trouble."

"No," said Vanessa slowly, "I don't think that was the reason. She was deeply hurt about you, Paul, and she did say things that... things that showed no one else mattered to her very much.' No one but you."

The faintest tinge of colour crept over his cheekbones, but he made no answer. They drove on through the stony mud at a fairly steady forty miles an hour, though occasionally he had to brake hard or slosh through a river. They had been going nearly two hours when they came to an expanse of water which brought the car to a halt. Both got

out and stood at the edge of it, but it was Vanessa who spied the roof-top of a car among reeds to the right.

"Someone had to abandon it," she said. "It must be horribly deep - you'd never get through."

He said consideringly, "There are other rivers beyond this, and they'll be in the same state. I'm afraid Lagos is out."

"What will you do?"

"It would be an anticlimax to go back to Bolambo and start out again tomorrow or the next day. I'll have to get the Sunday coaster up to Lagos, but they won't have room for the car."

"There's no hotel at our little port, is there? What about tonight?"

"I know the small-time agent on the waterfront. He'll find me a room." They were back in the car and he was reversing, when he added, "You do drive, don't you? Could you drive yourself back to Bolambo from the port?"

"Yes, of course. Don't bother about me."

"You've missed your shopping spree, I'm afraid."

"It'll keep."

But for other reasons she felt a little bleak. Paul couldn't help the roads being underwater, though, and he had his own problems. The day had seemed doomed from the start.

An hour later he turned off the road and down towards the port. The familiar huddle of mud and thatch, the primitive waterfront, the barges loaded with bananas and copra from inland, with yams and millet, and a hodgepodge of other produce, lay sweltering against a

background of shimmering, molten sea. Hardly anyone moved, but there were plenty of dark-skinned bodies lying inert in the shade of palms and buildings. It was one o'clock, on a suddenly cloudless day.

After parking the car under a breadfruit tree, they attacked the picnic they had brought with them, but neither was hungry. They rested and smoked a cigarette. Vanessa's body was simmering within her clothes, and hopelessness was like a wet fog about her brain.

It was something after two when Paul stirred himself to lift his luggage from the boot of the car. Vanessa had shifted into the driver's seat and was testing the gears.

"Feel you can make it?" he asked.

She nodded. "I hope you'll get through all right, Paul."

"I mean to," he said. "Goodbye, Vanessa. I'm looking forward to seeing you again when we get back to Bolambo."

I won't be there, she thought, but she nodded again, brightly. "Give Merle my love, and give Uncle Owen my love and tell him I still want to visit him when he gets his villa. Don't forget."

"I won't." He patted her hand as it rested on the wheel. "Start moving. I think you'll find it fairly easy to handle, but go slowly and avoid potholes if you can. The bus isn't as young as she was."

She waved to him, and then gave all her attention to the task of driving away from the port. But as she took the road back to Bolambo she longed for some miracle that would bear her right away from West Africa, for good.



There were a couple of casualties among the planters that morning. A boy was bitten by a scorpion and a middle-aged woman stabbed her leg with a pronged hoe. As always, the news spread through the plantations like a wind-blown fire, and inevitably, the rest of the workers were affected by the knowledge. Injury to any of their number always made them uneasy for a while. So at two-thirty they decided they had had enough till Monday.

Nick didn't mind. They needed the rest and the air of festivity which prevailed at weekends, and the planting was going ahead so well that he was sure that even his own estimate would be accomplished with a few hundred acres to spare.

Mid-afternoon he started going through the accounts, but in the heat the going was heavy, and there was no hurry anyway. Far better to put in an hour on them in the cool of darkness. He lighted a cigarette, took a walk into his veranda and stood there, feeling as he had felt for a week or more, fed up and restless.

Charnley, he had been told, was determinedly on his way to Lagos. If there had been much rain up that way he was in for a tricky time. Still, that was his concern; they did say a wife became more precious the more trouble she caused. It was probably true, he thought cynically, and trod out his cigarette with unnecessary force.

He looked back into his house, knew with distaste that he didn't want to spend the rest of the day there, and purposefully walked down to Owen Shepton's bungalow. The place was closed up but not locked, and he went into the living-room and hesitated. She'd be resting, and heaven knew she needed it. This wasn't the time for it, anyway. That was another thing that could be better handled in the coolness of evening.

He was halfway back to his own house when Claud Hewson's small car came trundling towards him.

"Where are you off to?" he asked irritably.

Claud had braked, and as usual he looked apologetic. "A little expedition. You always find the best fungi at the beginning of the rains. Later on, they get soggy and overblown. I want to take a few colour slides." He smiled self-consciously. "I shall soon have enough to put on an evening's entertainment. Do you think I could borrow the Company's projector?"

"I daresay you could." Nick was half inclined to get into the car with Claud. Anything to soothe this damned mood that had got into him. His next remark was almost forced out of him. "You once told Vanessa you'd take her into the forest. You'd better leave her alone today. She'll be resting."

"I wasn't going up there. She's out, anyway."

"Out? Where does one go when one's out in Bolambo?"

Claud blinked at the forceful tones; these days he preferred to keep some distance from Nick. "I thought you knew. She went off to Lagos with Paul Charnley."

"To *Lagos!*" Nick shot out. "You'd better tell me all you know!"

"Well, there ... there isn't anything. I came out of the offices just as she was leaving that children's place yesterday afternoon. We walked together and she told me she was going with Paul. They intended starting very early, but the car was bogged down. They did get away all right, though - my servant helped."

"And what," asked Nick, his face tight and angular, "did she intend to do in Lagos?"

"Shopping, she said. Seems that Donn Grieves had invited her up there while his sister is with him, and as Paul was driving there she took the opportunity of going along. Donn will bring her back tomorrow." Claud looked at his watch. "They'll be there by now."

"If they got through!"

"Paul would make it. That car of his takes water up over the wheels. He told me that once ..."

Nick waved him on and strode back to his own house. But he didn't go indoors; he turned and sprinted back to Owen Shepton's bungalow, went inside and straight down to Vanessa's bedroom. He swung open the wardrobe cupboard. She couldn't have taken much with her, but then perhaps she wouldn't. She'd told Claud she was going and might have planned to get him to send her stuff on, after her. His own damned idea had boomeranged.

His teeth had tightened till a pain sprang along each jaw, but he hardly noticed it. Back in his own house he flung a few things into a bag and called his servant. The boy came in sleepily, sad but not vexed at being disturbed from his snooze.

"Yas, master?"

"I shall be away overnight - back tomorrow afternoon. Tell Mr. Hewson and the doctor, when you see them." He locked his desk. "You can go off with your people."

Nick was rewarded with a drowsy white grin that he didn't see. He got into the estate car and set it purring. Within two minutes he had left the settlement and was speeding along the churned-up road away from Bolambo. This was all he'd needed, just the one infuriating incident!

The car arrowed through a couple of shallow streams, beat into the mud and skidded on a bend but zipped straight ahead. In less than half an hour he was approaching the turn-off for the port and his speed was such that if he hadn't sent a lightning glance down that road he wouldn't have seen Paul Charnley's vehicle. He did see it, though, and he braked with dangerous suddenness and turned back and down on to the port road.

The other car stood just off the track, half concealed by young elephant grass. It was empty. The shock was like an electric needle along his spine, but the next moment he had seen the trodden grass, a trail which led straight into the bush. For a second he listened, but heard only the sound that was everywhere, if you listened for it - running water. What had possessed Paul to take her in there?

He followed the trail among the trees, felt his feet sinking into the swampy ground and cursed under his breath as something long and beautifully marked slithered across his feet and disappeared among the newly-sprung ferns. And suddenly, there she was, leaning tiredly against a gnarled mangrove root which was as tall as herself while she stared absently at the brown-tinged water of a stream which had probably formed overnight.

For fully half a minute he did not move at all, but stood staring with an almost intolerable relief at the slight young figure in yellow linen. The mid-brown hair was rough and curly about her head, which was slightly bent. She was drawing a long blade of grass through her fingers, and he saw a sigh escape her, shakily, like a sob. Involuntarily he moved, and she looked up. She made no immediate response to his presence, but as plainly as if it were a physical movement he saw the reflex gathering of her wits, the swift lowering of a shutter between them. He covered the few yards that divided them.

"Where's Paul?" he asked, very quietly.

She straightened, and spoke in light, brittle tones. "We couldn't make it to Lagos - parts of the road were under water. So he drove to the port and I left him there. He'll sail tomorrow."

"What made you stop the car and come in here?"

"I stopped the car because," she shrugged, "because I fancied a rest in the shade. I heard the water; it sounded cool and inviting."

"It's never wise to go off the road alone. You know that."

"I'm a wee bit tired of trying to be wise." She looked at him briefly. "I suppose you want me to get going, back to Bolambo."

"There's no hurry."

The strangeness of his manner made her wary, but she asked evenly, "Are you going to the port?"

"No," without expression. "I was on my way to Lagos when I happened to see Charnley's car on this road."

"Lagos?" Her glance was startled. "Wasn't that a little ... unexpected?"

Irony crept into his voice. "Unexpected things do happen in the tropics, you know. They're happening all the time. You can plan and arrange, tie up every last detail, and then bang, you might just as well have left things loose. Why didn't you tell me you were going with Charnley?"

"It didn't seem necessary, so long as someone knew."

"And someone did know; you took care to tell friend Hewson. That let you out, so you thought."

Very slightly, her mouth narrowed. "Let me out? Do you think I mind your knowing?"

"Yes, I do. You weren't going to Lagos just for the shops, nor even to see the fascinating Donn." His teeth showed in an unpleasant smile as he added, "You had just one thought in mind - to get away from me for a while - or perhaps for good?"

She had dropped the long spear of grass and now her hands were behind her, pressed to the great mangrove root. The slight query in the last few words steadied her.

"When I'm ready to leave Bolambo for good I'll let you know. And if I felt it would be a relief to get away from you for a day or two, you wouldn't wonder at it. You've done your utmost to make me miserable ..."

"That's not true," he dipped out. "I may have tried every way I knew to make you so mad that you'd commit yourself, but the very last thing I wanted was to make you wretched. I haven't been feeling too merry myself, you know! You've got me in such a spot that I don't even keep my mind on my work. That never happened to me before in my life!"

The old fire showed in her eyes. "Too bad, but unfortunately it won't last. You'll find someone else to ..."

"Vanessa, stop it," he said grimly. "You're as much in love with me as I am with you!"

Utter silence followed this, but at last she was able to say, in dry husky tones, "You're either a humorist of sorts or colossally conceited. And please don't confuse the sort of emotion you bring to your affairs with love. I've known from the very first that I had something that ... that intrigued you a little. I wasn't responsive and

you hated me for it, but because I wasn't floored by that ruthless charm of yours, I was a kind of challenge. That's all that exists between you and me - nothing more."

He smiled, but there was a spark of violence in the grey eyes. "You haven't denied you're in love with me - for a good reason. You can't. For a couple of months, back in England, you built up a hate against men. One of them had let you down, and whether you realised it or not, you immediately began a private campaign against the whole sex. You liked the power your immunity gave you; Claud was clay to handle, Donn Grieves wasn't so difficult to keep in his place, either. But you found me a little more risky - so you went all out to hurt, rather than handle."

"No!"

"Oh, yes." He was bending towards her, speaking fast and with an undertone of fury. "You were determined not to be roused by anything at all. I know, because I tried a good many things. I even encouraged Lorin Grieves to stay on in my house to see how you'd react. You'll never know how it felt to have you tell me I was treating her badly. The darned girl hadn't the capacity to feel more than an emptiness when she was lost for something to do between preparing meals! Her staying here did get you, but in the wrong way."

She had brought her hands to the front and clasped them, to still their quivering. "Whatever you're trying to say," she managed, "I'm not interested. I don't know what it is that makes us react to each other the way we do, but..."

"Then it's time you learned!" he said, and took her tightly into his arms.

She couldn't fight, and presently she couldn't even keep her lips compressed; Nick saw to that. She returned his kisses with a sort of

hopeless abandon, and when he at last laid his cheek against hers, her skin was wet.

"Oh, lord, not tears," he begged, close to her ear. "I love you, Brownie, I want you and need you. You've got to believe that."

"I do," she whispered, "but it's no good. With you, the need passes, and I'm just not equipped to deal with an affair."

"For Pete's sake," he groaned. "I haven't had an affair in years! All that talk about them was to rile you and get at what you were thinking. In fact, that seems to have been my role - the watchful agitator. You've got to marry me, the sooner the better!"

"Marry you?" she whispered, and was silent for a long while, taking it in. "If you really do love me that way, how could you possibly be so cruel?"

"Because that's the sort of chap I am. Darling, for heaven's sake drop questioning everything. We're together, I've kissed you and I'm actually holding you now, and you don't seem to object. I love you, my sweet, and I can't wait to kiss you again and make sure that you kiss me. I love you!"

After a bit, Vanessa believed him. It was impossible not to.

Some time later they were abruptly brought back to a jungle in West Africa. It was raining, flooding down over the roof of leaves and banging on their heads and shoulders. He took her hand and dragged her, leaping over ferns and old logs, out to the road and into the estate car. She sat and laughed, breathlessly, looked into his vital face with the rain streaming over it.

"What about my bag in Paul's car?"



"Is it locked in the boot? Then we'll leave it where it is till tomorrow. Do you believe I love you, now?"

She nodded thankfully. "I like you quite a bit, too."

"Thanks. You're wet. Here, take this hankie and dry your hair a little. We're going home." He switched on and let in the clutch. "I've no servant, so we'll have to rummage for food."

"I'll get a meal, but I won't promise to compete with Lorin. Beef hash from a tin."

Rain cascaded over the car and he had to switch on the beams, to pierce the grey curtain in front of them. She sat in the wet dress, feeling snug and warm and infinitely happy. There was something very intimate about being alone with a man in a storm, particularly if the man happened to be Nick!

"What about that trained nurse you engaged in Jamestown?" she asked, when they had been going for a few minutes. "That's why I had to get away today - do you know that?"

He laughed silently. "It was a great idea that backfired. I did meet up with a woman who'd like the job; she's done ten years in a West African hospital and wants something a little easier. I never did intend you to carry on the creche for very long, but it was one way, as I thought, of keeping you contented. There was no need for haste, so I didn't mention it - till Paul Charnley turned up. That evening, when you came into my house with him, I saw that you and I couldn't carry on the feud any longer. You were looking peaked and I was feeling like the devil. So I had to do something about it. You ran out and left Paul with me, and I told him you'd be resigning because I had a trained nurse lined up. I counted on the fact that you two wouldn't have much to say to each other, and that he would probably trot out the information quite soon, to fill a gap. I definitely expected, that

night and all next day, to have you burst in and toss your job right in my face! And great heaven, what I was going to do to you!"

"Worse than you've done this afternoon?" she asked demurely.

"I haven't even started yet!"

Lightning flicked across the grey and purple pall and thunder crackled, very close. He looked at her anxiously.

"Not scared, are you? You're safe in a car."

"I'm not frightened - not much, anyway. I was thinking about Uncle Owen. I know that no one should be allowed to get away with crookedness, but I do feel he suffered enough for what he got out of it, don't you? I was so afraid you'd feel it was your duty to report it to the Board."

"So it was, but I couldn't do it; we'll put in some extra work to make up for the losses. The fact that they drove a bargain with Owen was no grounds for going his own way to make up the deficiency, but if the Company were told I'm sure they wouldn't prosecute. Still, it was a grubby business."

"If the Company knew, everyone at Bolambo would hear about it."

He nodded. "We'll make sure that doesn't happen. He hated my knowing."

"That probably hurt him most."

"I'm afraid it did. I didn't want to hurt him any more. I'm too grateful for the fact that he brought you here!"

"I'm thankful myself, for a few things." She looked at him with shining green eyes. "Nick, I'm so glad you didn't want an affair with me."

He gave a loud masculine laugh of pure enjoyment. "But I do want an affair with you, my darling Brownie. A passionate, exhilarating, infuriating, sweet and tender affair that will last all my life. And it can't begin too soon!"

Well, he could call it what he liked, thought Vanessa blissfully. She just happened to prefer the old romantic vocabulary. She called it marriage.