



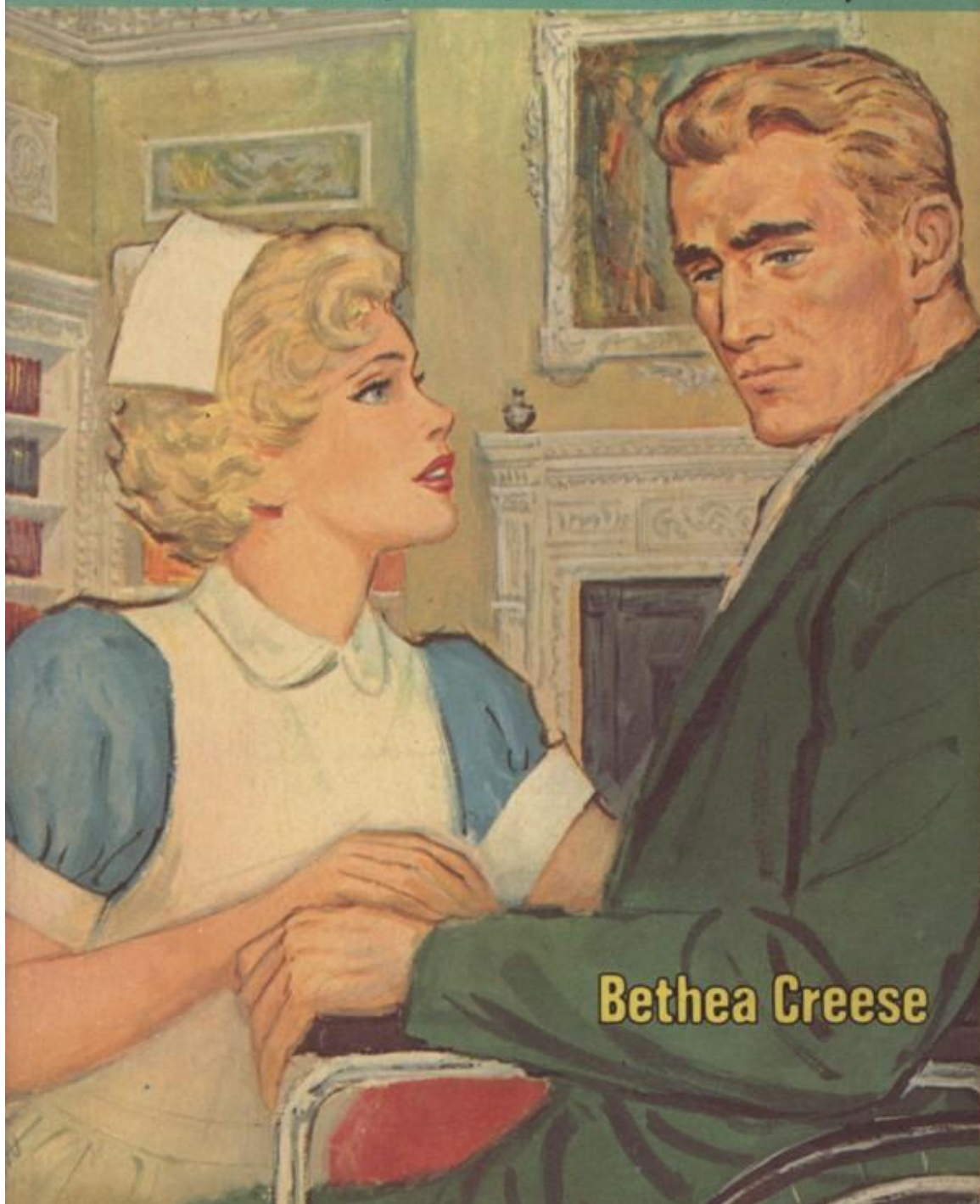
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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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Glorious Haven

(Original Harlequin title: "Patient in Love")



Glorious Haven by Bethea Creese

It should not have happened, Carline told herself. She ought not to have fallen in love with Chris. Chris was her patient — she had thought of him as that from the very first day she had seen him in hospital. A physiotherapist had to give everything of herself to her patient and yet give nothing of herself, and remain tranquil, with heart untouched. Much, much more so when he was already as good as engaged to another girl, and that girl the odd, lonely young creature whom Carline herself had specially promised to befriend. But she had fallen in love with Christopher, she was living as one of the family in his beautiful Chelsea house, and she could not abruptly take herself off without seriously delaying his recovery. So what was she going to do about the situation?

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CHAPTER ONE

Number Seven, Chelsea Terrace. . . . Carline had reached her destination. This was the house, then, a gem of a London house, eloquent in its beauty.

A steep flight of steps led up to the high front door on the principal floor, and the main window was balconied and adorned with delicate ironwork and a canopy of shaped metal that gleamed blackly against the cream paint of the walls. There was an upper storey and above it dormer windows in the roof. The lower floor of the house could hardly be called a basement since its windows came above the level of the paved front garden, where snowdrops showed already on this first day of February.

Carline loved the house at first sight. She wished she could have come to it by invitation or upon some happy errand, instead of carrying a load of trouble in her handbag. The trouble was enshrouded in a small, square envelope, pencilled with the address which Carline glanced at for verification before she put her hand to the modern wrought-iron garden gate and stepped up to the slender round-headed doorway.

The door was painted in a turquoise blue, and it had an old black knocker of iron, shaped like a circlet of flowers, with a tiny hand inside it clenched for knocking. The little hand knocked at her heart pathetically, fastening her mind to that other hand, a man's long-fingered hand, that had striven laboriously to scrawl the address upon the envelope. It was possible, probable even, that that hand could write no more.

The knocker with the tiny hand no longer served its purpose, Carline perceived, and laid her finger apprehensively upon the bell-push at the side of the door. The girl she was to ask for had the unusual name of Leone. Carline wondered if Leone would be

moved to tears at the sight of the handwriting on the envelope. Or would she be the stony, self-possessed kind? Meanwhile, footsteps approached from within, and the door was opened by a woman in a white overall.

"Please, could I see Miss Leone Burdock?" "Miss Leone is not at home at present."

"Do you mean that she is away from home or that she will be coming in presently?"

"She is expected home by six o'clock."

The woman looked at Carline with interest, as strangers always did look at Carline with interest—because she was beautiful, dark-haired, white-skinned, tall and slender; because there was an exceptional vitality behind her beauty; because her eyes and her smile unlocked the sympathies. She was attractively dressed in a fleecy coat of willow green with a matching velvet tammy worn at an appealing angle.

"Would you care to see Mrs. Burdock, Miss Leone's mother?"

Carline hesitated a moment. She had promised to give the envelope personally to the girl called Leone, but it might be wise to see the mother first and offer to call again.

"My name is Carline Lode—Miss Lode," she told the woman. "Would you ask Mrs. Burdock to be kind enough to spare a few minutes? She won't know who I am, but would you tell her I come on a kind of mission from overseas?"

Carline smiled to herself as she was shown into a long and beautiful sitting room with windows at either end. What had possessed her to use the word mission, instead of stating plainly that she had something to deliver? Mrs. Burdock would think she was a missionary, begging for money. Yet the word had slipped out naturally, and Carline had a conviction that she had not misused it. She felt she had been led to this house for a purpose that was none the less certain because it was veiled in obscurity. It

seemed as if the room were in the wings of a theatre, as if Carline waited for her cue and expected to make

her entrance without any knowledge of the drama in progress or the role which she herself was to portray.

The room was lovely enough for any stage setting. Carline's eyes took in the greens and greys of furnishing, the muted colors of a Persian carpet, many books and some fine pieces of furniture, including a small oval dining table at the far end of the room, near to the slender french windows that led on to the wonderful balcony.

Her ears registered footsteps overhead, and she feared that the lady of the house had been resting and was now dressing to receive her, perhaps ill-pleased by the interruption. Carline opened her handbag, took out the envelope, and then on second thoughts replaced it.

The envelope bulged in one corner. It contained a ring, as the man had told her that day in hospital.

"You are going home," he had said. "Will you take a ring to a girl in England for me?"

The man had been gravely ill from his injuries, too ill, in fact, to be flown home to England, and Carline had wanted to cheer him up.

"Wouldn't you rather keep the ring a little while?" she had said. "Then you will be home yourself and able to do the thing properly. You know, give it to the girl in person and put it on her finger."

Carline remembered him as being fair-haired, and his eyes had been blue—too blue and too large in the thin, long face, deadly pale beneath his tan.

"This isn't a romantic touch," he had said, and his lips had twisted in a boyish grin. "I shall never put the ring on her finger. And I couldn't manage a letter. She'll understand."

His meaning had been all too clear. Shakespeare as ever had the word for it, and the quotation had flashed into Carline's memory.

. . . But when this ring Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence: ' then be bold to say Bassanio's dead.

Perhaps it was his signet ring that he was sending to the girl, Carline had thought, since he couldn't buy her an engagement ring, as things were with him, flat on his back and hardly able to raise his hand.

"You can open the envelope to show the ring in the Customs, and if there's anything to pay you must make Leone give you the money," he had enjoined her. "Don't take it if you'd rather not," he had added testily. "It's of no real importance."

But the ring was of importance. Carline had promised faithfully that she would deliver it herself, without trusting to the post, as soon as she reached London.

The dreadful thing was that she had failed to keep the promise, or very nearly failed.

And now she had to explain to Leone and her mother how it had come about that over two years had elapsed since the giving of that faithful promise and its late fulfilment.

Carline was relieved when Mrs. Burdock proved to be a gentle little woman, inclined to plumpness and clearly very careful about her appearance, for her fair, greying hair had been expertly cut and styled and her skin had the well-tended look that conveyed the whispering suggestion of expensive creams and lotions.

Her dress was of navy blue with a frivol of pleated white organdie, and she wore pearl stud earrings and a triple row of imitation pearls which seemed to Carline just a trifle too large. Her features were small and regular. Evidently she had been a pretty girl and had never quite been able to forget it.

Her movements were leisurely. She came into the room with a polite smile of welcome, invited Carline to sit down, and seated herself in the protective ease of the settee with her back to the window.

"You wanted to see my daughter," she led off. "Leone is out at work she's going to be a model, you know."

"How thrilling!" Carline smiled. "I suppose she is very lovely."

"Well, yes, everyone thinks so." Carline detected a touch of anxiety in Mrs. Burdock's voice. "I

wonder, did you know Leone at school, down at Fairlawns? Or wouldn't that have been possible?"

Fairlawns was an extremely expensive boarding-school at the coast. Carline wondered if she meant that Leone was much younger than herself and therefore could not have been at school with her. Her own age was twenty-three.

"I haven't met your daughter," she said. "I have something to deliver to her, and I should have brought it long ago had it not been for a misfortune which was due mainly to my own carelessness. I'd better tell you the whole story, if I may."

She plunged into her explanation, beginning with the fact that she had formerly been stationed on an island in the Mediterranean.

"You are in the Services, then?"

"I used to be. I was in the Q.A.'s—it's rather a mouthful but the full title is Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps."

"So you are a nurse."

"No, I'm a physio—short for physiotherapist." "A masseuse! How lovely!"

"There's more to it than massage," said Carline, sensing that in the mention of her work she had struck some spark of appeal in her hearer. "It is about a patient in the hospital where I worked that I want to talk to you. He was in the Officers' Ward, where I didn't normally work, and he wasn't a patient of mine. I was told he was a captain in the Parachute Regiment."

Carline lowered her voice.

"I only knew his Christian name. I want to emphasize that point. They called him Chris—I suppose his name was really Christopher."

Carline hesitated.

"I don't know if my talking about this matter comes as a shock or a grief to you, Mrs. Burdock. If so, I apologize. Did you know Chris?"

"Why, yes, of course."

Mrs. Burdock seemed completely unmoved, and Carline gave a little sigh of relief.

"He might have been a friend of your daughter's with whom you were not acquainted." Mrs. Burdock laughed.

"I attended Christopher's christening, if that sets your mind at ease. But we never could get the rights of the story about what happened to him."

"He was travelling in the hills in an Army car and they were ambushed by bandits. The driver was killed outright, and the car went out of control and crashed down a ravine. Chris was shot in the right shoulder and his spine was badly damaged. They put him in a plaster jacket. That was how he was when I first spoke to him."

"You see, Mrs. Burdock, he didn't seem to have any fight left in him, and he was going downhill, day by day. He didn't even want to be sent home, and they didn't think he would stand the flight. I happened to be in the Officers' Ward one day, and the curtains round his bed were drawn back and I saw him. I'd heard about him, not by name but

as a case. I went up to him and spoke to him. It was conceited, I suppose, but I had an idea I might be able to put heart into him; but he didn't take much notice of me.

"Ten days later I had my notification to come home. My three years were up and I was leaving the Q.A.'s. On my last day I was going round making my farewells when an orderly told me a patient wanted to speak to me. It was Chris. He asked me to bring a little packet home to your daughter, and I promised to do so. Mrs. Burdock, it was a ring, for your daughter. He told me so. He—he wasn't any better, I'm afraid."

Carline paused. But when this ring parts from this finger . . . She could see Chris in her imagination, the fair hair, the drawn face, the blue sunken eyes in their hollows. She hadn't been able to forget as in the ordinary way one did forget patients, because of what had happened to the ring.

She observed that Mrs. Burdock was listening placidly and did not seem in any way distressed.

"Now comes the dreadful part," Carline continued. "I lost the ring, still in its envelope, just as

Chris had handed it to me. I put it in my pocket without glancing at the address, and I went back to my quarters to finish my packing. Time was short and I'd collected a great deal more than I came out with, so a friend lent me another travelling bag. It was a small affair, zipper fastened, about this size."

Carline held her hands about sixteen inches apart. She had slender, well-shaped hands, and she was wearing long-wristed, slickly fitting gloves of pale beige, in a nylon fabric. She noticed that Mrs. Burdock's gaze fastened itself upon her hands

"Anyway, I put my toilet things for the journey into this bag, and also the various presents I'd bought for home, so that they would be handy for declaring in the Customs. I put the ring there, too, in an inside pocket."

"And then what happened?"

"I was flying home and we came down at Malta and had to wait some hours. It was after midnight and I dropped off to sleep in the airport waiting-room, having put the bag down beside my chair with several other packages. We were called suddenly, and it wasn't until after the take-off that I realized I'd left the bag behind!

"It was still labelled with the Service address of my friend—her name is Rosemary. I'd been so pressed for time that I hadn't changed the labels, so despite my frantic telegram and letters, they sent the bag to her. Meantime she was sent out to the Far East and never received the bag, which arrived eventually at her home in Norfolk. Her mother and father had let their house furnished, and the tenant put the bag away in a cupboard to await their return.

"Meanwhile, I'd worried a great deal. I'd hardly glanced at the envelope, and I couldn't remember your daughter's name or address, and I'd never known Christopher's surname. Please believe that I did what I could. I wrote to the Matron of the hospital to ask for news of Chris, but the former Matron had gone and the new one wrote back rather snootily to say she was not permitted to give news of former patients. I believe she thought I was

pulling a line on some man to whom I'd taken a fancy."

Carline smiled, then her face sobered.

"The only news I had was from a man who had been in the same ward. He said he'd moved on elsewhere soon after, so he wasn't sure, but he thought Chris had—had set out on his last journey. Oh, Mrs. Burdock, you can guess how terrible I felt then about the ring!"

"Then how did you find us this afternoon?" Mrs. Burdock enquired.

"The bag came back," said Carline. "My parents live in the West Midlands, and when I went home last week end, there it was with the envelope safe inside it, sent on from Rosemary's home on her parent's return. I should have telephoned instead of calling upon you unexpectedly like this, but I couldn't find you in the telephone directory."

Mrs. Burdock rose to her feet, smiling tranquilly and saying Carline must be in need of a cup of tea.

Carline sat forward in her chair.

"Please," she said. "Before you go, would you mind telling me about Chris? Is it true that

Her voice stopped. ' then be bold to say Bassanio's dead.

"Chris is down below," said Mrs. Burdock. "Down below?"

"Yes, in the basement. He can't do the stairs, you know. This is his house. You would have found it in the telephone directory if you had been able to look for it under his name Christopher Bodenay."

She closed the door behind her, leaving Carline relieved and delighted by the news that Chris was alive and actually in this house. She surprised herself in the extraordinary feeling of elation that swept over her, because he was really nothing to her. She had known him only very slightly ; still, the circumstances had etched him in her memory, and she had thought him gone, poor boy.

Evidently he had not yet fully recovered, for Mrs. Burdock had spoken of his difficulty with the stairs. Carline felt a professional concern for his progress,

and it was interesting, also, to learn that he was the owner of this beautiful house. Her mind linked and repeated the familiar Christian name and the unfamiliar surname. Christopher Bodenay. It ran easily off the tongue.

Mrs. Burdock came back into the room, and the tea-trolley was wheeled in by the woman who had opened the door to Carline.

"Chris wants to see you," Mrs. Burdock said, pouring tea. "I told him he would have to wait until you had had a cup of tea."

"How is he?" Carline enquired quickly.

"It's pretty hopeless." Mrs. Burdock shrugged her shoulders. "There seems no possibility that he'll ever walk again. Luckily he has a very good man, who looks after him and gets him into his wheelchair. That was Veller's wife who came in just now, and it was she who told Chris you were in the house."

Carline took the envelope from her handbag and laid it upon the table.

"Do you think I had better give this to him or wait for your daughter?"

"If Chris asked for it, you will have to hand it over. He's very dictatorial." She hesitated.

"I wish you could have seen Leone."

Carline looked enquiringly at the photograph of a very pretty girl upon a side table.

"Yes, that's Leone," said her mother.

"I hope you won't think me inquisitive in asking whether Leone and Captain Bodenay are engaged to be married?" said Carline.

"Not exactly," Mrs. Burdock sighed. "How could they be, as things are? I suppose one might say that there is an understanding between the two, but Chris won't let Leone sacrifice herself for him, being as he is. And there are—other obstacles. Chris said I had better tell you, but—"

She halted nervously.

"Please don't tell me anything you don't wish to tell," Carline said, "I'm afraid I have been overcurious already."

Mrs. Burdock looked relieved.

"Chris will explain, I expect. By the way, Miss Lode, don't you go calling him 'Captain' or he'll bite your head off. He doesn't like to be reminded of the Army now."

She began to question Carline about her work. It wasn't mere polite questioning, for the subject seemed to have a fascination for her, and her eyes fastened themselves again and again upon Carline's hands, now that she had removed her gloves.

"I love having massage," she said. "I used to have a masseuse who came here regularly to do me, but it was too expensive and I had to give her up."

"What was your trouble?" Carline asked sympathetically.

"Oh, nothing definite. There's nothing really wrong, only I get tired and a bit achy. It was nerves, the doctor said, and this was a toning-up treatment. I don't know anything lovelier in life than just to lie down and have somebody's hands working on you. I miss my masseuse terribly, but there it is. We have to economize now."

"You could have free treatment if your doctor gave you a letter," said Carline.

"But that would mean trailing to and from hospital, and waiting about with any kind of people. And I shouldn't like to have machines used upon me. I'd be scared stiff and then half the good would be gone."

Carline smiled at Mrs. Burdock as she would have smiled at a new and nervous patient, thinking the while that if Leone was the young girl of nineteen or twenty that she seemed to be from her photograph, then she must have been born when her mother was in her late thirties. Carline's work had given her experience in judging people's ages, and she did not think Mrs. Burdock could be far short of sixty.

She presumed that Chris must be deeply in love with Leone, and if he could not marry her at present, he had not been able to endure life without her and had invited mother and daughter to live in his house. Yet she might be wrong, she thought, for the affair

must have been of long standing. Leone had been here when Chris was overseas, when he had been so anxious to send the ring.

The ring! How Chris must have mistrusted her own integrity, all this long time! Carline wanted to make her apologies to him without delay, and she was glad when Mrs. Burdock led her to the back of the hall, whence stairs descended to the lower floor.

"I won't come down with you," she said. "Chris topher's room is the first door on the right when you get downstairs."

She met Carline's eyes.

"Don't take it as personal if Chris speaks to you sharply, will you, Miss Lode," she said.

"He's inclined to be morose these days, and very short-tempered. But there, I'm sure you'll make allowances. You're used to sick people."

She shivered, although the hall was not cold, and Carline formed the opinion that she was for some reason afraid of Christopher's wrath, and uneasy in his presence.

Carline went down the stairs, found the door and knocked.

The voice that bade her enter had a deep and melancholy intonation. Chris was sitting in a wheel-chair near to a stove with a small open grille, a table-lamp by his side providing subdued illumination. The curtains were undrawn, the windows barred and spiked against burglars.

Carline walked over to him and shook hands and laid the envelope upon the rug that covered his knees.

"Oh, Mr. Bodenay, whatever have you been thinking of me?"

"I thought you had been a long time coming, but I never doubted you would arrive at last. And I couldn't have believed that you would have forgotten my name."

"Until I came here today, I didn't know your surname," said Carline. "If I had known it, I should have written to you. Please believe that."

"I wasn't referring to my surname," he said. "You called me Chris the first time you spoke to me."

"Everyone called you Chris, even the orderlies' and so did I, because you were ill."

"Do I strike you as being in such rude health now that you have to address me formally?" He smiled. "Do call me Chris now. I found out your name, long ago. Carline. It's a pretty name, reminding me somehow of a silky-haired spaniel. Will you be offended if I call you 'Carline'?"

"Please do." She laughed. "So long as you don't expect me to bark at you."

"I'm likely to do the barking. Sit down in that arm chair, Carline, and tell me all about it." Carline sat down and told her story again. She saw how thin he was, she noticed the languor of his attitude and the look of hopelessness that lurked in the blue eyes that regarded her so intently. Yet she did not judge him to be a man who would give in; the line of his jaw held that dogged quality that could be the deciding factor in a patient's recovery.

She still thought of Chris as a patient. His immaculate appearance was a good sign, she decided, although that might be due to the man who valeted him.

She finished her explanations.

"So you didn't look at the ring," he said, taking up the envelope. "Would you like to see it?"

He tore open the envelope, removed the wisp of tissue-paper from inside and, screwing up the envelope, pitched it with accuracy into a wastepaper-basket on the other side of the room.

"Good shot," said Carline.

"Constant practice," Chris replied. "You'll be amazed to know how little things like that affect one in my circumstances. If I'd missed I might have gone into a minor frenzy, because I can't stand litter. I couldn't have picked it up, you know."

"Yet you can get about, Chris."

"Surely."

With a swift movement of his hands, he propelled his chair to her side, opened the tissue-paper and held out the ring to her.

It was an opal ring—one large cabochon opal surrounded with an oval of diamonds. Larger diamonds in the wide shoulders of the ring formed a glittering background for the rainbow colors of the opal.

"How beautiful!" Carline exclaimed, holding the ring to the light to see the scintillating brilliance of the opal with its fire of color, dawn-flushed pink and mountain blue and sunset gold.

"I believe it is called a snow opal," said Chris.

"A snow opal!" repeated Carline, thinking that the ring with its diamonds must be worth a lot of money. She was horrified to think that through her own carelessness she had lost a ring of such value and had only regained it by the merest chance of fortune. She handed it back to Chris mutely.

"Don't you like it?" he said in such a disappointed voice that she took it from him again and held it this way and that way to view its exquisite shading. She longed to slip it on her finger, but resisted the longing, thinking he would not like to see the ring on any finger but that of the girl he loved. So far Chris had not said a word about Leone.

Carline put the ring back into his hand.

"It's a fairy-tale ring," she commented. "Has it a history?"

"It belonged to my great-grandmother," Chris said. "She was the daughter of an earl and he was only a tailor. He worked for a man who had a little shop not far from Berkeley Square, and she came there to order a riding habit. Doubtless she was suitably chaperoned, but that didn't deter him from stitching his seams with the thread of love."

He laughed.

"She had the wit to demand countless alterations, and the habit went to and fro between her father's town house and the little shop, always with a love-letter in the pocket. Finally he presented himself at the tradesmen's entrance of her father's house, down in the basement, saying he'd brought the riding habit and would wait to hear if it met with her ladyship's approval.

"It was dusk and a spring evening, and the story goes he declined a footman's invitation to step inside. He waited in the area, below street level, until she slipped out and joined him, and they nipped up the steps together into the street.

"He took her in a cab to the cottage where he lodged. It was down this way, in Chelsea, and his landlady was a seamstress. The next morning they were married. There was a good old shindy, as you can imagine, and her noble father swore she should never again darken his door. On one occasion, she called at the house, and was told to step down to the basement and ring the tradesmen's bell. Finally history repeats itself, you see, Carline, and here am I, also relegated to my proper place, in the basement."

It was the lead Carline had been waiting for. Much as she had enjoyed the fascinating story about his great-grandmother, she was more interested in his own affairs, and in one affair in particular, the wheel-chair.

"Chris," she said, "does it have to be the basement? Can't you get up the stairs, ever?"

"You might as well ask if I could climb Ben Nevis," he said.

"Haven't you walked at all yet?"

"Not a step, nor ever shall. It's quite hopeless. For goodness' sake, Carline, don't talk about it."

He spoke testily, his face had become blank and withdrawn. He proceeded immediately to withdraw his person from her, wheeling his chair round until once again he faced her on the other side of the stove.

"I say, Chris."

"Yes?"

"You remember that day in hospital when you asked me to bring the ring home? Did it occur to you that there was a chart hung up over your head, and I should have only had to turn it over to learn your full name and age and so on? I didn't do so."

"Kind of you, Miss Lode."

"I sensed you would resent my enquiry into the nursing details, Mr. Bodenay. I'm not going to

make any such enquiries now. I was only trying to be—ordinarily friendly."

There was a long silence. Carline took up one of her gloves from the arm of her chair, and fitted it on to her left hand, stroking down the fabric leisurely.

"Don't put on your gloves, please."

"Why not? I must be going."

"That's what I was afraid of. Besides"—his lips relaxed into a half smile—"it's a pleasure to look at your hands. You must be a star turn among the physios. Little as I

deserve it, won't you tell me what you are doing now? I gathered you had left the Q.A.'s."

"Yes. I'd promised my father and mother I wouldn't sign on for any longer. I'm a ewe lamb, you see, and at that time also you couldn't get full physiotherapist qualification in the Army. I wanted to do that, so I went to a civilian hospital training school, not too far from home. I finished last summer. Now I can grandly call myself a Chartered Physiotherapist, and I'm in my first real job, and in London. I felt life wouldn't be complete without the experience of living in London. I work at the River Hospital."

"And did your parents approve of London?"

"I'm afraid they had to. It's a three-hour journey to Hilltown; but I manage it once a month on my long week end, and I'm glad enough to get there. Our house is high up in the hills and you can get to the tops in no time. You know, there really is something very wonderful about being in the high places and looking down at the countryside, with the sky all about you, and green grass and sheep-bells and air such as you never breathe down below."

She halted, conscience-stricken.

"Oh, what have I said?"

"Only something that gave me a breath of fresh air, too, and I badly needed it. Once upon a time, Carline, I liked the high places. I was keen on climbing. And I wanted adventure, so I went in for the Parachutes, and see where that has brought me! I thought I was cut out for an Army career, and

I wouldn't hear of going into my father's business as he wanted me to do."

He looked at Carline with regretful eyes.

"My father died while I was overseas, soon after I had the crash. I heard the news in that hospital, only the day before you were good enough to come up and speak to me. That was one reason why I wasn't very responsive. It was a fearful blow, about my father, and I wish I could have been more use to him."

She ventured to voice a question.

"Is the business still tailoring?"

"Not exactly. We make children's clothes now on a large scale, though I'm sorry to say things are not going well as regards profits at the moment. Bodenay and Burdock is the name of our firm. Did you tumble to the set-up when you were talking to Emily?"

"Emily?" Carline queried.

"Mrs. Burdock. Emily is the widow of a director of the family firm. Her husband was unlucky with some speculations, so there wasn't much money for her when he died, years ago. There was the little girl, too."

"Leone?" "Yes, Leone."

Carline fancied that his voice softened.

"I never saw my mother, you know. She died when I was born. And Father, being a widower, offered a home to Emily and the child, so that's how it came about. Leone was five years old then and I was thirteen. I'm twenty-nine now, by the by."

Carline did the arithmetic. So Leone's age was twenty-one, and she and Chris had grown up together. Probably he'd begun with a big-brotherly protection to the girl and that had ripened into something sweeter and deeper. She thought she understood the story.

"Did Emily explain to you how things were, as regards Leone?" he said.

"Yes, she told me."

"It's a poor look-out, isn't it?" said Christopher grimly.

There was, indeed, no bright future for the two as things were now with Chris. Carline longed to give him some word of cheer, so she told him she had seen Leone's photograph and had thought her beautiful. Christopher would like to talk about his beloved, she thought, and enquired how long Leone had been modelling.

"Well, she can hardly call herself a model yet," he said. "It was the only work she wanted to do, so we let her take a training at a model school, but she couldn't get her foot in anywhere until at last Aldin got her into Fantome's showrooms. It's only a lowly job. She helps the models to dress, and has a chance to watch them at work, so she may learn the tricks of it herself eventually."

"Who is Aldin?" Carline enquired.

"Aldin Burdock. He's Leone's cousin and he manages our firm. You'll like him. He's a nice fellow and very good-looking."

Carline was a little taken aback by this intimation that her acquaintanceship with the Burdocks was to be extended. She knew better than to offer to help Chris while he propelled his chair across the room and drew the curtains.

"I keep the windows clear as late as I can," he said. "It shortens the night and I've a fondness for our solitary tree. It's a magnolia, and I'm looking forward to the spring. Sometimes I think spring will never come."

"It will come. You have snowdrops in your front garden already. Are there some at the back?"

"A few. It's only a patch of garden, mostly paving-stones and an inch or so of border." He looked at her sombrely. "It's my spare lung all the same, the only place outdoors that I can take myself to under my own steam."

"But you can get out into the street that way, can't you?" said Carline. "I thought I noticed a side path."

"There are two hellish steps, and Veller has to wrestle to get me up them. For goodness' sake, Carline, don't talk about the benefits of a daily promenade. People are confoundedly officious and seem to think that the fact that I can't stand up constitutes an excuse for dispensing with the usual introduction."

Carline looked about the room, noting the dull, dark-green paintwork and the plain deal kitchen table in striking contrast to a fine old mahogany desk. The floor was covered with an ugly shiny linoleum and a few worn rugs, and a divan bed was pushed away in a corner. It was a large room. The stove kept it reasonably warm, but it lacked the cheer of an open fire.

"Yes, you've guessed right," said Chris. "This used to be the kitchen until Father had a new kitchen made upstairs. There's a bathroom on this floor, and Veller and his wife were glad enough to have the front two rooms even if they had to take on the job of looking after me."

His voice sounded weary. Carline saw that it was nearly six o'clock and rose to depart.

"Please don't go," Chris said hastily. "Won't you stay for the evening meal, at seven o'clock? I want you to meet Leone."

"I'd love to stay," Carline said after a moment's hesitation. "It seems rather mean, all the same, for a stranger like me to call in unexpectedly, and be given tea, and then stay for the evening. Are you sure it won't be inconvenient to Mrs. Burdock?"

"Emily has taken a fancy to you," he said. "She hopes, as I hope, that you and Leone will hit it off together. Carline, the moment I heard you were in the house I thought what a wonderful thing it would be for Leone if she could have you for a friend. It's a great deal to ask—but now that you know about her, I thought you might help. She hasn't many friends of the right kind, and I get worried about her, naturally."

Carline wondered what his worry could be. It sounded as if he were asking her to act as watchdog to

Leone. Possibly the girl had other admirers of whom he disapproved.

"As a matter of fact, I want to put a proposition to you," he continued. "It's a long shot and you may think it cheek on my part, but Emily backs me up. Tell me, Carline, where do you live? In hospital or out of hospital?"

"Out of hospital," she replied. "I've a tiny flat at Ealing. To be honest, it's only a bed-sitter with a makeshift kitchen on the landing. Still, I like it perhaps because it's my first real taste of independence."

"Then you wouldn't think of making a change?" "It isn't likely, after the trouble I had in finding this place. Why do you ask?"

"We have two rooms on the top floor. I've been thinking for some time that we ought to let them, but we couldn't have a stranger in the house. I wonder, would it interest you?"

"But I am a stranger."

"I have never thought of you in that way." Carline stared at him in astonishment.

"Do you mean you are asking me to come here as a paying guest, to live with the family?"

"Well, yes, that was the idea. I can see from your face that it doesn't interest you, however, so I won't say any more about it. Do you like music?"

Carline had already noticed the table radiogram by his side. He stretched out his hand and set the record in motion as if to indicate that the conversation was closed. Carline was afraid she had unwittingly hurt his feelings, but his suggestion that she should live as a boarder in his house had taken her by surprise

He wheeled his chair to her side and offered a cigarette case. She took out a cigarette, and he whipped out a lighter and held it for her, silently, and then returned to his previous position. It was the first time he had smoked himself, and she had the impression that he drew upon his cigarette with the relief and pleasure of a man who had for some hours denied himself that small satisfaction. It

wouldn't have been surprising if he had smoked incessantly, by way of solace for the monotony of his infirmity, she thought, and wondered whether he restricted his smoking from sheer strength of will so that the habit should not get the better of him. Or could it be a question of economy? Was it possible that money could be short in this lovely Chelsea house which had all the appearance of a wealthy background? Her mind marshalled the evidence. Leone had to earn a living and Leone's mother had declared that she could no longer afford the services of her masseuse. And Christopher had mentioned that the family firm was not prospering. And they actually wanted a paying guest, though surely they could look for someone who could afford to pay more than a junior physiotherapist in her first appointment.

Anyway, Carline didn't want to live with a family. She liked the peace and solitude of a little place she could call her own. A physiotherapist gives out much in her day; she works hard, she talks sympathetically to patient after patient, and very naturally she may not wish to spend her free time in social conversation, except with chosen friends. Meantime, music filled the air. Carline recognized the record as a Schumann symphony, the entrancing Number One in B flat. It tore at her heartstrings, and it set the familiar little voice speaking within her, a voice with a message to which she did not wish to listen.

"You might be able to help Christopher," the voice said. "Isn't it your job to help people in misfortunes like his own? Surely it can't be true that he is condemned to sit in that

chair for the rest of his mortal days. Perhaps he isn't following the proper treatment, for lack of encouragement which you yourself are trained to give."

She studied his down-bent, listening profile in the light of the solitary table-lamp. Her gaze appreciated the fine forehead and the deep setting of the eyes, the long well-shaped nose and the sensitive

curve of the lips. There was fortitude in those lips, and where there is fortitude there may well be hope.

Once again, Carline was conscious of a destined purpose which was now in part revealed. It didn't seem credible that the Army doctors would have sent Chris home if there had been a chance of his recovery. Yet the possibility might still exist, and her spirits rose to the challenge. Could she help Christopher? Could it be possible that she had been brought to this house for no other purpose than to help to get Christopher upon his feet again?

The record came to its end and the spell of the music was no more. There was a sound of clattering heels descending stairs and the door of the room opened to admit a girl who might have posed for a golden-haired angel in a church window. She sped across to Christopher's chair, approaching from behind and putting her arms about his neck. Seemingly she had not noticed Carline's presence, for she bent her head and laid her cheek against Christopher's with the utmost tenderness. A strand of golden hair lay across his collar, and Carline heard her speak, in soft caressing tones.

"Christopher, my beloved, isn't it heavenly! I've heard that the ring has actually turned up, after all!"

CHAPTER TWO

"We have a visitor." Christopher reminded, gently lifting Leone's arms from about his neck. "Carline, this is Leone. Leone, this is Miss Carline Lode, who has been good enough to bring the ring home."

Carline rose from her chair and proffered her hand. Leone straightened herself and smiled. She was slender and lissom, with the tiniest waist and the fragility of a windflower. Her features were regular, her eyes were blue—not the true English blue of Christopher's eyes but a milky blue, sometimes seen in china, sometimes in the eyes of a Siamese cat—Carline could not resist the comparison.

Leone's handshake was nervy and uncertain. Carline put her down in her mental notebook as being vacillating and emotional, and then rebuked herself. She really must get out of the habit of summing up the people she met socially as if they were newcomers to the physiotherapy department. Character study was a big thing in her work. You had to understand patients and win your way to their confidence, or you couldn't hope to get them to work with you.

When Leone smiled, her lips curled charmingly, showing small white, pointed teeth. There was something that was young and innocent and touchingly childish in her smile, something that brought lark-song to mind and daisies in the field. Her voice was childlike, too.

"May we do Christian names, Carline?" she said in friendly fashion.

"Thank you, Leone," Carline responded.

"You said my name the right way, first time off," the girl approved. "I can't bear it when people call me `Leonie. I like to be Lay-own, to rhyme with moan, and tragically romantic."

"And I like my name to rhyme with soup-tureen' straight out of the kitchen," said Carline.

They all laughed.

"Thank goodness my name is commonplace," Chris remarked.

"Christopher is a lovely name, and a saint's name, too," said Leone.

"Most inappropriate," Chris rejoined.

Leone gave him a worshipping look, then she turned to Carline.

"You were with the Army nurses, weren't you?" she asked.

"Carline isn't a nurse," put in Christopher. "She wears a white overall and no cap."

"No cap," repeated Leone vaguely. Clearly the variations of hospital attire did not interest her. "Anyway, you went abroad, and that's what I envy. I haven't even been anywhere, and I long to travel."

"I envy you, too," slid Carline, smiling at her. "It must be fun to see the new fashions long before they reach the shop windows. Does your firm make dresses or only suits and coats?"

"Sportswear, ensembles, cocktail frocks and evening gowns." Leone's sigh was mock pathetic. "But you can't have them for yourself. What's the good of seeing an endless procession of models if you can't ever have them to wear?"

"Is that strictly true?" put in Christopher. "I seem to remember your being able to buy the dress you are wearing at a nominal figure."

"Oh, this black thing," said Leone.

"I was noticing the wonderful line of your dress," said Carline.

"Were you?" Leone looked at her wistfully. "I say, where's the ring? Is it in your handbag now?" "I have it," said Christopher.

"Let's have a peep at it, please."

"What's the use, Leone?"

"Please," she said and sank down on the floor by his chair and put her hand on his sleeve. Her movements were feather light. Carline admired her gracefulness, and frankly envied the coral varnish that

tinted the fingernails of that pleasing little hand. She herself could not use a colored varnish at her work, nor could she indulge in long pointed fingernails like Leone's. Christopher produced the ring from his pocket, and Leone took it from him and slipped it on to the third finger of her left hand.

"There," she crooned. "Beautiful, beautiful ring, how much I love you !"

Christopher looked displeased.

"Take the ring off your finger, Leone," he commanded imperatively. "You know you can't wear it there."

Leone looked at him mischievously, and extended her hand in Carline's direction, well away from Christopher's reach.

"Isn't it silly, Carline, that one has to keep one's most becoming finger bare and unadorned until some male thing provides the decoration? Don't you think it looks super on my hand?"

Carline felt acutely embarrassed. She did not know whether Leone and Christopher were staging this little scene because they were not disposed to let her see the tender one which would have taken place had she herself not been present. If Leone loved

Christopher, of course she would want to marry him all the more because of his disability. And he wouldn't let her do it—Leone's mother had said clearly that he would not accept the girl's sacrifice. Therefore he could not bear to see his ring upon her finger. And her gay pretence enraged him because it took place in Carline's presence. She wished she could make her departure forthwith, but she did not see how she could do so, having accepted his invitation to stay to supper, or dinner, or whatever it was. She talked about the ring, to cover her embarrassment.

"I never knew before that there were pictures in opal," she said.

"What pictures do you see in this one?" enquired Chris.

"Our range of hills, blue as you see them in the distance, and then touched with sheer dazzle, as you sometimes see the tops in winter time, if there is snow and you are climbing. I'm crazy about hills and mountains, I suppose."

Christopher said nothing and his face showed that he, too, could be crazy about hills and mountains, if he were climbing, if it were only possible that he could be climbing. Again Carline rebuked herself. Why couldn't she have the sense to keep off the subject? Ordinarily she prided herself upon her tact, but in some queer way he seemed to compel her to talk about her home surroundings.

"Sheer dazzle!" Leone took up her words literally. "The trouble with an old ring like this is that it doesn't dazzle enough. I'd like to get a jeweller to reset these diamonds modern style, perhaps in platinum, to bring them out a little. I do like to see diamonds doing their proper stuff. Flash and glitter."

She waved her hand and arm airily. The ring flew off her finger and curved through the air in a semicircle, high above Christopher's head. His right arm shot up vertically, and he caught it and held it.

"Once upon a time I used to play cricket," he said, looking rather pleased with himself as he took out his wallet, placed the ring inside it and stowed it away safely in an inside pocket.

"Wasn't that the shoulder that was wounded?" Carline said casually.

He nodded.

"I had no idea I could raise my arm like that," he said. "It must have been a fluke, and I expect it will be as stiff as ever if I try to do it again. Normally I use my left arm."

Carline had noticed that the radiogram was so placed that he could stretch out his left hand to it, and it had been with his left hand and arm that he had thrown the envelope into the waterpaper basket.

"You must practice with the right arm," she said, and forbore to suggest the arm exercises which sprang instantly to her trained mind.

Mrs. Burdock opened the door and stood a little way inside it, smiling in her gentle way.

"Would Miss Lode care to come upstairs with me to see the rooms?" she enquired.

"There would just be time before dinner."

"Carline isn't interested in the rooms," said Christopher.

"Oh, but I am interested," protested Carline. The fact that Christopher had moved his wounded arm in her presence seemed like an augury. There was work here to be done, and by herself, despite selfish disinclinations. "If I seemed lacklustre when you first mentioned it, it was because I was surprised that you should consider me as a—boarder. It would be wonderful to live here, in Chelsea, near to the river. Why, I could even walk to and from my hospital, along by the river."

She rose to accompany Mrs. Burdock, fancying that Chris was looking at Leone as if he wanted her to understand that here, at last, was their chance for a few minutes' private conversation.

But Leone came with her mother and Carline, running ahead like an eager child and switching on lights. The top stairs were steep and narrow, but in Carline's eyes they seemed fitted to the charm of low ceilings and sloping walls. The bedroom had running water, and a built-in wardrobe that could accommodate far more clothes than she possessed. The sitting room was furnished in modern style, with a studio couch and a fire surround containing shelves and shelf cupboards with sliding doors of glass. Both rooms were close carpeted in grey, the covers were maroon and green, and the curtains in a gay design of harmonizing shades, lightened with daffodil yellow. There was one picture only in the sitting room—a mountain picture that hung strikingly over the fire surround.

The room was luxurious and yet in some way severe, Carline decided, and immediately began to think how charming it could be with her own small possessions about it—flowers in her pet vases, her little clock and a few decorative bits of pottery. Her

eyes noted the convenient points for wireless and her iron, and her mind began to arrange her tea-set and coffee cups behind the sliding glass panels. Mrs. Burdock pointed out the electric kettle provided.

"The windows are small, but you get plenty of sunshine," she said.

"Mummie is trying to tell you politely that you'll be baked in summer up here, right under the roof, and frozen in winter."

Leone shivered as she spoke and hunched her shoulders.

"I don't think Miss Lode will be cold," said Mrs. Burdock as she pressed down a switch, whereupon the curving chromium backing to the electric fire glowed into a wide band of orange red.

"This is radiant heat," she told Carline.

"Lovely," said Carline. "I can feel it from here."

She went over to the window, and asked permission to open it and look out. She could see the corner of the terrace and the lamp-lit length of the street beyond, leading down to the river. By daylight it might even be possible to glimpse the river, Carline thought, turning her gaze upwards above roofs and chimneys. The view afforded a sweep of sky that was sizeable for London, and as Carline watched, the moon, now in her second quarter, smiled her way out of banking clouds, cresting the night scene with silver.

Carline touched the crest of her deliberations in that instant. There wasn't going to be much self-sacrifice in leaving the little niche she had made for herself at Ealing, which now seemed drab and colorless by comparison with Chelsea and this fascinating attic room. She knew she could be happy in this room, and she knew, too, why the furnishings had seemed to be severe. It was a masculine severity.

She turned to Mrs. Burdock.

"Will you mind if I bring my long wall-mirror?" "Bring anything you like. Chris didn't trouble about a long mirror."

"These were his rooms, then?"

"Always, from his nursery days. He refurnished them before he went overseas. I think he had the

idea that he wanted a little place that could be

absolutely his own when he came home, but there—"

Mrs. Burdock's voice showed little concern, and Carline thought for the second time that she was somewhat in awe of Christopher, but was not truly concerned for him, nor very fond of him. Leone had left them now. Her mother explained that she could not endure cold nor the slightest draught.

"I must get Veller to move Christopher's books to make more space for you," said Mrs. Burdock. "When he first came home from hospital, he intended to have his pictures and photographs downstairs in the basement. Veller carried them down and began hanging the pictures, but then Chris went off into one of his awkward moods and ordered everything to be packed away in a cupboard. Veller brought that mountain picture back up here without telling Chris, because he thought it would deteriorate, being an oil-painting. You don't object to it, do you, Miss Lode?"

"I like it."

Carline went back to the bedroom. She had noticed that one photograph had been left behind, an enlarged snapshot, framed, showing two batsmen walking out from the pavilion on some cricket ground. The one man was Chris, Chris in flannels, gay and carefree, going out to open the innings. She noticed his height, his length of limb. She had never seen Chris walking or even standing. Would he never walk and stand again?

Mrs. Burdock took her down to the floor below and showed her the bathroom.

"I expect you start work early," she said. "Leone doesn't have to get to the showrooms until ten o'clock, and I am afraid she isn't always punctual. She and I have breakfast in bed, so you would have the bathroom to yourself in the morning."

"That would be delightful if

Carline halted. An important query mark was assuming gigantic proportions in her mind. Two sumptuous rooms in Chelsea, with lashings of hot

water and meals as well would cost far more than she could afford. They wouldn't be taking a paying guest if they didn't want to make money, and in these days they could ask almost anything. Carline was by no means dissatisfied with her salary but she couldn't afford to live at top level.

When Mrs. Burdock took her into the bedroom, she introduced the delicate subject of finances.

"I don't know what to say," Mrs. Burdock hesitated. "Christopher didn't mention money to me, but I don't suppose he would like you to pay more than you can afford. He seemed so keen on your coming to us. It was his idea, you know, as soon as he heard you were in the house."

"But he hardly knows me," said Carline.

"Well, as I expect he told you, he thinks it would be nice for Leone to have another girl in the house." Mrs. Burdock looked at her queerly. "It seems like Fate, your coming here this afternoon."

It did indeed seem like Fate, when Carline thought of Christopher and the conviction she had that she had been sent to this house for the express purpose of helping him. She could not see why they were so anxious for Leone to have her companionship, however. Surely Leone had plenty of friends of her own, and she had Chris, too. It was really very nice of Leone not to mind having another girl in the house, in fact.

Carline's mind reverted to the practical issue. "I wish you would suggest a figure," she said. Mrs. Burdock hesitated.

"Would four guineas a week be too much for you to pay?" she suggested.

"No, I don't think so. It could cost me no more than living at Ealing, and I might even save money, fares being what they are. But I think you should charge more. There's the cost of electricity for the fire. Where I am now, I have to put shillings and shillings into the gas meter."

"I don't suppose you'll be like Leone. In cold weather, she keeps her fire on all night."

Mrs. Burdock laughed, then her face grew wistful. She put out her hand, tentatively, and touched Carline's arm.

"Chris said it wouldn't be fair to ask you this, but I wonder. Would you mind awfully if I asked you to give me a little massage, during the weekends, perhaps?"

"I'll do that with pleasure."

Carline was beginning to like Mrs. Burdock. There was something pathetic in her face, and she couldn't help feeling that life hadn't handed her out an easy deal, for all that she was now mistress of this beautiful house. But there was a master, too. It became increasingly evident that Christopher ruled the household from his wheel chair.

They went downstairs. The table was set for dinner and Leone was sitting on the fireside stool, looking entrancingly pretty with the firelight in her hair.

"Mummie, have you the keys?" she asked. "Don't you think we might indulge this evening, just for once?"

"Well, yes, perhaps, as we have a visitor."

Mrs. Burdock went over to a corner wall-cupboard and unlocked it and took out a bottle of sherry. Leone lifted beautiful stemmed glasses from another cupboard, set them upon a small silver tray, and laid it on a side table where her mother poured sherry.

"Don't be mingy, Mummie," said Leone. "Aldin promised to come in this evening, and very likely he'll bring us some more."

Leone offered the tray to Carline and her mother and took up her own glass. Her fingers curled lovingly round the stem, and Carline had a momentary impression that there was eagerness and too great a longing in the way she lifted the glass to her lips. Mrs. Burdock lifted her glass in a different manner and in Carline's direction.

"Here's to you, Carline," she said. "May I be informal and use your name? I hope you will be very happy living with us."

Carline smiled and thanked her. Actually she did not feel completely carefree. She did not like the thought of the three of them enjoying sherry together while Chris was sitting alone in the room below and no mention made of joining him or taking him a glass of sherry.

She remembered that the cupboard had been locked, perhaps for reasons of economy. The household seemed to be run on a curious mixture of economy and extravagance. Certainly there wasn't much economy about the very nice dinner which was brought to the table by Veller, who stood at Mrs. Burdock's right hand and watched with a superintending eye while she served the pitifully small portions which he was to take down to Christopher. Evidently his appetite was poor.

Veller was thin and wiry, not very tall but with broad shoulders that denoted great strength. His voice was soft, his face had humor in it, and his appearance was immaculate, with well-brushed hair and a white coat. Carline judged correctly that he had formerly been an Army batman. She sensed that he was a power in the house, and she felt his eye upon her and thought he was passing judgment as to her suitability as a resident visitor.

Carline praised the delicious mushroom soup, and the tender steak, and the perfect sauce that accompanied the cauliflower. She happened to know that cauliflowers were

absurdly dear at the moment, and grilled steak was expensive also. She thought that they would not make much profit out of their paying guest if she shared such a lavish table, and she intimated delicately that she could always obtain a good mid-day meal at the hospital and would not need much in the evenings.

"We always have plenty," said Mrs. Burdock. "Aldin often comes in to talk to Chris, and Leone needs an evening meal."

"Usually I have sandwiches middle day," Leone vouchsafed. "We don't go out for lunch, as a rule. Models do so much changing that they aren't keen

on getting into outdoor clothes unless they have a luncheon date."

Leone exerted herself to be amusing about the showroom.

"How I long for the day when I can show the clothes myself instead of having to wait in the background and be ready with the net." She sighed, explaining for Carline's benefit that the net was a chiffon square, usually black, which the model tied over her head and face each time she changed, to protect the garment as well as her own hair and makeup.

"Miss Smith lets me stand for fittings, often," Leone continued. "If only one of the girls were to be ill, I might get my chance."

"You shouldn't wish anyone to be ill, Leone," her mother said.

"I can't help wishing it. I wish I were an inch taller, too."

"How tall are you?" Carline enquired.

"Five feet seven and a half inches."

Leone's air of frailty made her seem smaller. When Veller came in with coffee, she floated like thistledown to her mother's elbow, and asked prettily if Carline would excuse her while she had coffee with Christopher.

"You'll want to see Christopher, too, on the business side, won't you, Carline?" Mrs. Burdock put in.

Carline smiled a vague affirmative and made no move to accompany Leone.

Goodness, she thought, have I to discuss finances with Christopher? Is he going to be my landlord, and present me with a weekly account or a rent book?

She was relieved and yet disappointed when Leone came back in a very short time and said that Christopher was tired and not in the mood for talking. Carline said she must be going. While she was putting on her coat, Mrs. Burdock asked her whether she would like to fix a day for coming to them.

It was Carline's way to be honest.

"I can't decide now," she said. "A move like this is too big a thing to make up my mind upon in one evening. It's come as a surprise to me, remember." She did not add that it was still more surprising that Mrs. Burdock and Christopher should have reached so swift a decision in the matter. "I'll write to you," she finished. "Or perhaps you'll write to me."

It was pelting rain when Carline reached the front door, but she would not wait a little as Mrs. Burdock suggested.

"Leone, run upstairs and fetch my umbrella," said her mother. "The black one in the wardrobe." She smiled at Carline.

"At any rate, you'll be obliged to call again to return the umbrella," she remarked.

As they stood in the doorway, watching the rain slanting against the street lamps, a large car drew up at the gate, and a man got out, slammed the car door and dashed across the garden path. He was laughing as he came up the steps.

"Hello, Emily, nice of you to be waiting to welcome me."

"I was seeing off my visitor. I hope she's going to become my permanent visitor.

Carline, this is Aldin Burdock. Aldin, Miss Carline Lode."

They shook hands. He was very presentable, very well tailored, very attractive.

"You can't leave in this," he said when Leone came downstairs and handed Carline the umbrella. "You'd have to swim for it."

"I'm a good swimmer," said Carline.

"Won't you let me drive you to wherever you want to go?"

Carline hesitated. She wasn't sure of her way to the nearest bus stop, and she was wearing her nicest shoes and didn't want to get them soaked. Equally she did not wish to take him away from the house when he had only just arrived.

"Emily, persuade the mermaid," he said, and gave Carline a look from expressive grey eyes.

"Let him take you, Carline," said Mrs. Burdock. "Aldin, she has to get to Ealing, so you had better drive her to the Underground."

"I'll do that," said Aldin Burdock and he smiled at Leone. "Back in ten minutes, lovey."

He took the umbrella from Carline's hand and opened it and held it over her.

"Sprint for the car," he said.

Carline sprinted. Aldin opened the car door for her and ran round and took his seat at the wheel.

"Which station suits you best, Sloane Square or South Kensington?" he enquired.

"Whichever is nearest. Either will do."

He had switched on the light and she was aware of his scrutiny.

"I prefer South Kensington," he said. "why?"

"Can't you guess?" He smiled. "Have you handed over the ring at last?"

"Can't you guess?" she imitated.

"You mean, you've told the story several times already and you can't be fagged to tell it again? And that I can get the know-how from Chris and Leone?"

"You are very perceptive, Mr. Burdock." Carline tinged her voice with deliberate severity. The man was a charmer undoubtedly, but she felt she would like him to know that she was capable of sensing the charm without succumbing to it. "I'd be glad to be on my way," she added. "I've an early start to make in the morning."

He took the hint and drove away. Carline reflected with some regret that although she had made her thanks for pleasant hospitality, in her hurried departure she had omitted to ask Mrs. Burdock to say goodnight to Chris for her. It amazed her to find that Aldin Burdock already knew all about her connection with the ring, just as it had amazed her to discover that Christopher had known who she was from the moment she had arrived at the house.

The car was luxurious, the seats wide and comfortable, the driving masterly. Carline leaned back

at her ease, and was only jerked out of her thoughts when a voice spoke into her ear as they waited for the traffic in the King's Road.

"Do you want to know how Chris described you to me when he told me about you?"

"Please, yes, if it bears repeating."

"He told me you were honest as the light of morning."

"I expect you pitched into him for handing over that marvellous opal to a girl he knew nothing about," said Carline.

Aldin chuckled.

"Chris has a great opinion of you," he assured her. "He went so far as to say you had daffodils in your eyes."

"Did he mean my eyes were yellow, then?"

"I don't know. I must have a look later on and compare them with the swatch."

"What on earth is a swatch?"

"I'll tell you in a jiffy."

The lights shone green, and Aldin drove on a short distance and then pulled the car up a little way from the Underground entrance.

"A swatch, my dear Miss Lode, is the technical term for a collection of fabric cuttings in different shades. In our trade, the swatch is often attached to a new model to show the colors in which the garment can be made. Chris hasn't much of an eye for color tones, I'm afraid." He looked into her eyes. "I might have said topaz, or rich brown sherry, the vintage kind. Or the velvet brown of a wallflower."

"Or just plain brown and leave it at that."

Carline placed her hand on the handle of the door.

"Won't you let me drive you all the way?" he offered. "I chose South Kensington because it was slightly farther than Sloane Square, but now I find it wasn't far enough. Let me take you to Ealing."

"Thank you, no," said Carline.

"You'll get wet at the other end."

"I prefer to go by train, all the same."

"Then I shall see you off."

He locked the car and accompanied her into the station. Carline mentioned her season ticket, and watched in some surprise while he put coppers into an automatic ticket machine.

"There may not be an Ealing train for some minutes," he said. "I'll give myself the pleasure of waiting on the platform with you, if I may."

"Really, it's unnecessary," said Carline.

"Let me come, all the same."

Aldin certainly had a way with him, reflected Carline, and if his charming manners seemed a little too well practised, it was none the less difficult to resist their flattery. As soon as they were seated on a platform bench, he enquired what Mrs. Burdock had meant in saying she hoped Carline was to become her permanent visitor.

Carline explained.

"And did Chris come clean? Did he tell you the awful secret—about Leone?"

"Mrs. Burdock told me and Chris corroborated. "And weren't you deterred?"

Carline met his gaze, and was glad that in the station lights he probably wouldn't be able to tell if her color had heightened. Could it be possible that this audacious young man was insinuating that she wouldn't want to live in Christopher's household because his affections were already fixed upon Leone, and she herself, therefore, had no chance of attracting him?

It seemed that it was possible, for Aldin immediately referred to Leone.

"Leone is really a sweet little thing when you come to know her," he said, as if to emphasize the wisdom of Christopher's choice.

"I'm sure she is," Carline replied warmly, and

then her mind reverted to her own perplexities. "I can't think why they want me," she said. "Can't you?"

Aldin grinned at her, then his smile faded. "Poor old Chris, he certainly has picked up a packet of grief since he came out of hospital," he said.

"He told me that your business wasn't flourishing," said Carline, observing that an arrow of white light had flashed up against the word Ealing on the train indicator. "Chris burrows in that hole of his until he can't see the blue sky for the clouds that exist mainly in his imagination" said Aldin. "I run the business and it's all right. Chris hasn't a clue about it."

"Then why is he worrying?" said Carline. "For the same reason that I'm worrying about your journey to Ealing?"

"And why is that?"

"Because I can't travel with you," said Aldin.

The train emerged from the distant tunnel and curled round the shining wet rails and drew up at the platform. Aldin put a hand under Carline's elbow and walked with her to the train, and waited on the platform while the doors closed, contriving to catch her eye and smile even as she was carried away from his sight.

Carline thought over his last remark. So Chris felt his position keenly, and didn't like being out of the flow of affairs in the family firm. Carlene suspected that Aldin didn't really want Chris to be in the flow and wouldn't take kindly to interference, though she hadn't any grounds for thinking so and it wasn't fair to harbor the suspicion.

She liked Aldin. She liked him especially for the gift he had of putting a mental finger upon the very marrow-bone of a situation.

She guessed that Chris held the controlling financial interest in the business, being the son of his father. It might help towards his recovery if he could take a practical interest in it, too, she thought, and pulled herself up sharply and told herself there and then to stop behaving as if Chris were her patient and she was responsible for doing everything and anything she could devise to help him to get better, supposing there was any hope at all that he might get better.

Anyway, she was under no obligation, she told herself repeatedly. She had enough patients on her hands already.

The day that followed was a stiff one at the hospital and Carline came home tired and longing to relax in the peace of her own room, where she didn't have to give out cheer and encouragement to anybody. She was more than half convinced now that it was wiser not to make the move, and in that mood she did not immediately open a letter with the Chelsea postmark which was awaiting her on her return.

The envelope winked at her persistently while she was preparing her simple meal. Twice she was impelled to take it up and look at the half-familiar handwriting. Chris hadn't scrawled this time as he had done that far-back day in hospital when he couldn't use his arm properly. His handwriting now was firm and decisive, the words well spaced and the dot to the "i" advanced a little distance over the letters which followed it. That meant that the writer had imagination and looked ahead, she believed.

When she sat down at the table, she was unable to restrain her curiosity any longer, and left her scrambled egg cooling upon its toast while she read Christopher's letter. He had written thus:

Dear Carline,

I was concerned for you when I heard the rain pouring down yesterday evening and I was glad Aldin arrived in time to drive you home, although I was sorry not to have a word with you before you left.

Now to business. If you come to us, we could not accept a penny over three guineas a week under the circumstances. I wish we could offer you entire hospitality. but I fancy you would refuse if we did.

Emily tells me you decided wisely to think the matter over. I hope your decision will be "yes." I have been counting upon your help.

Yours very sincerely,

Chris.

Carline set the open sheet of notepaper beside her plate and ate her supper with her eyes fixed upon it.

"I have been counting upon your help. . . ." The letter bore today's date and must have been written in the early hours of this morning. Did he mean that he had lain awake last night, counting the hours, wondering if he could count upon her own assistance professionally? The rest of his life was at stake, and his chances of happy marriage with Leone.

Carline slipped into her coat and left her supper table uncleared, an omission that was foreign to her customary procedure. There was no telephone in the house and the nearest call-box was at the end of a long road. She covered the distance in half her usual time and scanned the directory for Christopher's name. She would have to speak to Mrs. Burdock, for she had noticed that Chris had no extension in his basement room.

Five minutes later the matter was settled, and Carline had fixed her arrival for Wednesday week, a day when the hospital rota released her for the afternoon. She had asked Mrs. Burdock to thank Chris for his letter, secretly hoping he would not think her acceptance had been influenced by his absurdly generous terms. She wondered who had given Chris the impression that Aldin had driven her all the way home to Ealing. Aldin seemed bent upon making himself obliging, for a few days later she was called to the telephone at the hospital to find him waiting on the line.

"I've heard the good news, Carline," he led off. "I've been wondering, have you engaged a removal van?"

"I think a taximan will be able to manage my things," said Carline. "I'm going to make love to my grocer to see if he'll let me have cartons for packing books and china."

"Don't you go making love to any sugar-tongued grocerman," Aldin retorted. "Allow me to be your remover. Distance no object, absolute security and

no breakages. You needn't pack the books because they can go straight into the car. What time shall I call for you?"

He waved aside her objection that she could not think of taking up his time in the middle of a working afternoon.

"I'll be prompt," he said, and he kept his word. Carline was punctual, too, and she was waiting in the hall making her farewells to her landlady with her possessions neatly ranged near the door.

"Insubordination," he complained. "Did I or did I not give you instructions that you were not to carry packages downstairs? I shall claim a penalty."

He loaded her luggage into the car—a very distinctive cream-colored car with a crimson top, as she now saw by daylight. As they drove away, he told her that by way of penalty he would take her to Richmond, where they would have tea.

"I told Mrs. Burdock I would come by three-thirty and I prefer to keep my word," said Carline decisively.

"Very well," he said stiffly and put the car in motion. Presently he pulled in to the side of the road and stopped the engine.

"Do you dislike me, Carline?" he demanded. "Not at all," she smiled.

"Well, you are not behaving in a very friendly fashion," he grumbled. "Am I never to be granted a little time in your company?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be ungracious, nor ungrateful. This move is rather a big step for me to take. I want to get it over quickly and settle myself in. Aldin, can't you understand?"

He smiled his handsome smile.

"You've said it now," he exulted. "It tripped off your lips like a bell."

"But what have I said?" she enquired. "Something that put us on terms."

"What kind of terms?"

"Christian name terms. A distinct advance, in my opinion. Call me Aldin, and command me anything."

Carline smiled at him sweetly.

"May we advance, then, a little farther, towards Chelsea, please, Aldin?"

He drove on. Carline was pleasantly conscious of the powerful car, of the good looks and high spirits of the attractive young man by her side. Not that Aldin was such a very young man. Carline thought he must be older than Chris and put his age at thirty-four. There was sunshine in the Terrace that afternoon, and the house smiled its gracious welcome when they drew up at the gate. Mrs. Burdock appeared in the round-headed doorway, and Veller was beside her to help Aldin to carry in Carline's luggage. Mrs. Veller waited on the top landing, and it was she who ushered Udine into her new rooms while Aldin went downstairs to chat to Chris.

Carline walked into the sitting room, and gave a gasp of astonishment at the sight of the massed flowers that stood in two large glass jars on table and bookcase fitment.

"I did the best I could with your flowers, Miss Lode," said Mrs. Veller. "Mr. Christopher said he thought you'd like them put in water, and then you could arrange them to your own wishes later on."

So Chris had given her this magnificent presentation of flowers, to welcome her to his house. When Mrs. Veller had departed, with a reminder that tea was ready downstairs, Carline stared at the flowers incredulously.

They were still in their bunches, as they had come from the florist. One jar held yellow roses and palest pink carnations and freesias in delicate variations of color. Fluffy yellow mimosa waved its fronds from the second jar, rivalled by tall blue iris and the deeper purple blue of large-headed violets. There were snowdrops, too, tucked inside the rim of the jar. So Chris had remembered that she loved snowdrops. She had talked about snowdrops in the garden when she first came to the house.

An enticing breath of perfume came from the mimosa, and she longed to get busy on the richest

flower arrangement she had ever visualized. But she could not help feeling that the extravagance of the gift was overwhelming, and it worried her to think of the money he must have spent, in this month of February when flowers were so costly. It was a lovely welcome, all the same, and she determined to go down and thank him as soon as possible.

She tidied her hair in preparation. Carline's hair was darkest brown, smooth and shining and silky, with only the slightest natural wave. She wore it in a modified page-boy style, slightly curved to the head and rather full at the nape. Carline had worn her

gayest dress for the move, a woollen dress of robin red, feeling instinctively that the occasion called for color and brightness and cheer. Now she opened a suitcase, and hunted for a brooch with which to pin on the little cluster of snowdrops which she meant to wear out of compliment to Christopher. Thus equipped, she ran down to the basement and knocked at Christopher's door.

Aldin rose as she entered, Chris smiled from his chair. Carline walked over to him and shook hands, and began her speech of thanks.

"Chris, how good of you and how generous! The flowers are wonderful and I love them. I don't know how to begin to thank you."

"Please don't thank me," said Chris to her brusquely.

Carline thought he looked dejected, and the thought spurred her on to further efforts.

"I want to thank you," she said. "I must thank you for choosing exactly the colors I would have chosen for myself. Yellow roses and iris, and those exquisite pale pink carnations, and the freesia that has all the shades imaginable, like your opal ring." She smiled.

"Mimosa reminds me of the Mediterranean, of course, and snowdrops are like home.

Chris, thank you especially for knowing I was crazy about snowdrops. As you see, I am wearing them."

Christopher waved his hand towards Aldin.

"You'll have to make that pretty speech all over again, Carline," he said dryly. "You've made a mistake, you know. It is Aldin you have to thank for the flowers, and not myself."

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE following morning Carline came downstairs at seven-thirty and made her way to the kitchen, bent on saving Mrs. Veller the trouble of preparing her breakfast at that early hour. But Mrs. Veller was already cutting bread for toast while Veller was setting out two trays with attractive yellow and white breakfast crockery.

"Could I help, please?" said Carline. "I do hope you haven't got up early on my account."

"We always make breakfast well before eight o'clock for Mr. Christopher and ourselves," said Mrs. Veller. "You could watch the toast for me, if you'd be so kind, Miss Lode."

Carline made the toast, and Veller took it from her and cut it into neat triangles. She watched him making neat little curls of butter and praised his adroitness.

"You do everything so beautifully," she said.

"Mr. Christopher's appetite has to be tempted," broke in Mrs. Veller. "Like as not, he'll only take one slice of toast and a cup of coffee. Will you have tomatoes with your bacon, or an egg, Miss Lode?"

"Tomatoes, please," said Carline, moving over to the window so as to be out of the way. There was Christopher's magnolia tree, black and starkly beautiful against the high wall of red brick behind it. She noted that there were forsythias and a sapling prunus on the opposite side of the garden, and was glad to think there would be blossoms for Chris before many weeks had gone by.

But there wasn't much chance of his being able to use the garden today, Carline thought, for a fine drizzling rain was falling and an awning of heavy cloud hung over the roofs and back windows of the houses beyond the brick wall.

Mrs. Veller put her hand in her apron pocket and brought out a card, which her husband handed to Carline. The card had Aldin's name upon it and a few words of good wishes.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Lode," she apologized. "This card should have been with the flowers that Mr. Aldin Burdock sent for you yesterday, but it dropped out while I was unwrapping them and I left it there in the kitchen and it quite slipped my mind."

"Hadh't you better tell Miss Lode what happened, Lily?" said Veller.

"Well, the truth is that Mr. Christopher sent my husband out to get some flowers for you yesterday morning, and while he was away Mr. Aldin's flowers arrived, and as Mrs. Burdock was at the hairdresser's I showed them to Mr. Christopher and asked if I should put them in water since you weren't coming till the afternoon."

"Then when I came in with his own flowers, Mr. Christopher said you wouldn't be wanting them," explained Veller. "White anemones, they were, and very choice. He'd given me particular instructions that I was to go to the shop in Sloane Street and ask for something unusual. Quality before quantity, Mr. Chris said, and I'd been thinking he'd be pleased with the anemones and feeling I'd done well for him, but he looked at them as if they were dandelions and said I was to throw them away, as you had more than enough flowers already."

"You could see he was disappointed," said Mrs. Veller compassionately. "They were lovely, too, those anemones. I set them in a vase and put them in his room this morning, thinking they would brighten up the place a bit, but he didn't seem to notice them. Oh well, I suppose you can't thank him for what you never had. Least said on the subject the better now, Miss Lode."

But too much had been said already. Carline could have wept to think that on top of everything she had thanked Chris in elaborate detail for Aldin's flowers, and then had had to make her thanks to Aldin himself, in Christopher's presence. Aldin had

turned the matter off in his easy manner by making a joke about buttering Pussy's feet when she first came to the house so that she shouldn't run away, but the joke hadn't gone down very well.

Mrs. Veller served Carline's breakfast and told Veller to carry the tray to the sitting room.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to breakfast with Mr. Chris?" queried Veller, looking at Carline with a persuasive half smile.

"I'd be delighted," said Carline, "but I don't suppose he'd welcome my company so early in the morning."

"There isn't much doubt about that when he's been awake since five o'clock and the long day still before him," said Veller, while his wife quickly filled a larger coffee pot, remarking that it would seem more homelike if Carline poured Mr. Christopher's coffee. Chris was up and dressed, sitting in his chair, and his face brightened when Carline followed Veller other side of the table.

"I seem to be having the lion's share of the feast," said Carline. "Your Mrs. Veller has a generous hand when it comes to serving out."

"You have the day's work before you," Chris said. "I suppose you are always busy. What's it like, Carline? One appointment after the other all day long?"

"More or less," she said. "It isn't a case of just taking one patient at a time, Chris, but several patients. You put one on his treatment, whatever it is, and then you go off and do the second and the third and so on, and then come back to the first and give him his exercises or massage of whatever he has to have."

"It sounds as if you are always on the dash," commented Chris. "What happens if you leave some poor chap under some frightful contraption and then go away and forget all about him?"

"We don't have frightful contraptions, only lovely things that put new power into people's nerves and muscles, and lamps that warm them up and take the aches out of them." She smiled at

Christopher. "And we have time clocks that go off with a ping to remind us when a patient has come to the end of his time for that particular treatment, if a reminder should be needed. But we don't forget patients, Chris, not for one minute. We never go out of earshot. Have some more coffee?"

"Is there enough?"

"Heaps." Carline took his cup. "And you'd better have another slice of toast, and say it's good toast, because I made it."

"Don't you dare to try to manage me, Miss Lode."

"I wouldn't presume to do so," said Carline demurely, knowing that she was so presuming and had every intention of continuing to presume. She enquired casually whether he had had another shot at lifting his arm.

"No, it's gone stiff again," he said.

"Do this," said Carline, with an illustrative gesture.

Christopher obeyed.

"And then this . . . and then stretch. . . ."

"Witch," he said, grinning, with his right arm vertically extended. "I told you not to practise tricks on me."

"It's you who have to practise. Do that several times a day and your arm will be as good as ever it was. Will you do it, Chris?"

"Perhaps I will." He changed the subject. "Carline, I haven't been behaving like a very good host. I should have enquired if you slept well and if you like your rooms."

"I love my rooms. Perhaps I should say your rooms, and it's very good of you to let me have them. And I slept like a dormouse, thank you. The only trouble was that morning came too soon."

She paused. Morning hadn't come a minute too soon for Chris, from what Veller had related. She badly wanted to give a word of cheer, and also to apply a touch of salve for the hurt which Aldin's flowers had inflicted. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that Aldin's embarrassing munificence

had caused her to waste too much time arranging the vases, but the subject was a delicate one and she decided not to mention it.

"The truth is that I didn't get to bed till after midnight, Chris," she said. "I've the very bad habit of setting myself the impossible task and then fussing if I can't achieve it. As it was, I began to unpack my books and found myself compelled to abandon them."

"I must remind Veller to clear out my books from your shelves," said Chris. "Emily forgot to tell him."

"It wouldn't matter if you left them," Carline said. "But perhaps you would like to have your own books with you. Where will you put them?"

"Oh, Veller can shove them in the cupboard," Chris replied. "There are books there already. I always meant to tell him to sort them out."

"Sort them out yourself," said Carline, and she rose from the table and went over to the cupboard and looked at the jumble inside. The cupboard was in the lower part of an old kitchen dresser, the upper part consisting of shelves which ranged emptily up to the ceiling.

"These shelves would make a nice bookcase. Get Veller to pull the books out, and then you can arrange them to your liking, together with those he brings from upstairs. Books are an adornment to any room."

"Regrettably, the shelves are too high for me," Chris observed.

"I doubt it," said Carline. "Come over here and try:,"

She smiled persuasively, and was not a little elated when Chris propelled his chair over to her side and found that three of the shelves were within his reach.

"It will be splendid exercise for your arm," said Carline, whereupon he looked at her coldly.

"Carline, I didn't ask you to come here in order that you should treat me as one of your patients,"

he said. "Let's get that clearly, please. I don't want you fussing over me."

He met her gaze and held it. It seemed to Carline that he was looking not into her eyes but into her heart. A smile flickered about his lips.

"Oh well, I suppose it's second nature to you, you being what you are and I being what I am," he said. "But you may as well drop it, all the same. It's Leone I want you to help. She doesn't have much fun, you know, and I want her to go about under your wing, if you'll be so good as to extend it. She tells me she feels awkward about that show next week with you and Aldin."

Aldin had arranged previously to take Leone to a musical she particularly wanted to see, and yesterday evening he had insisted that Carline must come too, saying he could easily get an extra seat.

"Leone thinks she should drop out," said Chris.

"But why should she think that?" protested Carline.

"Well, you and Aldin mightn't want a third party liability."

"What nonsense," said Carline, but she saw by his face that Chris didn't think it was nonsense at all. She also saw by her watch that it was time for her to go. She didn't like the way Chris had coupled her name with Aldin's, and she told him that if anyone dropped out from the theatre party, it must be herself, the newcomer. With that she wished him goodbye, abruptly, and moved towards the door.

"I say, Carline," Chris called after her.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry if I annoyed you by referring to the bud as if it were a full-blown rose."

"I don't know what you mean," said Carline, although she knew perfectly well that he was referring to her budding friendship with Aldin. She gave Chris her best professional smile, the parting smile she would have bestowed on any patient, but he didn't respond and his face had reverted to its habitual set and serious expression.

It was exasperating, after all her efforts to cheer him up. Now he would sit there in that chair Blooming throughout the morning and not make an effort to touch the books, she thought. Time was racing, but she couldn't leave him thus.

She went to the window and bent over the white anemones that bloomed in delicate, ethereal beauty from the vase that Mrs. Veller had set upon the sill.

"These are exquisite," she said. "White flowers are always fields ahead of other flowers, and these are so rare, so unusual." She touched one of the anemones with a tender finger. "All flowers can speak to you," she said. "This one almost speaks aloud." Chris wheeled over his chair and swept the anemones from their vase and thrust them into her hands.

"Take them with you for the physio department, if you have flowers there," he said.

"We do indeed, when flowers are given to us. Thank you, Chris, so much. These will do more than cheer my poor patients, it will give them something to talk about and think about. If you can spare them, you will have done a little of my day's work for me."

Chris shouted for Veller and commanded him to wrap up the flowers and have them ready to hand to Miss Lode as she went out of the house. It was still raining. Carline wore her red mackintosh and a matching sou'wester. Something prompted her to turn at the front gate and look back at the house. Chris was at the lower window. Evidently he had wheeled himself into the Vellers' sitting room for the express purpose of waving goodbye to her, and his smile was heartening. Carline felt that she had made a beginning. The next step was to persuade Chris to open up about his own misfortune. It was a difficult step to accomplish, for Chris would not discuss his disability and put out his prickles upon the slightest reference to the subject. He was ready and eager to talk about other matters, however. Their breakfasts together continued and

he liked Carline to look in on him in the evening when she returned from hospital, although she was careful not to stay many minutes and to be upstairs and well out of the way when Leone came home, a little later than herself.

Aldin dropped in to dinner every evening that first week. He didn't spend much time with Christopher, and showed a tendency to settle in an armchair by the sitting room fire, seeking assistance, particularly Carline's assistance, in the morning's crossword puzzle, which he never seemed to be able to complete unaided.

Leone also preferred her favourite seat on the fireside stool, burying her nose in a thriller or setting stitches into a piece of embroidery. Leone was a talented embroideress. Carline could not see why she did not take her work down to Christopher's room and keep him company, but Leone, like Mrs. Burdock, seemed to think Chris didn't like people to be with him for more than a few minutes at a time and that it was best for his nerves to be left in solitude.

Carline did not agree. It troubled her sorely to think of Chris alone in his cheerless room on these cold evenings of early spring while they sat in the comfort of a glowing coal fire. Yet she herself could not intrude upon him without invitation. She could, however, withdraw herself from the general company, and betake herself to her own rooms, by way of a salve to her own uneasiness and a silent protest to the others. This she did on the Saturday evening, only to be disturbed some ten minutes later by the sound of firm footsteps upon the stairs and a tap upon the door of her sitting room. She guessed who her caller was and went to the door and opened it.

"I hoped you would ask me to come in," said Aldin.

Carline gave no invitation. She stood in the doorway, hesitating, while Aldin glanced past her into the room.

"You have a pretty touch with flowers," he said. "Will you come and do flower arrangements in my flat when I give a party?"

It wasn't the first time Aldin had hinted that he would like to entertain Carline in his own bachelor quarters near Belgrave Square, described by Leone as being super-sumptuous.

"You could engage a girl from a flower shop," said Carline.

"So I could," said Aldin, and he looked at her fiercely. "Am I so utterly revolting to you, Carline, that you won't ever do a thing I want you to do? I meant that I wanted to give a party for you."

He lowered his voice, a tinge of red shading his cheeks.

"Carline, you must have discovered by now that I like the slant of your eyebrows and the way you do your hair and everything about you. That being so, I naturally want to please you. Isn't there anything I could do to please you—a very little?"

Until this moment Carline had thought Aldin's self-assurance invulnerable, but now she sensed a chink in his armor. It was a genuine chink, and therefore appealing. It seemed to her that it wouldn't be difficult to like Aldin, quite considerably, as a friend. It also occurred to her, urgently, that he had offered the opening she was looking for.

"There is something you could do for me, Aldin," she said.

"What is it?"

"Teach me to play bridge. I played a little overseas, but not enough to be able to take a hand with average good players. I have two packs of cards."

"There are cards downstairs." Aldin looked eager. "The trouble is we need a foursome. Leone is pretty good, but Emily can't even remember her trumps."

"What about Chris?" Carline said casually. "Chris plays. I don't know if he'd want to be bothered though, Carline."

"Let's bother him. I'm keen to begin. Aldin, this is very nice of you. Leone told me you are a crack player."

Carline led the way downstairs, turning her head to smile at Aldin as they stepped into the hall. Instantly he put a detaining hand upon her sleeve.

"You needn't think I don't know what's behind all this," he said. "It's the angel touch, of course."

The angel touch! Aldin had guessed then, that her zeal for instruction in bridge sprang from a desire to provide entertainment for Christopher. It didn't matter, so long as Aldin co-operated, so long as her plan worked.

It did work. When the game was mooted, Christopher wheeled his chair over to his desk with alacrity and produced playing cards. Aldin hunted out score-blocks from the sitting room, and Leone hastened upstairs to drape her shoulders with a wide, blue, fleecy wool scarf, ostensibly because she thought the basement room chilly, though the scarf intensified the color of her eyes and made her look more incredibly ethereal than ever.

They cut for partners. Aldin played with Carline, Chris partnered Leone, as was fitting. Leone was a clever bridge player and her handling of the cards was enchanting to watch. To Carline's regret, she would not let Chris deal in his turn, but gathered up the cards in her slim, supple fingers and shuffled and dealt with a legerdemain that would have graced a conjuror's performance. She spoke her calls sweetly, and while she was playing the hand the little smile about her lips held the innocent absorption of a child engaged upon a game of its own fanciful imagination. Leone would have made a poker player.

"No post-mortems," she said when Aldin wanted to talk over the hand and give Carline a few hints, Leone insisted upon playing for money. There wasn't any thrill if you didn't play for money, however trifling the amount, she said. She and Chris won the rubber. Aldin paid Chris and Carline took her purse from her handbag and put one shilling and eightpence on the table for Leone.

Leone gathered up the coins with unconcealed delight. Carline was delighted, too, because Chris had been amused and interested and taken out of himself. Veller was pleased also. He had made tea for them earlier in the evening, and didn't mind being kept after eleven so long as his master had company.

Leone put her arms round Christopher's neck and kissed him goodnight.

"What about me, partner?" said Aldin, glancing at Carline. "Do I get a like reward?"

"I'm afraid not." Carline smiled at Aldin. She was grateful to him, and she hoped the bridge evenings down there with Chris would become a regular thing. She tossed a gay "Goodnight" to Chris and went off upstairs. Aldin hadn't brought his car, but he telephoned for a taxi.

"Wait and see me off, Carline," he said.

"All right."

She felt she owed him that much courtesy, after being so agreeable to her wishes.

There was a small, narrow-seated oak settle in the hall. She sat down in one corner to wait and Aldin seated himself in the other.

"I'm too sleepy to talk," she told him.

"Just sit there and don't say a word." His voice was caressing. "It's enough for me to look at you. I like you in black. I suppose a thousand men have told you how lovely you look in black."

"Not more than five hundred."

"Perhaps they didn't all mention that your hands are a poem. You have wonderful hands, Car-line, beautiful and feminine, and yet so capable, I don't doubt. I like your hands best when they are folded in your lap, reposefully, like white lilies."

"Do you always say charming things to girls, Aldin?"

"Always." He grinned. "But with you it's no effort. One simply speaks the truth."

He shifted his position slightly and leaned forward towards her, and slid his fingers delicately from the back of her hand to her wrist. There they stayed.

Carline willed him to take them away without argument. The taxi was a long time coming, she thought.

Leone had been in the kitchen, boiling water for her hot water bottle. She greatly desired to possess an electric blanket, but Chris was against her buying one, saying she would be sure to forget to switch off and perhaps come to some harm. She now emerged from the kitchen and drifted slowly past them, smiled at them vaguely and floated gracefully upstairs. Leone could look graceful even when she was clasping a rubber hot water bottle to her person.

Carline judged that Aldin had removed his fingers from her wrist in the moment before Leone had appeared. Her mind rested for a moment on the complexities of Leone's character. Sometimes she showed herself as a highly sophisticated young woman, at other times she had the simple directness of a child. Her manner towards Chris was childish, too, and she accepted his disability as a matter of course and never showed the concern for him which might have been expected in a young woman secretly racked with anxiety for the man she loved.

But there wasn't any doubt that Leone was very fond of Chris. There had been something very natural and touching in the way she had kissed him this evening, in Carline's presence. Carline remembered how oddly Chris looked at her when Aldin had asked if he was to be treated likewise, and she hoped he did not think that she and Aldin were on kissing terms already. Her backbone stiffened at the very thought, and when at long last her ears caught the sound of the taxi arriving, she hastened to the doorway and waited there to speed his departure.

The night was clear and beautiful, the air came freshly, and Carline wondered that he did not choose to walk home under the blazing stars instead of indulging in the extravagance of a taxi for such a short distance.

Regardless of the taximeter, too, he lingered at the door, taking her hand and holding it for minutes in which she feared he might be contemplating

further sentimentality, and then contenting himself by saying that tomorrow would be Sunday and that she could have a long lie in in the morning.

This was not Carline's intention, although she thought it unlikely that Chris would expect her to breakfast with him on a Sunday morning. She looked into the kitchen shortly before nine o'clock, prepared to take a tray up to her room.

Veller wished her good morning and told her that his master had been waiting for her for the best part of an hour. Carline saw at once that Chris looked better. When she came into the room, he put down his newspaper and wheeled himself up to the table with the air of a man who was looking forward to his breakfast.

"I told Veller to make tea this morning, not coffee," said Chris. "I hope you don't mind, Carline, but I didn't wake up in time for early tea, and, anyway, a tea pot is a matey thing to have on the table on a Sunday morning when you don't have to hurry away." Carline admired the charming linen tea-cosy cover and its embroidered design of cowslips and wild violets. The embroidery was Leone's handiwork, she was sure, and she praised it accordingly.

But Chris did not seem disposed to talk of his beloved this morning.

"You didn't notice that I'd rearranged the books a second time," he said.

"I did notice," said Carline. "They look very companionable."

"It's an odd experience looking over the books you liked and read when you were younger," he confided. "Sometimes you wonder what you saw in them and know you have grown out of them, sometimes you discover what you have missed. Anyway, I'm grateful to you, Carline, for making me have my own books on show. I intend to browse through them gradually, as soon as I've finished the particular reading I have on hand at the moment."

"And what is that?" Carline enquired.

"I'd prefer not to say."

Chris immediately began to talk about a newly published memoir which was reviewed in the Sunday newspaper.

"I should say it's a book that's worth waiting for," he said. "I shall get Veller to put in a request card for it at the library."

"Do you mean the public library?" said Carline. He nodded.

"But, Chris, don't you belong to a subscription library?"

She read the negation in his face and indignation welled within her. The household was run on luxurious lines, and although Mrs. Burdock talked of economies, she had her subscription library and she frequently went to the cinema. Leone seemed to spend a prodigious amount on cigarettes and cosmetics and the endless variation of dress accessories. Meanwhile Christopher, here in his basement, denied himself every comfort that might have made his life more endurable.

"Forgive me for being inquisitive, Chris, but have you taken a vow against spending any money on yourself?" she ventured. "I should have thought you would have liked television down here and a telephone extension."

"I meant to have all that and much more," he admitted. "When I came home from hospital, I hadn't any idea that I should have to incarcerate myself like this."

He waited a moment.

"I'd been too absorbed in my own troubles, I suppose, and I hadn't given a thought to other people's. Then I discovered about the firm. Carline, last year they passed their dividend. Such a thing had never happened before, and I can't think what my father would have said if he were alive and could have known of it."

"Tell me about your firm," said Udine. "What is the set-up?"

"It's a private limited company, Bodenay and Burdock, as you know. There are only a few shareholders left, elderly people who have at some time

been connected with the business. That's why it worried me terribly to think they were feeling the draught when the usual dividend didn't materialize."

"I suppose Mrs. Burdock was one of the sufferers?" queried Carline.

"No, not exactly. You see, when her husband was in difficulties, he sold his shares to my father, hoping to get himself out of his tangle later on, but he never managed to do so. Leonard Burdock was by way of being a thorn in my father's side, as you may have gathered."

Carline thought she detected a tenderness in Christopher's voice. Doubtless he was not unmindful of the fact that Leone had been named as nearly as possible after her father, this Leonard who had speculated wildly with his money.

"Who are the present directors of your firm?" Carline enquired.

"There's Yoichim, our designer. Father made him a director because he was such a clever creative artist that he couldn't risk losing him. And there's Uncle Ben. He's over eighty now and only manages to come up to London once in a way, but Father wouldn't let him resign because his judgment is so sound. He worked with my grandfather. And we have Aldin. Aldin used to be a salesman, a very brilliant salesman, I've always heard. When my father died so suddenly he stepped into the breach and carried on, and they made him a director, managing director in fact."

"That was your father's wish, you being overseas, was it, Chris?"

"Father had no chance to do any wishing. I thought Aldin might have told you about it, Car-line."

She shook her head.

"Father stepped out of a train one winter evening, thinking he was at his destination, but the train had only pulled up momentarily for a signal. He was found on the lines later on. Mercifully, it must have been instantaneous, I was told."

"Oh, Chris, and that was the news you heard while you were in hospital on the island."

"It was nothing to the news Aldin gave me on my return. He says everyone thinks Father jumped from the train deliberately, feeling depressed because the business was going down. But it's not true. Father was the most sensible, level-headed man I've ever known, and the most considerate for other people. He wouldn't have done it, however bad things were, and I'm by no means convinced that they were bad then."

"I'm sure you're right, Chris," said Carline. "I'll tell you why if you like?"

"Yes?"

"He was your father, and there was something of you in him, just as there is something of him in you. And you aren't the giving-up kind, I'm sure of that. Your father had an accident."

"I'm convinced of it. Father was going down to see Uncle Ben and he knew the journey well. It was a Friday night, and probably he was tired and fell asleep and woke up thinking the train was in at the platform."

Carline reverted to the main issue.

"I take it that you own the bulk of the shares, inherited from your father, but they don't bring in any money at present, whereas Aldin is managing director and draws a salary. Is that the situation?"

"With the additional fact that after my father's death, the firm gave Emily a generous allowance to carry on with temporarily until I came home. Aldin proposed I should continue to draw it, but I couldn't accept, in view of the shareholders."

"Then how do you run the house, Chris?"

"I've a small private income. It's money that came down from my great-grandmother, the Earl's daughter, remember? It's tied up on the eldest son, and after my father it comes to me when I'm thirty. Meanwhile the trustees allow me an income; nothing very palatial, but with my pension I can just make do."

He smiled.

"I don't like to keep Emily short, nor Leone. They were never used to economy, and it doesn't hurt me. I'm determined not to spend a penny on myself until the firm is on its feet again."

"You are the one who should put it there," said Carline decisively.

"What do you mean?"

"You should be a director. It's clear that something has gone wrong on the money side. Aldin tells me that business is flourishing, and that means that money has been coming in all right. Hasn't it occurred to you that money may have been flowing out in the wrong direction also, since your father ceased to hold the purse-strings? Have you studied the accounts, Chris?"

"I don't know a thing about them. I did ask Aldin for a balance sheet, but Jones, the secretary, has been ill and it wasn't forthcoming. Anyway, I should be hopelessly fogged, Carline. I know nothing of accountancy."

"You can add and subtract, can't you? Take a correspondence course in accountancy or buy a book on it. Then get the firm's books brought out here and study them. I presume they have a chartered accountant to audit, also. You could see him. See every man jack of them. Make them come here and give an account of themselves. Then, if you are not satisfied, you can reorganize."

"It wouldn't be easy," said Christopher.

"Nothing that is worth doing is easy," she rejoined. "From what you tell me, I fancy you'd have Uncle Ben on your side. Would he do the journey up here, do you think? I'd volunteer to look after him and see that he's comfortable. Then you could have your first meeting here. Surely, as the principal shareholder, you could demand a general meeting?"

"An extraordinary general meeting," said Chris, and he laughed, and then grew serious and stared at her fixedly.

"I've half a mind to try it," he said. "I must think. If only I could-

"If only you could do—what?"

"This is one of the times when I long to prowl about," he said, and flushed hotly. "Oh, Carline, if only I could take myself off for a ten-mile walk, and think while I walked. Do you know, I can hardly remember the motion of walking, but I do remember it as a safety valve and the best possible way of sorting out your thoughts."

Carline crossed to the window and looked out.

"I fancy it will keep fine," she said. "It's frosty, but there isn't much wind and the sun may break through later."

She swerved round.

"You are going for a walk, Chris, down to the river. This is Sunday, and I planned it for Sunday. I shall do the walking, not you, but you are coming with me."

CHAPTER FOUR

INSTANTLY Christopher showed signs of withdrawal. His face took on a look of shrinking reluctance, and his voice hardened to the practised finality to which Carline was by now becoming accustomed.

"It wouldn't be possible for me to go out this morning," he said. "I've given Veller leave to go up to King's Cross to meet his sister-in-law and her little girl. They're coming to spend the day. Anyway, I make a point of giving Veller and his wife all the free time I can on Sundays."

Carline smiled brightly.

"I wasn't thinking of asking Veller to come with us on our walk," she said.

"If you think I am going to allow you to lug me along, you are vastly mistaken," said Chris.

"Leone can help," said Carline. "I was going to ask her to join us, of course."

"Leone never gets up till lunch time on Sundays," objected Chris.

"Then we'll go out after lunch, if you prefer it," Carline allowed. "I know what's worrying you, Chris. You think if we are out this morning, we shall meet people coming home from church and you'll come in for the sympathetic approaches that you so much dislike. This afternoon, they will all be at home, snoozing after their dinners, Aldin will probably come round, too, and he can help if you really think we two delicate women are unequal to it."

"I shouldn't be too sure of Aldin if I were you, Carline," said Christopher darkly.

"What do you mean?"

"One step forward, chassez, pause—you know the old dancing instructions." He grinned. "Then the

gentleman takes two steps backwards, Aldin's usual tactical procedure."

Carline regarded him mirthfully.

"Can it be possible that you are trying to warn me not to place my trusting little heart in Aldin's ruthless hands?" she enquired.

"Girls have done so," said Chris laconically.

"And you think I might be one of them?"

"Maybe. Leone came down again last night because she'd left her purse behind. You know what a child she is for money." Christopher's face became serious for a moment, then he smiled again. "Leone said she hadn't been able to come until Aldin left because you and he were sitting in the hall holding hands and she didn't like to intrude upon you."

"Really, Chris!" Carline spoke lightly. "Leone must have been dreaming. At all events, I've taken out an insurance policy on my heart, so you needn't worry. It's an all risks insurance."

"A life policy?" he queried.

"You might call it that."

She laughed and withdrew, and went upstairs and tidied her room, feeling a little aggravated. Leone was a minx, she thought. Probably she had exaggerated the trivial little scene which she had chanced upon last night, with the result that Chris had taken upon himself to issue a warning that Aldin was one of those men who lavish attentions upon a girl and then sheer off the moment they feel themselves in danger of becoming entangled.

She wished Chris had credited her with the sense to sum up Aldin's character for herself. Naturally she was aware that a man in Aldin's position didn't reach the thirties and still remain a bachelor unless he chose to do so. Probably he was very comfortable in his own luxurious flat. He was certainly extravagant and liked to do things in a large-handed manner, and it was likely that he did make a fuss of any girl who took his fancy, but it wasn't fair to accuse him of selfishness unless you knew the true circumstances. Aldin might never have met a girl he really cared for, or he might have suffered grievously

in some unhappy love affair and therefore made a point of concluding any friendship with a girl who was foolish enough to read a deeper meaning into his light-hearted flirtation.

It couldn't be too light-hearted for Carline. She liked Aldin well enough, all the same, and she hoped he would turn up today, if only to show Chris that the cooling-off process had not yet begun. Aldin had made no promise to come. Doubtless, he preferred not to tie himself down to a definite arrangement. It might even be that he thought she would be the more pleased to see him if he kept her waiting in uncertainty. Carline went off to give Mrs. Burdock her promised massage. The little woman purred under her ministrations, and Carline told her of her plan to take Chris out in his chair. "I doubt if he'll agree to it," said Mrs. Burdock.

"I know he's still very sensitive and hates having to be dependent," said Carline. "In a way that's a good thing, because it makes him all the keener to try to help himself."

"Chris likes being a misery," murmured Emily Burdock, giving herself up to the contentments of the massage and saying no more until Carline said that would be long enough for today. She looked up at Carline gratefully.

"You're so good to me," she said. "I suppose it comes as second nature to you on account of your training, but it makes me feel ashamed, all the same. I wish I had spent more of my life doing things to help people. I think I'll go back to the Red Cross one afternoon and have another shot at book-binding, though I must say I didn't take to it."

"They might find another job you'd like better," Carline smiled. "It would be good for you, too. Very likely, you would make new friends."

"We don't want new friends," said Mrs. Burdock decisively. "They might expect to be invited here, and in our position that would never do."

"Do you mean because of Chris?" queried Carline, who had wondered often why visitors never

came to the house, with the exception of Aldin. It was particularly strange that Leone had no girl friends of her own age.

"Chris thinks as I do," said Mrs. Burdock evasively. "Carlin dear, I don't want you to be cast down if he doesn't fall in with your most kind offer to take him out this afternoon. He hates to be conspicuous, and he's bound to feel that he'd attract still more attention with you and Leone pushing him along. People always stare at Leone."

"I'll go and see what she thinks about it, anyway," said Carline, and she crossed the landing and tapped on Leone's door.

Leone's room was far from tidy. Her clothes were scattered about the floor and furniture just as she had flung them off yesterday, her windows were closed and her electric fire had been burning for hours, yet she looked fair and fresh as a budding water-lily, lying there in her green-quilted bed.

She assented to Carline's plan charmingly, and began at once to think what she should wear for the outing.

"If only you and I could borrow nurses' uniforms and dress up for the part," she exclaimed.

"That would be the very worst thing to do," said Carline. "The idea is to make Chris forget his troubles and feel that he is on the mend."

"But he never can mend." Leone looked pathetic. "I only wish he could, but the doctors were positive about it. It isn't fair to stuff him up with false hopes, if that's what you are doing."

Leone's lips parted in a half smile, and a look of derision crept into her milky blue eyes. "What's the little game you are playing with Chris?" she queried. "Ever since you came here, you have hardly let him alone for a moment. Can it be that you have developed a crush on him, helpless as he is?"

"What nonsense," said Carline. "I'm only trying to make life a little more endurable for him."

That was a half truth, she thought, and her heart rapped against her ribs in protest, because she wasn't

given to half truths, nor to prevarications. But she couldn't confide in Leone. Leone would never believe that she had all along been possessed by the conviction that she was meant to help Christopher and that her coming to the house had been intended.

It was such a certain conviction that she couldn't help it if Leone became a little jealous, although there was no need, no need at all.

For some unaccountable reason, she felt herself to be trembling, and she sat down on Leone's bed and gazed at her with troubled eyes.

"Don't look so worried," said Leone. "I don't mind if you lie awake at night thinking about Christopher's profile. You won't be the first, you know. Poor old Chris, he used to bowl over the girls in the old days, though it didn't make any more difference to him than it does now. But perhaps you're not a heart case, after all. Maybe you are laying on your stuff with Chris so as to ginger up Aldin. Wise of you, Carline. Aldin prefers to win in a competitive field. Is he coming round today, by the by?"

"I expect so," said Carlin, and she took herself off, not caring to attempt a denial.

Leone's preposterous allegations had been spoken in a manner which suggested that she knew them to be inventions of her own light-hearted creation and therefore not to be taken seriously. But were they all inventions? It was easy to dismiss the absurd suggestion with regard to Aldin, but not so the rest.

Leone had hit the nailhead squarely, and Carline knew that she really had been thinking much of Christopher, by day and by night, although she insisted to herself that she thought of him only as a patient.

She went upstairs to her room and sank into an arm chair. It was Christopher's arm chair, a wing chair, chosen by him with the rest of the furniture. This was Christopher's room, she remembered, and his spirit still pervaded it. Carline leant her cheek against a wing of the chair and murmured his name aloud, three times, as if she were chanting a spell.

"Chris . . . Chris . . . Chris."

The chair seemed to enfold her. When Christopher had bought it, he must have been in the brightness of young manhood, possessed no doubt of the superb physique that the Parachute Regiment demanded. Surely something of that physique remained, surely something of that strength and vigor could still be regained.

The sun came out of the clouds and shafted through the windows, warming, comforting, irradiating. Carline put away her doubts. It was going to be fine for their walk, and that for the moment was the matter of supreme importance. It would be the first time for months that Christopher had seen the outside world.

They set out at half-past two, after the approving Veller had supplied Chris with a warm rug and negotiated the two steep outside steps that led from the back to the front garden. Carline pushed the chair, Leone walked beside it, looking romantic and beautiful in a fur-trimmed coat of golden brown velveteen and a bonnet-shaped hat of the same material.

Carline herself wore green—a hip-length suede jacket of Robin Hood green and a tweed skirt. It wasn't really sensible to wear only a short-length coat so early in the year, she knew, but the weather was mild for February and she wanted to convey the impression that spring was on the way and give Chris hope accordingly.

For the first five minutes he was tense and nervous, and very apprehensive that Carline would over-exert herself as she wheeled his chair down past the lovely old houses of the Terrace and into the street beyond.

That, too, was an entrancing street of low, two-storied houses, with gaily painted doors in jade and daffodil and vermilion. It was a homey kind of street, with prams outside front doors and toys displayed on nursery window sills. Two small boys pointed toy guns in a mock hold-up as they turned the corner.

Chris grinned at the boys. Carline sensed that he was beginning to enjoy himself, and she saw his head turn when the driver of a fast white sports car started up outside one of the grand red brick houses facing the river and streaked away down the embankment.

They crossed the road by the broad white lines, happily at a moment when there was no traffic. Chris would feel he was on show if the cars had to pull up for him, she knew. She turned towards the Albert Bridge, with the intention of taking Chris on to it to view the river.

"Too much of a slope, Carline," Chris said with authority. "The bridge arches quite steeply and I shall be too heavy for you."

"I wish you were heavier," said Carline, but she gave way gracefully, wishing Chris to feel that he was in command of the expedition and could go where he pleased. They turned in the opposite direction, pausing to read the inscription on the memorial to a certain chairman of the then-styled Metropolitan Board of Works. The statue showed a short, lamp-post-like column climbed by two curly-headed urchins, the one in pursuit of the other.

"He must have been a human kind of fellow, anyway, and knew that boys like to shin up places," Chris commented. "But why the horn of plenty, if that's what it is, twining round the other side?"

"Perhaps they had a first-class argument about it in some top office of the day," suggested Carline. "One grandee wanted a classical effect and another was fond of little boys and insisted on reality, so they combined the two."

"Oh, come on," said Leone impatiently. "We didn't come out to look at statues, did we?"

But Christopher wanted to look at everything. He was coming back to life after weeks in the house and even the scarlet of a Number Thirty-Nine bus coming out of the side turning and rushing grandly past them was of interest to him. The river spread its lights and shades before them, grey and green, rose-flecked and rippling in the afternoon sunshine.

The water was low, and they stopped to admire vivid green-headed mallards disporting themselves on the muddy foreshore.

"How deep is the water when the tide comes up, do you think?" enquired Leone.

"It rises pretty high sometimes," said Chris. "I suppose it depends on the rains, too."

"Do you think it would be deep enough to drown yourself?" enquired Leone.

"Probably." Chris laughed. "It would be better to take a header from the bridge and do the job properly, I should say."

"Then somebody might stop you," Leone objected as they strolled on, looking across the shining waters to the green banks beyond. Chris said he didn't object to the Battersea Pleasure Gardens. Anyway, they were taking their winter rest now and were scarcely visible, and he thought that the giant chimneys of the Power Station positively added to the delights of the landscape, from sheer familiarity.

"In a minute, you will have a glimpse of one of the towers of Westminster," Carline promised, and he was so busy telling her it was impossible and then taking back his words that he forgot to protest against her pushing him up the rise to Chelsea Bridge and Carline had wheeled him up the slope and past the golden galleon lamp standards and on to the bridge itself before he realized her intention.

A rosy light painted the western sky and the river shone like gilded mirror glass. The air came freshly. It was the very peak and crest of the afternoon, and Carline felt, with certainty, that Chris had taken the first psychological step forward that she had all along been willing for him.

As they left the bridge, Leone halted on the edge of the pavement.

"Look who's here," she exclaimed, smiling at a man who was advancing towards them from the other side of the road. He was a man with an air of unusual distinction, very neatly groomed and of medium height and slender build, with a small dark pointed beard. Carline took him for a foreigner.

No Englishman would wear a tie woven in broad horizontal stripes of grey and yellow, she thought, although the effect was not displeasing.

Christopher introduced him simply.

"This is Yoichim," he said. "Yoichim, this is Miss Carline Lode, who has been good enough to bring me for an outing."

"I am very glad to meet you," said Yoichim, raising a black felt hat with a slight flourish. "I have already heard of you from Mr. Aldin Burdock."

"Were you coming to tea with us?" Leone said.

"I hope to have that pleasure. I felt it was too early in the afternoon to disturb you, so I have been walking from Westminster to fill in the time. Miss Lode, may I assist you?" He did more than assist, for he possessed himself of the handle of Christopher's chair. Carline walked on one side, Leone on the other. So this was Yoichim, the clever designer, Carline thought, observing the high forehead, the large expressive brown eyes and the well-shaped nose, broad at the base. Carline found it easy to observe

him, for although Yoichim made pleasant general conversation, his eyes strayed constantly to Leone, and it was clear that he admired her greatly. Yoichim proposed they should return through the grounds to the Royal Hospital, and he took pains to point out the features of Wren's architecture.

"What say we go into the gardens?" said Chris. "My father used to be very fond of Ranelagh Gardens, and not only for the Flower Show."

His voice had a strange eagerness, and Carline hadn't the heart to say they should really go straight home, since he had been out long enough for the first time. Her own eye had been taken by the vista of lawns and trees and grassy banks behind the iron railings, and she longed to go into the gardens.

"No go," exclaimed Christopher as they came within sight of the entrance gates, where a notice announced that permission to take invalid chairs and perambulators into Ranelagh Gardens had to be

applied for by letter. "It seems that I'm classed with the infants."

Carline detected a note of bitterness in his voice, although he tried to make a joke of it. She read the notice quickly, Christopher's keen eyesight having forestalled her. She wasn't going to have his pleasure in this perfect afternoon spoiled by any notice, however, and she darted away to speak to the two keepers, who were standing at a little distance from the entrance. She smiled at them persuasively and explained the situation.

"That's all right, miss," said the man. "You go ahead and take him inside."

"It is not the first time that a woman's smile has opened the gate to an enchanted garden," said Yoichim, and he bowed to Carline and relinquished the handle of the chair to her as if by right. She led the way in with Chris, and presently found herself looking down upon a gracious, curving, sloping lawn flanked by a high banking shrubbery and centred by a weeping ash, exquisitely positioned. Carline paused, and in that moment of her pausing a ray of sunlight shafted the elms and chestnuts, touching the turf with emerald and transforming the bare, pendent branches of the ash into a bower of glory, as if in promise.

Carline took the winding path behind the shrubbery and was surprised to find herself alone with Chris. Yoichim and Leone must have gone the other way.

"They'll catch us up in a minute," she said, thinking Chris might feel aggrieved because Leone had given them the slip, in company with Yoichim.

"I'm not worrying," said Chris, as if he read her thoughts. "Yoichim understands Leone. He has known her since she was a little girl, and he thinks the world of her. Sit down, Carline, on that seat, if it's not too cold for you."

It was not too cold, she assured him, noticing the buds on the rhododendrons and the daffodil leaves that pierced the grass already. Blackbirds and

thrushes were busy, and the willows showed golden against the dark green of firs and hollies.

"I can almost smell the spring," said Chris, and he smiled like a boy. "Do you know, Carline, these gardens were my father's escape place. When he spoke of them, he had that same look in his eyes that you have when you talk of your native hills. Father came here to think out his problems and to rest and rejuvenate himself."

"And you shall do the same," Carline thought to herself. Later on, in springtime and summer, these gardens would be a little paradise for Chris if he could be prevailed upon to use them. On the way home, she planned to write for the required permission, though she feared Chris wouldn't like her sending the guinea that was demanded.

Possibly he would do it himself, she thought, and decided to ask him about it, but not this evening. Leone's remarks of the morning still rankled and Carline did not propose to bestow her company upon Christopher this Sunday evening.

After tea, Yoichim announced that with Christopher's permission, he was taking Leone to see a film, and Mrs. Burdock went off to church. Carline went up to her room to write her weekly letter home, but she had scarcely got beyond "Dearest Father and Mother" when Veller tapped upon her door to say that Christopher requested her presence. Chris was not alone, for a little girl was sitting on the floor by his side, playing shop with a toy grocery store, Chris acting as the customer.

"This is Cathie," he said. "Maybe you would like to buy some provisions at her shop, Carline, only first of all I wondered if you would be kind enough to make a telephone call for me."

Cathie, it seemed, was Mrs. Veller's niece, visiting for the day with her mother from their home in Hertfordshire. Cathie was four years old, brown-haired and rosy-cheeked, with wide, wondering grey eyes. Her mother cherished the ambition to see Cathie's photograph in the magazines, and Chris wanted Carline to telephone to ask Aldin to come

round at once and consider the child as a model for the firm's spring collections.

Carline agreed to do so with secret reluctance, feeling afraid Aldin might think she was making the pretext to ring him because he hadn't come to see them. She dialled the number, Aldin's voice answered and she made her request.

"My dear, I'm sorry, but no can do," he said. "I have two friends with me and I'm taking them out to supper."

"That's all right then. I'll tell Chris."

Carline was about to ring off when Aldin's voice recalled her, urgently.

"I tell you what, Carline, you ring up for a taxi and come round and join us. I'll be down at the street entrance to meet you, and you'll like my friends. Jan is a doctor and his wife used to be something in your line. Janet was a speech therapist before her marriage. They are only in town for the weekend, and they rang up unexpectedly, otherwise I should have been round to see you long before this."

The invitation sounded attractive, but Carline declined it. Cathie and her mother were leaving shortly, and Mr. and Mrs. Veller wouldn't like to go out together to see them off at the station if it meant leaving Chris alone in the house.

Chris made no remark when she told him that Aldin couldn't come, but his expression was eloquent and he might as well have said aloud that Aldin was behaving exactly as he had expected. They played together with Cathie until her mother came in to say goodbye, holding her up to kiss Chris. Evidently the child had been told that she was not to scramble up on to his knees, but she put her arms round his neck with a sweet simplicity that was reminiscent of Leone, as Chris must have thought, for he told Cathie's mother that Leone had been a child model for their own firm when she was tiny and had ever since cherished the ambition to make modelling her career.

Cathie should have her chance, he promised, whereupon the child waved to him from the doorway

and unburdened herself of the question which had all along been perplexing her.

"Haven't you got no legs at all, Mr. Chris?" said Cathie.

There was an instant's horrified pause, and then the child's mother picked her up and retreated apologetically from the room. Chris was laughing, Carline was smiling and

secretly willing herself to seize the moment as tactfully as she could. Cathie's pertinent question had given her her cue.

"Chris," she began tentatively. "I can't help it if I'm like Cathie, but I've been wondering, too. Don't you ever feel anything in your legs, I mean?"

"I prefer not to discuss the subject," said Chris shortly.

"I just thought of the way you got back the use of your right arm so perfectly. I wondered if anything was happening to your nerves, something in your spine, perhaps. You haven't felt any kind of feeling in your legs, I suppose, even the tiniest tingle?"

Christopher looked at her stonily.

"Carline, if you are trying to get at me, I won't have it. I won't play, do you understand? Why didn't Alvin come, by the by?"

"He had friends with him and he was taking them out to a meal," said Carline.

"A girl, I take it."

Carline nodded absently, a teasing whimsy disinclining her to tell Chris that Aldin's friends were a young married couple and that she herself had been invited to join them.

"Carline," said Chris. "I've no right to ask you this, but I couldn't help feeling curious this morning when you said you had taken out an insurance policy —on your heart. Did you mean that there's someone else? Perhaps you are engaged already, one of these private understandings that isn't announced yet, so that you don't wear a ring to warn people like Aldin to keep off the grass?"

"There was someone else," said Carline. "And I was engaged. I don't wear the ring because I sent it

to the Red Cross for them to sell for their funds. I thought that was the best thing to do with it."

Chris propelled himself across the room and offered her a cigarette.

"Tell," he said. "If you say as much as this and then don't tell, you'll set up a raging toothache." He didn't mean toothache. Carline smiled.

"People always say I couldn't have felt it much because I was only touching eighteen when it happened. But a girl of eighteen can love very deeply, especially if she's known the man all her life. You know the kind of thing, Chris. Big boy and little girl, and then she grows up and they fall in love with each other properly."

That was what had happened between Chris and Leone, Carline reflected.

"What was his name?" Chris asked.

"Dick," she said. "He had blue eyes and fair hair, and he was in the Air Force—a pilot."

"Was he killed, then, Carline?" She nodded.

"But that wasn't all," she said. "When his parents had the news about him, someone turned up at his house. A girl. Rather a pretty, red-haired girl. She was a cinema attendant in the town near his station, but she couldn't go on working any longer. She was Dick's widow, you see. He'd married her just before he'd crashed. He'd had to marry her, in fact, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to tell his father and mother, nor to tell me, though I'd known vaguely from his letters that something was going wrong."

"I wouldn't mind betting you took the knock with great courage, Carline?"

"I took it very badly. Father and Mother had insisted I should have a training for something even if I was going to be married, and ours was to have been a long engagement. So there was a place reserved for me at the physio-training school—the civilian school,"

Carline caught her breath.

"I wouldn't take it. It was too near home. I hadn't the courage to stay near home, where everyone knew about Dick. So I went into the Q.A.'s to lick my wounds."

"And the wounds healed?"

"Yes and no. I got over Dick, after some considerable time, but the scar remained. I made up my mind that I'd never run the risk of being so badly hurt again. I vowed I'd never fall in love again."

Christopher's smile was enigmatic.

"Weren't you attempting the impossible, Car-line?" he said dryly. "That thing called love. I don't profess to be an expert, but I've always understood it falls upon you, like sunshine or rain."

"So far I've worn dark glasses and carried an umbrella," Carline rejoined. "I'm not at all susceptible to men."

Christopher smiled again, as much as to say that he didn't believe her, and she half wished she hadn't told him her poor little story, especially as that curious inward trembling which had assailed her this morning had come over her again, and she felt unlike her normal self and absurdly inclined to weep.

"I shall take up that accountancy study, as you suggested this morning," Chris said with an air of determination. "The more I think of it, the more sensible it seems to me. I ought to know something about our business, although Aldin won't care for my poking my nose into affairs."

"Why should he object?" Carline queried.

"Oh, Aldin likes to drive the chariot, galloping horses and all. Don't think I'm running him down, will you? He's been the mainstay of the show since Father went. Anyway, I couldn't ever do much myself."

For some minutes Chris was silent, but it was a speaking, telling silence. Carline felt she could almost hear the orchestra of his mind, enlarging and elaborating upon that main theme and argument which hitherto he had declined to discuss.

At last he began to speak, haltingly, yet with the urgency of determination.

"Carline, I must seem all kinds of a mule to you, the way I've shut up whenever you tried to help me. After all you've done for me, too, especially today. Only I was told, practically for certain, that there wasn't any hope for me. You don't think seriously that there might be a chance of things changing, do you?"

"I do know that things sometimes happen, Chris, with people like you. There can be changes, even after quite a time. It's too soon for you to give in altogether, without any further trial."

"But they tried everything. I was treated like a positive test tube, Carline, and I had a sickener of it."

"Did they get you on to crutches, Chris, and try you out with physiotherapy?"

"Crutches were no good to me." He flushed. "And the physiotherapist wasn't any good, also. She was too bossy, for one thing."

"Try another physiotherapist," said Carline with a little smile.

"How could I? I haven't a word against military hospitals, but I'm not going back to one."

"Go to a civilian hospital, then," said Carline. "There's an orthopaedic man at our hospital that you might like to see. Mr. Braive, his name is, and he's done some marvellous things. I deputized once at his clinic. If you liked, I could speak to him about you, or get my chief to do so."

"Carline, it's not worth spending a lot of money on. I couldn't, anyway, and it's only the merest chance this Mr. Braive might be able to do anything for me."

"It needn't cost you a penny. You could come in and see him as an ordinary out-patient. You'd have to have a letter from a doctor, and I suppose they'd want all the details, and the X-rays, too. Surely you have a doctor, Chris?"

Well, I was handed over to Emily's doctor, and I think he has all the dope. I'm afraid I rather choked him off."

"Still, he'd give you the necessary letter. Oh, Chris, it's worth trying."

Carline tried to keep the elation out of her voice. She felt she was already succeeding far beyond expectations. But Christopher's face was dubious.

"I say, Carline, what would all this entail? What should I have to do?"

"You would have an appointment. Veller could bring you along, or I would, only if you come with me you would have to start early, and that would increase the time of waiting. There's bound to be waiting, Chris, you'd have to face that. No doctor can tell how long each interview is going to take, nor whether he'll be delayed in starting his clinic."

"And then, after I've seen him?"

"I can't say. Some kind of treatment, I hope. He might even want you as an in-patient for a time, or he might put you on to us, in the physio department."

"Or he might tell me to go on my way and put up with the inevitable. Carline, I doubt if it's worth it. I doubt if I could go through with it."

"It's worth a trial," she said.

"Well, I'll think about it," said Christopher. "I'm grateful to you, Carline. I'll be still more grateful if you'll be good enough not to badger me on the subject. Leave me to work it out in my own way, will you, my dear?"

She took it that he had slipped in that casual my dear by way of softening the refusal upon which he was meditating. And she took his request for her to leave him literally, and said she must go back to her letter writing, and made for the door.

"I owe you an apology, Carline," said Christopher. "When Veller brought down my books from upstairs, he included one of yours—a school prize, I noticed. I hung on to it. I should have told you before."

He took up a blue, leather-bound book from the table beside him and turned to the title page.

"Dante Alighieri," he said. "I wonder why they gave you a translation of Dante as a prize for science. I've been reading it for the first time."

"Not very cheerful reading for you," said Carline. "I got through to the end of the Inferno once, but it gave me the creeps, though I must say it gripped me, all the same. I always meant to go on, but somehow I never did."

"You should do," said Chris. "I like the way the spirits in the Paradiso don't smile—they just glow when they are pleased, and get brighter and brighter. And I like the description of climbing in the Purgatorio. It cheered me. Listen to this, Carline.

`We reached the summit of the scale, and stood Upon the second buttress of that mount Which healeth him who climb . .

May I keep your book a little longer?" he said.

"Do," said Carline, and she went away wondering whether she had done any good or no good at all. The next step was up to him, and for some days it did not seem as if he was likely to take it.

She thought a little about Yoichim, whose charm and intelligence had impressed her very favorably. It couldn't have been pleasant for Chris to have had to let Yoichim take Leone to the pictures when he couldn't take her out anywhere himself. And when the evening came for Aldin's theatre party, Carline felt it heartrending to have to leave Chris behind. Aldin insisted upon making an occasion of the evening and he arrived, immaculately dinner-jacketed, to collect them in a large, chauffeur-driven car. Leone wore a billowing gown of pale blue chiffon, and she had wanted Carline to wear a long dress, too, but Carline only possessed a short-length dress of silk organza in a shade of mulberry red that harmonized interestingly with the creams and pinks of Aldin's cymbidium orchids.

Carline wore the orchids on her dress, not daring to pin them to the collar of the squirrel coat which Mrs. Burdock kindly lent her. She had to wear the

coat loosely, therefore, which was going to be a bit of a nuisance on this cold evening. And somehow she didn't wish Chris to see that Aldin had sent her orchids, so she did not accompany Leone when she ran down the basement stairs to show herself off to Christopher. Carline hoped Leone would say something especially sweet and consoling to Chris. It almost spoiled her own pleasure to think that he couldn't come with them.

But it was a wonderful evening. Aldin dined them expensively in a restaurant in St. James's and they had sixth-row stalls at the theatre. The only hitch that occurred, if hitch it could be called, was that during the second interval, while Aldin was outside, an elderly woman in the seat in front of them discovered that she had dropped her purse, a tiny gold-mesh purse, and asked if they would see if it was visible from behind. She was a frail, pathetic old lady, silver-haired and with blue eyes that filled with tears as she told them that it was the sentimental value of the purse that mattered far more than its intrinsic value and the money it contained. It had belonged to her sister, and Carline gathered that the sister wouldn't have any need for purse or money ever again. The purse was not to be seen. Leone hunted even more assiduously than Carline, groping down in her beautiful gown to look under chairs and causing several people to rise from adjoining seats in a fruitless search that continued until lights were dimmed and the incident was forgotten as the curtain rose again.

It was a late-ending performance and the car did not turn into Chelsea Terrace until half-past eleven. Aldin handed Leone out first and Carline was following when to her annoyance Leone said, "Thanks for a rocket of an evening, Aldin," and darted through the garden gate with a haste that suggested that she knew the other two would prefer to be left alone.

Carlin made her thanks more circumspectly and followed, Aldin escorting her, to find that Leone thoughtlessly had closed the door. Carline had no

latch-key as yet, Mrs. Burdock having taken the spare key to have a new one cut for her, and having forgotten to collect it.

"Now I shall have to ring the bell," said Carline. The bell was a loud one and it rang in the basement. "It will wake up the Vellers—and Chris."

"Chris will not have gone to bed," said Aldin. "He's a fidgety hen where Leone is concerned and he's bound to wait up until he knows she's safely home."

"Anyway, it will rouse Mrs. Veller," Carline objected. "I hate doing that because she gets up so early in the morning."

"Wait a minute, then," Aldin said soothingly. "Leone may remember."

They waited several minutes, but Leone did not come.

"The best plan is to walk round to the back and tap on Christopher's window," said Aldin. "Then he can wheel himself to the back door and let you in."

This they did, Aldin taking the opportunity to hold Carline's arm tightly as he guided her down the garden steps, and she herself inwardly perturbed lest Chris should be asleep after all, or that the back door should be bolted and he unable to reach the bolts and therefore exasperated by his own inability.

But Chris was still up and dressed, and he turned the door key with ease and smiled at Carline very nicely when she was safely inside and had said goodnight to Aldin.

"I heard Leone come in," Chris said. "I knew you were not with her, but I didn't know about the latch key. Have you had a happy evening?"

"Lovely," said Carline.

"I was going to call out to you, anyway." Christopher's voice was oddly determined. "I wanted to give you this."

This was her copy of the Dante translation. She took the book, tucked it under her arm and tip-toed up the stairs, smiling a little because Chris had seemed so very anxious that she should have her

book. Surely he did not expect her to begin reading Dante at this hour of the night, she thought.

Seemingly, he did expect it, for on arrival in her room she saw a folded paper bookmark between the pages. It marked a canto in the Inferno, but there was no indication as to where she should read. She switched on a second lamp and laid the book open upon the table and stared at the pages. Somebody, presumably Chris, had underlined a half line and then a whole line, and then had taken an indiarubber and had tried to erase the underlining.

Carline read the words that had been underlined:

Follow but thy star,

Thou cant not miss at last a glorious haven. . .

A glorious haven. She closed the book, puzzled, and it was not until she was brushing her hair that she noticed the slip of paper which had fallen to the carpet and, in falling, had opened itself to show the writing upon it.

Christopher's handwriting! So the slip of paper wasn't a bookmark at all, but a note intended for herself.

Carline pounced upon the paper and read Christopher's message, hoping and fearing, yet not willing to fear, and not daring to hope.

"Carline, I'll try it," he, had written. "I'll go to your hospital. Something may come of it or nothing may come of it, but in either event, please believe me to be, Yours very gratefully, Christopher."

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTOPHER reclined against nicely placed pillows in the privacy of the curtained cubicle. Every now and then he put down his newspaper and glanced at the oblong, cream-colored instrument by his side. The instrument panel bore the encouraging legend Progressive Treatment Unit, and it had switches and knobs and dials that were of intense interest to Chris. Best of all, he liked the tiny red glowing circle of light which signified that the power was on, and the pale golden light from another little circle

which came on and off like a winking benevolent eye. This latter circle was labelled Output.

The output was for Christopher. The power was for Christopher. Every time the golden eye glowed into light, his right knee moved. It actually moved and fixed and lifted a little! After the wilderness of weeks and months and years of inactivity since his misfortune, Christopher now had the pleasure of seeing and feeling his right knee in action as the blessed current flowed into it from the leads that ran under the light covering blanket and connected up with the machine.

The cubicle curtains swayed very gently in the breeze from some open window, welcome in the highly heated atmosphere. They were curtains that took the eye and held the eye entertainingly, because the fabric was woven in an interesting design of spring and summer flowers, set in small squares, each with their foliage. Chris was no horticulturist, but under Carline's instruction he could now put a name to the familiar pyrethrum and the gay golden gaillardia and the anchusa. Carline had described the vivid blue of the anchusa as an opal blue, and it had crossed Christopher's mind that she might not have

lost all recollection of the opal ring which she had brought home for him.

Somewhere, down the room in another cubicle, Chris could hear Carline's voice taking a patient through a set of exercises.

"Bend, stretch, push out. Again. And again. Much better. Out sideways. Right up above your head. That's the way. Very good."

Carline's deep contralto was not the only voice to be heard, of course. There was Miss Bridget's voice, soft and persuasive, and very Irish. And Miss Susan's voice, high and clear and fluting, like an eager bird. Physiotherapists were known by their Christian names in the River Hospital, an unusual custom. Even Miss Angela, the senior physiotherapist, was so addressed, although in reality she wasn't Miss Angela at all but a married woman.

Anyway, the name suited. The door of Miss Angela's glass-partitioned office must be open, Chris presumed, because he could hear her on the telephone, speaking to one of the Ward Sisters.

"Let her try then," said Miss Angela. "If she feels she can do it, then there is every reason why she should try. Can you send her down here or would you like me to send someone up to the ward?"

Chris hoped she would not send Carline. In a busy department like this, he couldn't expect to have Carline's services all the time; there had been blank occasions when she had been entirely occupied, elsewhere and he had had to content himself with the attentions of Miss Vera or Miss Bridget or whoever it happened to be, and that was not the same, not at all the same.

Carline parted the curtains and came in to take off the apparatus and fix it up on his other leg.

"How much current am I taking?" Chris enquired, looking at the dials that said Train and Pulse Lengths.

"More and more," said Carline, and she went away to fetch fresh wet pads and then came back to answer his question more completely. Carline believed in giving a patient all the explanations and

amplifications that she could; it quickened his interest in the treatment and increased his co-operation, which was all-important.

"You are doing very nicely, Chris," she told him as she put the black rubber bandage round his leg with swift, practised fingers. "By the time we have finished with you, you'll be a streak of lightning."

She laughed and sped away. Chris thought to himself that he was a long way from the finish yet, that the going had been hard, and that the worst ordeal was still before him, this very morning, after this pleasant time in the treatment cubicle was over.

Still, there was hope, after utter hopelessness. Chris looked at the paintwork above the curtains. They had decorated the department in colors that gave an impression of sunshine, and today there was real sunlight, too, shafting through high windows. It was April, and Christopher was now able to stand up, entirely on his own. He could do little more than stand, but his legs and feet really did support him, at long last.

He smiled to himself as he heard Carline speaking decisively to a patient across the way.

"Mr. Brown, would you mind putting away those papers, please? If you work during your treatment time, you can't relax properly and you lose half the benefit."

Chris heard the man saying something about pressure of work at his office. He happened to have seen that patient, a thin-lipped type in City clothes, who had had the cheek to push a box of chocolates into Carline's hands with the request that she should slip him in, out of his turn, if it happened to be a day when they had to keep patients waiting.

Carline had thanked the man calmly, telling him she would send the chocolates on to the children's convalescent home, where they would be appreciated. And she hadn't let the incident make one iota of difference to the nice way she treated the fellow, sympathizing with him sensibly about the pain in his shoulder and encouraging him to persevere with his exercises.

Chris would have been indignant if anyone had told him he was jealous of Carline's men patients, but he did feel a trifle possessive about her. This, he assured himself, was due to the fact that she lived in his own house, and at home he didn't have to call her "Miss Carline", a formality to which he adhered strictly at the hospital.

Every now and then Chris heard the familiar ping-ping from one of the time-clocks. He played his own little luck-testing game with those time-clocks. Should a bell ring and Carline appear in his cubicle immediately afterwards, signifying she wouldn't have remembered that his time was up if the bell hadn't rung, then his luck was not so good for that day, and he wouldn't do so well in the exercises. But if Carline came back to the cubicle without any reminder from a bell, then his luck was in and all would go well for him. It was mere fantasy on his part, of course, but he was convinced that the fact that she kept him in her thoughts counted for something.

Today the luck was good and no bell preceded Carline's entrance. They prepared for exercises, first with the right leg which was a shade less recalcitrant than the left.

"Press down," said Carline. "Harder. Harder still. Can't you see the muscle coming up?"

He could see it. If he couldn't see very much of it, he could honestly feel that there was some slight happening going on in his leg, and he was gratified.

"Now the bending and stretching," said Carline. "Stretch right out. Farther. Farther still."

At first, Christopher had felt a fool performing these antics, or rather failing to perform them, under Carline's eyes. Now he didn't mind, and in fact liked it and found that he

could do a great deal more in Carline's presence than when he was practising on his own.

At first, too, there had been pulleys to lift his leg, but now Mr. Braive had decreed that he must try to do it on his own. They had come to the difficult part now.

"Lift," said Carline optimistically. "See if you can raise your leg, even a little."

Chris looked at her appealingly. Carline was a different being to him in the very trim white fitted overall with the blue epaulettes. It struck Chris that he had never seen Carline dressed in blue—it was not one of her colors. But this touch of bluebell blue was absolutely right for her. It blended with the rich darkness of her hair, and seemed to add a note of piquancy to the color of her eyes. Those beautiful golden-brown eyes in their clear white setting, thought Chris, noting the arching brows and the tilt and fan of the lashes, noting as if for the first time the fine white forehead and the hair-line, and the small, close-set ear.

"Chris, your mind is wandering," rebuked Carline. "Concentrate on lifting and please try hard. I want you to do it, so try very hard."

He tried hard. He tried so hard that tiny beads of perspiration showed on his forehead, but his right heel lifted nearly three inches and even his left heel moved.

"Splendid," said Carline. "No more today. You've earned your rest."

It was more than a rest, it was a basking under the warm, beneficent rays of the lamp. Christopher drowsed contentedly, keeping himself from sinking into slumber in the expectation of Carline's return to give him massage. Sometimes he was appalled to think how much trouble he gave her, but she made light of it, and if he apologized, she would say that if she were not doing it for him, she would be doing much the same for someone else. These physio girls worked superbly, Chris considered, and he thought it amazing how Carline went on giving and giving and giving without any seeming diminution of her own vitality.

He felt the power flowing from her fingers when, some minutes later, she moved the lamp and began to work upon his back. Some weeks ago her massage had hurt him terribly and he had thought her merciless, but now his muscles seemed to have loosened up

and her touch was blissful to him, and he would have liked her to go on for ever.

"Now you can get up, Mr. Bodenay," said Carline finally.

"Thank you, Miss Carline," said Christopher. Of course, he could not get himself up, not completely, and Veller was waiting to assist him, but the assistance was considerably less now than had once been required.

"I'll see you after Alley Dally," said Carline, and she gave him her brief, reassuring, physio-to-patient smile and went on her way.

Alley Dally was the name they had coined between them jokingly for a procedure that was no joke at all but an ordeal which he dreaded. Alley Dally was really an alley, formed by two strong rails between which Chris could stand supported as he tried to take his first steps forward.

He came to the hospital three times a week, on alternate days. This was Friday. Last Friday, he had made his first attempt in Alley Dally, with no success, and Monday's trial had been much the same. On Wednesday, he had taken one step forward with his right foot, and had managed to shuffle his left foot along to join it. Now he was to try again.

He insisted upon trying alone. He didn't want any physio, not even Carline, to stand by him with words of encouragement. No encouragement was necessary because he longed to succeed. There were not any words to describe how he longed to succeed. The gymnasium led out of the room where the cubicles were. Veller wheeled Chris to the alley and got him out of his chair, and he stood there, motionless, grasping the rails with either hand, willing himself to move and hating the publicity of it, because there were other patients in the place, twiddling their toes, exercising arms or legs on the side bars or sitting in chairs, resting from their efforts. Miss Angela was at the far end of the gym, and there was another physio, busy with a patient. Nobody watched him, nobody looked at him, as far as he could tell.

He stood for some minutes, feeling as if his feet were made of lead and his legs of putty. In his time, Chris had had his fair share of nerve-racking experiences, including a number of parachute drops. This was worse than any of them; panic threatened him, and he was on the point of signalling to Veller when Carline sped through the gym, having been obliged to consult Miss Angela upon a patient's knotty problem which she herself had not the authority to untangle.

She hadn't meant to come within Christopher's line of vision, intending to content herself with a distant, surreptitious glimpse of his tall figure. It thrilled her to see Chris standing up. His position was tolerably erect, considering everything, and although his clothes hung too loosely upon him by reason of his extreme thinness, he made a presentable figure. Carline remembered a remark of Leone's—"Chris used to bowl over the girls. . . ."

She couldn't pretend that she didn't see Chris as she came hurrying back in Miss Angela's wake, so she smiled at him. Unknown to herself, it wasn't a physio-to-patient smile this time, but the smile any girl gives when she sees an attractive young man of her own acquaintance advancing down the street in her direction.

It was in that magical instant that Chris himself advanced. His right foot moved forward, his left foot passed his right foot and before he knew he had done it, he was half-way down Alley Dally and pausing to collect his senses before making the further effort with which he now hoped to seal his achievement.

Carline was out of sight when he reached the end of the alley, very pleased with himself but so exhausted that he was thankful to be back in his chair and waiting quietly at the side of the room until Carline was free to speak to him. Meanwhile his friend Mrs. Ladley came to sit by him.

Mrs. Ladley was recovering from a broken ankle, sustained when she had been knocked down by a car when dodging across a busy street instead of using the appointed crossing.

"Half our troubles in life come from being in too much of a hurry," she had told Chris one day when they were waiting in Mr. Braive's clinic, and she had gone on to ask Christopher about his trouble, and he had told her and hadn't minded doing so because there was an engaging simplicity about Mrs. Ladley which made it impossible to withhold the desired information.

Today Mrs. Ladley was in jubilant mood.

"My word, Chris, you'll be putting that chair of yours up for auction any day now," she prophesied. "You'll be walking in and out of hospital in no time."

"Do you really think so?" Chris looked gratified.

"I'm sure of it. When you wouldn't try the crutches, I must admit I thought you might suffer for your stubbornness, but now I see you were out for something better. Walking

will come all the easier because you haven't very much to carry about with you, Chris. Now, if you were a fairy like me!"

Mrs. Ladley laughed. She weighed nearly twelve stone and she was old enough to have been Christopher's mother.

"I thought I saw a fairy tripping across the lawn when I came in this morning," said Christopher slyly.

They were trying to get the hospital garden into better condition and patients were requested not to walk on the grass, but Mrs. Ladley never could resist a short cut.

"I like to be on time," she asserted. "What do you think I did just now, Chris? Left my stick behind in the cubicle and had to go back for it. Miss. Angela says it's a very good sign to leave your stick behind."

With that, Mrs. Ladley said she must go or there wouldn't be any dinner for the old man, and she went off jauntily, despite a heavy limp. Chris turned his head and found Carline by his side. Her eyes were shining as she told him how wonderful he had done and that Miss Angela had said that next week they would get him on to two sticks and that he might

attempt a few steps in his own room at home, this weekend, provided Veller was at hand.

"I wish you were going to be at hand, Carline," said Chris.

Carline was leaving town this evening for a weekend at her home.

"Leone will be thrilled when you tell her," Carline reminded him, thinking of the lovely hope which now seemed a not too distant possibility—for Chris and Leone. Leone was not at work this week, having been obliged, as a junior member of the showroom staff, to take a week of her summer holiday early in the season. The trouble was, however, that she hadn't any friends to go away with or invite her to their homes.

"Why not go on your own to some seaside hotel? You'd be bound to make friends," Carline had suggested, and had been surprised when Chris and Leone's mother vetoed the proposition. She could not understand why they were so very careful with Leone and would not let her so much as go down to Brighton for the day without a companion. Feeling sorry for Leone, Carline had overcome her private disinclination and had offered to take her to her own home for the weekend, but Leone had declined, saying she didn't like climbing hills, an excuse which Carline had taken to mean that in her own absence Leone was looking forward to having Chris to herself. Today Leone was with Aldin, who had gone out of town on business for the day and had taken her in his car for the pleasure of the run.

"I suppose you won't be seeing Aldin before you leave?" Chris asked Carline.

"He won't be back in time," said Carline. "I am catching the five-forty-five from Paddington."

"If you write to him or speak to him on the telephone, will you please remind him to be sure to come round on Tuesday evening?"

"Really, Chris! Are you under the impression that Aldin and I write to each other by every post?" Carline laughed. "He couldn't ring me up, anyway, because we are not on the telephone at home."

She wished she had not vouchsafed this information, for she could see Chris thought that if there had been a telephone, Aldin would have been on the line to her just as often as he was at Chelsea Terrace. She spared a few moments to wave Chris off, and gladdened herself throughout the busy day with the thought of the great event of his first steps forward.

At a quarter to five she was giving her last patient exercises and promising herself a punctual occupation of her reserved train seat at Paddington, when she was called to the telephone in Miss Angela's office.

Leone's distressed voice greeted her.

"Carline, can you come? Aldin has had an accident to his eye and he's in hospital."

"Where are you?" Carline enquired hastily. "A place called Varley: V-a-r-l-e-y."

"Where is it?"

"Not far from London. It's in Surrey, and there's a railway station."

"But I was just going off home," said Carline, concerned for Aldin and yet thinking this was surely a case for an appeal to Leone's mother.

"I've tried to ring the Terrace, but there's no answer," wailed Leone. "Veller must have taken Chris into the Gardens. And I'm all alone and frightened. I've always been afraid of hospitals. Carline, please come, please. . ."

Carline enquired whether Aldin was hurt seriously, and she heard Leone sobbing and then the line went dead. Carline's hand went out to the railway guide on Miss Angela's desk and then it stayed still. She thought of her precious weekend, worked for and waited for. She thought of waking up tomorrow morning in the peace of the hills, and she thought of her parents' disappointment if she didn't go.

Oddly enough, her thoughts were more of Chris than of Aldin. "Look after Leone," Chris had said. "Do what you can for Leone."

Carline took up the thick, orange paper-covered book and turned the pages hurriedly. It was six o'clock when she arrived at Varley, and took a taxi to the hospital from the station yard. A

porter directed her to Casualty, a nurse looked at her blankly when she enquired after Mr. Burdock.

"I don't think we have admitted anyone of that name," said the nurse. "Will you take a seat, please, while I enquire."

Her enquiries seemed to be lengthy. Carline had expected to find Leone sitting upon the benches waiting for news of Aldin, but she was not to be seen. It was possible that she had been allowed to go up to the ward where Aldin was, but somehow Carline could not envisage it.

After some time the nurse returned.

"We did have a Mr. Burdock here for a short time," she told Carline. "He had a speck of dust underneath his upper eyelid. A mere trifle. It was removed and he was not detained, so you needn't be anxious."

Carline thanked her and departed. She judged the distance to the railway station to be less than a mile and it did not seem worth while ringing up for a taxi. Her suitcase was small, but by the time she reached the main street, she was tired, and the cake which she had bought for her mother seemed to weigh pounds.

Dusk was falling as she plodded up the High Street, set on quite a steep hill. Lights glowed invitingly from the Lion Hotel as she passed it, vaguely noticing masculine figures seated under the white-pillared portico and dismissing the thought of indulging herself with a meal before she recommenced a journey that was bound to be tedious. Hasty footsteps came behind her and a hand relieved her of her suitcase.

"Carline!" said Aldin. "I've been watching out for you, but I could hardly believe you were really coming. I've been up to the station twice."

He gazed at her, beaming.

"You look worn out, poor darling," he said.

"Come into the hotel and let me try to revive you."

He didn't call her "darling" ordinarily, but she let it pass and accompanied him, thankfully, and when he asked if she would like a drink first or to go

straight in to dinner, she said she would be glad to have something to eat, without mention of her train and the need to hurry.

She tidied herself in the cloakroom, glad that she had bought the gay little spring hat that matched the primrose of her blouse, but wishing she had been wearing something more glamorous than a suit for dining with Aldin. The hotel was old, dark-beamed and romantic, with cherry-colored carpeting on the slightly sloping landing, and a fine oak staircase that called for the tap of satin slippers and the soft frou-frou of a billowing silk gown.

Aldin waited in the hall and a genial waiter conducted them with unction to a table near a window looking out upon a walled garden where blossom drifted palely in the magic of the twilight. The waiter's name was George, and he and Aldin discussed the menu in a manner which indicated that they were already well acquainted. Smoked salmon was set before them, and a fillet steak was ordered, also a Chambertin agreed upon by Aldin and George after serious perusal of the wine list.

Carline enquired after Aldin's eye.

"It must have hurt very badly," she sympathized. "Leone was quite frightened about you. When she telephoned to me, I had the impression you were seriously injured."

"And that was why you came!" Aldin's eyes spoke volumes. "Carline, that was very, very sweet of you."

"But where is Leone?" queried Carline.

"I trust and pray she is safely at home in Chelsea by this time," said Aldin. "I'd better ring up later on to enquire. I didn't do so before, knowing Chris would be in a state about her if she hadn't turned up. I can't see how I am to be blamed for it."

"Why should you be blamed?" Carline said. "Tell me what happened."

"I was about twenty minutes in the hospital," Aldin answered. "I left Leone sitting in the car outside and when I came back I found this note on the seat in the car."

He produced a scrap of paper, pencilled with Leone's feathery handwriting.

Carline is coming down on the next train so I am going home. You never liked triangles, nor do I.

Leone.

"She might have been a little more explicit," Carline commented with a hint of aggravation.

"I presume she thought herself in the role of the good fairy," Aldin chuckled. "She must have guessed that for all my persuasions you have never before done me the honor of dining alone with me."

Carline was silent. She couldn't very well tell Aldin that it had been Leone's apparent state of agitation rather than his own misfortune that had caused her to cast aside her own plans and come hurrying to Varley.

"Leone didn't take the train home," Aldin related. "She accepted a lift from some passing motorists. The hospital porter saw her come out of the telephone-box and step into a car—a black Jaguar saloon. I fancy it belonged to some people we chatted to at a place where we had a cup of tea earlier in the afternoon. I'm thankful to say they were a middle-aged couple, and very nice people, so Leone couldn't come to much harm with them, provided she behaved herself."

"Why shouldn't she behave herself?" Carline said.

"Well, you know what Leone is." Aldin grinned. "She was dressed rather spectacularly in tight blue trousers and a scarlet sweater. If Chris had been at home when we set out this morning, he'd have made her change into different clothes."

"You mean that he doesn't like her to attract attention?"

"Exactly. Carline, you know about Leone? You told me you knew."

"Of course."

Carline did know that Christopher's affection for Leone was strongly protective and that he worried

about her when she was out of his sight. She recollected Christopher's message to Aldin.

"Aldin, you will be sure to come round on Tuesday evening, won't you? Uncle Ben is coming up specially, and Mr. Jones and Yoichim, and Chris wants you to be there. I'm hoping you'll make him a director of the firm."

"But what's the use, Carline. He'll never be able to do anything."

"You haven't heard the news. Chris actually walked this morning! About eight yards, holding on to the rails."

"That's grand!"

"And he's worked awfully hard and finished his course."

"A correspondence course."

Aldin's tone was disparaging. Chris had been taking a correspondence course in business administration.

"It's a very good course. I think you'll find he knows a great deal about companies and shares and things."

"He doesn't know a thing about our business." "He could learn."

"So he could."

Aldin smiled and stretched out his hand to put back the folds of a white voile curtain which had fluttered in suddenly from the open casement window and had draped itself over Carline's shoulder.

"Would you like me to close the window, Car-line?"

"No, don't do that. The air is so heavenly, after London. Do you know, I fancy I can smell lilac. I thought it was a week or so too early for lilac."

"The lilac must have seen you arriving and blossomed accordingly. Do you notice that it's not properly dark yet?" Aldin fixed his eyes upon her. "That's because it's full moon tonight. I should greatly like to drive you out to see the woods by moonlight. Pines and silver birches. Would you like to see the lady silver birch by moonlight, Carline, my beautiful?"

"I'm afraid it's impossible." Carline had been worrying about her trains, but she hadn't liked to spoil Aldin's kind hospitality by mentioning the matter too quickly. She was relieved when he anticipated her wishes by requesting George to bring a Bradshaw together with the coffee.

"I never could fathom the depths of a Bradshaw," Carline confessed thankfully, watching Aldin flick over the pages with practised fingers.

"Hilltown," he murmured. "Let's see. I'm afraid it's no good from Paddington. The last train leaves at eight-twenty. I might manage to get you to Reading, if there was a connection."

He paused, scanning train times, and shook his head.

"It looks as if I shall have to drive you gently back to Chelsea, pausing of course to see the silver birches on the way," he said. "Then you can take the first train home in the morning."

But Carline did not wish to return to Chelsea and intrude upon Chris and Leone. It was clear to her now that Leone had thought she might be kept waiting a long time when Aldin left her at the hospital gate. Then her new acquaintances had driven along and she had begged for a lift, anxious to get home to Chris and doubtless impressed by the luxury of their car. She had asked them to wait while she slipped into the telephone kiosk, and had included her remark about disliking triangles in her note to Aldin, knowing that he would show it to Carline and hoping she would take the hint and understand that her presence at Chelsea Terrace was not desired.

Carline determined, therefore, that she would spend the night in the train or waiting at railway stations rather than return to Chelsea. There were her father and mother to think of, still more importantly. She glanced at her watch—eight-fifteen. At this very moment they would be on the platform of Hilltown station waiting for the London train to arrive.

Aldin could read thoughts, as well as timetables, it seemed. He tossed the railway guide on to a chair.

"It's awkward that your people are not on the telephone, Carline," he said sympathetically. "Is there a neighbour you could ring up who would take a message?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm afraid they'll be very disappointed."

"What are your father and mother like?" Aldin enquired. "Are they easily upset and apt to be put out if anything occurs unexpectedly that takes them out of their routine?"

"Not in the least." Carline smiled. "My father takes life very calmly and sensibly. Possibly my mother is a little more excitable, but she doesn't fuss and she usually rises to the occasion."

Aldin leaned across the table, smiling into her eyes.

"I'm not averse to night driving, especially by moonlight and with a beautiful companion," he said. "Do you think your mother would rise to the occasion if you turned up after midnight, with an unknown male visitor?"

CHAPTER SIX

CHRISTOPHER stood up to receive Carline when she came down to his room for breakfast on Monday morning. He had had to hold on to furniture in order to reach the table, and Veller was hovering behind to get him seated; still he was not in his wheelchair, and that was a major event, and Carline's smile showed an elation proper to the occasion.

Christopher's responding smile was cheerful enough, but there was frost in his voice and a bleakness in his face which Carline was quick to notice.

"So you had a successful weekend," he said, making his remark a statement rather than a question.

"Very pleasant, thank you," said Carline, pouring coffee. "The blossom is wonderful this year. I wish you could get out into the country."

She looked at him hopefully.

"Oh, Chris, have you done any walking? Have you had another shot at it?"

"I've tried," said Christopher, and he relapsed into silence while Veller came speeding down the basement stairs, served them with kidney and bacon and then withdrew. Chris was able to tackle a real breakfast now, Carline was thankful to see.

"I thought you and Aldin might have looked in to see me last night," he said.

"Aldin didn't come inside, and I thought it was too late to disturb you."

"Twenty-five minutes past ten. Carline, I know, always, the moment you enter the house." "Because I walk like an elephant?"

"No. I've trained myself to hear you." Chris flushed. "I mean, I've trained myself to recognize people's footsteps. Yours and Leone's are entirely different. You walk with a tap, tap, tap, evenly

spaced, energetic, purposeful, as if you know where you are going and intend to get there. Leone is more hesitating and uncertain. Sometimes she races, sometimes she puts one foot down, and then waits and thinks before she puts the other down. She can walk like a cat, too, although I always hear her."

Naturally, he always heard Leone's footsteps, thought Carline, and said she had been sorry to hear from Mrs. Veller that Leone had developed a cold and was to spend today in bed. Perhaps that was why Chris was looking glum. Leone's cold might have spoiled the happiness of their weekend, and she hoped Christopher had not caught the cold himself. He had more than enough to contend with as it was.

"When did Leone's cold come on?" she enquired.

"Only yesterday. She was all right at tea-time. Yoichim was here, and stayed on for supper, intending to have a word with Aldin if you had arrived in time."

"We were five hours on the way," said Carline quickly.

"Really." Somehow Christopher managed to put a derisive incredulity into his manner of passing the toast-rack. "I suppose you dined en route."

"We only stopped for a snack," said Carline, and she bent sideways and took up a flat square parcel which she had put under her chair.

"Chris, I've brought you a little present. It's a record. Something you haven't got and I hope you'll like it."

"I say, Carline, you shouldn't, really. . . ." He undid the paper and read the label on the record. It was a Schubert symphony, played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

"Good-o!" Chris ejaculated. "I always wanted the Number Six in C."

He looked at her gratefully.

"Carline, I can hardly wait to play it over. But you shouldn't have done it. Long-playing records are terribly expensive, I know."

"I didn't buy the record, to be perfectly frank, Chris, so you needn't worry. My mother gave it to

me, to give to you. She had it as a present from some woman who came to Hilltown to lecture for the Archaeological Society—a stranger whom Mother put up for a couple of days. This Mrs. So-and-So, the lecturer, discovered that Mother and Father were keen on good records and she wanted to give them something in return for their hospitality, but she didn't know they possessed the Schubert already and they didn't like to hurt her feelings by telling her. So I thought of you."

Christopher seemed to be thinking this over. He took the record again, looked at it as if the label were written in a foreign language which he did not understand, and then put it down with an air of finality.

"So you did go home to Hilltown, after all, Carline?"

"Of course."

"Leone arrived here on Friday evening with the story that you had joined Aldin down in Surrey."

"Perfectly true. She told you, I suppose, that she had telephoned me to say Aldin had had an accident. Luckily, it didn't turn out to be at all serious."

"But you went to him, at once, cancelling your other arrangements."

"Yes."

"Your father rang up about nine o'clock on Friday evening, very anxious because you had not arrived yet. Veller answered the call and told him he didn't think you were coming, having been in the room when Leone arrived and told us what had happened. She didn't come in until eight o'clock, and we were anxious about her, too. I didn't like the idea of her having to accept a lift from strangers."

Carline gazed at him very directly. She couldn't ask him just exactly what story Leone had told, nor could she give the lie to his beloved's story. But she did not intend to leave him under any misapprehension as to her own whereabouts between Friday and Sunday.

"Aldin drove me all the way to Hilltown on Friday evening," she told him, a little haughtily. "Have you been thinking otherwise?"

"As a matter of fact, I have." Chris returned her gaze with equal candor. "That was the impression I had from Leone. I knew you well enough to be sure there was some reasonable explanation, Carline; but there you are, it's been bothering me a bit."

"Well, I took Aldin home and introduced him to my father and mother, and he spent the weekend in our house and made himself charming all round. So I hope that pleases you, Chris."

She smiled. Chris smiled also. She was aware, however, that in some inexplicable way he was not entirely pleased, and an equally inexplicable perversity in herself led to her glorifying in the events of the weekend. They had climbed the Beacon, Aldin had helped her father cut the hedge, and had taken her mother on an expedition to some favorite woods, filled with wild daffodils just now.

"You see, Father had an illness some time ago and the doctor thought it wisest that he shouldn't drive, so we haven't a car at present. It was a little treat for Mother to be taken about, as she doesn't go out very often."

She longed to tell Chris that the weekend had not been such unadulterated bliss as she made it out to be. Her mother had fallen an easy victim to Aldin's charm and manner, but she was not so sure that her father had really taken to him. And Aldin was in some ways a restless companion, and she didn't think he really saw any beauty in the countryside, not even the hills. He didn't hear the lark song nor the tinkle of the sheep-bells, nor was he aware of the tender green springing bracken and the heavenly scent of thyme. He did see, of course, that there was a view, and in the panorama spread out beneath him his eye had noted salient features such as the railway line and the golf course, whereupon he had said he would bring his golf clubs with him next time he came to Hilltown.

Carline was not sure in her mind that there was going to be a next time. She hadn't come back from her weekend feeling so refreshed and invigorated as she usually did feel, and she longed to confide this to Christopher.

But Chris was not in a mood that invited confidences, and he didn't do so well with his exercises nor his walking this particular Monday. Carline tried to cheer him up when she came home in the evening, but he wouldn't be cheered. She felt it her duty, too, to tap on Leone's bedroom door to see if she could do anything for her. Leone was sitting

up in bed sorting the contents of her handbag ready for the morning. Her cold wasn't very bad, after all, and she intended to get up for dinner this evening and go to work as usual tomorrow.

As Carline sat down by the bedside, she saw Leone tucking away a slender, crested powder compact into the plastic case that contained her make-up. The compact looked expensive. Carline fancied that she saw the glitter of diamonds, but she did not see the compact because Leone was queerly secretive about her possessions and was given to strange little bursts of temper if asked to display them. Now, however, she produced her lipstick and opened it to show its worn-down condition.

"Bang goes another ten and sixpence for a new lipstick," she said. "This is the only kind I care to use."

"Couldn't you get a refill for less money?" "Messy things, refills—I never can cope with them."

Leone turned her note-case inside out. It was a pretty note-case of scarlet leather, and it had a solitary pound note inside it.

"I could lend you some money till next Friday if you are short," Carline offered, thinking Leone must have been obliged to spend more money than usual during her holiday.

"No, thanks," said Leone decisively. "If I had to borrow money, I should ask Chris. He has plenty, you know, only he has this queer kink that he ought

not to spend it. I heard Veller ring up Mr. Corkley this morning, so perhaps that means Chris is going to be sensible and lash out a bit."

"You seem to have been lashing out yourself," said Carline, who knew that Mr. Corkley was Christopher's solicitor and in some way connected with the money that was to come to him from the titled great-grandmother. "What a beautiful handbag."

"This old thing!" Leone's china blue eyes were reproachful. "I've had it for ages, as you know, only I've been polishing it up a bit."

It was true that Leone had had a square black handbag for some time but it had been of inexpensive material with the handle a little worn and on the shoddy side. Carline was sure that the handbag into which the girl was now packing her possessions was of real calf leather, and it was deeper than the other one and of good quality. She said no more, however, concluding that Leone had bought a new handbag and did not wish Chris to know of her extravagance. Leone was often in straits over money, and Chris frequently had to come to the rescue.

Carline had been deliberating in her mind whether to make a protest to Leone about her behavior on Friday evening. It wasn't right that she should act as she had done and get away with it without a reproof. This she proceeded to administer, gently but with determination.

Leone leaned back against her pillows with the air of an injured angel.

"I thought you'd be thrilled to come down to look after Aldin," she said. "You jumped at the chance, anyway."

"You might at least have waited at the hospital to see if Aldin needed any looking after," Carline rejoined. "Your good sense should have told you there was no need to fly into a panic nor to upset my arrangements. My father and mother were worried when I didn't come on the train, and they were

still waiting up when Aldin and I did arrive at last. He drove me, you know."

"Do you mean to say that Aldin went to your home and let himself be introduced to your parents?" "Certainly," said Carline.

"Whacko!" cried Leone. "He must mean to marry you. Aldin is cautious with girls. He wouldn't do a thing like that with his eyes shut. Well, well, well."

"Please don't talk nonsense."

"I am not talking nonsense, and you know it. I expect you have worked it out for yourself, Carline, and discovered that Aldin has the one essential virtue. He doesn't stint. If you marry Aldin, you'll be able to spend. Spending is the loveliest thing in life. It's hateful to stand looking into shop windows and wishing and wishing."

"Is that what you do, Leone?"

"Of course I do. Whenever I see something I want, I ache and ache if I can't have it. It's more than an ache, it's a pain right inside me, here!"

Leone spoke with feverish intensity. Her two hands went out to the black handbag, and her fingers curled about it as she clutched it to her chest as if it were a panacea for her pain.

"Aldin is the kind of man who might make bags and bags of money. . . ." Leone's voice lingered caressingly over the magic word money, and her eyes looked as if she could see wads of bank notes, stretching endlessly into the distance. Then she laughed. "He would spend it all in advance, of course. I told you Aldin is a spender. His bank balance is always in the red."

"Let's not talk about him, if you don't mind," said Carline. "I meant to ask you about Uncle Ben. Your mother told me he would probably stay the night at his club tomorrow, but wouldn't it be nice if we offered to put him up here? Would you turn out of your room for him, Leone? I'd willingly give him mine, but I think it's too much to ask of an old man of eighty to sleep on the top floor. You could

have my room if you liked, and I'll make shift on the couch."

"Uncle Ben will go to his club," said Leone. "He likes it there, and looks forward to meeting old cronies. I don't see any sense in my offering to turn out."

Her face took on a look of obstinacy.

"I don't care for people poking about in my room, Carline. I couldn't offer Uncle Ben an inch of space in my wardrobe. Why don't you ask Mother to give him her room, if you are so keen on it?"

"From what I have heard of Uncle Ben, he wouldn't care to inconvenience her," Carline remonstrated.

"Leave it as it stands, then, and don't interfere," Leone said.

Carline left it. She was sorry, all the same. She had looked forward to taking care of Uncle Ben, filling his hot water bottle and carrying up his breakfast and surrounding him with every possible attention. Uncle Ben was Christopher's good friend and counsellor, and she hoped she might be introduced to him before the meeting and was disappointed to find that he was downstairs with Chris when she came home on the Tuesday evening, and as Mr. Jones, the Secretary, and Yoichim arrived shortly afterwards, she felt she could not intrude upon them uninvited.

It was of course an exclusively masculine occasion, although that consideration did not worry Leone, who tripped down to the basement unconcernedly as soon as she came into the house and returned to report that they had looked about as cheerful as a party of holiday tourists on the wet morning when the driver of the coach has failed to appear.

But Aldin would turn up. He must turn up, thought Carline, not permitting herself to think of Christopher's disappointment if, in Aldin's absence, nothing could be settled. She wandered into the kitchen to see if she could help Mrs. Veller with the sandwiches and snacks which were to be served

downstairs after the meeting. But there was nothing more to be done, and Carline could not bring herself to settle in the sitting room, where Mrs. Burdock was contentedly knitting and listening to the wireless while Leone had cast herself upon the settee with her favorite picture paper.

Carline's feet led her to the front door and her hand went out to open it, despite her better judgment. It wouldn't do to be found there, under the curved archway, looking out for Aldin, but she stood there all the same, pretending she was only admiring the first tulips and the budding golden chain. It had been raining, and the paving stones glittered in the slanting rays of a sinking sun. A stormy sunset, she thought, watching the lurid golden light behind purple-dark clouds in the western sky. She wondered if the meeting was going to be stormy, too, and Aldin the storm-cloud. Or would he be at his best, lively and enthusiastic, the vital spark of the company and abounding with progressive ideas? Whatever his faults, Aldin certainly had powers of initiative and a gift for setting balls rolling and arousing people's energies.

Aldin's car slid up to the gate and he came along the path, confident and handsome, superbly tailored and wearing a dark red carnation in his button hole. His smile flickered as he saw Carline in the doorway, and he mounted the steps in strides and took her hand

His eyes danced, and he said that it was enchanting of her to be waiting for him.

"I'm not the only one who is waiting for you," she said.

"I'm for the inquisition and maybe the stake as well," laughed Aldin. "Wish me luck, Carline!"

He bent his head swiftly and his lips brushed her cheek. Only her cheek. Aldin had never yet kissed her on the lips, although it had been a near thing on more than one occasion. She had managed to avoid his embrace without the direct refusal, either by laughing at him or by a dignified freezing in her manner.

Aldin, too, had his dignities. Carline noticed the deliberate aloofness in his bearing as he strode off down the hall and disappeared down the basement steps.

Time lagged for the women of the household. Mrs. Burdock, Leone and Carline ate a sandwich supper in the sitting room, Leone complaining because Veller was serving drinks downstairs which Chris had ordered for his visitors but there wasn't so much as a spoonful of sherry for themselves. Leone could not see why they should not have joined up together when the business was over, and she crept down to listen and came back to say she had heard raised voices and somebody banging upon the table, and then, in a pause, Chris saying coldly that it could not continue.

"But it does continue," lamented Leone. "They sound as though they will go on till midnight, and Veller hasn't taken in the eats yet."

It was nine o'clock when Aldin's footsteps sounded in the hall. He put his head round the sitting room door and looked at Carline compellingly.

"I'm clearing out," he said. "Come and see me off, will you?"

It was clear that he was in a blazing rage, and that underneath his anger he was feeling sore and unhappy. Carline followed him into the hall.

"Get your coat," he said, gripping her arm. "I'm taking you out with me."

But she could not go with him. She had promised Chris long ago that she would look after Uncle Ben, and she hadn't even spoken to him yet. She had hoped that Aldin would offer to drive the old man to his club and see him safely indoors, especially if it turned out to be a wet evening, as seemed likely, for large drops of rain were falling as she walked, or rather ran, beside Aldin as he strode out to the car.

He paused a moment on the pavement, feeling in his pocket for his car key, his face dark and furious in the lamplight.

"Get back indoors out of the rain if you won't come with me," he told Carline. "I might have known that you, too, would let me down."

He entered the car, and started the engine and was gone, leaving Carline standing at the gate, forgiving him the injustice of his last accusation because it had been made in bitterness of spirit.

She went back into the house. Leone and her mother had gone down to Christopher's room, but Carline did not care to join them, feeling that the family business was no affair of hers. After some minutes, she heard a slow, measured tread in the hall, and rose from her chair in the sitting room to receive Uncle Ben.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, and remarkably upright. His eyes were very blue, his features fine-drawn in the beauty of old age.

"Miss Carline Lode, I think?" he queried with a smile that won her heart immediately.

"You are the physiotherapist? I have been looking forward to a little talk with you."

They sat down. Uncle Ben did not smoke and he told her he had already had all the refreshment he required.

"Where's the young man?" he enquired. "Aldin? He's gone."

"Never mind, my dear, he'll come back. He'll be bound to come back."

Carline very much wanted to tell him that he mustn't assume that it would be a deep personal grief to herself if Aldin never came to the house again, but the matter was too delicate to put into words. Instead she found herself answering Uncle Ben's interested enquiries about her work at the hospital. Soon they were friends and she was calling him "Uncle Ben" and found herself able to ask him the question that was burning in her mind.

"Uncle Ben, have you made Chris a director of the firm?"

"Yes, Chris is to be a director—a directing director and a very active one, I hope. I'd like to

know what you think of his chances, my dear. Is it true that the boy is going to be able to walk again?"

Carline smiled. Chris was, of course, a boy to Uncle Ben.

"He has walked already."

"So I heard. But he's in his chair this evening, still wheeling himself about."

"That's because he isn't very sure of himself and he still has to be helped."

"He can't manage stairs, I suppose?"

"Not yet. Going up and down stairs is always a great difficulty, you know. It's a matter of gaining confidence, really. Veller still has to get him in and out of the chair."

"I want him to be done with that chair. Carline, have you been to see our factory, off the Holloway Road?"

She shook her head.

"It's an old-fashioned building, part offices, part factory, with a warehouse below and some twenty stone steps up to the main entrance. Christopher will not be able to come into the offices until he can climb those steps. The idea is that he begins by helping Jones, who isn't in very good health, and then gradually takes control of other affairs if he is able to get about. Our showroom is in the West End and the main factory in the north of London."

Uncle Ben seemed to be thinking deeply.

"I spoke to Chris about getting an invalid chair that he can drive himself about in, but he doesn't like the idea. He says he'll have a car or nothing. Do you think he will be able to drive a car in time, Carline?"

"I don't know. It depends how he strengthens. I hope so."

"Well, I thought it a good sign that he should set his thoughts on a car. We have a great deal to be thankful for—thankful to you, my dear, as well as Providence."

He patted Carline's arm.

"I have an idea that Christopher wouldn't have made any progress at all if it hadn't been for you. Rest assured he's grateful, and so am I."

Carline flushed with pleasure and ventured to ask another question which had come into her mind.

"Uncle Ben, you spoke of Christopher being able to take some control of the business later on. Was it that, and his being made a director that made Aldin so—so unhappy?"

"No—no. To give Aldin his due, that wasn't the reason. Well, not exactly the reason. There was something else—a very necessary business adjustment that had to be made. But Aldin will tell you about it himself, my dear, in his own time. It wouldn't be fair for me to talk about it to you. The thing had to come to a head, but I'm sorry it should have happened just now. It's hard on you, Carline."

She knew Uncle Ben better now, and she was about to explain that she hated the way everyone was talking as if matters were settled between herself and Aldin when Leone and her mother came into the room, followed by Yoichim, who said in his nice way that he had telephoned for a taxi and hoped Uncle Ben would do him the honor of allowing him to conduct him to his club.

Carline and Leone saw them off at the gate. Stars were showing in the blue, the rain had stopped, the night air was peaceful, and Uncle Ben took Carline's hand and held it in a warm and friendly clasp.

"Everything will be all right," he said. "You'll see. He'll come round tomorrow, no doubt about that."

But Aldin did not come round, neither on the Wednesday, nor the Thursday, nor the Friday. On Saturday morning, Chris announced that he was going to buy Leone a pair of gloves, in fulfilment of a promise, and he said he would like Carline to come with them to advise and to look after the paying for him.

"We'll go to Sloane Square," he said. "Veller can take me there, and you two can come on by bus."

"There's no need for Veller," said Carline quickly. "You must please allow Leone and me to propel the chariot. Sloane Square is a good choice, because you can easily come up in the lift to the glove counter."

"Oh, I shall not come into the shop," Chris protested hastily. "I shall sit in the square while you do the shopping."

"So long as you bring your wallet, that's all that really matters," said Leone in a voice that would have melted an iceberg.

Chris was standing up by the basement window. He practised standing up often now. Leone sidled up to him and laid her head against his shoulder.

"If you are feeling in a generous mood, I could do with some stockings," she said plaintively. "I'm down to my last pair."

"Perhaps Chris could do with some socks himself, ready for all this walking," suggested Carline, trying not to see that Christopher's hand was playfully ruffling

Leone's curls, and thinking that if he could be persuaded into the Men's Wear Department, it would do him good to spend a little money upon himself, for a change. But he insisted on their leaving him by the fountain in the square, and assured them that he did not mind how long he waited.

"I thought of trying on a hat I saw in the window yesterday," Carline said tentatively.

"Another new hat?" Leone emphasized.

"This is for my new summer rig," Carline explained. "I'm determined not to be caught out this year if the warm weather comes suddenly."

"And what is the new rig?" Christopher enquired with interest.

"A dress with a little coat in a figured silk. It's quiet and unobtrusive, and yet a little out of the ordinary, I flatter myself. You know the idea—nice but not showy, and everything in the line and the quality."

"What is the color?"

"Blue mainly, but there is some white in it, and I mean to buy a white hat. You might describe it as a lavender blue, perhaps, but it isn't a mauve blue."

"Is it a bluebell blue, like the shoulder-bits you wear on your overall at the hospital?"

"Yes, perhaps it is." She smiled. "Whatever made you think of that?"

They went off into the shop and bought the stockings and gloves for Leone—elegant cream-colored gloves in a nylon fabric—and then made their way to the millinery section.

Carline was given to quick decisions in her shopping. There were several hats which suited her, but none so much to her taste as the white one which she had seen in the window. An assistant went off to fetch it, Leone amusing herself in the meantime by trying on hats. She did not wear a hat often and had come out hatless this morning, but she took a fancy to a provocative little beret and consulted Carline as to whether the change from the money Chris has provided would run to the purchase.

Actually it would have done so. Chris had been generous, but Carline had assured him there was no likelihood of their spending it all. And he never indulged himself in any way. Carline did not think it right that Leone should throw away his money upon a hat which she might not wear half a dozen times.

"That lime-green color would not be very useful," she said, hoping to dissuade Leone.

"We can show you other shades, madam," said the assistant, who had now returned.

"The little beret is very new and the price reasonable, only forty-nine and sixpence."

Carline tried on the white hat. It was her hat as she had known from the beginning, an ideal summer hat of fine straw, neither too large nor too small, and with a lovely side line. The price was sixty-five shillings.

"There you go, spending over three pounds on your own hat and grudging me a cheap little beret," said Leone disconsolately.

Carline felt a pang of compunction. She might have told Leone that she had budgeted carefully for her own hat and that it was her own earned money which she was spending, but instead she offered to slip outside and ask Chris if Leone might have the beret.

"Can't you trust me to go and ask him myself?" Leone retorted.

"Of course," said Carline, still chiding herself. There wasn't a doubt that Chris would give Leone whatever she fancied.

"I don't think I'll bother, anyway," said Leone carelessly. "In a few weeks' time, women will be walking all over London in these berets."

Carline returned to her own purchase, handing over the money and asking very nicely if they would send the hat. She did not feel that she would care to be encumbered with a large paper bag while pushing Christopher's chair.

"Let's go down the stairs," said Leone as they strolled away. They were actually on the first stair when a tall woman, evidently the manageress, came hurrying after them.

"Madam, are you taking the hat?" she enquired.

"I am having it sent," replied Carline, and then perceived that the woman's gaze was directed not at herself but at Leone, who had put the lime green beret back on to her head and was walking away with it unconsciously.

Leone laughed merrily.

"Really, I'm so sorry!" She snatched the beret from her head and handed it back to the manageress. "It is such a light little thing that I didn't know I was wearing it."

Her blue eyes became engagingly childlike.

"I only wish I could have the lovely little beret but I'm not allowed to." She glanced at Carline as though she were her governess, withholding permission for the purchase.

"I'm terribly sorry to have made you run after me. I don't know what you can have thought of me!"

Leone relapsed into giggles as they went on down the stairs and through the shop.

"This will make a funny story to amuse Chris," she said. "I'll save it up to tell him some time when we are alone together. The fact is that I find it rather difficult sometimes to talk to him, don't you, Carline? It's a shame that he has to lead such a narrow life, and he is such a darling to me."

Carline made no comment. She herself had found it easy enough to talk to Chris before last weekend, but it hadn't been the same since Monday morning when she had told him about Aldin's visit to her home. And then there had been Aldin's behaviour on the evening of the meeting, after which Christopher's manner towards her had seemed more constrained than ever. His temper had been short, too, on occasions, and she hadn't been able to get the same response from him during his treatments.

This was the most important consideration of all. They had managed to get him to try to walk with two sticks fitted with arm supports, but he wasn't trying hard enough. For no apparent reason, the heart seemed to have gone out of him.

The sun shone. The April sky was blue. The plane trees spread their tasselled branches, jewelled the buds of golden green. The planes that border the paved oblong centre of Sloane Square are the picture-book trees of London with their shapely crowns and harmonious spacing. They stand like good children on either side of the Gilbert Ledward fountain, whispering the ring-game invitation. "Step into the centre," they seem to say. "See this pretty little girl of mine. . . ." The girl is the green, kneeling figure of the fountain, holding up her shell from which the water sprays about her, splashing and tumbling into the blue-lined basin surround.

"I could watch that fountain for hours," said Chris. "Do you see how the water fluctuates? First it comes gently, then it makes a spurt and runs from both ends of the shell and brims from her pitcher. I fancied she moved once or twice."

He grinned at Carline and Leone.

"I moved myself, from the windward. I was catching too much of the spray. Do you notice the figures on the frieze underneath—Charles and Nellie Gwynn?"

They were there, in the bronze frieze beneath the tumbling waters, King Charles the Second and sweet Nell, two romantic figures under the foliage of the oak and the orange tree. The King's face was in half profile beneath a curled peruke. His coat

looked like velvet, tailored in the manner of an exquisite of the period. The line of his head and shoulders was gallant and adoring, and half mirthful, for his beautiful Nell had stretched out her hand to pluck an orange from the bough, perhaps to share with him, perhaps to pelt him with. The sculptor had seen the two as gay young people, happy as a May morning on which everything might be forgiven.

"I read somewhere that Charles's coach must have rumbled down the King's Road a thousand times on his way to Nell Gwynn's house at Chelsea Creek," said Carline.

"That's why the sculptor chose to portray them here, where the King's Road begins." Leone yawned.

"Let's be like Charles, then, and take the road," she said. "I'm tired of sitting here staring at that hefty green girl. Look at her ankles! Why can't these modern sculptors choose a slim elegant girl for a model, like the real thing?"

It was never worthwhile to argue with Leone, although Carline would have liked to say that she thought the figure graceful and exquisitely proportioned, and that there was a beautiful tenderness in the girl's face. Chris made no remark. His eyes were fixed upon Leone as she drew her crested compact from her smart black handbag and began to repair her makeup.

"Where did you get that powder thing?" he queried. "Let me see it."

He held out his hand imperatively and Leone closed the case with a snap and passed it to him.

"A naval crest," said Chris. "Whom do you know in the Navy?"

"Nobody." Leone laughed. "Don't look so worried, Chris. I haven't fallen in love with an admiral. I swapped this for my chain bracelet with a girl in the showroom. They are not real diamonds, of course, only synthetic."

"It looks old-fashioned," said Christopher. "The kind of thing men used to give to their wives and fiancées during the war, I believe."

"Oh, but they still do that now," said Leone eagerly. "This girl said it was a present from her former fiancée, only she broke it off and became engaged to someone else. That's why she didn't care to keep it."

She smiled at Chris ingratiatingly.

"It's only eleven o'clock," she said. "I can't remember a Saturday when I got up so early. What say we stroll along to the Royal Hospital and go in those pet gardens of yours?"

Chris acquiesced. Leone was not particularly fond of the Ranelagh Gardens, and Carline was sure she had made the suggestion to please Chris, but he did not look happy all the same. Was he jealous? she wondered as they made their way along the King's Road. Did he really suspect Leone of having an unknown admirer in the Navy? If so, his jealousy was unnecessary, she decided. A girl as pretty as Leone might have been expected to have unlimited boy friends, but she did not seem to encourage them, presumably because she loved Chris. Yoichim was her only admirer, apart from Chris himself. And Yoichim was a trusted family friend, years older than Leone, who took him for granted and did not regard their friendship in the light of a romance.

"Look who's here," cried Leone, and as they approached the gardens, Aldin strolled to meet them, smiling as if the affair of Tuesday evening had never taken place. He walked with them to the far side of the centre lawn and then paused,

"You said you wanted to see over the Royal Hospital, didn't you, Carline?" he remarked. "I've fixed it with a pal of mine so that we see the whole place, if you'd like to come right away. We have to get through before the old boys' dinnertime."

"In spite of your pressing invitation to include me in your party, I feel I must decline," said Leone, laughing. "I'll stay here and bask, with Chris."

"I shall be all right on my own if you'd like to go with them, Leone," said Chris.

But Leone declared that her legs were unequal to making the grand tour, and it seemed clear that she and Chris wanted to be left alone together. Carline went off with Aldin. It was true that she had expressed the wish to see over the building, but she had done so one day in early March when she and Christopher were on their way to the Gardens. He had remarked that despite all opinion to the contrary, he liked to believe that Nell Gwynn had persuaded the King to found the Royal Hospital for old soldiers throughout the centuries to come.

"As long as land stands, or river runs . . ." Chris had quoted, and it had been then that Carline had said she wished she could go inside the Hospital.

"Someday I'll take you," Chris had replied. That had been a joke—a very brave joke because he had hardly been able to move at all then. He must have told Aldin about it. Carline was pleased to have Aldin with her again, for she had missed his company and, failing Chris, she could not have had a more agreeable and witty companion. Failing Chris. It might still be weeks or months before he would be able to manage the steps that led up to the chapel and another short flight to the approach to the Great Hall. She pretended to herself that Chris was with them, an unseen but appreciative third, who certainly would have delighted in the captured colors that floated bravely in the hall. The colors themselves were replicas, the staves were original, their pensioner-guide told them, including the stave with the golden eagle which was taken at

Malta in eighteen hundred when the French surrendered the island.

Here Carline fancied that Chris nudged her elbow in spirit. It had been at Malta that she had lost her travelling bag and the opal ring. If she had not lost the ring, she might never have seen Chris again nor come to live in Chelsea.

They saw the old black leatherjacks that were used to draw beer from the cellars, and they admired the pegged joints in the dining tables, already set for the midday meal. The tables, like the panelling, were of Windsor oak, their guide informed them.

He was a likeable old soldier with a taking smile, pleased to be showing them round and anxious to interest and muse them. When they came to the large painting over the dais, where a magnificent Charles pranced upon a magnificent horse in the grounds of the Royal Hospital, he pointed out Charles's Queen, Catherine of Braganza, among the admiring ladies painted in the foreground.

"You see that other one, in a brownish color, right in front," the pensioner added. "They do say that lady was intended for Nell Gwynn, only they had to make her a bit misty-like or it wouldn't have done."

He informed them further that Antonio Verrio, the artist, had only begun the painting, and another artist named Henry Cooke was believed to have carried out the original conception.

"How sad, not to finish such a great undertaking," commented Carlin. "I wonder if Verrio was taken ill, or died, before he could complete the work."

The pensioner said Verrio was notoriously dilatory, and he was delighted to tell them about a man who had been in no hurry to die, and that was William Hiseland, one of the first pensioners. He had fought for King Charles the First at the battle of Edgehill in 1642, and had lived to the age of a hundred and twelve.

"He was married three times," said the pensioner with a chuckle. "He'd passed his century when he

took on his third. You'd have thought he'd had enough of matrimony by then, wouldn't you?"

They saw the library and the television room, and the Pensioners' Club with its comfortable lounge and bar, where the men chatted over their pints and half-pints. Then they were escorted through the Long Wards, their individual open-sided rooms still boasting the fine dark oak of Wren's original design, but now enlarged so that each old soldier had ample room to stow his kit and display his photographs and personal possessions.

One or two of the men were very old soldiers indeed, and too infirm to make their way to the dining hall, so dinner would be brought to them, their guide told them, and he added that the grub was very good, although they enjoyed an occasional grumble like everybody else.

Aldin rewarded him with a handsome tip.

"Poor old chap," he said while he and Carline strolled back to the Gardens. "How I hate the thought of growing old!"

"But the pensioners are very happy," protested Carline. "They have lots of comforts. Didn't you notice the headphones for wireless in their berths, and there was central heating. They have independence, they can do what they like and have friends to talk to. And when something goes wrong with them, they are taken care of properly, and don't have to feel they are being a burden."

She broke off as they reached the gate and the custodian came up to them with a message to say that their friends had gone home. He knew Chris well already.

"The young gentleman's valet came to push his chair," he added.

"But how did Veller know we were here?" Carline stared at Aldin and remembered that Leone, surprisingly, had expressed a desire to come to the Gardens. "This is a put-up job between you and Leone."

"Of course it is," said Aldin. "Leone helps me and I help her, poor little thing. It means that you are

coming out to lunch with me. Afterwards I shall drive you into the country for the afternoon. You can't go home now."

That was true. She couldn't go home to intrude upon Leone and Chris, who also had been a party to the arrangement, otherwise he would have waited for Aldin and herself. The only thing for her to do was to acquiesce gracefully and to take the opportunity to ask Aldin what had happened to make him so angry at the meeting last Tuesday evening.

This she did, later in the afternoon.

"They offered me a large helping of humble-pie," said Aldin. "It's a dish I've never been partial to, and I didn't like the sauce with which the dish was served, so I threatened to resign, I've taken it back now."

"Why?" asked Carline.

"For love of your bright eyes." He grinned. "If I quarrelled with the family firm, I mightn't be allowed to call upon you so frequently."

"I expect the family firm would miss you pretty badly," said Carline.

"My dear, I am the firm!"

Aldin changed the subject and would not be drawn back to it. Instead, he talked about the old pensioners.

"When I get old and dodderly, Carline, you can put a little something into my drink and finish my history."

"You seem very sure I shall be on hand when that time comes," she said, smiling.
"If you are not on hand, I shall step out of a moving train like Christopher's father."
"Don't you ever say that in Christopher's hearing," she responded quickly. "It was an accident. Never say otherwise."
She waited for a moment for Aldin's affirmation, but it did not come.
"Promise me something," she said.
"Anything in the world."

"Promise you'll be nice to Chris when he first comes to the office. Promise you won't put difficulties in his way."
"I'll be a kind uncle to him," said Aldin. "But do you think he'll ever make it? I haven't seen him walk a step yet. There are lots of steps at our office, Carline."
"He'll do it," she said, and she went on saying it, to herself, to Aldin and Leone and Mrs. Burdock, to Chris himself, whenever his spirits failed as they sometimes did in the weeks that followed. He learned to walk a little way with sticks and a still shorter distance without them. They helped him on to the stationary bicycle in the hospital, and he pedalled with some success and liked the experience.
But he couldn't take a single step upwards, not even crabwise, bringing the other foot after him. It was confidence that he lacked, Carline was sure, and she racked her brains but could not find the way to give him that confidence.
At the end of May, the Vellers took a day off, since Chris was now able to look after himself adequately, although he couldn't leave the basement or back garden without Veller's assistance. Carline came home from the hospital promptly that evening, to help Mrs. Burdock with the dinner.
Mrs. Burdock wasn't used to cooking, nor was Carline herself, having spent most of her adult years in physiotherapy departments and never having had her fling in sole possession of a kitchen.
She found that the fling was to be granted to her, indisputably, for Mrs. Burdock had been obliged to retire to bed with a bad headache.
"I'll manage," said Carline, after administering aspirin. She was anxious, all the same. Christopher's dinner now depended entirely upon herself, and Leone's dinner also. Leone did not offer to help, but she wandered into the kitchen with a tumbler in her hand in quest of ice for orange squash.
"Don't leave the fridge open," said Carline, busy buttering a dish and glancing over her shoulder.

Leone was walking out of the kitchen, glass in hand, leaving the door of the refrigerator hanging ajar. Carline went to close it, thinking she would take out a lemon for the fish at the same time, to save opening it again.
But Leone had turned and given a swift push to the heavy fridge door. Carline withdrew her hand and arm—a second too late.
She gave a little moan—not a scream, not a yell, but the pain was intolerable. The latch had caught her just above the wrist and blood welled slowly from a small, three-cornered tear.
The pain became less acute. Carline straightened herself and put out her other hand to close the fridge. Leone had disappeared—evidently she had gone upstairs, unaware that Carline herself was hurt.
Luckily she was not badly hurt. She wrapped her handkerchief round her wrist, and began to wipe the fish with a damp cloth, telling herself that she was all right. And then

she knew that she was not all right. The cooker began to wave up and down before her eyes and the kitchen felt intolerably warm.

It occurred to her that she must have air and that the french windows were open in the sitting room. If she could make the sitting room, all would be well, she thought, and set out blindly. Determination took her as far as the sitting room settee, but when she sat down she found she was obliged to put her head forward on to her knees.

She felt herself slipping sideways, and she would have fallen entirely if someone had not sat down beside her, and caught her, and lifted her, and held her against his shoulder.

Some moments later she opened her eyes and found that it was Christopher's shoulder against which she was reclining.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR a few minutes, Carline drowsed within Christopher's clasp, vaguely conscious of the distant whisper of his voice saying her name, saying small, pitying, comforting things to her. Then she became aware that his voice was not distant at all, but near to her, very near to her. She stirred and moved away from him, whereupon he rose to his feet and placed cushions, and commended her to put her feet up and lean back. The next thing she knew was that he was holding a glass of water to her lips.

She opened her eyes and sipped the water and immediately felt better.

"I'm very sorry . ." she began, and then stopped short, suddenly realizing the extraordinary fact that he was here, in the sitting room, on the ground floor of the house.

"I heard a little sound," he explained.

"I didn't yell out, did I?"

"No, it wasn't that. But my door was open downstairs and I had a feeling that something had happened so—I came."

His eyes were on her face, his smile expressed concern for her, and yet there was something triumphant about it.

"Chris, how did you get here?"

"I walked."

"Up the basement stairs and without your sticks!"

"I forgot my sticks in the excitement of the moment. Carline, you are hurt. Let me see your wrist, please."

"It's nothing." Carline felt that no injury could be anything by comparison with the glorious, wonderful fact that Chris had mounted the steep basement stairs entirely on his own. He came towards her,

and gently untied the handkerchief and looked at her wrist.

"I think I can fix this for you," he said. "Don't you dare to stir."

He went to a cupboard and produced a first-aid kit. Then he made his way to the kitchen and came back, carefully carrying a small pudding basin filled with water, the sight of which had the effect of making Carline afraid she might burst into tears, although she managed to laugh instead. She had never seen Christopher carrying anything before, and now he looked like a little boy, entrusted with a vessel containing some precious elixir of which he must not spill a single drop. His movements were slow

but commendably steady, and he seemed to know what he was doing. It was clear that it wasn't the first time he had attended to an injury.

He dragged a small table to her side, and spread out his own large clean handkerchief upon it before he laid out cotton wool and the dressings.

"I took the water from the kettle, presuming it had been boiled," he said earnestly, swabbing her wound with great gentleness. "I'm not sure that you ought not to have a stitch in it."

"Nonsense," said Carline. "It will heal up in no time."

"Your hands are very precious."

"This is only my wrist."

"Your wrist is precious, too."

He cut a square of gauze and laid it on her arm and bandaged it with no small skill.

Then he cleared away his dressings.

"Stay where you are," he commanded as Carline began to get up from the settee.

"But I have to see to the dinner."

"Dinner can wait. You don't stir from there yet." He smiled. "The tables are turned, just for once, and I am the one to give you the word of command."

He seated himself in a chair and faced her with something of the manner of a watchdog.

"You were closing the door of the fridge, weren't you, when you hurt your wrist?"

"Yes."

Carline did not tell him that Leone had pushed the door upon her arm, accidentally, of course. With his acute hearing, Chris could not have failed to hear Leone running upstairs. Possibly he had thought Leone herself had been the one who was hurt, and that she had raced up to her mother in sudden panic. Yes, if he had supposed Leone to be hurt, it would account for his bracing himself to the effort to climb the basement stairs. And when he had found that she herself, and not Leone, was the sufferer, he had behaved with the natural kindness which he would extend to anyone in trouble. Upon this, Carline bethought herself of her need to be grateful.

"Chris," she said. "Thank you very much for looking after me."

"If you only knew," he began, and halted, almost stammering. "There aren't any words to describe how—how I've longed to do some small thing in return for everything that you've done for me."

There weren't any words, also, to describe the intensity of the look which he gave her, nor the effect which it had upon her. A sorrow crept into her, proving and penetrating her inner consciousness with a pain that was almost physical. And yet it was a sweet sorrow, one of those sorrows that touches the heart, like music.

She could not meet his eyes—it was the first time ever that she had been unable to look back with candor into Christopher's eyes. Therefore she took the alternative, and closed her own eyes, pretending to be drowsy. When she opened them again, some minutes later, Chris was staring about the room.

"It's good to see the old furniture again," he said. "Do you realize that I haven't been in this room for years, Carline, not since I went overseas. When I first came home, I was lugged straight into the basement, of course. The window looks very pleasing from here, and the balcony."

Carline pulled her wits together to answer sensibly.

"I was charmed by that window when I first came to the house," she said.

"Do you like living in Chelsea, Carline? Does this part of London appeal to you?"

"It enchants me. I wish I knew more about it. I've seen the house where Rossetti and Swinburne lived in Cheyne Walk, and the house where George Eliot died; and I was thrilled when I came across the house in Oakley Street where Captain Scott lived. But I'd like to know more—most of all I'm interested in the far-back history of Chelsea."

"I've a book downstairs I can lend you," he offered. "I was looking at it the other day, and I came upon a curious thing. The old name for Chelsea was Cealchythe and the word hythe means a haven. Odd, isn't it?"

A haven. A glorious haven. It was odd indeed. But perhaps he wasn't thinking of the Dante quotation at all. Perhaps his mind was still running on the history of Chelsea, linking the haven with the river. His face had a far-away look, as if he were listening for something. It was more than likely that he was listening for Leone's footsteps descending the stairs. He must be longing for her to find him here, on the ground floor, having won his way up from the imprisonment of the basement. In his newly-found strength a new world was opening up for him, and for Leone.

"Well, I must get along," Carline said, and moved from the settee.

Chris rose also, as if to intercept her. "Look here, Carline, must you really trouble about cooking this evening?" he protested.

"Of course I must. Leone will want her dinner if you do not, and Aldin may come in, too."

Chris made no more objections. If he thought she was cooking dinner principally for Aldin, he was mightily mistaken, she thought, as she heard him calling Leone from the foot of the stairs, and closed the door of the kitchen so as not to overhear what they had to say to each other.

Aldin arrived in his gayest mood, bringing with him a bottle of Liebfraumilch, as if he knew there was cause for celebration on Christopher's account; only Carline found it difficult to seem carefree. Her strange sorrow was still upon her, but she wrestled with it, and thought she was giving a fair impression of light-heartedness until, on rising from the table, she found Christopher's eyes upon her.

"Carline, is your wrist throbbing?" he enquired.

"Not in the least," she replied.

Once again she could not meet his gaze, and was thankful to escape upstairs to see how Mrs. Burdock was feeling. Mrs. Burdock was asleep, so there was no excuse for lingering. Carline longed to be alone, but she couldn't absent herself from the party. Upon her return she found herself obliged to hunt for methylated spirit, required by Aldin for the making of coffee in an elaborate apparatus, presented by himself to the household but usually kept tucked away in a cupboard.

The aroma was delightful and the coffee very good, and while they were enjoying it, Aldin produced a square envelope from his pocket and, drawing out two gilt-edged cards, handed one to Carline and the other to Leone. They were double invitation cards for a ball to be held at the Dorchester on June the twenty-first by the Couture Association. Aldin explained that it was going to be a very smart affair, attended by everybody who was anybody in the dress trade, including important buyers.

"I think you will enjoy it," said Aldin, looking at Carline. "I shall rustle up some nice young man to make up the foursome."

"Why don't you rustle up Chris?" said Carline. "Chris" repeated Aldin incredulously. Carline smiled at Christopher.

"Now that you go upstairs, you'll be able to go downstairs, and you'll be able to get in and out of cars and taxis. In three weeks' time, you'll be able to go anywhere. I don't say you'll be able to dance, but you can enjoy the floor show and eat the supper

and talk to people. The Dorchester will be a bit of a break for you."

"It certainly would." Chris looked almost dazed. "I wonder if I could do it. The twenty-first of June is a fateful day for me, anyway."

"It's his birthday!" cried Leone. "It's the day he comes into his money."

They all laughed when she put her arm round his neck and kissed him. Aldin, too, extended his hand, palm upwards, and said he'd be glad of a loan. The gesture was made humorously but Carline had the impression that the request had been made before and in real earnest.

She told them she was going to wash up the dishes since she didn't want the Vellers' day to be spoiled by a pile of dirty crockery on their return.

"Let me help," said Aldin.

"I believe I could help," said Chris.

"Thank heavens, there's no need for my services, with so many offers," said Leone.

Carline let Aldin help her, telling Chris he had done enough already. He had still to get down to the basement, and she didn't like to tell him he was sure to find it a great deal more difficult to go down than to come up.

Her heart gave a great jump when, from the kitchen, she heard a slow step on the basement stairs. Chris was trying to get himself down on his own, and she had meant him to have help, from Aldin or herself. She rushed to the head of the stairs and looked down anxiously and then heard his voice talking to Veller, who had come in by the basement entrance just in time to see him complete the descent.

"You can pack up now on the great work," said Aldin as he was about to depart.

"What do you mean?" Carline asked.

"Didn't you set yourself out to wind Chris up and get him going? It looks as if you have succeeded far beyond expectations."

"Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased? I'm delighted. Now perhaps you'll have a little more time to spare for me."

Aldin dropped a kiss on her hair and strolled to the front door and let himself out, turning his head to smile at her. Carline didn't protest about the kiss, and she even managed a smile that faded immediately the door had closed behind him. Then she went slowly upstairs. She should have been happy, she told herself. She had thought that it would be the most wonderful thing in the world if Chris could walk again. And he had done it! Mainly through his own efforts, of course, but she had helped. If only she hadn't lost herself in the helping.

Carline reached the top floor and shut herself inside her room, and remembered with a bitter delight that it wasn't many hours since she leant against Christopher's shoulder. That was how she had learnt the truth about herself. That was why she had experienced the bewildering sorrow that had something in it that was very nearly ecstasy. She went to the window and pushed it open, and gazed at the stars for a long time. Only the stars, and the vast empty air, heard her broken confession.

"Chris, my dear, I love you," said Carline.

It should not have happened. Half the night she told herself that it should never have happened. Chris was her patient—she had thought of him as her patient from the very first day she had seen him in the Mediterranean hospital. A physiotherapist had to be able to give everything of herself to her patient and yet give nothing of herself, and remain tranquil, with heart untouched.

She had thought, too, that she was unlikely to love again, after Dick. . . After the long, slow, aching recovery from her unhappiness over Dick, she had thought she would

have the good sense to consider carefully before she allowed herself even to come to the verge of a liking that might develop into loving for a second time. Certainly she had not thought herself capable of falling in love with a man who was already as good as engaged to marry another girl.

In the days that followed, Leone talked about the ball continually, lamenting the fact that there was no

chance at present of her being allowed to buy a new dress cheaply from the showroom. None of her existing dresses were good enough for the Dorchester, she complained, and besides, she wanted a white dress, she wanted to float about the dance floor like a little white cloud, with no other color about her.

Her mother was persuaded to take her to the shop where she had seen the white dress of her dreams. Carline fancied that Chris was responsible for the financial side of the persuasions, and it was understandable that he should wish Leone to be dressed exquisitely for this special occasion, the first time for years that he had been able to escort her, although he would not be able to take the floor with her. Aldin had promised Leone that he would produce lots of nice men to partner her.

Even with the new white frock safely home and billowing in her wardrobe, Leone was dissatisfied. After consideration, she fancied a touch of color in the way of long slinky gloves in palest blue. A white cloud might look the better for showing the azure behind, as she said. And she declared that her slightly tarnished silver shoes would be an insult to any evening gown. She had set her heart on satin slippers, but she did not know where the money was to come from.

"The dress cost a lot more than I expected, and I can't very well touch poor old Chris for the extras," she confided to Carline. "What are you going to wear, by the by?"

"My red dress."

"Not the mulberry red that you wore when we went to the theatre with Aldin?"

"That same mulberry red."

"But it's really only a cocktail frock and not new at that," protested Leone. "Carline, you can't do it. Aldin is sure to introduce you to some of his specials —people that matter in the rag trade. The women will be wearing marvellous frocks. You can't let Aldin down by appearing in a back number."

"I can't help it." Carline spoke defiantly. "I've spent all the money I planned to spend on my

summer outfit, which is much more useful, and I didn't budget for anything like this. I've a dance dress at home in Hilltown, but it is far from new and would have to be cleaned, and I hardly think it worthwhile bothering Mother to pack it up and send it. There isn't much time now."

All this was the truth, but it was not the whole truth. Carline had money in the bank, and she would not have hesitated to race round the shops for a new dress if she had been looking forward to the ball in happy anticipation. But she wasn't looking forward to it, and her ever-active conscience pricked a little on that score.

"It's mean of me," she thought. "I'm pleased that Chris can go, of course. I'm truly pleased that he can walk well enough to go to the ball, but oh, how am I going to bear to watch him with Leone? How am I going to feel when he sees her in that dream of a frock, all white and bride like! He loves her, he's been waiting all these years for her, and now the waiting time is nearly over. He may be planning at this very moment to give her the ring and announce their engagement on the night of the ball."

Chris was making good progress. He had begun to go to the office for half days, by taxi, and he hoped to manage the buses soon and go to work regularly. Mr. Braive was optimistic for the future, but he had ordered Chris to continue his physiotherapy for the time being.

Carline still gave him his treatments, including the massage, a secret indulgence to her own longing. She was sure Chris couldn't tell the difference between now and hitherto. He couldn't know of the love that flowed into her fingers, she argued with herself, and to safeguard the certainty, she hardened her voice and was stricter than ever over his exercises. He continued to improve. At last he could have the pleasure of taking a bath, and he naturally preferred the beautiful green-tiled upstairs bathroom to the small one used by the Vellers in the basement. Returning from work one evening, Carline encountered Chris emerging from the first-floor bath-

room, looking just as attractively masculine as a tall, fair, clean-shaven young man can look in a dark blue silk dressing gown. He paused on the landing as she came up the stairs.

"Hello, Carline, have you had a hard day?"

"So, so," she said. "Have you been to work, too?"

"Not today. I had some business here." He laughed. "Veller has been digging out my party clothes for the ball to see if I've grown too large for them."

"And how do they fit?"

"Like a glove, one size off standard."

Chris was still too thin. He had told Mr. Braive that he had always been on the lean side, but that hadn't saved him from a session with the hospital dietitian, whose sheet of nourishing instructions was carried out and enforced by the combined endeavors of Carline and Mr. and Mrs. Veller.

"You don't know what a joy it is to come up to this bathroom and wallow," he said when Carline drew level with him.

"I can guess."

She laughed and passed on, guessing he did not wish her to watch his labored banister-gripping descent to the hall. All the same, now that he could get up to the first floor, it would not be long before he could negotiate the slightly steeper stairs to the top floor—now her own quarters but in reality his quarters.

Chris would want his own rooms again, she thought. He could not be expected to remain indefinitely in the basement, nor was the basement good for his health.

Therefore she must relinquish his rooms. And as she knew Chris would never consent to make an exchange and let her sleep in the basement, there was only one solution to the problem. She must go. Oddly enough, through the many days when she had longed for Chris to get better, it had never occurred to her that his recovery would amount to the signing of her own marching orders. Now she had to face it. It would be wise to begin watching advertisements for a furnished room, a

bed-sitter most likely or, with the greatest good fortune, a tiny flat.

Even the lure of a flat did not seem enticing, away from Chelsea and this most delectable of terraces. Carline dropped the evening newspaper without glancing at the

accommodation columns, and went into the bedroom to assure herself that her stockings and shoes and gloves, at least, were in perfect order for the ball, now only two evenings away.

The mulberry dress leered at her from the wardrobe.

Ha ha, my girl, don't put your faith in me, the dress seemed to say. I wasn't cut out for a ball dress. I was stitched and seamed for the minor occasion, a quiet dinner-party or may be the Old Girls' school reunion. You'll look very much of the old girl yourself if you wear me to the Dorchester. What will Aldin think of you? And Christopher? Don't forget that Christopher will be sitting down all the evening. He'll have nothing to do but look at the dancers, including yourself. Do you care in the least what he thinks of you, or doesn't it matter?

It did matter, so much so that Carline thought she might as well make herself tolerably presentable for dinner this evening. It was June, the blue skies over the chimney-pots were gilding with the first flush of sunset, and there didn't seem any reason why she shouldn't wear her new blue silk for the evening, without the jacket. The dress was sleeveless, the neck had a good line, and Carline decided not to spoil it with ornaments except pearl ear rings and a cluster of bangles on one wrist.

She was brushing her hair into sleek, silky curves when Leone burst into the room, carrying a brown paper parcel.

"See what I've brought you," she said, casting the parcel upon the bed and tearing the string from it to reveal the sheen of black silk and a foam of black lace. "It's a model, going cheap, and I thought of you at once."

Leone spread out the dress, showing how the lace underskirt revealed itself at the hem, and pointing

out the long, flat, tailored bow of pale pink satin that finished the top of the fitted bodice. The material was of a wonderful texture and quality, as Carline could see at a glance.

"It's a faille," said Leone, stroking the black silk with reverent fingers. "They're letting me have it for ten pounds. I expect they're selling it because it's rather small in the fitting." She looked at Carline's figure. "But then you are small, considering your height. Put it on and see if it fits."

"It's just on dinner time," said Carline.

"So it is." Leone smiled as she watched Carline pick up the dress and hold it against her figure and glance at herself in the mirror. "Let's come up after dinner, and you can try it on properly, shoes and everything. I should like to slip on my own dress again. I rather fancy wearing a flower coronet. I've some artificial blossom I can fiddle with for effects, but if I do decide upon it, I shall have a coronet of real flowers—stephanotis and lily-of-the-valley. Can one get stephanotis in June, do you know, Carline?"

"Provided you can pay for it, yes," said Carline.

"That will be all right," said Leone, tripping gaily down the stairs.

Carline presumed that Chris had told her she could go to the florist and order whatever she liked to wear at the ball. As it happened, Aldin had enquired what color she herself was wearing and she had answered evasively. She didn't want Aldin to give her flowers. To wear his flowers seemed to commit her to Aldin in the eyes of his friends, and she didn't wish to wear flowers at all now that she had seen the pink satin bow on the black frock.

The pink bow worried Carline. It was smart, it was clever and effective, but in her mind she gave it the description that an aunt of hers always gave to any article of attire which attracted too much attention—the pink bow was actressy!

But the dress itself was lovely and Carline felt it to be well worth the ten pounds asked for it. When she tried it on, after dinner, Leone was loud in her praises.

"For once in your life, Carline, you will know what it means to be really well dressed," she said. "Only an artist could have made that satin bow. It's so becoming, I'm almost jealous."

It was true. Carline had to agree that the flat satin bow of sugar-pink emphasized the whiteness of her skin and the dark brown of her hair. She had black slippers, too, and her long, pink-beige gloves picked up the color of the bow exactly. She looked in the mirror, and felt an entirely different being from her normal self.

"I'll give you a cheque," she told Leone. "Shall I make it out to you or to your firm?"

"I'd rather have the money in notes," said Leone. "It's less fuss with our cashier."

Carline slipped out of the black dress carefully.

"You are sure it's all right for me to have it?" she queried, with the feeling that she would now be bitterly disappointed if she could not have the frock. "I mean to say, when they have clothes like this to dispose of, they don't intend them only to go to staff, people they actually employ?"

"Oh, they don't care who has them," said Leone carelessly. "The only thing is they won't let us girls run into debt for clothes. It's an understood thing that we pay cash at once. If I give them your cheque, it will be all right of course, but they'll have to have it specially cleared as they don't know you. You do realize, Carline, Fantome are couturier wholesalers. We don't sell clothes to the general public."

"That's why I wondered."

"That's why you're lucky," Leone laughed.

"I'll nip out to the bank at lunch time tomorrow," said Carline, calculating her hospital duties. "Then I can cash a cheque and bring you the money tomorrow evening."

"Why don't you ask Chris to do it for you?" suggested Leone. "He always keeps a wad of cash in hand."

"I could do so." Carline hesitated. For no sensible reason, she felt shy of approaching Chris on matters concerning her own finances.

"Well, he's sitting out in the garden doing nothing in particular," said Leone. "If you don't give him something to occupy himself with, he'll start doing his up-and-down trick for the third time since dinner."

Chris practised stairs assiduously. His up-and-down trick was to go from the back garden to the front of the house, negotiating the steps on the side path, then to mount the long flight of steps to the front door and descend inside by the basement stairs. All this entailed considerable effort for him and he was inclined to overdo it.

Carline took her cheque book from a drawer and put it into her handbag.

"I shall tell Chris exactly why I want the money," she said.

"I shouldn't do that," advised Leone. "He might tell Aldin what you are going to wear. It's better to keep it a secret and then knock him backwards on the evening. Always keep men guessing."

"All right," said Carline, and she went slowly downstairs and made her way into the garden where Chris was sitting pensively, listening to the Schubert record which she had given him, having set his radiogram on the table just inside the open window of his room.

He rose slowly from his chair as she came into view. It was no good telling him not to trouble to perform this small courtesy, because he rejoiced in his new-found ability to do so. He would not sit down until Carline was settled comfortably in a deck chair.

Then he resumed his own chair, an upright garden chair—Chris could not as yet manage the sinking down and the rising up required in deck chairs. She sensed that he did not wish to speak until the music was over, and indeed it was pleasant to lounge there in the cool of the evening, drinking in the fragrance of stocks and tobacco plants. Veller

had done marvels with that small square of London garden. Wichuraianas flourished on the south wall, and Madonna lilies raised their stately heads at each far corner. The lilies had been there as long as Chris could remember, and he liked to fancy they had been planted first by his great-grandmother—the lady of the romantic elopement. When the music died away, Carline made her request, modestly.

"I came to ask you a favor," she began.

"I thought there must be something." Christopher's eyes brooded upon her. "You don't honor me with your company very often in the evenings nowadays."

"Would you cash a cheque for me, Chris?" Carline said, coming quickly to the point, "I'd be delighted."

"It's for ten pounds."

"I'd still be delighted." He rose. "I'll go and fetch the money or, better still, will you come with me? There's something I'd like to show you."

They went inside. Chris switched on the table lamp, and Carline sat down and took the cap off her fountain pen and wrote the date on the cheque.

"Shall I make it out to you as 'Mr.' or 'Esquire'?" she said. "I never know the right thing to put."

"Put my name plainly, without frills," he suggested, and took the slip of paper she offered and scanned the signature.

"'C. D. Lode,'" he read out. "You have beautiful handwriting. Every letter readable and yet full of character. What's your other name, Carline? I never knew you had a second name until I was able to get up to the hall and do Paul Pry with the letters when the postman came."

"I have to admit to Dorothea," she said, laughing.

"That means the gift of God, doesn't it? Very appropriate. But I like 'Carline' best. I remember that first and only letter you wrote to me to say you were coming here. I took it very kindly when you signed it simply with your Christian name.

`Yours faithfully, Carline,' you wrote. I liked the combination."

Carline remembered now, after telephoning, she had pondered all the evening as to whether she should write also to accept his invitation—the invitation which had seemed so very much like a call for help.

"I hadn't very much choice since you signed your letter 'Chris,'" she said. "But I wanted to seem businesslike, so I used the 'Yours faithfully.' "

"Was that all?" He moved over to the desk. "See here, Carline, I want you to know my secrets. You see this little door?"

She had often been fascinated by the small door and its miniature columns between the array of tiny drawers and pigeonholes in the upper part of the desk. Chris now explained that each of the miniature columns concealed a hiding place for private papers.

He opened the little door.

"Put your hand inside and feel about, high up, until you feel a difference in the wood," he said. "Then press."

Carline put her hand inside the door and ran her fingers up and down the wood, to no avail.

"Allow me," said Chris, and she felt his hand close upon her own, guiding her forefinger first to the right and then to the left. As she pressed on each side, a soft ping sounded and the columns sprang forward, revealing open-box interiors, from one of which Chris took money and handed her ten one-pound notes.

"That's where I keep the fateful ring," he said, and suddenly stiffened and closed the hiding-places.

"Veller, are you there?" he called out, and waited a moment until Veller put his head round the door.

"I want you to have a drink with me," Chris told Carline, and handed Veller his keys and told him to bring two Benedictines. Carline was given no chance to decline. She was surprised to find that Chris kept liqueurs in the house, and she had often wondered why drinks were kept strictly under lock and key. Could it be that he suspected the Vellers of a weakness in that direction?

She sensed now that the liqueurs were intended to be ceremonial. Veller served them in tiny Venetian glasses upon a crested silver tray, and Chris lifted his glass to her in a silence which implied that he had something of importance to communicate and was pondering as to how best to say it.

"Carline," he began, "if anything were to happen to me suddenly, would you be kind enough to look in that right-hand hidey-hole? You'd find all the necessary details, who my executors are and what's at the bank and so on. I've no one to ask but you."

Carline supposed from this that he considered Mrs. Burdock and Leone too inexperienced to manage business matters. She told Chris he could count upon her assistance, but she hoped it would never be required.

Chris looked at her sombrely.

"I've a premonition I've something ahead of me," he said. "I feel as if I'll never get properly better unless something happens to me, something unexpected. You know how slow and awkward I am. Do you think, Carline, that I'll ever be able to walk quickly, like an ordinary person?"

"There's no reason why not," said Carline. "Things should get easier gradually, and you should find yourself able to speed up, little by little."

"I don't think it'll be like that," he said. "I believe I'm in for another crash of some kind." He laughed. "Perhaps it's because I've just ordered a new car."

He told her the make and the color—dove-grey. It was a modest car, easy on petrol and easy to drive, he hoped.

"I asked Braive about it last Friday," Chris said. "He thinks I shall be all right for driving in a couple of weeks' time."

"I suppose you will have to take your test," said Carline.

"I've a driving licence already," he told her. "My father kept it up for me while I was overseas, and I renewed it since then, as an act of faith,

although, you know, I never really hoped, not until you came, Carline."

Carline felt herself flushing under his eyes. She was glad the room was only dimly lighted from the one table lamp with its rosy shade.

"I wouldn't have ordered the car if I hadn't found out I was going to be a lot better off than I expected," he went on. "You know, that money from great-grandmother. It was cleverly invested."

He paused awkwardly.

"Carline, what I'm trying to tell you is that I've made a will, recently. Corkley said I ought to. I—I've left my money to the girl I love. I'm pretty sure she'll do the right thing with it." He hesitated. "Do you understand?"

"You mean—if there were need, and of course there won't be need, you'd want me to help her?"

He said nothing. He just looked at her with an odd expression in his face.

"All right, Chris," she said. "Trust me." "I always have."

She wished him good night, and went upstairs to Leone and gave her the money.

"You've been a very long time," said Leone. "What were you and Chris talking about?"

"This and that," said Carline.

Leone was brushing her hair. A filmy silk wrapper hung loosely about her shoulders and her smile was tender and mysterious.

"Did Chris tell you about me?" she said softly.

Carline remembered how Chris had looked when he said he had left his money to the girl he loved.

"Yes," she said, and steadied her voice deliberately. "Yes, he told me about you."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE black dress had a long back zipper fastener, hitherto slick as oil, but intractable on the evening of the ball. Carline decided to run down to Leone to ask for assistance. As usual, Leone's portable radio was playing far too loudly, but for once it was not a dance tune but a pleasing song.

I will make you brooches and toys for your delight
Of bird-song at morning and star-shine at night.

Carline smiled to herself, thinking that Robert Louis Stevenson's conception of jewellery would be unlikely to satisfy Leone. Above the baritone voice and the murmuring piano accompaniment, she thought she heard Leone's response to her tap on the door and entered the room.

Leone was sitting at her dressing table, her back towards the door and an array of little jars and boxes spread out before her. But she was not at the moment attending to her makeup. Carline saw her stretch out her left hand admiringly and caught the glint of diamonds and a shimmer of glorious color. Leone was wearing the opal ring.

It might have been the opening of the door, it might have been that Carline's reflection was visible in the mirror. Suddenly Leone's attitude took on an awareness, and her head lifted, almost imperceptibly, and poised itself like a listening bird. Her hand shifted, quick as a dream, and the ring disappeared from sight and was hidden away somewhere among the fripperies on the dressing table.

It happened so quickly that Carline might have taken the incident as a phantasy of her imagination had she not understood its meaning exactly. Chris had given Leone the ring in sweet privacy, she

thought, with the intention of making the announcement this evening, the evening of his birthday and of his coming into his money, perhaps before they left for the ball and while Leone's mother was present.

Leone, doubtless, had tucked away the ring because she was looking forward to her big moment, and did not want it spoiled by Carline's premature congratulations. She showed no trace of self-consciousness, however, as she slid the zipper into position for Carline and commented on the perfect fit of the bodice.

"Really, and truly, I suppose they sold off the dress to you because it was cut a bit too small at the waist and that's why the zipper sticks," Carline suggested.

"The cut is perfect," said Leone casually.

"By the way," said Carline. "Will your Director be at the ball this evening, or any of the people from your showroom?"

"Mr. Fantome is in Paris," said Leone, and her eyes shifted oddly. "Ever so clever, that idea of yours of wearing just the fine gold chain and nothing else."

It was the real gold chain which normally accompanied the cross which Carline's godmother had given her at her Confirmation. She had left off the cross this evening because it did not seem to harmonize with the pink tailored bow on the dress. It seemed that she was not to be the 'only one to wear a bow this evening. Leone showed her the white satin ties to her flowers, which lay ready on the bed, together with an exquisite flower bracelet, beside the white chiffon ball gown.

"I've practically decided not to wear my pearls, only the flowers," said Leone. "Do you see, Carline? The coronet ties with a bow, to hang down at the nape."

A white satin bow as the final bridal touch, together with the ring, thought Carline. Well, she must steel herself. It was lucky that she had caught that one glimpse of the ring, and was therefore prepared to

keep every muscle of her face under control when the time came for her to wish Chris happiness.

"Shouldn't you be getting dressed?" she hinted to Leone. "I think Aldin has arrived already. I believe I heard his car."

"You would!" Leone laughed. "I'm nearly ready. I've only to slip into my dress and fix on the flowers. Don't wait for me, Carline. You go on down."

Carline went back to her room, and completed the steeling process with a final touch to her hair and a whisper of perfume behind the ears. Luckily the June evening was warm, for she had no evening coat that would have done justice to her black dress. She had a black tulle scarf which she floated behind her from her wrists, and she went downstairs with her head held high—too high!

One moment she saw Chris standing in the hall looking so attractive in tails that her heart froze inside her like a lump of ice. The next moment she skidded unaccountably on the stairs, saved herself from falling headlong by clutching at the banister and then landed full tilt against Christopher, and was caught in his arms and held to him for a whirling second and then set safely upon her feet.

"Well saved, sir," said Aldin, emerging from the sitting room with Mrs. Burdock. "Why wasn't I waiting at the foot of the stairs?"

"What happened, Carline?" Christopher's voice was a little breathless, which wasn't surprising after the hard impact of her person against him. "Did you twist your ankle?"

"I slipped," said Carline, staring back up the stairs. "I can't think why. The stair seemed to slide away from me."

"Look here!" Chris put one foot up on the lower stair—and bent to examine the higher ones. "The carpet's worked loose from its moorings. I wonder how that happened."

Veller appeared on the scene and went to work with hammer and tacks, Mrs. Burdock said several times that she couldn't think how it had happened and what a mercy it was that Chris himself had not

been descending, and Aldin took Carline into the sitting room and pressed sherry upon her and hoped she hadn't shaken herself too badly.

He praised her dress. He told her with his eyes that she was loveliness itself, and he gave her to understand that he had never been so pleased and proud to take a girl to a dance as he was to take her—and that was saying a lot, because Aldin had taken a long, long procession of girls to dances, each in her day.

Carline smiled, and was gay, and put on the party spirit, and hoped she made the right responses. She hadn't come to her senses yet after that unforgettable moment when she had cast herself, willy-nilly, into Christopher's arms. And yet her senses were working acutely, for she was waiting, as Chris was waiting, doubtless, for Leone to come downstairs.

The unexpected always happens. When Leone appeared, she looked lovely as the flowers of June, but she was not wearing the opal ring and Chris did not lead off with the expected announcement. Instead, he raised his glass in Mrs. Burdock's direction, and spoke very kindly to her and said he wished they were not leaving her behind for the evening.

"I'd far rather stay at home," said Emily Burdock, and Carline knew that she meant it. She genuinely did not like going out, and she took no pleasure in new acquaintances. Carline saw her gaze rest upon Christopher and then upon Leone, and she saw also, as many times she had seen before, that habitual look of fear in her eyes, as if she was forever expecting disaster. Carline supposed that Mrs. Burdock had never quite recovered from the shock of her late husband's financial misfortunes and of his death. Always since then she had been dependent, upon Christopher's father and now upon Chris himself.

Looking back upon that evening afterwards, Carline remembered that her thoughts had centred throughout upon Leone. The girl had many different partners, introduced to her mainly by Aldin, but it struck Carline that she did not exert herself to

interest and amuse them. A young man would be brought to Leone with the pleasure natural upon introduction to one of the prettiest girls in the room, and she would float away in his arms across the dance floor, smiling her mysterious smile and looking infinitely enchanting. Five minutes later, or at most ten minutes, the young man would return Leone to a chair by Christopher's side and then fade away, and Leone would sit there watching and waiting until Aldin, dancing with Carline, would remember his duties and bestir himself to find another partner for Leone or dance with her himself. Perhaps the young men knew that Leone was going to marry Chris, Carline thought, and she half expected the long-awaited announcement at supper time, when they drank Christopher's health in champagne and Aldin joked about his inheritance and the new car he had ordered.

It was during supper time that Chris produced a fine white cambric handkerchief ostentatiously, and informed them that Carline had given it to him for a birthday present.

"My birthday comes in October, Carline," commented Aldin. "Would you kindly make a note of it?"

"I shall give you a tie," Carline promised. "Yellow and magenta, with zigzag stripes, and you'll have to wear it or offend me for life!"

The joke sufficed, but Carline was aware that Aldin and Leone were each in their own way displeased that she had seen fit to remember Christopher's birthday. Leone had given him no present, unless she had done so privately. To Carline, it seemed impossible to live in the same house as Christopher and let his birthday pass without recognition.

She was happy to discover that Chris himself was by no means lacking in friends and acquaintances, for a number of people came up to talk to him, including several old friends of his father. It was not a ball where young people predominated, but a social and business occasion, where goodwill was of more importance than the pleasures of dancing.

Although Carline danced mainly with Aldin, she had other partners, some of them not so young and far from unimportant in the dress world. It was the director of a cotton firm in Manchester who introduced her to Miss Smith, a tall, majestic-looking woman in a long sweeping gown of rose-colored lace. Earlier in the evening, Carline had been aware of the woman's eyes upon her; she understood the reason for her interest when she discovered that Miss Smith was the head of the showroom at Fantome's.

This, then, was the terrifying Miss Smith, Leone's chief, who had no mercy for a girl who was late in the morning and had a hornet's sting in her tail for the model who failed by her manner to convince a buyer that the dress she was showing was the one she would have chosen among all others in the world.

Carline knew that Miss Smith must have recognized her own dress as one of her firm's creations, and it was on the tip of her tongue to thank her for letting Leone buy it for her so reasonably. Shyness prevented her from mentioning the matter, however. She had received a number of compliments already about the elegance of the dress, and she wasn't at all sure that she liked the attention it aroused. Carline preferred to dress unobtrusively. She didn't like to be dowdy, but she held the theory that a girl's clothes should be the frame to the personality rather than the picture itself. She planned to have the pink satin bow altered to a less noticeable black before she wore the dress again.

Miss Smith did not seem to wish to talk about Leone as Carline had expected, but she was interested in Christopher.

"I understood Mr. Bodeney could not go anywhere," she said. "Yet I saw him move across the room after the cabaret, and he seemed to walk pretty well. I suppose he'll always have to use a stick."

"The surgeon wants him to manage without it," Carline explained. "He brought it tonight because of slippery floors and for fear there were any awkward stairs. This is really his first evening out."

"You're the physiotherapist, aren't you?" said Miss Smith, and proceeded to ask Carline a number of questions about her work and the River Hospital. She even enquired where Carline had trained, and where her home was and why she had left the Army. Carline began to be a little weary of the inquisition. The conversation was taking place in a side lounge outside the ballroom, and she was thankful when Aldin came into view and said he had been looking for her everywhere, as they would be leaving shortly.

"We shall go soon, too," said Miss Smith. "I don't enjoy late nights, but this of course is different."

She flashed a smile at her partner. Carline had gathered long since that the important textile man had turned up in London unexpectedly, hence Miss Smith's presence at the ball.

"I suppose you will be at your hospital in the morning?" smiled Miss Smith.

"Nine o'clock," said Carline.

"Poor you!" Miss Smith yawned. "At least, we don't open until ten o'clock, so I have the advantage."

Aldin took Carline back into the ballroom by the entrance that was farthest away from the table where Chris and Leone were sitting.

"One last dance together," Aldin said, and put his arm about her and drew her on to the floor. His clasp was firm and yet gentle, his timing perfect, he was the easiest partner to follow Carline had ever known. The two bands played one after the other, non-stop, and it seemed as if Aldin was determined to follow the same procedure. Meanwhile, Chris and Leone were sitting alone at their table. It was now two o'clock. The ball was timed to end at four in the morning, but only keen dancers remained on the floor. Leone was very faithful, Carline thought. She must honestly prefer to sit out with Christopher, otherwise she would not have been so discouraging to her partners earlier in the evening. And Chris himself must be weary of watching now and bored beyond endurance.

"Aldin, don't you think we should leave now?" she hinted, and looked up into Aldin's face and received a smile that could have shaken any girl's resistance.

"Let's send Chris and Leone home in a taxi together and we'll stay on and dance—and dance—and dance. . . ."

His words matched the music and were equally enticing. Carline did not want to stop dancing. There were times when she liked Aldin very much indeed, and this was one of them. And dancing with Aldin eased the pain about Chris. But she insisted that they must go home—it would cloud the end of their beautiful evening to split up the foursome.

Aldin fetched his car. Carline sat beside him in the front, Chris and Leone were together in the back and entered the house first. Carline followed, after saying goodnight and thanking Aldin. She thanked Chris, too, as he waited at the door to shoot the old bolts into position. Although Aldin had produced the tickets when he issued the invitation, Carline had a notion that Chris had shared, or more than shared, the expenses.

"Did you enjoy it, Chris?" she asked.

"Very much," he said. "But I wish I could have danced with you, Carline."

"One day you shall," she said, and wished him goodnight hastily and fled upstairs, hoping Chris would understand she had spoken at random, being very sleepy at the moment. There were only a few hours left for sleep, and she hardly dared lose herself completely, being under the necessity of rousing herself at the usual time. She did not expect Chris to breakfast with her, but he was waiting for her when she came down in the morning.

From her first morning in the Chelsea house, Chris had never failed to breakfast with her. Carline loved those early morning times with Chris, and felt that they sustained her throughout the day. She would miss them terribly if she went away, and the if was becoming more and more of a certainty.

Today he walked part of the way to the hospital with her. He was walking a little farther each day now, still at a slow pace.

"I mustn't hold you up any longer," he said when they reached the Embankment. "I expect you have a full day before you."

"I've a few minutes in hand," said Carline, looking at the dazzling, sun-caught ripples on the water and remarking that she had never seen the river quite so high.

"High tide is at two a.m.," said Chris. "I happened to notice it in the paper."

"Chris, if I were you I shouldn't go to work this afternoon," Carline said. "You need to take it easy after last night."

"And what about you?" he rejoined.

"I'm different," Carline laughed. "Do be sensible, Chris."

"I am being sensible. I believe I'm beginning to get the hang of things in the firm, and it's more interesting than I ever thought a business could be. I should go this morning if I were not expecting to hear from Tony about the car."

Tony was the agent through whom Chris had ordered his car. They were old school friends, and Tony was arranging for delivery as quickly as possible.

Carline looked at her watch, said "goodbye" and set out at a smart pace, resisting the temptation to look back until she had passed the next lamp—one of the old round lamps with a tiny crown at the top and a support decorated with foliage. Then she turned her head, which was foolish, because it wasn't likely that he'd been waiting and watching her.

Chris was waiting and watching. He waved his hand. Carline waved back.

"Good luck!" he called out as if he knew she had a tricky day ahead of her. This was Friday and she wasn't on treatments this morning except for a few early patients. At ten o'clock, she had to take duty in Mr. Braive's clinic in the absence of a senior

physio, who was on holiday. Carline greatly wished to satisfy Mr. Braive's sometimes exacting requirements, especially after all he had done for Chris.

In the early afternoon, Cat-line was down for treatments, and then a geriatric class at three-thirty. Geriatrics referred to old people. Carline had never thought it a good word, but it was the established professional term. She liked working with the old people, even if it did take patience. It was wonderful how the old dears pepped up after doing simple exercises and throwing a ball about.

By lunch time, Carline was aware that it wasn't so easy to keep on top gear after dancing through more than half the night. Still, the clinic had gone off well, and the rest of the day was plain sailing, she thought, ordering egg mayonnaise and accepting a letter handed to her by Miss Angela, who had just sat down at table.

The envelope was dove-grey. It was hardly a commercial envelope, and yet it was a little too ornate for private correspondence. It was addressed to Carline at the Physiotherapy Department, in typewritten italics, with the words BY HAND in capitals. She slit the envelope with curiosity, glimpsed the name Fantome splashed across the heading and read the letter twice, scarcely able to believe that it contained the following words:

Dear Miss Lode,

I was astonished to see last night that you were wearing a model gown which disappeared from our salons during the past week. The black faille trimmed pale rose satin is a prototype, not yet in production and intended for our early autumn collection. Before we take steps in the matter and in the absence of my Director, will you please let me have your explanation as quickly as possible.

The letter was signed by Miss Smith as Assistant to the Director. If she had signed her name as Thunderbolt, she could not have startled Carline

more completely. For some minutes she sat stunned, leaving her plate untouched before her, until she became aware that Miss Angela was looking at her with concern and saying in her gentle voice that she hoped the letter had not contained bad news. "Oh no, not at all."

Carline started as only the scrupulously honest can start when under the faintest suspicion of dishonesty. She began to eat her lunch quickly, obsessed by the necessity to seem unconcerned and tranquil lest Miss Angela should seek her out afterwards and with her kind sympathy perhaps arrive at some inkling of her trouble. The trouble was Leone's, of course, and therefore to be kept secret, thought Carline, not yet realizing how far she herself might be implicated but all the same panic-stricken, and feeling as if the heavy hand of the law might be laid upon her shoulder before she rose from the table.

She forced herself to eat stewed fruit and rice pudding so as to keep up the appearance of normal appetite, and then sped away to take her turn in the lunch time queue for the hospital call-boxes. There was only a chance that Miss Smith would be in between one and two o'clock, but Carline knew she would not be able to get to the telephone again until late afternoon, and it was unendurable to think that if she should miss her, the matter might have to be held in abeyance over the weekend.

But Miss Smith was lunching in, it seemed, and after a few minutes' delay she came to the telephone and agreed to see Carline at five-thirty, although they usually closed the salons very punctually on Friday evenings. Thanks to her geriatrics class, Carline was able to leave the hospital soon after four-thirty, but she planned to go home to Chelsea Terrace to fetch the black dress before her appointment.

Mrs. Veller was ironing in the kitchen when Carline appeared in the doorway.

"You'll laugh to see me ironing with the old flatirons, I'm sure, Miss Lode," she said.

"The electric

iron is out of order, and Veller has taken it to the shop to be repaired. I wanted to get this job finished, and I don't dislike the old irons."

She went to the cupboard in search of the sheet of brown paper which Carline requested.

"Won't you let me pack your parcel for you?" she offered.

"It's sweet of you, but I can easily manage," said Carline.

"I'll give you some newspapers, too, for inside packing," said Mrs. Veller, obviously curious. "There's nothing like newspaper if you're sending anything that's likely to break in the post. Don't you go out again this warm evening, Miss Lode. Veller can take your parcel to the post office."

Carline accepted the newspaper as well as the brown paper, with the feeling that it was as well to give Mrs. Veller the impression that she was packing anything but the dress in which she had set out so gaily for the Dorchester yesterday evening.

She was thankful Chris was not at home so that there was no risk of meeting him as she came downstairs with her guilty parcel under her arm. She had packed the dress carefully, wishing she had a box for it. She remembered how she had supposed that Fantome's would not allow employees to use their dress boxes, when Leone brought the dress home.

A taxi took Carline to a smart front door of wrought iron over green glass, up three steps leading from the pavement of a Mayfair cul-de-sac. The door was closed, but Carline's ring was answered immediately by a man who seemed to be the caretaker. He led the way up carpeted stairs, past another wrought-iron door and a display of indoor plants. Carline caught a glimpse of a spacious showroom with deep arm chairs

and settees and frilly pink curtains against drawn blinds which gave the place a ghostly, deserted appearance, Harassed as she was, Carline could not help thinking what fun it would be to be invited into that beautiful showroom when the chandeliers were lit and glittering, perhaps for the showing of a dress collection.

The autumn collection. . . . Carline recalled Miss Smith's letter, and followed the man up a further flight of stairs, nerving herself for the interview. It was brief. Carline laid her parcel on Miss Smith's large desk, undid the string and showed that the dress was inside. She related how she had bought it from Leone in perfect good faith and had paid her ten pounds for it.

"Ten pounds," repeated Miss Smith, and made a little squiggle on her writing pad with a scarlet pencil. "Even if that were anything approaching the eventual retail selling price of the dress, which of course it is not, the value of the original model would have to be estimated at a very different figure. You realize, Miss Lode, that the dress may be of no use to us now that it has been shown, on your own person and on an occasion when it was seen by many people in the trade. If it had been in our summer collection the loss would have been less considerable, but, as I explained, the black faille was for the autumn showing."

"I'm sorry," said Carline, "but if that was so, how did Leone come to think the dress was to be sold off cheaply?"

"When we first discovered the loss, Leone denied any knowledge of it, like the other girls," said Miss Smith. "This morning, however, she admitted to the theft."

She paused, as if to emphasize the incriminating word.

"We gave her two weeks' money," she added. "Leone has been dismissed, of course."

"Dismissed?" Carline repeated, aghast at the thought of what that would mean to Leone and to Christopher.

"Miss Lode, I take it you know that Leone has never been considered to be quite normal. We only had her here because the late Mr. Bodenay was a friend of Mr. Fantome. I myself was against it from the start."

Carline looked at her bewilderedly.

"I did not know," she said. "I really did not know anything of the kind—about Leone."

Miss Smith looked incredulous.

"After living in the household for some time, I should have thought you would have been very well aware how things were. Miss Lode, I'm extremely sorry about this. I want you to know that I, personally, would judge you to be a person of integrity. I don't know whether Mr. Fantome will decide to go further with the matter, but I think you should consider your own position."

Carline stared at her.

"You can't be unaware that there is such a thing as receiving stolen goods," said Miss Smith. "I'm sorry for you, but there it is. Mr. Fantome returns from Paris on Monday, and I shall be obliged to put the matter before him. I—I wish you good evening."

She pressed the buzzer on her desk and rose to her feet. The caretaker man appeared in the doorway. Carline smiled at Miss Smith dazedly, unable to think of a word to say to her under the shock of that frightful possibility at which she had hinted. Afterwards Carline could not remember how she descended the stairs and found herself in the street, hailing a taxi. Money did not matter. Extravagance did not matter. Her only feeling was indignation against Chris, against Mrs. Burdock. They should have told her. If it was true about Leone, they should not have left her in ignorance all these

months, and let her fall in ignorance into this ignominious situation, frightening to herself as well as Leone.

And it was true. It must be true. Her mind began to marshal facts one after another, against Leone, against Christopher, who loved Leone so dearly that he could not bring his tongue to tell the truth about her.

Carline supposed she must go home and put the facts of the case before Christopher. The case! The very fitness of the word smote upon her like a summoning gong, leaving her mind whirling and

incapable of reason. She needed time to think it over, time to frame her words and to think what best to say, what best to do.

On a sudden impulse she changed her instructions to the taxi driver, telling him to take her to Chelsea Bridge. If she walked by the river, the soft-flowing river which had already been the recipient of so many of her confidences, she might be able to view the situation sensibly before she went home. The house in the Terrace wasn't going to be home to her very much longer, she thought, and remembered her first call at the house, and the wet evening, and how Aldin had driven her in his car to South Kensington station.

Aldin had tried to warn her there and then.

"Did Chris tell you the awful secret—about Leone?" he had said lightly, and Carline remembered assuring Aldin that Chris had told her. She had thought Chris had been referring to his being in love with Leone, and the postponement of their engagement, about which Mrs. Burdock had been careful to inform her.

Indignation welled within Carline again. Now she understood why Leone had no friends, why Chris and her mother fussed about her continually. Chris had actually dared to ask her to be Leone's friend, to try to help her, without making sure that she understood why that help was needed.

Carlin walked slowly along the Embankment, glancing towards the Royal Hospital, and thinking she would never again be able to bring herself to enter the Ranelagh Gardens—those lovely gardens where she had sat with Christopher.

She hardened her heart and remembered the evening at the theatre when the old lady in the seat in front of them had dropped her gold-chain purse and Leone had been so assiduous in her pretended efforts to find it. She also remembered the embarrassing occasion when Leone had tried to walk out of the Sloane Square shop wearing the beret which she had coveted.

Covetousness. That was the kink in Leone's character. She could not live without pretty things, as and when the fancy took her. Carline knew now that the flower coronet and the new satin slippers Leone had worn for the ball had been bought with the ten pounds she herself had paid for the black dress.

That hateful black dress with its still more detestable pink bow! Carline faced her own situation squarely. She would be obliged to tell Christopher. She could not bear to think of the shame of telling Christopher, and the shame of the whole affair and the possible consequences. A paragraph in the evening newspapers, perhaps in the morning papers, too. She pictured her own father opening his morning paper and coming across her name, in shameful circumstances. She pictured Miss Angela glancing through the paper over her elevenses at the hospital. Carline shuddered. It would not be surprising if she had to give in her resignation at the hospital, or perhaps it wouldn't even be a question of resigning. She might be dismissed, like Leone. . . .

It had to be faced. Carline came to the lamp where she had turned to wave goodbye to Christopher that morning. The river had been a pale, grey blue then, and the ripples sparkling like diamonds where the morning sunshine touched them. Now it was green and brown, with long dark shadows flashing into crimson in the evening light. She remembered Christopher wishing her good luck. Little did he know of the luck that the day had brought her.

She crossed the road and turned up the side street and came to the Terrace, thinking the house more beautiful than ever, for all the trouble that awaited her inside it. A woman in a grey suit was coming through the garden gate as Carline reached it. Her face was vaguely familiar and she fancied she had seen her at the hospital, perhaps in the Almoner's department or somewhere on the social welfare side.

The woman smiled and then spoke to her.

"I was calling on Miss Leone Burdock, but I was told she was not at home. The manservant who

answered the door seemed uncertain when she would be in. Would you be kind enough to give her a message?"

"Certainly," said Carline.

"Just tell her Miss Grey called to see her. She'll understand. And say I shall look in tomorrow morning."

Carline promised to deliver the message, although she thought it odd that Miss Grey had not cared to entrust it to Veller. She went on into the house, finding Mrs. Burdock hovering in the hall, looking anxious as usual.

"Dinner is waiting," she told Carline. "Chris wouldn't let us begin till you came. We were quite worried about you."

From the back window of the sitting room, Carline saw Christopher sitting in a garden chair, very much at his ease and not in the least worried. She sped upstairs to tidy herself, observing in her bedroom that the wardrobe door was open, and that her blue silk two-piece had slipped from its hanger and lay crumpled in a heap.

It was not Carline's habit to let garments fall from their hangers and leave them where they were, however hurried she might be. She deduced, therefore, that Leone had looked for the black frock in her wardrobe and, finding it missing, had guessed that she had gone to see Miss Smith. Leone might have decided to give Chris her own version of the story right away, and that would be a relief, because Carline could not think how she was going to tell him, as told he must be.

But when Carline took her place at the dinner table, Chris was carving the particular little cut from the joint of cold lamb that Leone liked, and giving careful consideration to helpings of salad and creamed potatoes for the tray which Mrs. Veller was to carry upstairs. Leone had retired to bed, as was usual in a crisis. Carline fancied from Mrs. Burdock's manner that there had been an hysterical outburst, but Chris made the explanation that Leone had come

home with a splitting headache and was tired out after the ball.

He looked at Carline with concern, too, thinking she had been kept late at the hospital. Evidently Mrs. Veller had not mentioned her coming home to pack the parcel.

"It was a shame you had to work late today of all days," Chris said with sympathy. "I prescribe bed for you, too."

Carline went off upstairs, heavy-hearted. Now she would have to wait all night and hope to talk to Chris in the morning. It wasn't fair to tell him until she had spoken to

Leone, she considered, and she knew by experience that it was hopeless to try to speak to Leone when she was in bed and had made up her mind not to be spoken to. The newspaper Mrs. Veller had pressed upon Carline for packing was lying upon the floor in her bedroom. She picked it up, noting that it had been Christopher's newspaper—his lettering was to be seen in the half-finished crossword. She wondered why Chris had left that particular crossword unfinished. Months of inactivity had made him a practised solver, and it had to be an especially baffling puzzle to keep him occupied for more than half an hour. Something had distracted his attention, she thought, and glanced down the Personal column and found her eye marking the following words.

Will the lady who accepted a lift from Varley to Hyde Park Corner on April th kindly return the handbag which she took away in mistake for her own.

Leone again! Carline remembered how she had come upon Leone sorting the contents of a very good-quality handbag just after the Friday when she had summoned her down to Varley and had gone off back to London in a stranger's car.

The newspaper itself was dated Saturday, May rd. That was the Saturday they had gone to Sloane Square, when Chris had noticed the naval crest upon

the powder compact Leone had been using, probably having acquired it from the handbag she had taken in exchange for her own shabby one.

This last discovery shattered Carline more than the others. All the time she had thought that Chris might not have known, and that he hadn't taken her into his confidence about Leone because he had nothing to confide. She had even thought that she herself might be misjudging Leone, and that the taking of the model gown from Fantome's might be the first and only temptation to which she had succumbed. But this proved otherwise.

Carline went to bed, thinking she might as well lie down if there was no likelihood of her sleeping. There was no book which could possibly distract her mind, so she took up the newspaper and tried to finish the crossword.

Chris had filled in one word only in the lower right-hand corner. Carline read the clue by the fading daylight. "The sea-goer sometimes longs for this"—in five letters. Chris had put in those letters and the word was—haven. A glorious haven. . . .

Carline fell asleep with the newspaper held fast in her hand. Once it had been Christopher's newspaper, after all.

She did not know what sound awakened her, some hours later, but she was so sure that she had heard a sound that she roused herself up and went to the window and gazed down at the front garden, just in time to see Leone passing through the garden gate.

Was she running away? Carline thought quickly. If so, she was taking nothing with her, for she saw that the girl's hands were unencumbered as she passed under the street lamp. Leone was wearing her tight scarlet trousers and a shirt blouse, and there were two mysterious black objects on either side of her waist.

Carline began to dress hurriedly. Leone had moved away slowly but purposefully, with a step that was very different from her usual light, drifting gait. Whatever her purpose, she must be half frantic with misery to creep away from the house in the

middle of the night. Carline remembered, as she had all the time remembered, that Chris had asked her to help Leone. The best thing was to follow, therefore, and persuade her to return.

Diving into the first dress that came to hand, Carline looked from the window again and saw Chris come out from the side of the house and make his way through the gate. No need to follow, then, she thought, and immediately revised her judgment. Chris was trying to hasten, and he couldn't hasten. What if he hastened too much, and lost his balance and fell, and undid all the good work of the past months?

Carline raced down the stairs. The bolts were undone. It was probably the unfastening of those old bolts by Leone which had first awakened her, she thought, as she sped through the garden, down the Terrace, across the road and into the street that led to the river.

The river! Chris was about to cross the Embankment road when Carline came in sight of him. There was no traffic, but she saw him look carefully before he left the pavement. He wouldn't have had a chance if a lorry had come racing round the corner. She slackened her pace so as not to overtake him, and waited when she came to the end of the street, standing in the shadows watching Chris as he made his way by the river. No one was about, no policeman's footsteps sounded; ahead of Chris there was Leone's slender figure, trailing along slowly, and pausing every now and then to look at the river.

The stars glittered, the lamps shone, the plane trees murmured. Carline waited irresolutely. Surely she ought to turn and make her way home and creep into the house, and not remain to witness what could only be a lovers' meeting. When Chris caught up with Leone he would take her in his arms, there by the river, as many a man had taken his girl into his arms by London's river. And then Leone would have her chance to tell him what she had done, and Chris would shoulder her burden and bring her home and care for her and cherish her. They would not wish to

encounter Carline on that homeward journey; therefore she had best make herself scarce, she told herself.

Big Ben chimed distantly, first the quarters, then the hours, with its dignified pauses. Bourn—bourn. Two o'clock. Chris had said that high tide at London Bridge was at two o'clock in the morning. She tried to drag her eyes away from the moving figures on the other side, by the river. Chris was drawing nearer to Leone now, and she had paused, half turning, as if she heard him coming.

Then, in an instant, she put her hand on the parapet and vaulted, and was gone from sight into the river. In a second breathless instant, Chris had followed her, struggling up to a sitting position on the parapet and then going off sideways into the water.

Carline dashed across the road, full tilt for the river, looking neither to the left nor to the right. She did not hear the screech of brakes and the sickening skidding of the lorry as the driver swerved in an attempt to avoid her.

CHAPTER NINE

THE room was filled with flowers, carnations, stocks and gladioli and baby zinnias in a variety of gay colors. One vase particularly pleased Carline because it held Canterbury bells, blue and white Canterbury bells which looked as if they had come from some old-fashioned garden. The vase which contained them was of frosted white glass, delightfully shaped and not an ordinary hospital vase. The Canterbury bells were decoratively arranged with a delicate trailer foliage which she couldn't put a name to.

Nor could she put a name to any one of the kind friends who had sent the flowers. Sister had said that the letters and cards which had come with the flowers were being put by for her, but she mustn't read them yet, and there would be time enough to write thank-you letters later on, though nobody expected it of her.

Meanwhile she had to obey orders. No books, no newspapers, no wireless and no visitors. Absolute rest. Absolute quietness. That was one reason why they had put her in the side ward, which was the River Hospital term for a private room. The other reason was that she was a physio and one of their own, and there wasn't anything in the hospital that could be too good for her.

Carline could sit up for a little time now, and have two fairly fat pillows instead of the one thin small pillow. The room no longer whirled round whenever she opened her eyes, and she could talk with reasonable intelligence although talking wasn't encouraged, not even by Mr. Braive when he came to see her leg. There was nothing much wrong with Carline's leg except a large bruise where the lorry had caught her and sent her flying headlong, so that

she might have escaped injury altogether if only her head had not hit the curb. It had hit hard. Sir Charles was now satisfied that the damage wasn't more than a bad concussion, but you couldn't be too careful, he decreed. Therefore Mr. Braive wouldn't indulge in conversation when Carline put out a professional feeler about their patients, hoping he might let something drop about one particular patient, soon to be an ex-patient, if all went well with Christopher. But Mr. Braive wouldn't rise. He and Sir Charles swam in the same stream, it seemed, and they were unmoved by any conversational bait Carline tried to dangle.

Her mother had given her the only real information she had had about Chris and Leone.

"They are both safe and well, so you can be quite happy about them," her mother had said. "Go to sleep now, darling."

Her mother was strongly under the influence of Sir Charles also, and it was clear she had been warned not to enter into details. Carline's father and mother had come dashing up to London to see her, but now that she was getting better they had gone home, with the intention of returning as soon as she was well enough to be taken down to Hilltown. Meanwhile the time dragged, as Miss Angela noticed when she popped her head round Carline's door one afternoon.

"You are moping, Carline, my love," she said. "It's terribly dull for you."

"I do feel a bit forlorn and forgotten," Carline admitted.

"You are certainly not forgotten," said Miss Angela, looking at the flowers. "And I hear there's a young man who calls constantly to enquire after you. I think that I shall tell Sir C. that he ought to take off the padlock."

"You wouldn't dare," said Carline.

"I have my ways," said Miss Angela, and proceeded to follow them, with the result that the next morning Carline found herself sitting up against her two pillows, attired in the rose-colored satin bed

jacket that her mother had bought for her, and receiving Aldin.

Aldin gazed at Carline for thirty speechless seconds, and then, with his genius for the light and easy touch, said exactly the right thing:

"Carline, you look so beautiful that my knees have gone all groggy. Might I sit down?"

"Please do."

"And may I move this chair over here so that I can hold your hand? And then may I tell you a secret?"

"I am aching to hear any secret."

Carline looked at him beseechingly.

"Well then," said Aldin with portentous gravity. "I have fallen in love—with your mother! The next time she comes to town, she will come alone, by appointment. I shall meet her at Paddington. I shall drive her to her hotel. I shall take her out to dine with me. And in the morning I shall call for her in my car and drive her to can you guess?"

Carline laughed.

"I'm not allowed to do conundrums."

"No, my sweet, I forgot. I'll tell you at once. I shall bring your mother round here in the car, and we shall pick you up, bag and baggage, and then I'm going to be your chauffeur all the way home to Hilltown. Won't that be lovely!"

"It's very good of you, Aldin."

"Good for me." He chuckled. "It will be heaven."

All this time he had been holding her hand. Carline twisted her fingers gently, removed them from his clasp and looked at him wistfully.

"I'm so afraid they'll turn you out before I've had time to ask you anything important."

"Ask me something important, by all means," he said.

"What happened to Chris and Leone—in the river?"

"Oh, that," said Aldin lightly. "The river police came along in one of those jolly little speedboats and picked them up and took them to the Waterloo Station, that's the river police station, you know,

near Waterloo Bridge. There they dried them out and so on."

"Was Chris all right?"

"Right as rain."

"And Leone? Was there any—trouble? Did you know about the black dress? I—I was in that, too."

"You should have come to me and I'd have dealt with Miss Smith for you. Fantome is a decent chap. I could have told you he would never take any action against a relation of Christopher's—he being the son of his father."

Aldin looked at her severely.

"No more questions, Carline. I've been warned that if I bother you, I won't be allowed within yards of you another day."

"Just one little question more, please!"

"What is it?"

"I thought—that is, I wondered. Leone threw herself over into the river. Wouldn't she get into trouble for that?"

"They didn't charge her with attempted suicide, if that's what you mean. They don't always, you know, not when there's someone to look after the girl. In this case, they were influenced by the fact that Leone had a man who was ready and waiting to marry her. The wedding is next Saturday, Carline, and I'm to be best man. It solves a lot of problems, doesn't it?"

Carline said that it did. She also said that it had been extremely kind of Aldin to come to see her, whereupon he said he would come again, this afternoon maybe, if he could slip away from big business affairs.

She gave him her best smile and he went out of the door and then her eyes filled with tears. She hadn't cried since her accident, but now she wept and wept and couldn't stop herself. The tears were all for herself, and therefore the more agonizing. It was no

good telling herself that she ought to rejoice because Chris was happy at last and going to marry Leone. Carline did not feel she would ever rejoice again.

Sister was most concerned.

"No more young men for you if this is what happens," she said, taking away one of Carline's pillows. "Do stop crying, dear, or you'll do yourself harm. You've been so splendid up to now."

But Carline couldn't be splendid any longer. She wept for an hour at least, and then fell asleep and woke up sad at heart but with her self-control regained. Sister was off duty, and the nurse who came to take away her tea-tray brought the news that a visitor had called to see her and was waiting outside hopefully. Nurse Doyle was Irish and romantic, and she was only helping out in the ward that afternoon and hadn't seen Carline before.

"Sister did say not to bring in any callers, but I'll slip him in for two minutes if you're longing to see him," she offered helpfully. "He's a lovely young man."

The lovely young man had not acquainted Nurse Doyle with his name. Carline felt a wave of longing. What if it should be Chris?

She recollected that there were six flights of stairs to be climbed to the top ward, and the hospital did not encourage visitors to use the lift. There was also a long stretch of corridor.

"Is he lame?" she enquired. "Not exactly lame, I mean, but does he walk slowly and awkwardly?"

"He does not indeed," said the Irish girl. "I'd be proud to walk out with him myself if the luck came my way. He has a wonderful suit on him, too, of dark grey flannel."

It must be Aldin, then, in his wonderful suit. Carline did not feel she could trust herself to see Aldin again today.

"Tell him I'm sorry, but I don't feel up to visitors," she said and closed her eyes, and did not open them again until Nurse Doyle returned and urged her to do so.

"Look what I've got for you! Red roses. He pushed them into my hands and gave me a smile that fairly turned the heart in me. Then he streaked off without a word."

Dark red roses. Nobody had sent Carline roses, as Aldin must have observed.

"Red roses are for love," observed the Irish girl sentimentally and went off in search of yet another vase, in which the roses opened into such perfection during the night that Carline could not take her eyes from them when she woke up next morning. She took great comfort from those roses, and regarded them as bringing her luck, because from that morning she really improved marvellously. The odd thing was, however, that she never could remember to thank Aldin for the roses. Each time he came, and he came frequently, she forgot to mention the matter, and always remembered it after his departure, too late.

Visitors were unrestricted now, and the date for Carline to go home was only three days away when Mrs. Burdock was shown into the room, looking scared and nervous after braving the adventure of finding her way into the hospital. Carline was up and out of bed by this time, and she vainly attempted to persuade her visitor to take the only arm chair. But no, Mrs. Burdock would not be persuaded. She perched herself on the edge of the hard chair, clutching her handbag and looking at Carline with trepidation.

"Oh, Carline, my dear, I'm thankful to see you looking fairly well, after all. I should have come before only "

"I expect you've been busy." Carline, too, had to nerve herself to calmness. "Tell me about the wedding. I've been longing to hear. Was it a white wedding and Leone in full array?"

"No, it was very quiet. The men wore lounge suits and Leone was dressed in pale blue with a small tulle hat. She carried Sylvia roses, pink roses, you know, and looked very sweet."

"Did she have any bridesmaids?"

Emily Burdock shook her head.

"Chris thought it best to keep it very private, and we didn't have any guests. There wasn't anyone there except Yoichim and Aldin, and of course Chris

and myself. But we had a nice little lunch afterwards, with champagne, and I must say Leone looked very happy when she set off for the honeymoon. They are spending it at Cromer. Chris has an Army friend there whose father owns a hotel, so he was able to book accommodation. It's difficult to get in at any seaside place during the holiday season."

Mrs. Burdock sighed.

"After they come home, Leone is going to work in our own firm, for a time, anyway. Chris advises it. He thinks it's best for her to be occupied."

Carline was surprised to hear this, for she would not have thought Chris the kind of man to like his wife to go out to work, usual as it was among young married women nowadays. Surely it was not necessary financially, she thought to herself.

"Leone is going to work on the designing side," Mrs. Burdock continued. "Well, it's not exactly designing. Yoichim has to have a skilled machinist to make up the little garments as he plans them out, and Leone is going to learn to do it. She's very clever with her fingers—too clever."

Mrs. Burdock hesitated fearfully, and seemed to be making up her mind to make a conversational plunge.

"Carline, I have something to confess to you. Chris says I must tell you."

Her voice shook a little.

"Do you remember that afternoon when you first came to the house and before we had tea I went down to the basement to speak to Chris? He knew you had come, and he made up his mind, there and then, to ask you to live in the house, but he said he couldn't do so unless you knew about—about Leone. I tried to tell you, but I found I hadn't the courage. I'm afraid I let Chris think I had told you, however. It was very wrong of me."

"Please don't be so unhappy about it," said Carline. "You needn't tell me anything unless you wish, and perhaps I can guess, anyway."

"You couldn't guess that Leone is not my own daughter by birth. My husband found her one

evening under a seat on Brighton Pier—a tiny baby wrapped in rags of clothing! He'd wanted a child very badly, especially a daughter, and we adopted her legally after all sorts of enquiries had been made, although we never found out anything about her parents.

"That was the point, Carline. We don't know who her father was, nor her mother, nor any relations, nor how she came to inherit the tendency to-- "

Emily Burdock broke off despairingly and her eyes filled with tears.

"To tell you the truth, Carline, I didn't want the baby very much to begin with. I was nearly forty then, and I hadn't had any experience with children. I grew fond of her in

time, and my husband worshipped her. She was a pretty child and very sweet in her ways, but the trouble started when she was a little girl. She used to take things and hide them away. She was like a little magpie, especially if she saw anything that was bright and small and glittering. More than once I lost my rings and had to hunt the house for them. Later on, she began to take pennies and sixpences, and in a toyshop she would pick up whatever she fancied and scream when it was taken away from her. Try as we did, we could not make her see the difference between right and wrong.

"Meanwhile, my husband had died and we went to live with Chris and his father. Mr. Bodenay did his very best for Leone and he sent her to good schools, but every now and then the trouble broke out again. She was expelled from Fairlawns, and always after that I was afraid of meeting people who knew. Do you remember my asking you, Carline, whether you had met Leone at school?"

"Don't tell me anymore, dear Mrs. Burdock, if it hurts you to talk about it," said Carline. "I—I understand."

"You don't understand everything, I'm sure. In the end Leone had to go to a very different kind of school—for eighteen months. She was caught taking things from shops, and it wasn't the first time.

That was while Chris was overseas. Fortunately she was home again before he came back to the Terrace.

"There was another thing, too, Carline. I'd better be straight about it now. Leone had developed a liking for—for taking a little more drink than was good for her. She used to help herself until Chris determined to stop her. You must have noticed everything like that was kept locked up. He didn't like doing it, but ...

Mrs. Burdock opened her hands in a pitiful little gesture.

"Chris is very fond of her, Carline."

"Of course he is," said Carline, and she sat thinking over the story. She thought of the poor baby whose mother had abandoned her on Brighton Pier. Maybe it wasn't fair to blame Leone for her misfortunes.

"Did you ever tell Leone that you had adopted her?" she enquired.

"My husband told her when she was four years old. He made it sound like a fairy story, and he told her exactly how he had found her. Personally I think that was a mistake, because years after I

discovered Leone fancied that her mother had meant to throw her into the sea and drown her. She was haunted by the fear of being drowned, and yet water seemed to fascinate her. And you see what happened."

Carline suddenly remembered the woman in grey.

"That woman who called—Miss Grey her name was," she said. "Was she, by any chance, a probation officer?"

Mrs. Burdock nodded.

"She used to call at intervals and was really very kind, but Leone was terrified of her. That evening, you know, she saw her coming from the window and told Veller to say she was away from home. Chris was cross with Leone about it, and when she began to cry, he went off into the garden and wouldn't say a word to her, which was very unusual for him."

Carline looked concerned.

"I slipped a note under Leone's door to give her the message that Miss Grey was coming back in the morning," she said. "I hope it wasn't that which made Leone do what she did do."

"You couldn't be blamed," said Mrs. Burdock. "By the way, Carline, would you like Mrs. Veller to pack your things, and then Aldin can put them in his car for you to take home?"

"That would be most kind," said Carline.

"I suppose she had better pack everything," went on Mrs. Burdock. "Much as I hate to say it, you realize that it wouldn't be possible for you to come back to live at the Terrace—under the changed circumstances."

Carline did realize it. She said so, in a voice which sounded to herself like a cracked bell, but Mrs. Burdock seemed to notice nothing unusual. She told Carline that Chris had done everything in his power to make things right for Leone. He had returned the handbag and its contents to the people who had given Leone the lift in their car, and he had seen Mr. Fantome personally about the black dress.

"Chris asked me to give you this," she said, handing Carline an envelope which proved to contain a cheque for ten pounds.

Carline turned pale—with sheer fury. All the time Mrs. Burdock had been talking her anger had been mounting against Christopher. Why hadn't he had the decency to come to see her himself, after their close friendship, instead of obliging poor Emily to make all the painful revelations? At least he could have written to her, she thought, forgetting that Sir Charles had forbidden her to have letters.

And now he was trying to pay her off—like the rest of Leone's creditors!

She tore the cheque into four pieces, replaced them in the envelope and handed it back to Mrs. Burdock, who put it in her handbag without a protest, and rose to make her farewells.

"I've tired you, dear," she said. "I'm sorry if I've stayed too long."

She moved towards the door.

"Don't think any more about Leone," she said. "She has a very good husband, and they are very much in love with each other."

She gave a little chuckle.

"I hope you are going to be happy, too, Carline," she said. "Aldin will give me news of you."

She ran back to kiss Carline, although they were not in the habit of kissing. Carline could not fail to understand her meaning, coupled with her mention of Aldin. There was no doubt that Mrs. Burdock regarded their engagement as a near-future certainty.

CHAPTER TEN

OTHER people shared Mrs. Burdock's anticipations. Interested friends in Hilltown saw Carline arrive home in Aldin's car, and confirmed their conclusions when the same far from unnoticeable crimson-topped car was seen winding up the hill road on the following Friday evening and then again on the Friday after that. Interested friends called to enquire after Carline's health or, meeting her in the town, paused to engage her in conversation and assure themselves that there was, as yet, no adornment to the third finger of her left hand.

Carline's mother shared the glow of romantic anticipation, but her father, as usual, kept his feet firmly upon the ground.

"I had a talk with Aldin in the garden last Sunday," he said when he and Carline were walking together on the hills.

"What were you discussing?" Carline spoke airily. "Marrows or Brussels sprouts?"

"We were talking about finances," said her father. "Aldin talks like a business magnate, but I have an idea that he isn't so financially sound as appearances lead one to suppose."

"Daddy, you old money-grubber !" Carline laughed. "He has a very good position and, anyway, money isn't the main thing in life."

She didn't think it fair to tell her father that she fancied Aldin might have had to turn some awkward financial corners since the meeting in Christopher's room which had so upset his temper. She had gathered in roundabout ways that Aldin had been drawing too much money from the family firm, and she could well believe that his expenses touched sky high. Probably Uncle Ben and Christopher had insisted upon economies, and it looked as if Aldin

had been compelled to toe the line. Mrs. Burdock had told her that the business was now doing well, and that Chris seemed easy in his mind about it.

"Don't let yourself be rushed into anything," her father counselled. "You haven't quite recovered yet, you know."

"But I have recovered," Carline protested. "I'm perfectly well. I could go back to work tomorrow if that silly old Sir C. hadn't said I was to have six weeks—not that I don't like being at home."

She gazed away at the hillside, pink with foxgloves, glowing in the sunshine. She couldn't tell her father that the only trouble from which she had not recovered was the ache in her heart for Chris. She still thought of Chris continually. It was wrong of her, she knew, but she could not cure herself. She was trying to play fair with Aldin, too. Time and again, she had tried to show Aldin that which it was impossible to tell him in plain words until he told her.

On the following Saturday evening, he did tell her, but he didn't use plain words. He took her in his arms and kissed her hair, and then her cheek, and he would have kissed her lips if she had not turned her face away and resisted him with such finality that he knew, without any words, plain or fanciful, that Carline was not for him.

Of course they did have words. They had a long conversation next morning, in Aldin's car. He never could see the sense of climbing hills on foot when you could reach a number of vantage points, easily and comfortably, by driving along the side roads. And he had a great deal to say about other vantage points in life which he might have reached, with Carline at his side.

Aldin did not play the rejected suitor, and Carline's parents could not have guessed from his manner when he drove away that afternoon that he had no intention of returning. It was not until the following Friday that they tumbled to the situation, and were tactful enough to maintain the discreet silence all good parents have to practise on occasions.

When, on Sunday morning, Carline announced her intention of taking sandwiches and going off by herself for a long walk on the hills, her mother merely said she thought the mist would soon clear and it was likely to be a very warm day, therefore she would postpone the cooking of the chicken until the evening.

"So that I shan't get out of helping," said Carline merrily, knowing well that her mother was postponing their customary midday Sunday dinner so that she herself would not miss the main meal of the day.

She set out at a smart pace, swiftly surmounting the stiff slope that led to a grassy path which eased the ascent to a wide higher path which ran round the upper part of the North Hill. Few people troubled to leave this upper path to climb higher, as Carline did this morning, setting her footsteps in the deep furrow of the Red Earl's boundary, an ancient earthwork raised by a powerful noble in days long past to mark the limit of his territory, and then turning aside for the final climb up the grassy slopes that led to the top of the hill.

There was no ascent in this gentle chain of hills that could be classed as mountaineering, but the climb was steep enough to satisfy Carline's need to ease her troubles in physical exertion. She walked in the solitude of a thin white mist with a glint of sunlight somewhere above it, silvering the sheen of the spiders' webs on the gorse bushes and pricking the dew on the bracken into sparkling drops of diamond.

As she walked she planned. The purpose of her walking was, in fact, to plan out her return to London, with no thought of Chris. She must rid her mind of Chris—she told herself emphatically that she wasn't going to spoil the beauty of living for love of a man who had never loved her and was now happily married to the girl he adored. The sensible solution of her problem, therefore, was to fill her life with other interests, so many absorbing interests that it wouldn't be possible to waste a moment in foolish languishment.

The sun came out as she reached the summit, beguiling her to pause and rest and not immediately to carry out her intention to patrol the crest of the hills, from highest point to highest point with all the dips in between. She sat down upon the turf, casting off her white cardigan, and began to formulate her ideas.

Her starting-point was to be Hampstead. Miss Angela lived in Hampstead, and had offered very kindly to let Carline occupy the spare room in her flat until she settled herself elsewhere. Therefore Carline proposed to hunt for rooms in Hampstead, a safe and sufficient distance from Chelsea. She would be resuming her work at the River Hospital, and she warned herself that there must be no more walks by the river; whereupon she was so acutely reminded of that last terrible occasion when she had walked down to the river that she had to lie on her back and restore herself by watching the blue of the sky, now almost cloudless.

Her evenings must be fully occupied, she determined. She expected to be back in town by the middle of September, exactly the right time to enrol for classes in Italian. She thought of joining a choral society also. Usually they had vacancies for contraltos, and she could keep a part tolerably. Then it occurred to her that it might be better to offer her services to sing in a church choir. That would be service indeed, with the advantage that it not only occupied a weekday practice evening but the best part of Sunday as well. Sunday was a day when a girl who lived by herself in a bed-sitter might be in danger of remembering things which were best forgotten.

Carline thought she could fill in yet another evening. Country dancing, perhaps, or lectures on the history of London. This last thought was disastrous, for it immediately set her dreaming of an evening when she and Chris had discussed the history of Chelsea; that same evening when she had nearly fainted and he had been so kind as to put his arm about her until she came to her senses.

She came to her senses now and jerked herself into a sitting position to dispel the dream. It was then that she saw Chris coming towards her round the side of the hill. He was walking swiftly, striding in fact, and mounting the hill as easily as if it had been a level road. He quickened his pace when he saw her, and waved his hand and smiled. Carline jumped to her feet as he came up to her, and they stood and faced each other, there on the hill-top, with the larks singing overhead.

"Chris, how did you get here?" said Carline incredulously.

"By car and on foot. I drove down from London yesterday evening and put up at an hotel in the town. It was too late to call upon you then."

He smiled. They were both smiling, and could not stop smiling, in fact.

"I worked it out that I couldn't in decency call at your house before ten o'clock on a Sunday morning. I missed you by a few minutes, and your mother told me you might be anywhere on the hills and there wasn't too good a chance of finding you. But your father advised me to make for the Red Earl's boundary and then strike upwards.

Heaven bless the Red Earl, say I!"

"But it's very steep there. It's steep most of the way. How did you manage it, Chris? You seem to me to walk perfectly, as if you had never had anything wrong with you at all. What's happened to you?"

"Would you like to sit down and I'll tell you."

She accepted his invitation, her trained eye noticing the ease with which he cast himself upon the ground, facing her but at a little distance. Christopher's eyes were occupied also, looking at her face and her dark hair, a little wind-tossed. His gaze slowly travelled to her dress and her bare, golden-brown ankles and the fiat, white sandals on her feet.

"Your father told me you were wearing a blue dress. He didn't mention that it was bluebell blue, the color of the flowers on your hills."

"We call them harebells," said Carline shyly. "And it's a terribly old dress, I'm afraid. Come on, Chris, tell me how the miracle happened."

"It was going in the water, Carline, that night by the river. I had to swim for my life, you know. It seems that swimming did the trick for me—when I went to see Mr. Braive he said I'd better go on with it, so I've been visiting the baths regularly. He told me that the water was a recognized treatment in your line of business."

Carline nodded. "It's called hydrotherapy. Physios can take a special training in the methods."

He had spoken of swimming for his life, she was thinking, but it hadn't been his own life he was swimming for, but Leone's life.

"Chris," she said. "Nobody has told me exactly what happened when you were in the river. Wasn't it very frightening, all in the dark?"

"There were lights about and there wasn't time to be frightened," he said. "It was a near go for Leone. Did you know, Carline, that she'd weighted herself by running a leather belt through the handles of Mrs. Veller's old flat-irons and fastening it round her waist? She meant to do the job thoroughly, poor little thing. . . ."

He paused expressively.

"They kept her in at the river station, but they lent me some clothes and wished me good morning," he said. "The sergeant offered to get me a taxi, but something came over me and I said I'd walk. And then I discovered that I really could walk. You can't picture the joy of it! It was daylight by then, and marvellously fresh, and of course I knew Leone was going to be all right."

Carline nerved herself to the polite enquiry which courtesy demanded.

"Where is Leone, by the by?" she said lightly. "I daresay she didn't want to do the climb up here. Is she sitting in your car down below or have you left her at the hotel?"

Chris stared at her.

"Leone isn't with me, here in Hilltown," he said. "Carline, surely you heard about the wedding. Didn't Emily tell you?"

"She told me. Chris, I suppose I should congratulate you. I hope you will be very happy."

"Thanks very much." Christopher's lips twitched. "Did Emily happen to mention the name of the bridegroom? Is it possible you don't know that Leone is married to Yoichim? He was always crazy about her. They live in Highgate, in his large and commodious flat which also accommodates Emily. So I'm left alone in bachelor solitude at the Terrace. The Vellers have the basement to themselves, and I've moved up into your rooms."

Carline looked at him in a dazed manner. Chris was smiling because he didn't want her to sympathize with him over losing his love. Because it was so difficult to stop herself from smiling back at him, she turned her head away from him and gazed down at the woods and fields, enchanted now and shimmering in the sunshine.

"What a clot I am!" Christopher's voice was concerned. "Here have I been forking on about my own affairs and not a word about you. Carline, are you really better? I shouldn't have been walking home so blithely on that morning I told you about if I'd known then what had happened to you. Please, do tell me how you are."

"I'm perfectly well and bursting with energy," said Carline. "I intended to stay on the hills all day and walk it off."

"Let's walk now," said Chris. "The air's wonderful. I don't wonder you raved about your hills."

She let him rise first because she wanted to see how easily he did it. And when he held out his hand to assist her, she pretended not to see it. It wouldn't do to touch his hand, not if she was to keep up the air of cool detachment which the occasion demanded.

They went along in silence. Presumably he had noticed her omission, for when they came down to a steep, short, earthy bank that had to be descended

before they stepped on to the wide path, he put his hand under her elbow and spoke peremptorily. "You'll allow this, Carline."

It was a statement, not a query, therefore she made no reply. Anyway, he was talking. He talked in a voice which she had never heard before, and he still held her arm, rather more closely.

"I was frantic when I heard you were hurt so badly," he said. "I knew you wouldn't have raced across the Embankment road if you hadn't been trying to help me. You did it for me—at least, for Leone and me." He corrected himself hastily.

"It was frightful not being able to do a thing for you, never to see you, not even to write to you. I did write you a letter once, but I tore it up and just sent flowers. I was afraid some nurse might open the letter if you asked who it came from."

"They kept the letters and cards for me, and I've been going through them here at home and writing to people to thank them. Did you really send me some flowers, Chris? What were they?"

"Only Canterbury bells the first time. I knew you'd have lots of grand flowers, so I asked the florist to find me something homely. I don't suppose they lasted long."

"They were lovely and I liked them especially. Thank you now, and I'm sorry I couldn't thank you before. It sounds very much as if you were kind enough to send me flowers twice. Did you, Chris?"

"I didn't send the second lot, I brought them. Naturally I'd been into the hospital several times to enquire after you—it was the only way I could get any news of you. Then, one morning, Aldin came into my office all cock-a-hoop and said he'd seen you, so I thought presumably you could see other people, and I nipped round to the hospital that afternoon, but I wasn't lucky. It was an Irish nurse I saw that time—a girl with great googly eyes."

So it was Chris who had brought those wonderful dark red roses. Carline hoped Nurse Doyle had not favoured him with her interpretation of the meaning of red roses.

"Carline, I found it hard to endure," Chris complained. "Sending me away that day when you had been well enough to see Aldin. And then tearing up my cheque and sending it back in four pieces. Didn't you understand that I was trying to clear things up for Leone?"

Leone again, thought Carline. It was because of Leone that he had come to the hospital to see her.

"It hasn't been easy trying to make wrong right—for Leone," said Chris. "I made her tell me every single thing. She handed over a gold chain purse, by the by, and told me how she came by it. Fortunately I was able to get the address of the lady it belonged to at the theatre box office. I called on her. I was shown into one of those drawing-rooms that go back about fifty years, and then she appeared, looking old and pathetic. I was half afraid she was going to dial nine-nine-nine when I made my explanation, but she took my word for it in the end and nearly cried for joy to have her treasure back again." Carline made no comment. It was clear to her that his mind was still running on Leone and would continue to run on Leone till the end of his days. He seemed to have forgotten the one conclusive fact which proved that he loved Leone. What about the ring—that wonderful opal ring that he had wanted her to bring home to England—to Leone?

"I wish you'd let me give you the money you lost over that dress, Carline," he went on. "It would clear the score for Leone, and she's promised Yoichim she'll go straight now, for always. I've some hopes she'll keep her promise. She—she loves him, you see. And she isn't entirely to blame—I've always known it was an inherited tendency. Do you remember slipping on the stairs that evening when we were going to the ball?"

Carline said, "Yes, I remember." Apparently, he himself did not remember the insignificant fact that she had slipped from the stairs straight into his arms.

"Leone had pulled up the stair carpet. I'm sure she didn't wish you to hurt yourself seriously, but she

admitted she felt she must stop you from going to the ball. She had only just heard that, Miss Smith was to be there, unexpectedly, and she knew she was bound to spot the dress. The poor child was in a panic."

The poor child! Christopher spoke the words with a lingering, melancholy tenderness. Would he never be done with speaking of Leone? Carline withdrew her arm from his clasp, and they walked along in silence until they came to a seat. Here Chris paused. "I have something to tell you," he said, as if he had not already told her enough, much more than enough. "Shall we sit down?"

It was one of the old hill seats, no more than a plank of wood fixed upon two supports, polished and then re-polished a thousand times by the hill lovers who had rested there to enjoy the view. The seat was set in a niche cut from the hill and shored up by a stone wall. This protected users from the wind and it also gave them the pleasant sensation of being in a small, private hill room of their own.

"Aldin rang me up at tea-time yesterday," Chris began conversationally. "He wanted me to go down to Richmond with him, for a cocktail party."

"Did you go?" asked Carline.

"Not likely," said Christopher. "It came to me on the instant that if Aldin was going to a party at Richmond, he wasn't here in Hilltown with you. I've practised going up the stairs at the Terrace often enough, Carline, as you know, but I don't think I've ever done it faster than yesterday. I flung some things into a bag, and I put the bag and myself into the car and here I am. I came because I wanted a piece of information from you."

It was evident that he wished her to ask him what the information was, but she did not oblige him.

"I wanted to know—Carline, it may be frightful cheek on my part, but I wanted to know if you'd made up your mind to marry Aldin. Everyone says it's a certainty, but he hadn't said a word to me and I—I wondered. . ."

"I made up my mind last weekend," said Carline.

"Did you?"

The dejection in his voice made her turn to look at him.

"I couldn't marry him, Chris," she said. "I like Aldin. I like him immensely, but I couldn't love him."

"Would I do instead?" said Chris quickly.

"I'd prefer you not to joke about it."

Carline tried to smile and had to turn her head away because the smile was not very successful. The next moment, Chris was close beside her, casting his arms about her, his lips upon her hair and his voice speaking into her ear.

"Do you think this is a joke?" he muttered, and tightened his clasp and held her closely, almost fiercely. "I owe you everything that makes life worth living. I'm not at all sure that I don't owe you my life itself."

Carline stiffened herself. Chris was still straightening the debt side of his ledger, she thought. Not content with offering her the ten pounds for the dress, he was now offering her, as in duty bound, that which remained of himself, after Leone, in return for her services as a physiotherapist.

She shook her head, very slightly. Chris released her instantly, and moved himself away from her and sat watching her intently. Carline did not want to be watched. The touch of his lips on her hair and the clasp of his arms had stirred her profoundly. She did not know how she had resisted the temptation to cast reason aside and melt into his arms.

Presently he spoke again, tenderly.

"Such beautiful eyes," he said. "Such lashes to dream upon. It's a pity those wonderful lashes should have to carry tears. What's the great grief, Carline? Couldn't you tell me?"

He waited.

"Tell me," he said again. "Tell me, darling. . . ."

"It's Leone," she said at last. "Mrs. Burdock told me how things were between you and I saw—I

saw with my own eyes, time and time again. I saw your ring on her finger, before the ball."

"Carline, I'm obliged to tell you that Leone took the ring from my desk. She was listening outside that evening when I told you where it was. I have it back again now. That was the evening when I told you I had made my will, in your favor. I thought I'd given myself away completely then. When I said I had left my money to the girl I loved, I was sure you knew I meant you and that you wouldn't let me say any more because you wanted to let me down lightly, and didn't want to tell me that there wasn't any hope for me, because of Aldin. I wanted to be sure you were all right for money if anything happened to me, even if you did marry Aldin."

Carline turned her head and looked at him.

"When you were as you were when I first knew you, on the island, your only thought was to send the ring home to Leone," she said. "I can't believe you've finished with loving Leone."

"Carline," he said very gently. "I couldn't be finished with a thing I never began. I never loved Leone. Years ago, some silly story got around that there was something between me and Leone, but if Emily gave you the impression there was anything in it, she was greatly mistaken. I don't want to say anything hard about Emily because she's had a tough time. And Leone always was given to—to demonstrations of affection. I found that a bit tiresome at times.

"As for the ring, Leone had plagued my father, often, to give her the ring, but he wouldn't do so, because it came down from my great-grandmother and he had given it to my mother for her engagement ring. My father handed it over to me to keep, and Leone made such a gefuffle that before I went overseas I promised her it should be hers if I never married, meaning of course if I never came home. That day you came along the hospital ward, on the island, I was convinced that I never should come home, so I asked you to take the ring to Leone. I

should never have taken the thing out of England—it was mere family sentiment that made me do so."

Christopher put his hand into the inside pocket of his coat.

"Do you remember what you said to me that day in hospital, Carline? You said I ought to bring the ring home myself, and put it on the finger of the girl I loved. Please, may I do just that?"

He took her left hand and bent his head and set his lips to it. The next moment the opal ring was on her finger, and the moment after that she was in his arms and he was kissing her as if life had just begun.

Far down the valley, sometime later, a clock chimed the quarters and then the hour. It was one o'clock.

"That's the church, isn't it?" said Christopher, looking down the hill to the spreading town and the square grey tower that showed among the trees. "I went there this morning, early," he added to Carline's surprise.

"Then you saw our heavenly painted glass windows?"

"I'd hoped to see you."

"I was at the little church on the other side of the hill."

"I knew you'd be in church somewhere. Do you think I don't know where you always went to, Carline, when you never could breakfast until a quarter to nine on Sundays at the Terrace?" He paused expressively. "Will you like living in my house again, Carline?"

"I fancy I shall."

Carline hugged to herself the vision of herself and Chris sharing every meal together, sharing that lovely dinner table in that lovely, lovely room, in that loveliest of all houses. Meanwhile they shared her sandwiches, and she told him how she had walked up the hill this morning.

"I wanted to get to the top of the hill so that I could think more clearly. I was planning what I

could do to try to forget you. I thought of learning Italian, for one thing."

"So that you could read Dante in the original," Chris rejoined. "Did you notice that I had the audacity to underline a certain quotation in your prize copy of Dante?"

Carline said the words:

"Follow but thy star, thou cant not miss at last a glorious haven. . . ."

"Where you are is the haven, of course," he said. "It means something else, Chris."

"All that, too."

Chris waved his arm in a gesture that took in the sky and the hills, and then brought his hand down upon her hand, and held it and looked into her eyes and worshipped her with his own eyes.

"I thought of the star as the pole star, the guiding star, the lode star. Miss Lode, in fact.

It was she who piloted me out of the depths and very, very nearly into my haven.

Carline, I look upon you as practically perfect. There is only one thing in you which I should like to change."

"What is that?" enquired Carline, a little startled.

"A change in your surname would be infinitely desirable," he explained. "Carline, when? How soon? Dear, darling, dearest beloved, how quickly can it be?"

THE END