



Mills & Boon

PENNY PLAIN

Sara Seale



Penny Plain by Sara Seale

Emma Penelope Clay was only twenty, and inexperienced in most things except the care of the pedigree Alsatians in whose world she had been brought up — and it might have seemed like leading a lamb to the slaughter when she went to work at the Kennels of the rich, spoilt Marian Mills. But there was an unexpected streak of firmness in Emma's character, which at least helped her to hold her own with her imperious employer, But the vet, Max Grainger, was a different kettle of fish indeed. Nothing in Emma's limited experience had taught her how to regard his enigmatical attentions — and when Miss Mills sharply ordered her not to get ideas about 'her' property, Emma had not enough self-confidence to disobey. But Max Grainger had not yet had the last word...

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All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE dog was sniffing about in the gutter, snatching at any morsel which might prove edible, and Emma watched it with a fellow-feeling. She, too, was hungry and, since the post she had applied for was already filled, was likely to remain so until she returned to Miss Hollis's sketchy fare in the evening. It was unkind of fate to dangle such bounty under her nose only to make it impossible to come true. It would have been pleasant and somehow right, she thought as she waited for the Chode bus, to return to the half-remembered background of her childhood. Plovers Green, in this empty hour of noon, appeared still unspoilt with its pollarded trees lining pavements of herringboned brick, the green where cricket was played in summer, and church and public house rubbing shoulders as they had for two centuries. Somewhere beyond the village must lie the old farmhouse where Emma had been born, too long ago to remember where, too long ago, she supposed, to claim anything more than a faint nostalgia for scenes described rather than remembered.

Even so, that advertisement for a kennelmaid coming at a moment when she was obliged to change her job had drawn her irresistibly, and although she had not particularly wanted to work with poodles, since the breed she knew and understood

were Alsatians, locality had overruled preference. But even as she stood in the July sunshine, regretting her lost opportunity, and watching the scavenging dog, a car roared suddenly round a bend in the road, and the dog, lost its head and made a bolt for the opposite pavement.

Emma reacted instinctively without thought for

senseless folly and flung herself after the panicking mongrel in a futile attempt to snatch it back to safety and, as the car stopped with a screech of brakes, one of the wings caught her on the shoulder, throwing her into the road. She sat in the dust, dazed but undamaged. From where she sat the driver of the car looked immensely tall, not to say threatening; almost black hair and a beaky nose combined to give his face a predatory air, while a pair of light blue eyes expressed such an icy fury that she expected to be picked up and violently shaken any minute.

'What the hell do you imagine you're playing at, leaping under my wheels without any warning?' he demanded furiously. 'Do you have to pick the one moment when the road isn't clear to cross it?'

'I wasn't crossing it. Didn't you see the dog?' she protested indignantly.

'Of course I saw the dog. It's an institution here and was away on the other side before I'd even put a foot on the brake. If you had managed to check the brute you'd probably have succeeded in killing it. Are you hurt?'

The question came as such an afterthought that Emma felt her own temper rising.

'You were driving much too fast and might well have killed me,' she stated firmly.

'I was strictly within the thirty-mile limit, and if I'd killed you you would only have had yourself to thank. You haven't answered my question.'

'What question?'

'Whether or not you're hurt, of course.'

She felt her shoulder gingerly.

'I — I d-don't think so.'

'Then why are you still sitting there?'

His lack of concern backed by that unmerited air of censure seemed the final straw.

'Anyone else would at least have been sufficiently concerned to help me up!' she retorted, trying to keep a sudden quaver out of her voice. She was not seriously hurt, but her shoulder was beginning to throb, and shock and fright combined to make her feel suddenly tearful.

The corners of his uncompromising mouth began to twitch in a smile, and he stooped down to give her a supporting hand and felt her wince as her shoulder took the strain.

'Caught your shoulder, didn't I? Let's have a look,' he said more gently, and the change in his manner caused the unwelcome lump in her throat to grow alarmingly. It would be the final ignominy, she reflected, to burst into tears on a stranger's chest in the middle of the village street. He had, however, no intention of encouraging any female weakness, for, having expertly pressed and prodded, he snapped out briskly:

'You'll have the whale of a bruise, most likely, but there's no bone damage, so pull yourself together and save the tears for another time. Can I give you a lift anywhere, or is your home in the village?'

'I don't live here. I was just k-killing time until my train goes,' she said, and although his astringency had successfully stemmed the threatening tears, there was a forlorn note in her voice which made him look at her more closely.

'H'm ... you could do with a drink or something,' he observed. 'I'll take you across to the pub over there.'

'Please don't trouble. I'll get something at the station,' she replied, hoping she sounded distant and assured, but he merely answered that he could do with a drink himself after being put to such an unnecessary strain and ordered her to remain in safety on the pavement while he parked his car, then he crossed the

empty street and firmly marshalled her across.

In the little bar parlour, hung with horse-brasses and sporting prints, he sat her down at a corner table and went to order the drinks without enquiring for her preference, and she watched him leaning on the counter exchanging pleasantries with the landlord who had addressed him by a name she could not catch and clearly knew him well. He came back with a small glass of brandy for her and beer for himself, and settled down opposite her, stretching his long legs under the table.

'Now,' he said, 'drink that slowly, and tell me, as a matter of interest, what you're doing in peaceful Plovers Green, killing time before your train leaves by hurling yourself to destruction after strange dogs.'

He spoke as briskly as ever, but there was a hint of humorous kindness in his eyes which encouraged her to talk with a freedom which, considering first impressions, surprised her.

'I'd come after a job as kennelmaid, only the place was already filled, so I suppose it was second nature to try to save that dog which probably knows its way about better than I do,' she told him. 'It was especially disappointing to me, you see, because years ago my father had his kennels in these parts and I was born here.'

'Your father was a breeder?'

'Yes, of Alsatians. His kennels were famous at one time and his affix world-renowned. I'm Emma Penelope Clay, though that won't mean anything to you.'

'Oh, but it does,' he contradicted her mildly. 'The Claymore Kennels, wasn't it? So you're Clay's daughter,' he said. 'How do you come to be earning your living as a kennelmaid?'

He spoke, she thought, with the layman's usual

amused tolerance for work that might better be listed as a hobby, and answered gravely:

'It's the only way I know, and I love dogs — Shepherds in particular. Kennelmaiding isn't really just a hobby, you know — we work hard for our money.'

'And are you a good handler, Miss Clay?'

Her sense of ease vanished as she fancied a hint of ridicule in his voice. What should he know about such an art, of the skill required to present a dog with all its virtues displayed and its faults disguised?

'Yes,' she answered simply. 'My father trained me from a child and there was little he didn't know about correct presentation.'

'That was a perfectly serious question,' he said. 'I happen to know of another job going in these parts that might suit you if your claim is justified.'

As she leaned eagerly forward on the settle, her annoyance forgotten, a faint colour stained her sharp cheekbones, momentarily obliterating the negative qualities of pale skin and mouse-brown hair so that he spared a second surprised glance. He had found her at once refreshing and a little absurd, but not until now had he thought her in any way noteworthy except for a rather disturbing pair of eyes which seemed to possess the wondering, unblinking gaze of a very young child.

She was already pouring out a flood of questions, her animosity forgotten, and he answered briefly and succinctly. A young client of his had recently come from the

Midlands to live here, he told her, and was building up a kennel of Alsations, no expense spared since money was no object and only the best were kept. She was, he said, already winning well with her foundation stock and had a breeding schedule worked out, but her head girl had left suddenly and since she herself was still a comparative novice, she needed a kennel-

maid with more experience than the average junior.

'I must warn you that she's the only child of a doting parent, self-made and a stickler for his money's worth, with nothing to do in his retirement but back his daughter's numerous fancies,' he finished, humourously, 'but if you can stomach a rather stinking excess of wealth and an occasional childish tantrum, you should find yourself in clover.'

'Who is she?' Emma asked, puzzled by the note in his voice.

'Her name is Marian Mills, and she's extremely pretty and extremely shrewd when it comes to assessing what she wants. She's also extremely rich.'

'Oh!'

'You know her?'

'No, but I know of her. She's been buying up every champion she can lay hands on.'

'I take it you don't approve,' the stranger said, observing the frown which that juvenile fringe of hers could not quite hide. 'Well, I suppose it's inevitable there should be jealousy when a pretty newcomer walks off with the prizes and most of the glory.'

'It's easy enough to win when you own some of the pick of the breed,' said Emma sharply. 'Even so, there's more to showing and success than a limitless purse.'

'So true, of course. You will doubtless be very good for my poor misguided little friend, should you agree to take her in hand,' he replied, and now she knew he was laughing at her.

'She may not want to employ me,' she demurred a little stiffly, and wondered if he himself might not have an eye on the rich Miss Mills's well-gilded charms.

One eyebrow rose again, a trick he seemed to adopt when refusing to be drawn.

'That you'll have to find out for yourself, if you're sufficiently interested, won't you?' he retorted. 'I should have explained, incidentally, that the latest idea is to employ a kennelmaid-cum-companion, so the choice is somewhat narrowed.'

'Live as family, you mean?'

'Oh, definitely — and share and share alike, so I understand. Miss Mills is nothing if not wholehearted in whatever she undertakes. A cushy job, I would have said, in these hard times.'

'I don't know,' she said slowly. 'Living as family has its drawbacks — I've tried it.'

'What hasn't? But comfort and an equal status has its compensations, I imagine.'

She began to feel angry again.

'Kennelmaids come from all walks of life these days,' she told him somewhat tartly.

'The fact that they can still be regarded as staff doesn't put them on a lower scale.'

'My dear young lady, what a preposterous statement!' he observed. 'I hadn't supposed you to be a snob.'

'Me — a snob?' she exclaimed, stung to the point of rudeness. 'It was you with all this condescending talk of an equal status who were being old-fashioned, not to say downright snooty!'

'How old are you?' he asked suddenly as if he was already making allowance for youthful indiscretion, and when she answered a shade defensively that she was nearly

twenty with two years of kennel experience behind her, he merely nodded absently, then glanced at his watch.

'I must be off, I'm already late for my next appointment,' he said briskly, and dug about in the pockets of his jacket for a well-worn notebook from which he tore out a page. 'I'll scribble a few lines of

introduction, and write the address on the back, in case you're interested.'

He was scribbling as he spoke, folded the paper double and printed an address, then anchored it down with his empty mug and got to his feet.

She barely had time to thank him both for the drink and for the offer of a job before he was gone without even troubling to introduce himself. Anyone else, she thought, would surely have evinced some interest as to the outcome of his suggestion, but of course he would hear in time from the charming Miss Mills, so it was hardly surprising that he hadn't asked to be kept informed.

The little she knew of Marian Mills's impact on the dog world had not disposed her towards charity, but it was true, of course, that envy could flourish there as well as in any other walk of life. 'Who knows?' Emma told herself brightly, 'this may be the prelude to a beautiful friendship, and who am I to despise crumbs from the rich man's table?'

But she did not feel quite so flippant when the bus dropped her off at a pair of ornately scrolled gates an hour later. Armina Court was as pretentious as its fancy-sounding name and put you in your place at once, she thought as she walked down the long, impressive drive with its meticulously tended verges and no blade of grass or straying weed or pebble to mar its smooth perfection.

The drive terminated in an arrogant sweep round spacious lawns and shrubberies to a heavily-porticoed front door, but the house restored her nerve, for it was frankly hideous, with turrets and gables sprouting from every conceivable angle, bright red brick unmellowed by time, and its design a rich confusion of architectural blunders. It was exactly the sort of house

that a man of acquired wealth would buy in his retirement, and pay through the nose for, she thought a little scornfully, then immediately felt abashed remembering her late host's chastening remarks about snobs. As she hesitated on the front steps, she became aware of an elderly man sitting in the sun on the terrace watching her from under the brim of an ancient hat tipped over his nose.

'There's no one home,' he observed when he realized she had seen him.

'Oh,' said Emma, taking an uncertain step towards him. He looked very comfortable with his shirt unbuttoned and his braces dangling, and she wondered if he was a guest annoyed at being disturbed when he had the place to himself.

'Could you tell me when they're likely to be back?' she asked politely. 'I'm only here for the day, you see.'

'Too bad,' he grunted. 'Didn't my daughter know you were coming?'

'Your daughter? Are you Mr. Mills, then?'

'Who did you think I was, any road? Marian been spinning you the yarn that I'm the old family retainer?'

'Of course not. I — I don't know your daughter.'

'You don't? Then what are you doing here? If you're selling something you're wasting your time.'

Emma suddenly wanted to giggle, for the whole conversation seemed so unlikely, but she made a great effort to speak with firmness and assurance and said very clearly:

'I'm not selling anything in that sense, only myself, or rather my services.'

That did seem to rouse him, for he pushed his hat to the back of his head, exclaiming: 'God bless my soul, girl, Who the hell are you and

what new trick are you trying to pull on me?'

'Really, Mr. Mills, you're making it very difficult for me,' Emma replied, and could not quite keep the laughter out of her voice. 'I'm not trying to put a fast one over, I've simply come after the job.'

'Oh, you're one of these doggy folk — that explains it,' he said, sounding relieved.

'Is the post filled?' she asked, suddenly aware that despite earlier misgivings she would be very upset by a second disappointment.

'Not that I've heard, but then my daughter likely wouldn't bother to tell me if she's fixed up. Come over here and let's have a look at you,' Mr. Mills replied, and Emma stepped carefully over a well-dragooned flower bed and on to a terrace dotted with monstrous urns.

On closer inspection Mr. Mills appeared to be a stocky little man running to fat with a pugnacious jaw and surprisingly mild blue eyes. He looked as though he had omitted to shave that morning and his clothes had been selected for age and comfort rather than elegance.

'Come and sit down beside me and let's have a chat. You'll excuse me not getting up, but if I do my trousers may fall off,' he said, and this time she laughed unrestrainedly, suddenly liking him very much.

'Don't worry about the politenesses, Mr. Mills. I know that feeling of release when one's waistband has grown too tight,' she said, sitting down contentedly in the vacant garden chair.

'Do you?' he said, eyeing her slender waist with some doubt. 'Any road, I can see you're the right sort — not like some of those other young misses we've had here, either giving themselves airs or out for what they could get with as little work as they could

put in. My girl isn't all that clever at picking, I reckon. How come you've taken up this sort of fancy trade, Miss — Miss—?'

'Emma Clay. I just like dogs, I suppose — besides, I was reared in the business until my father died. I haven't much talent for anything else,' she replied, but her name clearly meant nothing to him, and he looked a little sceptical.

'H'm ... you don't look to have the build for what seems to be expected of these girls,' he observed. 'Are you sure you're strong enough? Your face has a peaky look to me.'

'I'm strong enough. The thin ones are usually wiry, you know. Do you expect your daughter back soon, Mr. Mills? I only have an hour or so before my last train goes from Chode.'

'Shouldn't be late back as the under-kennelmaid's a bit of a dimwit, I gather. She's gone into Chode, as it happens, to interview another girl. You prepared to live in?'

'Live in? Oh, you mean as family. That was explained to me, but Miss Mills may not care for the idea when she's met me.'

'Marian will do what I say so long as I go on backing this latest fad of hers. She has a thumping good allowance, but when it comes to paying out fancy prices for the latest champion she has to call on her old dad.'

'It isn't really the best way to build up a kennel, you know, Mr. Mills,' Emma said, unable to resist the urge to instruct. 'I mean, buying in stock which has already reached the top is rather like running before you can walk — besides, half the fun in

showing is bringing out a good one you've bred yourself and fighting your way up the ladder.'

'Is that so?' he said with a certain dryness. 'Well,

I've reckoned that one up for myself, but my daughter thinks I don't know my onions when it all boils down to pedigrees. You dog folk take your hobby mighty seriously, don't you?'

'Well, you see, breeding, and showing too, is a business with a great many of us, for as a hobby it becomes too expensive these days,' she said, and he frowned.

'Maybe that's the reason my girl don't win as often as she should with the top-class stuff she's got. These dog fanciers seem a mighty tough crowd to break into, or maybe my Marian's too smart and pretty for 'em. They're a dowdy lot in all conscience, saving your presence, young lady.'

Emma's sudden smile appeared fleetingly, but she answered soberly enough: 'You needn't spare my feelings, Mr. Mills. Kennelmaids aren't expected to be glamour girls, merely efficient.'

'And are you efficient?'

'Oh, I think so.'

His habitual grunt expressed a faint degree of appreciation, and he eyed her again, wondering what it was about her that puzzled him. She had few pretences to the graces Marian adopted, and, if not particularly plain, was unremarkable except for a pair of rather curious eyes. By his standards, she was much too thin and at first he had taken her for a schoolgirl, but they all looked like children these days, with their short skirts and long, straight hair, and their pale, innocent mouths. Yet there was something about her that merited a second glance, he thought, that nebulous quality, perhaps, that he could vaguely recognize but never quite pin down. Whatever it was, he liked her, and whether she was any damn use with those perishing dogs or not, he thought she would be good for Marian.

'Now, I'm a plain man, Miss — er — Miss Clay, isn't it?' he said, 'and I'll tell you straight I hope you'll give us a trial. I don't take any stock in this show-game nonsense, but if it gives my girl a kick that's okay by me. I can see she's started off on the wrong foot with this crowd, but make no mistake, my daughter's got what it takes and some over to make a go of anything she fancies, and her old dad's behind her. Anyway, here she comes, so you can settle things between you. You state your terms and stick to 'em. I can afford to pay double what you'd get anywhere else, and money talks, you'll agree.' Yes, money talks, thought Emma, remembering the stranger's like remark as she watched a long white saloon take the curve of the drive in an arrogant sweep, and just for a moment she knew envy, not for the ease and opulence which so much money must bring, but for the luxury of being for ever cushioned against the uncertainties of life, for the security of a father who, no matter what your mistakes, would cherish and support.

She got hastily to her feet as the car door slammed shut, remembering she was not here as a guest but to be interviewed, and setting eyes for the first time on the unpopular Miss Mills, felt her reservations slipping away in honest admiration.

CHAPTER TWO

MARIAN was so pretty that her exquisite but rather too elaborate clothes made her at first glance seem expensively artificial all over, but as she stopped in a patch of sunlight to glance enquiringly at the visitor, it became evident that her bright gold hair owed nothing to artifice and her dazzling complexion was entirely her own. Emma, who found her own looks discouraging but unimportant, could well understand why the doubly blessed Miss Mills had been met with reservations.

'No luck in Chode — that girl who wrote was already fixed up with those poodle people,' Marian announced as she reached the terrace. 'Dad, you really are the limit, getting into those frightful old togs as soon as my back's turned! Who's this?'

'The answer to your troubles if I'm not mistaken,' her father replied with a chuckle of male complacency. 'Came after the job by chance, and as far as I'm concerned she's got it.'

'Oh! Did you make an appointment?' asked Marian, taking fresh stock with an appraising eye.

'I'm afraid I didn't see your advertisement, Miss Mills. I don't live here, you see, and it must have been the same poodle job I was after. This will explain, I hope,' Emma replied, and handed over the stranger's note.

'Well, of all things! ' Marian exclaimed when she had read it. 'I never expected our snooty Max to come up with an answer so soon — how long have you known him?'

'I don't know him at all,' said Emma, wondering

what form her chance acquaintance's recommendation had taken.

'Are you really Major Clay's daughter?' Marian was saying with a complete change of tone. 'He's almost legendary, isn't he, and there's Claymore blood in nearly all my pedigrees.'

'Said you'd know the name; didn't mean a thing to me,' her father grunted. 'Now, my girl, if you know what's good for you, you'll settle things right now and won't haggle over terms. I'll leave you girls to settle things between you, and remember, Marian, there's no call to be stingy over salary.'

He winked at Emma, then took himself off into the house, and his daughter pulled a face.

'You mustn't mind Dad,' she said. 'He hasn't a clue about kennel management, but he seems to have taken a fancy to you, which is more than I can say for any of the others.'

'I liked your father immensely. There's no pretence about him,' Emma replied thoughtfully. If Marian was aware of any censure, however, she showed no resentment, but linked a friendly arm with Emma's and offered to show her over the kennels.

'I do hope you'll agree to stop when you've seen how up-to-date we are. Everything's labour-saving, light and heating and fully equipped kitchen and wash-house. The kennels were specially designed and cost the earth, but I don't mind betting we have the best and most modern layout in the whole of Britain.'

It was no idle boast, Emma realized as she was led on a tour of inspection, and she gave herself up to the pleasure of making a fuss of the dogs which, released from their kennels into one of the big grassed runs, raced around Marian. They were obviously fond of her, and their bloom and condition certainly spoke well for the kennel regime; only one,

a quality golden sable, which had caught Emma's eye at once, circled at a distance and refused to come near.

'Who's that?' she asked, falling in love quite suddenly and irrevocably, as she sometimes did, with the sort of dog she could never possess herself.

'Oh, that's Flight of Came. I was done over him. He's got one Certificate and I hoped to make him up, but he's shy, and that's why they sold him, of course.'

'Shyness can sometimes be confused with natural suspicion, or even a change of ownership. He's absolutely gorgeous. Might I try him out on a lead? Sometimes they will go for a stranger, and he's so very beautiful.'

Marian shouted to the young girl who had hovered in the background to bring a lead and chain-choke, then eyed Emma a little patronizingly.

'Don't be surprised if he has you on your back,' she said. 'He's one of the daft sort, and can pull like a train.'

Emma advanced across the grass very slowly and casually, while the dog stood pressed against the chain-link fencing, watching her. His head with its stiffly pointed ears was raised proudly on a neck which flowed faultlessly into a sloping line of withers and croup, and he seemed to her in that moment of natural positioning the very epitome of what the ideal Shepherd should be. Emma advanced, speaking his name softly, and she had the curious feeling that this was her time of testing.

'Good Flight ... good, beautiful boy ...' she coaxed, unconsciously laying her heart at his feet, and whether he sensed the love in her voice or whether he simply knew he was cornered, he made no move while she slipped the chain-choke over his head and

snapped on the lead.

After that she put him through his paces without any trouble, and when she brought him to a final halt, he jumped up gleefully with his paws on her shoulders.

'Well! You certainly seem to know your stuff,' said Marian, sounding torn between satisfaction and annoyance. 'You must have done a lot of handling.'

Not as much as I'd like. Most owners prefer to handle themselves. Here, you take him round — I'd love to have a judge's view of that superb gait.' Emma made the suggestion in all good faith, but she wished she hadn't as she watched the subsequent lamentable display. Marian clearly had no idea of presenting a dog correctly, overstretching in stance by pulling out a hind leg already properly placed, jerking at the lead and losing her temper when the dog consequently crouched on his belly.

The little kennelmaid, who had remained to look on, did not help matters by observing tactlessly that you'd never believe it was the same dog if you hadn't seen for yourself, and Marian flung her the end of the lead and told her sharply to kennel up the dogs again and not to be cheeky. She then turned to Emma, remarking a trifle acidly that one would naturally expect an experienced kennelmaid and the fabulous Major Clay's daughter at that to have learnt a few tricks in the ring and would Emma care to come back to the house and discuss such important matters as references.

When they reached the house, Marian took her into one of the downstairs rooms which she casually said was her office, and certainly no effort had been spared to turn it into a room which would impress clients.

Emma took a deep breath, resisting a temptation to

give vent to a vulgar whistle of amusement, and sat down in the chair that was indicated by an authoritative wave of the hand. Marian herself sat behind the desk,

looking quite out of keeping with her surroundings, and reeled off the usual questions with the unsmiling abruptness she evidently thought suitable to an interview.

'Will you take the job, Miss Clay?' she finished.

Emma did not know why she still hesitated, for it was essential to establish herself somewhere and with the little work that would be entailed here with such a small nucleus made the job seem a rest cure after some she had known.

'I will have to let you know. I can't make a snap decision,' she replied stubbornly, and knew that in any other circumstance she would have accepted hastily before such an advantageous offer could be withdrawn.

'Would it help you to make up your mind if I told you Flight could be yours if you came here?' Marian asked, frankly wheedling, and Emma, who had already got to her feet, stood for a moment, her indecision melting in that familiar yearning for the impossible.

'You really mean you would give him to me?'

'Why not? He shows for you where he won't for me. Of course he would remain in my name so that I'd get the credit for anything he won, but to all intents and purposes he would be yours. What about it?'

'I'll let you know,' Emma repeated, wondering why she still held out, and Marian said sharply:

'Is it the salary? Dad told me not to be stingy. We'll pay anything above the usual rates and then some.'

'I know, and I'm most appreciative; all the same, I'd like to think things over and let you know.'

If she had done it deliberately, she thought afterwards, she could not have made the issue more secure. Just as Marian must possess the latest winner, only made keener by opposition, so she became determined to possess Emma.

'Please ...' she persisted as she, too, rose. 'I — I want you here, and Dad — well, he's never before taken a shine to any of the girls I've employed....'

'What's the time?' asked Emma, aware that she must have missed her connection at Chode and wondering if there was another train that would get her back before the last bus at the other end.

Marian at once became efficient and helpful, and she insisted on driving Emma, not into Chode, but to the big junction further up the line which had a better service. She prattled merrily all the way. Did Emma realize that her kennel affix, Armina, was an anagram of her own name, Marian, and wasn't it clever of Dad to have thought that one up? Only when Emma's train was moving out of the station did she refer to the interview.

'I'm not saying goodbye,' she called gaily. 'There's so much you can do for me at Armina, and —remember Flight.'

Remember Flight, the wheels echoed as the train bore Emma away ... a bribe ... an extravagant promise ... a reward to put out of one's mind ... She dozed between stations and finally fell asleep, remembering with disconcerting vividness the dark, angry face of the arrogant stranger who had knocked her down and then made himself largely responsible for all the rest that had followed.

It was Miss Hollis, strangely enough, who finally decided her or, more accurately, ordered her to be sensible and accept.

'Oh, I know I've no time for these monied amateurs who think they can buy their way to success, but from your point of view the job's a cinch,' she said after Emma had recounted the day's events.

'Why me?' asked Emma in surprise. 'I was sure you'd pour cold water and have acid things to say about the fleshpots.'

Miss Hollis, crop-headed, weather beaten and dad in the same shabby suit she had worn for years, glanced down at Emma.

'Because you could do with a taste of the fleshpots,' she said gruffly. 'It's all right when you're my age to devote your life to man's best friend and live in a perpetual pig-mess, but when you're young you need something more. You're a child still, Emma. It's as good a way as any of earning a living if your bent lies that way, I'll grant you, but it can mean heartbreak, too. Haven't I dinned it in over and over since you came to me that it's no manner of use making favourites among puppies that have to be sold, and wasn't there always that terrible wrench when the time came? Your heart is too tender for this game, my child, and it's time you made a change. At least in the Mills kennels they won't be forced to sell for want of the ready and you can hold out for suitable homes. Go to bed now before I talk any more nonsense.'

Upstairs, in the little room under the eaves which had been her refuge through many hours of private heartbreak, Emma pondered on these final indictments and knew them to be true. She had not supposed hard-hearted old Holly knew of these moments of weakness, and she herself had taken great pains to hide them, but she wondered now whether had it not been for her upbringing she would have chosen such work. She stared moodily at her reflection

in the dressing-table glass. The image that looked back at her was one with which she was so familiar that never before had she troubled to assess its possible attractions, but now she examined her face with interest, trying to visualize it through masculine eyes. What impression, for instance, had she made on that chance stranger who had not only knocked her down and sworn at her, but had also been instrumental in determining her immediate future? None at all except as a possible means of doing a good turn to another girl, she admonished herself severely, then wondered why the admission should annoy her when the principal emotion he had roused in her had been one of enmity.

Oh, well, thought Emma, kicking off her shoes as the first start to getting undressed, no doubt the glamorous Miss Mills had plenty of admirers, and whether the casual stranger was one of them or not could make no possible odds to her prospective kennelmaid.

CHAPTER THREE

IT took Emma very little time to settle in a new job, for she had an adaptable nature and was accustomed to change. After a year of Miss Hollis's forced economies and old-fashioned premises the amenities of Armina Court and its well-equipped kennels seemed too good to be true. If she was disappointed that, apparently, no dogs were allowed in the house, Marian's exception in the case of Flight was a gracious reminder that her bribe had not been idle. It was not altogether clear, certainly, if the dog was, in fact, a gift or merely on loan to give credence to a half-promise, but Emma accepted the gesture with gratitude, surrendered her heart unconditionally, and Flight surrendered his. He slept in Emma's room, was her constant shadow, and only when

old Mr. Mills remarked with jocular approval on the dog's changed behaviour was she aware of Marian's resentment.

'If you make too much fuss of him, Emma, he'll have to go out to the kennels again,' she said rather sharply. 'House dogs get too soft and never show well.'

'My father always held that Alsations were different from other breeds. They need human companionship and to be one of the family,' Emma replied. 'Ours always had the run of the house, and if there were too many they took it in turns.'

'Very likely, but I prefer to run my kennels my own way. After all, I do happen to be the owner,' said Marian. It was Emma's first intimation of her true position and she felt herself flushing.

'Yes, of course, Miss Mills,' she said politely, and Marian's manner immediately altered.

'Marian, not Miss Mills. I thought we were friends,' she said reproachfully.

'Yes, of course,' said Emma again.

'Now, let's make plans for Wednesday's show,' said Marian briskly. 'I want to get off by seven o'clock as it's some distance, so that means getting the kennels done by six-thirty. That little drip, Ireen, won't be here till half-past eight, and I don't trust her to see that Saracen doesn't give her the slip and get at one of the others, so you'd better see that they're all in their right runs, yourself. Really, I can't think what I pay the girl for — she's just a moron!'

Emma, remembering her own mistakes at that age in her first post, had a sneaking sympathy with Ireen, who invariably bore the brunt of their employer's periodical ill-humour.

'She'll learn, but you can't expect experience at barely seventeen, and you frighten her to death,' she said with a grin, and Marian looked quite pleased.

'A good thing, too,' she said. 'You might do a bit of nagging yourself instead of clearing up after her.'

'Well,' Emma said apologetically, 'I'm not very good at nagging. I had a dose of it myself at her age and it only makes you stupider still.'

'Where was that? At Wentworth?'

'No, I was with the Spooners later. I was supposed to have got past the apprentice stage by then.'

'Why did you leave? I should have thought you'd have found old Holly very dead and alive after them. I always think Mr. Spooner looks a bit of a lad. Is he?'

'I wouldn't know. The kennel staff had their own quarters and we didn't fraternize ' Emma answered so shortly that Marian raised an enquiring eyebrow, but she only said:

'Oh, well, I don't suppose the poor devil has much opportunity. Mrs. S. keeps him pretty well tied to

her skirts at shows. I wonder if they'll be there on Wednesday. They were showing a rather nice little bitch at Windsor.'

Emma was looking forward to the show which, although not a Championship, was one of the bigger Open events run in conjunction with the County Agricultural. They got off to a good start in the estate car which Marian used for shows, with Flight and a couple of youngsters in the back, and when the car was finally parked and they made their way on to the showground, jostled and jostling in the chattering stream of arrivals, the old familiar nervous tension took hold of Emma.

Marian had gone on ahead, leaving Emma to get the dogs vetted, and as she moved slowly up the queue, every so often catching the eye of someone she knew, she had a

sudden incongruous mental image of the stranger who had knocked her down in the village and was inadvertently responsible for this change of luck. She could see the arrogant tilt of the dark head, the beaky nose and the quizzical lift of the eyebrows as plainly as if he was standing there in the marquee where the vets in their white coats were inspecting and passing on the stream of dogs crossing the long trestles one by one. Just as she was craning her neck for a better view, however, someone prodded her again with a testy injunction to get on with it, and she found her turn with the vet had come at last. When she looked again the man had gone. Probably it was just a fleeting likeness, she thought, becoming aware of Marian gesticulating impatiently from where she was waiting at the exit.

'Come on!' she cried. 'There are only two classes to go before Novice and I want to get the dogs benched. The Spooners are here with that bitch, so I suppose they'll win the Open. They seemed surprised you

were working for me now, and she said how fortunate I had no husband, which I thought a bit catty, and –oh, yes – there's been a last-minute change of judge, isn't it sickening?'

'Oh. Who've they got?'

'Dawson. Still, it shouldn't make any difference. He once tried to buy Flight, and there's nothing here to touch him.'

They had reached the tent where the Alsations were benched and Emma was glad that she was well occupied with settling the dogs and securing their chains. When she straightened up, rather flushed, to take the catalogue which Marian held out to her open at their classification, she said quite calmly:

'I think, in that case, you'd better take Flight in the ring yourself, Marian.'

'For heaven's sake, why?'

'I think Dawson would probably put me down.'

'Why the heck? You're only a kennelmaid handling someone else's exhibit, so there can't be any question of personal rivalry. Anyway, I thought he was one of the honest ones.'

'He's a good judge. I just think—'

'Oh, fiddle! You've just got cold feet! I'd take him in myself if I thought he'd show for me, but you know you get the best out of him, and I don't want a dog that already has one Certificate to be bumped at an Open show.'

'Well, you know, there's a feeling among some people that Certificate winners should stick to Championship shows and give others a chance,' Emma said, but Marian merely looked annoyed.

'Well, it's done, isn't it?' she snapped. 'And this is hardly like the little local shows one gets all round the country. In Varieties other breeds don't hesitate

to show their Champions, so Dawson, being an all-rounder, won't care.'

'Yes, well ...' said Emma rather lamely, and Marian began attending to her make-up and hair, already more concerned for her own appearance in the two classes in which she was to handle herself.

Emma set about preparing Jester, the young dog Marian had bred, and hoped she would have luck with him. When the dog was ready she took him up to the ringside to hand over to Marian, then sat down to watch the judging.

Frank Dawson was making a good job of it, she thought dispassionately, but then he was an old hand at the game and knew just what he wanted.... He had always known what he wanted, even to the adulation of a raw little girl who could have mattered

nothing at all to him, she thought, but, like all vain men, he would not forget a slight, however little it had meant at the time.... Marian was posing Jester now, fussing him too much, murmuring self-consciously to the judge as he bent to handle her exhibit. She looked charming and expensive, Emma thought, but Dawson, if he found himself attracted, was not the man to give himself away until the moment suited. Having examined Marian's exhibit, he dismissed her to the side of the ring with the mechanical smile he reserved for everyone and went on to the next.

Emma felt herself relaxing. If Dawson had seen her, he made no sign, and indeed, she thought, regaining her sense of proportion, why should he? It was only too possible that he wouldn't even remember her after two years.

Marian was unplaced, but came third in the next class, and when they broke for lunch, she tried to waylay the judge for an opinion, but he only smiled

politely and walked away with his stewards. Emma watched him go, reflecting that he had changed very little. He was a tall, thin man, who was probably in his late forties, but his hair, which had been fair and in greying merely looked platinum blond, lent him a false air of youth, and the experienced lines in his narrow face seemed puckish rather than ageing. Emma supposed he might be considered attractive by a great many women, and certainly Marian seemed to think so.

'Quite a dish, our Mr. Dawson,' she said, when she helped Emma to carry the luncheon hamper to a shady spot under the trees. 'I've never seen him close to before. Is he married?'

'I believe there was a wife once upon a time, but nobody's ever seen her,' Emma replied.

'You sound as if you know him personally. Do you?' 'Not as you mean it. I worked for him once for a short time.'

'Did you? You are a dark horse, Emma! You never told me you'd had so many jobs when I engaged you.'

'You never asked me. Anyway, I've only had three. Mr. Dawson when I first started, then the Spooners and then Holly. You only wanted one reference.'

'Oh, don't think I'm suspicious, darling, only interested. I'm really very lucky to get someone as young as you are who's had a decent training. Emma, Flight must win today. The judge for Wilchester is here and will be having a good look, and someone's been putting it about that Flight's gone shy. Oh, I know it was my own fault because I handle him badly and he did look shy at Windsor — that's why you must take him today. You can't have been serious when you said Dawson might put you down — unless, of course, you left him under a cloud or something.'

'No, I didn't leave under a cloud, and I don't

suppose it would affect his judging even if I had,' said Emma. 'Will you spread the rug, Marian, and I'll unpack the hamper.'

When judging was resumed Emma went back to the bench to get Flight ready and give him a run before going into the ring. As she exercised him loose under the trees, she experienced again that thrill which near perfection could bring her which had nothing to do with the emotional attachment she felt for the dog.

She met the Spooners exercising their bitch and would have passed by with a casual greeting, but Mrs. Spooner stopped to run a critical eye over Flight. Her husband mumbled a salutation, but did not meet Emma's glance, and Mrs. Spooner observed: 'H'm ... doesn't seem much wrong with his temperament, but you had quite a way with the shy ones, Emma, I will give you.'

'Flight isn't shy, he's only sensitive. He just got into bad habits,' Emma replied a little shortly.

'And no wonder, with that ham-fisted girl pulling him about without a clue. I was surprised to hear you're working for her, Emma, but no doubt after poor old Holly's bread-and-scrape, a bit of ostentatious luxury is a pleasant change.'

'I left Miss Hollis only because she couldn't afford to keep me any longer. I was extremely happy working for her,' Emma said, giving her erstwhile employer a very straight look, and the woman laughed unpleasantly.

'Implying, I suppose, that you were not happy with us. Well, you have only yourself to thank when things went wrong, my dear,' she said, and the knowing look she directed at her husband seemed to embarrass him further.

'We'd best be getting back to the ring, now Elsa's

had her run,' he muttered, and his wife looked amused.

'They haven't done Open dog yet, so there's no hurry for the bitches,' she said. 'It's Emma who had better be getting back if the glamorous Miss Mills is waiting to take over.'

'I'm handling today, Mrs. Spooner,' Emma said, then wished she had let the woman find out for herself when she countered meaningly:

'Of course, a change of judge! I'd forgotten that

under Dawson your chances could be said to be better than most. There are no flies on Marian Mills, even

if it does mean admitting her own lack of skill.'

Emma went back to the ring with all her restored confidence ebbing away. The assumption that Marian knew of that past connection with Dawson and was cashing in was as distasteful as the knowledge that, if she won, the Spooners would undoubtedly set rumours circulating, but as she walked into the ring, and saw the flicker of recognition in the judge's eyes as they rested on her for an instant, she was certain, as she had told Marian, that he would put her down. Well, it was too late now to insist on changing handlers, and she went through the familiar routine, trying to rid her mind of everything but the dog's reactions. Only when she had to pose him alone in the centre of the ring and had for those few minutes Dawson's individual attention did she feel conscious of any personal element, but he asked his questions without a flicker of interest, made careful notes, and when he had finished his inspection, dismissed her with the same mechanical smile he had awarded to Marian and everyone else.

Emma slipped away, and sat on one of the ringside benches to wait. The stewards were calling for puppy bitches to come into the ring, and she did not notice Dawson get up from the judge's table and stroll towards her.

'Well, Penny Plain, so you're in circulation again,' he said, and sat down beside her. She glanced up at him quickly, annoyed to feel herself colouring, and wished she had not chosen to wait so conspicuously by the momentarily deserted ringside. Penny Plain. . . . She remembered, as if it was yesterday, his refusal to call her Emma. A prim, dull name, he had told her with flattering consideration, and enquired if she had any others. He had shortened her second name to its diminutive, and added the rest of it with his periodical liking to tease.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Dawson. You have a nice entry,' she said, trying to sound politely casual, and his eyes silently mocked her.

'You thought I was going to put you down, didn't you?' he said.

'It was what you intended me to think, wasn't it?'

'How like a woman to harp on personalities. I wasn't averse to making you sweat a little, I must own, but I was also justifying my decision to the critical ringside. There was, of course, nothing to touch your dog when it came to movement.'

Emma was silent, feeling a little foolish. She ought to have known that Frank Dawson was much too good a judge to be swayed either by personal feelings or public opinion. Even if he had confessed to enjoying her own discomfiture, he would have been more concerned with making his placings quite clear to the ringside.

'So you've landed a nice cushy job with our latest recruit to fame and fortune — not that the fortune's lacking from all one hears, only the know-how,' he said.

'You can't come by know-how all in a minute,'

Emma replied rather sharply. 'People should be more tolerant instead of sneering at natural mistakes.'

'Very properly spoken, as becomes a loyal employee,' he said, his thin face creasing into its familiar puckish lines. 'And don't think I have any objection to the monied amateur. With a little judicious guidance, they can do a lot for the breed. She's an attractive piece into the bargain, if a trifle over-decorative for the occasion. You must introduce me later.' He got to his feet as Marian came hurrying towards them, delighted to seize the opportunity at last of speaking to him, but he waved her aside, saying that the next lass was ready for him and he would be pleased to answer any questions when the judging was finished.

'Honestly!' Marian exclaimed, affronted, as he walked away. 'It wouldn't have hurt him to be civil — he seemed to have plenty to say to you!'

'He was merely being circumspect. He's got to decide the Best of Breed yet, so it's better not to be seen hobnobbing with the possible winner halfway through the show,' Emma said prosaically, and Marian's pouts turned to smiles.

'Oh, yes, of course, how silly of me,' she said. 'I think, when the time comes, I'll take him in myself, Emma.'

It was not Emma's place to make objections, but the decision proved to be disastrous. Flight, subjected unexpectedly to inexperienced handling, went to pieces, not only giving a good imitation of a dog that was shy, but straining towards the side of the ring to get at Emma who stood there watching. Marian lost her temper and slapped him across the muzzle, which completed his disintegration, and Dawson could do no other than award the supreme honour to the Spooners' bitch.

Marian came out of the ring nearly in tears, too

humiliated to care whether her behaviour should label her as a bad loser.

'It's all your fault!' she shouted at Emma. 'Why did you have to stand where he could see you? Did you want to make a fool of me? You've certainly made a fool of the dog, weaning him away from me with all this silly attention as a house pet ... he'll go straight back to kennels when we get home, and you'll forget about him till he's learnt who owns him, do you hear?'

'Be quiet, Marian!' Emma said in a sharp whisper, hoping her well-intentioned warning would not be mistaken for impertinence, but her heart was sick within her. Marian, having caught the significant glances exchanged between certain exhibitors within earshot, was already looking a little ashamed, and Dawson, choosing that moment to reward at last Marian's efforts to make contact with him, strolled across to them and observed:

'You should have let your little kennelmaid finish the job, Miss Mills. The dog dearly has a preference for her.'

Marian might act like a spoilt child at times, but her sense of occasion was never far off, thought Emma, admiring the ease with which she regained her poise and smiled up at the judge.

'Yes, I should, shouldn't I? Emma, of course, is much the better handler. I'm still very new at this game,' she said, fluttering her eyelashes at him, and he smiled.

'Are you? I shouldn't have thought it,' he replied with a slight drawl, and she coloured sufficiently to betray recognition of a possible double meaning and dimpled delightfully.

'I've been wanting to meet you, Mr. Dawson,' she said. 'You have so many irons in the fire, haven't you? Buying and selling for export and things. Perhaps

you could find me a really good bitch. Emma says—'

'Penny Plain seems full of wisdom,' he interrupted lazily. 'I'm sure she must have quoted the old saying that a kennel is as good as its bitches. It's true, you know.'

'Penny Plain? What an odd nickname. Is that what you called her when she worked for you?'

'That, among other things. Her second name happens to be Penelope and I never cared for Emma—but we're embarrassing the poor child, she never liked my pet name for her.'

'Probably because it was too appropriate, Mr. Dawson. At seventeen one is rather sensitive about one's looks,' said Emma, refusing to rise, as she once had, to his oblique methods of drawing blood, but he merely smiled and answered carelessly,

'No reference to your looks was intended, my dear, simply association with another old saying – one of my nurse's, I rather fancy. Yes, Miss Mills, I can find you a first-class brood, if you're really serious, and I think you should be if you intend to build up a top-class kennel. Come and have a drink with me and we'll work out your existing blood-lines and see what's needed.'

He did not extend his invitation to Emma and she watched them walk away in the direction of the refreshment tent. Emma went off to get herself a cup of tea, glad that the day was nearly over, glad, too, to find that she had outgrown the confusion and trepidation of early youth. Whether or not at the time, Dawson's pet name for her had been a teasing reminder of her adolescent lack of charm no longer mattered, and she thought she knew which old nursery saying he was referring to now and agreed 'with its moral. Penny plain, two pence coloured ... If, thought Emma, the apt comparison had only that

instant occurred to the nimble-witted Mr. Dawson, he had nevertheless hit the nail on the head. In every respect and without the slightest effort, the well-endowed Miss Mills was two pence coloured ...

The refreshment tent was crowded, and Emma, ignoring the furtive signals of Mr. Spooner who seemed momentarily detached from his wife, went through the barrier to the Agricultural. Section which offered more spacious accommodation.

She went to the end of the counter where tea was being dispensed, and was just about to pay for the cup that was handed to her when a voice at her elbow said: 'You must allow me, my dear,' and Mr. Spooner pushed some coins across the counter.

Emma turned round to protest, her cheeks hot, but he waved her objections aside and stood ogling her with a rather ridiculous air of complacency. Horrid little man, she thought angrily, he must have followed her deliberately, and to make matters worse, he said roguishly:

'Very smart of you to avoid the Dog Section. I took your tip and followed you here.'
'If you imagine I was inviting pursuit, Mr. Spooner, you couldn't be more mistaken,' said Emma, outraged. 'If you want to know, I was avoiding you just as much as the other overcrowded tent.'

'Now, that's not very nice,' he said reproachfully, even as he spoke, glancing over his shoulder as if he expected to see his watchful wife bearing down on them. 'I only wanted to say what a shame your dog let you down in the end. His temperament really is dicey, isn't it?'

'He's not used to Miss Mills's handling,' said Emma coolly. 'Congratulations on your bitch winning. Was that all?'

'Well, no. I wanted an opportunity to clear up that little misunderstanding when you were working for us.'

'That was more than a year ago, so why bring it up again now?' said Emma coldly, and he looked sly and rather unpleasantly eager at the same time.

'I've.. I've had no chance to explain, you see. And I should so much like to resume our little friendship now that

you — er — work for somebody else,' he said, and put out a tentative hand to touch her.

'There's nothing to explain,' Emma said crisply. 'You could, of course, have admitted to your wife at the time that it was not I who engineered that little scene she interrupted,' she went on, rather enjoying his discomfiture. 'But I realize now, of course, that this sort of thing had happened before, and Mrs. Spooner saves face by blaming the staff.'

'She wouldn't have sacked you, you know, my dear. She had too much respect for your kennel qualifications,' he said, as if that excused the distasteful affair, and Emma knew a moment's unwilling compassion for the disagreeable Mrs. Spooner.

'Well, my kennel qualifications don't stretch to swallowing unpleasant suggestions in order to keep my job, so I got in first and left,' she said, picking up her cup of tea and wishing he would go away.

'That's not nice, my dear. I only wanted to get things dear,' he said, and put out a hand again to stroke her arm.

She backed away too incautiously in that congested area, and someone jerked her elbow, sending the cup and saucer flying to the ground. She gave an involuntary exclamation of pain and annoyance as she felt the hot tea soaking through her thin frock, and a voice behind her said:

'I do beg your pardon. Let me buy you another.'

She turned quickly, glad of the diversion, in time to look down on the dark head and broad shoulders of a man stooping to retrieve her cup and saucer, then, as he straightened up and placed them on the counter, she said: 'Oh ' a little blankly.

'Well,' said the dark stranger, running a rather critical eye over the damage to her dress. 'You seem to have a knack for messing up your clothes.'

'And you seem to have a knack for causing unfortunate accidents,' she retorted, and his eyebrows shot up in the irritating expression of indulgence she remembered.

'I think I should point out that the fault was yours in both instances, but don't let's quarrel over minor details,' he replied. 'And I have offered to buy you another.'

'No, thanks,' she said, annoyed to find herself caught off balance when she had been dealing so neatly with the persistent Mr. Spooner.

'Here, my dear, let me treat you. But first you must allow me to mop up that pretty dress. Some people are extraordinarily clumsy ' Spooner, whose presence she had

temporarily forgotten, spoke in a loud proprietorial voice and whipped out his handkerchief, but before he could make a lunge at her dress, the tall stranger had produced his own and thrust it into her hand.

'I'm sure you would prefer to do your own mopping up, and if your friend is alluding to me I would suggest that there are clumsier methods of annoyance than the spilling of a cup of tea,' he said, and Emma, seeing Spooner wince under a sudden and very direct look, felt she could have warned the brash little man, herself, not to tangle with someone right out of his class.

'What do you mean, sir?' he blustered now. 'I pre-

sume you must be a friend, but the young lady is with me.'

'An acquaintance, shall we say? And I rather got the impression she was averse to your company.'

By that time Emma had finished dabbing at her dress, the stranger was waiting with another cup of tea and his faintly amused expression dared her to refuse a second time.

'Thank you,' she said meekly, and buried her nose in the cup to avoid his eyes. When she looked up again, Spooner had melted into the crowd, and her unknown acquaintance had propped his back against the counter and was observing her reflectively.

'So you got the job, Miss Emma Penelope Clay ...' he remarked idly. 'I trust you're suitably grateful to me.'

'Yes, of course,' she answered. 'It was kind of you to trouble, and it's a great pleasure to be back in Plovers Green.'

'Ah, yes, of course, the nostalgic scene of your childhood. And what about the old home — the house where you were born, waiting for recognition in the best romantic tradition?'

'I haven't had much time for exploring,' she answered a little shortly. 'Kennel work is much the same anywhere, but a new routine takes adjusting to, and the under kennel-girl is young and not very bright.'

'The unprepossessing Ireen, pronounced, alas, as it's doubtless spelt.'

'You know her?' But of course he must have seen Ireen if he was a visitor at Armina Court, and she was just going to ask for his name when he said suddenly:

'Who was that unpleasant little bounder? He seemed to have rather erroneous notions about his own image.'

'Spooners? He was once my employer, or rather his wife was. They run the Wentworth Kennels and have

rather a bit of trouble keeping their staff.'

'So I should imagine. Did they sack you?'

'Certainly not! I handed in my notice in the proper way and went to work for a Miss Hollis, an elderly spinster with no frills but a fund of knowledge. I found her restful.'

'I see. And do you find your present employer restful? She, too, is a spinster, but there the resemblance presumably ends.'

Emma gave way to a schoolgirl giggle at the thought of such a comparison and he smiled in sympathy.

'Yes, I can understand your amusement. The glamorous Miss Mills must cause quite a few heartburnings among your less well-favoured exhibitors. How has she done today?'

'We won the Open Class and should have got Best of Breed, only—'

'Only what?'

'Oh, nothing really. The dog just wasn't in form, I suppose.'

'No,' he said. 'Are you wondering what I'm doing here?'

'Well, yes, I was. You didn't seem particularly interested in showing dogs.'

'You're perfectly right, but you doggy enthusiasts have a regrettably limited viewpoint.'

This is primarily an Agricultural Show.'

'Yes, of course.' She noticed for the first time that he was wearing breeches and leather leggings, and decided she had been quite out in her guesses. He was probably a well-to-do farmer or the owner of hacks or hunters having a day out at his local annual event. There had been no reason to assume, just because he had stopped for a drink in Plovers Green, that he had not been merely passing through. She was conscious at the same time of a somewhat inexplicable sense of

regret that this being so, they were unlikely to meet again.

'You are disappointed, Miss Clay?' he said, and for an embarrassing moment she thought he had guessed her thoughts.

'Disappointed?'

'That I don't share your reverence for the dedicated aims of the Fancy.'

'Oh! No, of course not — why should you? I suppose I thought since you seemed interested in Miss Mills's kennels that you knew something about dog breeding,' she answered, feeling a little foolish.

'My interest wasn't limited to the kennels as such, you know,' he said. 'Still, why do we confine ourselves to unrewarding topics of conversation? Tell me about yourself. Do kennelmaids have any sort of a life outside their duties? What do girls like you expect to get out of it when getting up at six-thirty in the morning to muck out kennels, and going to bed when the last job's done begins to pall?'

Emma gave a little shrug of impatience. What right had this stranger to unsettle her with questions and statements thrown out with such casual unconcern? The shows were fun, never mind if you won or lost, and a nameless bond of fellowship linked them all in a little world where pride of achievement through sheer hard work could bring its own rewards.

She found herself trying to explain to this sceptical stranger, but, although he listened attentively, he seemed unconvinced by her arguments.

'Don't think I disagree in principle; the object of shows is to improve the breed standard, I understand, and as such very admirable,' he said, 'but the means can defeat the end when inbreeding merely produces the requisite show points, and at its worst, unsoundness.'

'That, of course, is the popular uninformed quibble,' Emma replied a shade condescendingly. 'Do you know anything about dogs?'

'A little.'

'The layman's knowledge which is so superior to the experience of breeders who've been at it for years, I suppose,' she said somewhat rudely, and his grin was all the more infuriating for its tolerance. Then, becoming aware that the tent was beginning to empty and she must have spent longer than was permissible over her tea, she asked him rather anxiously for the time. 'Golly, I must fly!' she exclaimed. 'Miss Mills won't like to be kept waiting. Thank you for the tea.'

He accompanied her into the open and they stood for a moment, jostled by the thinning crowd, listening to the loudspeakers, final announcements.

`Well, I've enjoyed our chance encounters, Emma Penelope — you reveal a lot of yourself when you forget your prickles,' he said

`Then it must be like meeting someone in a train,' she told him firmly. 'You talk a lot of nonsense because you're dealing with a stranger you'll never meet again.'

`Ah, but that's where you can get led astray by false conclusions. You and I, I regret to tell you, Miss Clay, will undoubtedly meet again. Goodbye for now.' He sketched a vague salute and walked away, and she looked after him uncertain whether to be further incensed or secretly rather pleased. At least, she thought, making her way back to the Dog Section, she would find out his name from Marian on the way home, and would be properly briefed should they indeed meet again.

The intention, however, went out of her head, for Marian, although her session in the bar with an attentive Mr. Dawson had done much to restore her

customary aplomb, seemed determined to keep her kennelmaid at a distance.

'I meant what I said about Flight,' she snapped to Emma's tentative condolence for the day's disappointment. 'It was rather a dirty trick, Emma, to go all out to steal his affection. Did you think I would hand him over to you altogether if he took a dislike to me?'

'Of course not, but I had to win his confidence before I could make anything of him in the ring, and you did give me to understand I had a — a share in him.'

'Yes, well ... to tell you the truth, I didn't realize then he was a certain Champion, but Dawson says there's nothing to stop him if he's handled right. He could get me a good price now from America if I felt like selling.'

'But you wouldn't, surely? Not Flight!'

'That will depend on you. You'll have to do all the handling in future because Dawson says I'm rotten at it, but that doesn't mean I'm prepared to lose my dog's devotion to you, so please treat him like any of the others, and forget favouritism.'

Emma was silent, wrestling rather bitterly with her innermost thoughts. She was young enough to feel a child's resentment at the unfairness of offering a gift with one hand, and snatching it away with the other, but she supposed she had only herself to blame for such a naïve faith in unlikely promises, so she asked instead:

'How did you like Dawson on closer acquaintance? He's quite a useful man to know when you're starting in dogs.'

Marian laughed and gave Emma a quick little look of knowledgeable amusement.

'Very much, but you don't, do you?'

'I don't dislike him. He can be charming when he chooses.'

`So I imagine. I rather gathered he had a little trouble with you in the days when you worked for him. He was most amusing about some of the silly young girls he used to employ who mistook his purely avuncular interest for something else.'

`Very likely. Mr. Dawson can be an amusing man when it suits him,' Emma snapped back, and Marian gave her knee a little pat.

`Don't be cross, darling. You were young and inexperienced and we can all make mistakes imagining romance where none exists,' she said, and Emma restrained herself from forgetting her place with difficulty.

Marian let the subject drop with more tact than she usually displayed.

She must, thought Emma during the next couple of days, have had second thoughts generally about her behaviour, for she tried very hard to win back favour, admitting her faults with the little-girl charm she could employ so successfully when she chose, seeking advice quite humbly on the mysteries of ring-craft and stressing her

appreciation for Emma's superior knowledge and skill. Flight, it was true, was banished to the kennels, but there was no more talk of subversion on Emma's part and, indeed, Marian seemed inclined to be afraid she had gone too far as a result of her ill-tempered pinpricking.

'You wouldn't ever leave me just because I'm sometimes thoughtless, would you, Emma?' she pleaded. 'I get all worked up when things go wrong and take it out on the nearest person.'

'Of course not. Everyone spits out now and again. It's much more likely you'll up and give me notice one of these days,' Emma answered, trying to make light of it, and Marian looked at her with that brown-velvet softness which could be so disarming.

'Oh, no, I shan't, and if I did you mustn't ever take me seriously,' she said. 'Dawson says I'm lucky to have you, and there are plenty of other kennels who would be glad to snap you up. People forgot you when you buried yourself with old Hollis, so it's lucky I got in first when you decided to make a change.'

'In point of fact, I gate crashed,' Emma laughed, reflecting that Dawson must have indulged in some highly-coloured embroidery for reasons best known to himself. 'And that reminds me, who was—'

'Promise – promise!' Marian interrupted with her usual disregard for a change of subject which might deflect from her own.

'Promise what?' asked Emma, diverted.

'That you won't leave even if I sack you.'

'Oh, well, that's hardly a promise one can make and never break. Circumstances alter, and who can say what they may feel in six months or a year?'

'Well, a year for sure – six months even. You can promise that.'

'Why?'

'Because Flight must be made up. He's worth more than my other Champions put together, Dawson says, and when he finds me a brood-bitch to suit his bloodlines, I'll have the foundation stock for a top-class kennel.'

'Well now, that's common sense,' said Emma, wondering at the same time what Dawson was up to other than securing commission on a good deal, and whether Marian herself would have the incentive to build up her own strain before tiring of the work and patience that must go into it.

'Then promise that at least you'll see Flight through to his title. After all, he is half yours,' Marian said with such an audacious disregard for her recent retraction that Emma could only think she had forgotten.

'Yes, I can promise you that. I have as much interest as you in getting those tickets,' she said, and Marian dapped her hands like a child.

'Good! Now I can go away with a quiet mind, and you'll be able to work on that temperament and slip in a few illicit cuddles that I won't be here to see.'

'Going away?'

'Only for the week-end. I get browned off sticking around here. The people are stuffy and there aren't many unattached males, anyway,' said Marian, and Emma reflected that it was probably true.

'Where are you going?' she asked, because it seemed only polite to show interest, but Marian suddenly looked coy and flirtatious and shook her bright head, and Emma got the notion she had fixed up some date with Dawson. Most likely they were going to make a round of well-known kennels to select a bitch, and whatever the arrangements

for accommodation, Dawson would be much too fly to suggest anything faintly improper.

'What shall I bring back for you?' Marian was saying gaily. 'I owe you a present as a kind of olive branch.'

'Nothing, but thank you all the same,' Emma replied.

'All right, you needn't be stuffy,' Marian snapped offendedly, and sounded decidedly stuffy herself. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you Grainger will be coming on Friday to inoculate the puppies. It's tiresome he couldn't fit in with my plans, but vets are as choosy as doctors these days, so you'll have to cope on your own.'

Emma repressed a smile, recognizing the mood. Miss Mills of Armina Court was making it clear to the kennelmaid that one's vet, no less than one's paid staff, had no right to put their own convenience before hers.

'I'll make a full report when you come back,' she murmured demurely, and was rewarded with a satisfied little pat of approval.

'That's right,' Marian said as if, thought Emma, the routine immunizing of puppies was an operation requiring expert supervision, then added roguishly: 'And don't get up to mischief with our rather attractive Mr. Grainger in my absence.'

'Is he attractive?' Emma asked Mr. Mills when Marian had driven away in her sleek white car.

'Couldn't say, not being a female,' the old man replied without much interest. 'A bit la-di-da for my taste, but Marian's a bit sweet on him, I fancy, for all she likes to play the lady of the manor.'

'And is he — sweet on her?' asked Emma.

'Couldn't say, m'dear, but if my little girl fancies summat, she'll go out after it, whether it's high-priced dogs or high-priced humans,' he replied with a chuckle. 'It's the price that attracts, see?'

'But how can that apply to human beings?'

'Hard to get — choosy. The trouble is it cuts both ways. Once you've got 'em licking your boots, you don't want 'em any longer. Same with the dogs. It was poodles before this, you know, because they were the fashion, then these Alsations go top of the pops and she switches. Never make a name for herself that road to my way of thinking, but it keeps her happy.'

Emma went thoughtfully down to the kennels to help Ireen with the evening feeds, reflecting on their brief conversation. In her short time at Armina Court she had conceived respect and liking for this blunt little man who seemed to get so little in exchange for his pride and pleasure in a daughter whose superior assets never quite ceased to surprise him, and she wished his retirement could bring him more than just a satisfaction in his hideous, expensive country estate and the Utopian project which would never see the light of day.

Her introspection lifted, however, at the familiar out-

burst of greeting from the dogs as they hurled themselves against the chain-link fencing in a frenzy of pleasure at the sight of her, but sadness and that sense of indignation she had expressed to Mr. Mills took hold of her again as she went to speak to the old dog who sat all day by the gate of his run patiently waiting and watching for Marian, who had tired of him long ago.

'Poor Corrie ... poor, faithful old fellow ... I wish I could do something to help you,' she said to him, but, as always, he turned his head from her, polite but disappointed when his sense of smell told him what his eyes could no longer clearly see, that this was not

the beloved. Emma watched him a little anxiously, for he looked sick and the midday dish of food was beside him still untouched.

'Corrie looks off colour,' she called to Ireen. 'Have you tried tempting him with liver for a treat? He usually goes for that.'

The girl put down the bale of straw she was carrying and came to stand beside Emma at the run gate.

'He's moping,' she said. 'He knows she's gone off without a pat or a kind word. She made a fuss of the others this morning and walked straight by his run without a glance. He whimpered pitiful for nearly half an hour. Oh, Miss Clay, she'll have him put down if he's lost condition when she comes back, and he's not eating.'

'Oh, she wouldn't do that if the old boy wasn't suffering,' said Emma with more assurance than she felt, remembering that Marian had once said that Corrie should have been put down long ago.

'She'd make out he was suffering if he's gone thin and won't eat. She only needs an excuse,' said Ireen, refusing to be optimistic. 'It's always the same — all over 'em when they come, having them in the house

and all and chucking 'em out as soon as she's won their affection, and forgets 'em altogether if they don't win for her. Old Corrie, now, was give her as a pet long before she took up breeding and she thought the world of him till she fancied showing and making a splash buying Champions. He wasn't up to much, I suppose, compared with all those prize-winners, but I reckon an old dog's got a right to his place in the sun when his useful days are over, same as you or me.'

Ireen finished abruptly by bursting into tears after the longest speech Emma had ever heard her make.

Emma administered such comfort as she could, working out a special diet for Corrie with delicacies to tempt a jaded appetite, but all the time she felt like weeping herself.

'The vet's coming tomorrow for the puppies' inoculations. Perhaps he'll be able to suggest something to pep the old boy up,' she said, proffering another thread of consolation. 'Is he the helpful kind in a case like this — sympathetic, ready to co-operate?'

Ireen looked vague.

'I suppose so. Ever so up-to-date and clever, Miss Mills says. I think she's a bit struck on him, if you ask me.'

When Emma went to bed that night she remembered, too, those words of warning ... never make favourites ... never give away your heart if you must work for others ...

Ireen had given her simple heart to Corrie just as Emma had given hers to Flight, and neither of them had the right to question whatever decisions lay in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, however, Emma had forgotten the doubts of bedtime. The sun still shone with a brief return to summer, and the week-end stretched ahead, blissfully long in anticipation, promising the freedom of solitary leisure. She dressed with speed, putting on paint-stained jeans and tying up her head in a bright bandana handkerchief in preparation for a morning of dirty jobs in the kennels.

She lingered so long over breakfast listening to Mr. Mills's anecdotes that she was reminded rather sharply of her duties when a message was sent up from the kennels to say that the vet had already arrived and was waiting.

'Golly! I'd clean forgotten he was coming!' she exclaimed, springing up from the table, and caught a dismayed glimpse of herself in a wall-mirror. This was no get-up in which to make the right impression of hygiene and efficiency on a first appearance, but there was no time to change, and she raced out of the house and across the tidy lawns.

Grainger ... she remembered ... ever so clever and up to date.... Miss Mills was sweet on him or wasn't she? Emma slowed her pace to a more decorous walk as she came into the yard and saw Ireen in conversation with a tall man standing with his back to her. There was something vaguely familiar about that back view, or perhaps it was just that the tweed jacket resembled another, but as he turned to meet her, she stopped dead in her tracks.

'Oh, no!' she exclaimed before she could stop her-

self, and Ireen, evidently feeling she should make the introductions, observed with bald simplicity:

'This is Mr. Grainger, our vet, Miss Clay. Mr. Grainger, this is Miss Clay, the new head girl.'

'Miss Clay and I have already met. I'm sorry if I'm a little early for you, but I have rather a heavy round of visits to get through this morning, so shall we get on with the job?'

She bade him good morning with as much dignity as she could muster, wondering whether for the sake of politeness she ought to offer to shake hands with him, but he had already stooped to pick up his bag, and was clearly only anxious to get the inoculations over as soon as possible and be off.

She followed him into the wash-house without speaking, and took each puppy from Ireen as she carried them in one by one, and held it steady on the table. Marian had alluded to him by his surname, but once she had referred to an unknown Max Max Grainger ... Emma repeated in her thoughts, watching him give the injections with gentleness and skill ... the man she had guessed might be a doctor from the way he had examined her shoulder, but never in her senses would have put down as a country vet with his elegant tweeds and urbane air. There was no reason, she supposed, to feel cheated because he did not conform to a more familiar pattern of the veterinary surgeons she had known, and he presumably could well afford to dress well and drive an expensive car if his practice had many clients like Marian Mills. All the same, she felt deceived.

'Not the accepted image, were you thinking?' he asked suddenly, echoing her thoughts so uncannily that she jumped and the puppy she was holding wriggled out of her grasp and started yelping.

'Hold him still, please. I don't want to run the risk

of a broken needle,' he ordered sharply, and immediately made her feel like an ignorant little tyro in her first job.

'Right!' he said when, the last puppy dealt with, he began packing up his bag. 'They're a sturdy lot and you shouldn't have any trouble, but if you get a reaction keep them warm and quiet and on a light diet and, of course, let me know. Still, I don't need to tell you the drill, do I? You have years of experience behind you, so you gave me to understand.'

'Two, to be exact. I don't shoot lines,' she said, taking him literally, and he snapped his bag and stood looking down at her with one eyebrow lifted.

'Why are you so prickly?' he asked quite mildly.

'Because you have the effect of making me feel inefficient,' she answered promptly.

'Also, you've taken advantage of me. Why couldn't you have told me before who you were?'

'You didn't show much curiosity. You were too busy arguing and putting me in my place for my lack of knowledge of the dog world.'

She saw the mitigating twinkle in his eye, but she was not to be humoured.

'There was nothing to stop you slapping me down on that score,' she retorted. 'You're rather good at it.'

'Am I? Perhaps you do something to my masculine ego. Your prickles appear so unexpectedly.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, you do something to mine, too. You bring out the worst in me.'

'Really, Miss Clay! Don't you think you assume rather a lot on such short acquaintance?'

It was difficult to judge whether he was still indulging in idle banter or administering a reproof for trespass, and she felt herself flushing.

'I'm sorry,' she said a little primly. 'I'm wasting your time with irrelevant chatter. Have you any other in-

structions, Mr. Grainger? Anything I should tell Miss Mills?'

His eyes crinkled at the corners in a smile and she noticed again how blue they were, but he answered gravely enough:

'No, I don't think so. I'll be back in a fortnight for the second dose unless I'm needed before. Is that a new line in kennel attire, incidentally?'

He was observing her jeans and rakishly tied bandana with an interested eye, and she became suddenly conscious of her unprofessional appearance. Emma came to the conclusion that fate did not intend her to exercise charm on dark strangers.

'I was going to do mucky jobs like creosoting. I'd forgotten you were coming,' she said.

'How very unflattering, when I'd told you we should meet again,' he observed, but she didn't think it was worth pointing out that she hadn't known who he was then, since he would probably retaliate with an infuriating assurance that in that case he would excuse her.

'Now, if you'll forgive me hurrying away, I've got work to do,' he said, becoming brusque and impersonal again. 'Anything else needing attention now that I'm here?'

Emma hesitated, unwilling to prolong a visit which he clearly wished to terminate.

'Well, there's Corrie, but I don't suppose there's much you can do,' she replied.

'Corrie? Oh, the old gentleman in the end pen. There's nothing much to be done for old age, I'm afraid, except respect it and indulge its weaknesses. But let's have a look at him.' He picked up his bag and walked out into the yard, but Ireen was there already waiting with Corrie on a lead and she said before Emma had a chance to speak :

'Please do something for Corrie, Mr. Grainger. He's

moping and not eating. If we don't get some flesh on him before Miss Mills comes back she'll have him put down, and I couldn't bear it.'

Tears were quite evident in the girl's eyes and she made an awkward gesture to brush them away, but Emma was touched by the gentleness with which Max Grainger spoke to her and the patience with which he listened to a disjointed repetition of last night's outburst. He might have shared Marian's opinion of Ireen's stupidity, but nothing could have been more kindly or reassuring in the attention he was affording her now.

He went over the old dog with thoroughness and a gentle manner in handling which Corrie appreciated with a response he showed no one but Marian, and when he had finished, he patted Ireen on the shoulder and told her that there was nothing to worry about. He would leave some pills to promote appetite and an injection Emma could give should it be necessary, but the dog would pick up again when his mistress returned, and at thirteen years of age there was little wrong with him but failing eyesight and a rheumatoid stiffening of limbs.

'Try bringing him into the house while Miss Mills is away,' he said. 'If he feels himself to be important again it may do the trick.'

'They go down so fast,' said Ireen, uncomforted. 'She's only waiting for a chance to get rid of him and make room for something else. Old dogs have earned their rest, they should be pensioned off if they're not wanted any more.'

She gulped, and Emma, who felt rather tearful herself, said quickly:

'It's all right, Ireen. Mr. Grainger has left me something for Corrie. Take him back to his run now and sit with him for a bit and talk to him.'

The girl went away, the old dog pattering after her, his nails, untended and long with age, clicking on the yard stones. The vet watched them out of sight with a curiously compassionate expression on his cool, rather arrogant face, and Emma said, trying to sound professionally unemotional:

Ireen's very fond of old Corrie. She hasn't worked in kennels long enough to be philosophical about these things.'

And you have?'

'Long enough to have learnt that it's no use pitting your own personal opinion against those of the people who employ you.'

He turned to look at her then and when he spoke there was none of the usual raillery in his voice.

'You're not much more cut out for this sort of work than that poor child, are you? Why do girls like you slave away for little or no return for the love you put into it? Is it from a sense of dedication or just the spurious glamour of the show-ring and a share in the rewards?'

'You don't think much of showing, Mr. Grainger, as you made clear the other day, but there's more to it than the winning of a few cards,' she said.

'I don't think much of the false importance attached to it, the cut-throat determination to win at all costs, this bug that bites you all and turns serious breeding into nothing more worthwhile than a canine beauty contest, but I admit I'm probably prejudiced. I'm more concerned with curing sick animals than pushing healthy ones to stardom. Now, having shocked you again with my heretical views, I'd better be going. Tell Miss Mills when she returns that I found everything here as it should be, including the working efficiency of her new kennelmaid if not an entire suitability for the job.'

'You recommended me,' Emma pointed out, a little stunned by such frank speaking, and he grinned at her rather unfeelingly and picked up his bag.

'I didn't know you then as well as I do now,' he said, and she retorted with a return of the old opposition: 'You don't know me at all, Mr. Grainger.'

'Well, that can be remedied. When are your days off? Never mind now, I can see you feel more like hitting me than making a date. I'll be seeing you.' He hurried away then without so much as a goodbye, and Emma spent the rest of the morning hammering in nails and slapping on paint with an energy which left her exhausted by lunch-time, but at least relieved her feelings.

On Sunday Emma decided she would take Flight for a long walk of exploration and somehow discover the whereabouts of her old home.

She let Flight out of his run and slipped a chain-choke over his head, then climbed over the boundary fence into a field beyond. 'Hi, boy! Hi, my beauty!' she called to Flight, and began to run.

Within sight of the village the footpath ended in a stile bordering a lane which would take her to the main road, but going the other way the lane continued downhill, dipping steeply into a hollow where it became little more than a track, and something stirred in Emma's memory. Halfway down the hill she met a labourer, and asked with so much assurance if she was on the right road for Plovers Farm that she felt little surprise when the man replied laconically :

'Straight on and turn left over the bridge.'

It was, she thought excitedly, like a fairy-tale come true, not the existence of the house which was an established fact, but finding the way back, and just for a moment, as she crossed the little dapper bridge over a tiny river which was hardly more than a stream, she

was stayed by a doubt. She could see the open gate with the name painted on it, but the house from this angle was hidden by a copper beech. Supposing it was deserted and fallen into ruin, or even pulled down and a modern one built in its place ... was it foolish to risk disappointment and exchange the dream for reality? Flight, however, settled matters in more prosaic fashion by suddenly spying a straying hen and chasing it through the open gate and into a carefully tended flowerbed. Emma perforce had to follow, praying that an irate owner would not emerge from the house before she was able to capture the dog and make a hurried retreat.

As she snapped a lead on the dog's choke, reviling him bitterly for such wanton behaviour, she cast a quick glance at the house, congratulating herself on the fact that everybody appeared to be out, but even as she turned to make her escape, a man in his shirtsleeves with a dog at his heels came out on to the porch and stood there watching her.

'Won't you come in, Miss Clay? I've been expecting you,' he said.

Her surprise turned to chagrin as she realized who he was. It was just her luck, she thought crossly, that Mr. Max Grainger should happen to be paying a professional call on this particular house at the very moment she had chosen to rediscover it and, not only that, was a witness both to trespass and damage. He was coming down the path to meet her and she had a passing thought that he looked very unprofessional with his sleeves rolled up and a scarf tucked loosely into his shirt in place of a tie. The dog, a setter and presumably the patient, fixed a wary eye on Flight and growled, and Emma, anxious to be gone before a scrap was added to the day's mishaps, said hastily:

'I'd better be going. I only came to look, you see —only Flight put up a hen, but it's not hurt. Do — do you think I ought to stop and apologize about the flowerbed, Mr. Grainger, or could you? I don't know these people.'

'What people?'

'The people who live here.'

'You know me — or to be more exact one might say we are acquainted. I've already invited you in, you know.'

She stared at him blankly for a moment.

'You mean Plovers Farm is your house?' she said, and was aware all at once of the twinkle in his eye.

'Yes, I live here. I told you I'd been expecting you to call.'

'I wouldn't have dreamt of calling on complete strangers just because I once lived here. Why didn't you tell me, anyway, when I asked if you knew the place? You seem to enjoy making mysteries.'

'Not really, but when one is bold enough to renew acquaintance with a half-remembered dream the enchantment lies in finding the way back oneself, and I wouldn't want to deprive you of that,' he said, and Emma had an odd sense of recognition as if, after all, she had known him a long time.

'How clever of you to understand that,' she said with pleasure. 'But why do you say if one is bold enough as though it could be dangerous to go back?'

'Because sometimes it can be. The remembered image changes, or even turns out to be false. In either case, one risks disillusionment.'

'Not for me,' she said, looking over his shoulder and allowing her eyes to dwell curiously on the old thatched house. 'I remember so little, you see, not even my mother dying, so I'm not sentimental about the place, but I think my father had been happy here

because he so often talked about Plovers Farm and the village, so that in a sense I felt we still belonged. That was why I had applied for that post with the poodle kennels because it seemed like a pointer to go back.'

'Your fate might well have been a messy demise under my wheels,' he retorted severely, a little handicapped from pointing a moral with any dignity by Flight's demonstrations of delighted recognition.

'And you,' she responded, equally severely, 'would then have been had up for manslaughter, which wouldn't have done your practice any good.'

'Neither it would. What a child you are, Emma Penelope. Come in and inspect the house and wallow in childhood memories.'

He put a careless arm about her shoulders, turning her round to go up the path with him. The friendly gesture seemed no more unusual than the light use of her Christian names, and she felt only curiosity on entering the house which had once been her home. It was a picturesque old house with beamed rooms running one into another like many such dwellings that had once been cottages and added to through the years, but although she could remember little, the house still possessed an odd familiarity.

'The most vivid impression that comes back,' she told Max, 'is that the beams seemed high above me and far out of reach, and now if I stretch up my hand I can almost touch them. Things seem to shrink as one gets older.'

'A common delusion which either deflates the ego or compensates for lack of it,' he said. 'In my case it's merely a reminder to duck my head at strategic points if I don't want to be brained.'

'Do you live here alone?' she asked, then wondered why she should have assumed he was not married. She became aware that his eyes rested on her in amuse-

ment for a moment, and looked away.

'Yes, except for an invaluable Mrs. Mopp, who comes in daily and keeps me as well as the house in excellent order,' he said.

'I thought your practice was in Chode,' she said, hoping he had not been aware of her more inquisitive thoughts, and he stopped to relight his pipe which had gone out.

'So it is. My partners share that enormous house behind the surgery with their respective wives, but I prefer to live away from my work,' he said. 'It's useful, too, to have an overflow kennel outside the town in event of an epidemic — your father's old

kennels, you know, and one of the reasons I bought the place. Would you like to renew acquaintance?'

He took her out to a yard at the back of the house where stables and farm buildings had been converted to kennels and runs, and here she found she could remember more clearly for very little was changed. The byre with its divided cow stalls, the loose boxes, the tack-room which had been turned into a kitchen and the little dairy which had housed the carcasses and paunches which used to frighten her as a child, revived forgotten incidents, although now the kennels were empty.

He watched her absently as she darted here and there, exclaiming and remembering, and thought how young she looked in her pink cotton frock, with her bare legs scratched and grass-stained, and her flying hair catching glints of brightness from the sun, young and rather charming and, in some odd fashion, a little touching.

'Well, now that you've purged your memories and satisfied your curiosity, suppose we go back to the house and I'll give you a glass of sherry,' he said, speaking rather brusquely, and she glanced at him

quickly, aware that he might well have found her enthusiasm tedious, not to say foolish.

'There's no need for that, Mr. Grainger. I realize I've gatecrashed on your Sunday afternoon, and I should be getting back, anyway,' she said.

'Nonsense!' he retorted, giving her shoulders an admonitory slap. 'You rely too much on a misplaced sense of fitness, Miss Clay. Do your employers frown upon fraternization with their friends?'

She did not altogether understand him, but found herself wondering if his last remark was an oblique reference to Marian's reputed fancy for him.

'Certainly not, and I would hardly call a casual glass of sherry fraternization,' she replied discouragingly, and he smiled back at her, rather enjoying the embarrassment which her heightened colour betrayed.

'Neither would I, so swallow your outraged feelings and take pity on my solitude. It isn't often I have the pleasure of an unexpected visit,' he said, propelling her towards the house, and she replied with some shrewdness:

'It isn't often you welcome one, I don't mind betting!'

He laughed and did not comment, but back in the low, raftered living-room, he said as he filled two finely cut glasses from a matching decanter:

'You were right, you know. I value my privacy when I can get away from sick animals and their much less intelligent owners. I suspect you have something of the same need yourself, living and working among other people all the time.'

'Yes,' she said, 'privacy is important, but you have your home and can barricade the doors.'

He had perched himself on the arm of a chair by the open french window and said as he raised his glass to her:

'True, I can, but I won't barricade them against you, Emma Penelope, if that's any solace to you.'

She gave him a quick glance from under her lashes, not at all sure how she was intended to take this, but replied in rather the same tones she employed when resisting one of Marian's more ill-judged propositions:

'You wouldn't be at all pleased if I took you at your word and blew in here when I felt like it, but thank you all the same.'

'How do you know?' he retorted, and of course she didn't know except for the very definite impression she had formed when dealing with him in his professional capacity, but this chance interlude had stripped her of certainty.

'After all, I wouldn't care to put your old home out of bounds to you,' he persisted when she made no reply, and now she knew he was laughing at her.

'Don't think for one moment I have nostalgic yearnings, or even regrets for a place I can hardly remember — just curiosity,' she said emphatically. 'How long have you lived here?'

'Two or three years. It's changed hands several times since your father's day, you know.'

'So I would imagine. What made you decide on becoming a vet, Mr. Grainger?'

'A number of things which, at the time, seemed vitally important to my youthful principles but were very likely largely bloody-mindedness and an inflated ego. I was intended for the medical profession, you see.'

'Were you? How odd — that first day we met, I'd put you down in my mind as a doctor. I never thought of a vet. What made you settle for animals instead of humans?'

'Just a difference of opinion. I was a bit browned off with the human race at that time and thought

animals worthier of my skill, since they were dumb and couldn't answer back. I'd quarrelled with my father, you see, and as he'd taken it for granted I'd follow in his footsteps and be grateful for his ambitious help in pushing me to the top, I naturally chose the other course.'

'Your father was a doctor?'

'My father is a fashionable Harley Street consultant, with a famous bedside manner and an enormously rich practice. His patients are nearly all neurotic women with too much money and too much time on their hands, and they all adore him.'

He spoke on such a note of bitterness that Emma was silent, wondering if the breach had never been healed or whether something else had hurt him badly at one time.

'Don't get the wrong idea,' he said. 'My father earns his reputation and he's quite skilled, I believe, but his ambitions didn't stop with himself. He told me once, as a rather bad jest, that I might as well set up practice as a vet as a country doctor for all the social good it would do me, so I took him at his word. My father, now, really is a snob, both socially and professionally '

'So, just to pay him out—?'

'No, you ridiculous child, I wasn't quite so adolescent as that! There were other considerations, too. Let me give you some more sherry while we speak of more pressing matters. How is the old dog?'

'He's happier now he's in the house,' she replied, 'but he's not eating well. I think he must remember the days when he was the only one because he lies outside Marian's bedroom door whenever he gets the chance and won't move unless you put a lead on him '

'H'm ... well, persuade her to have the old chap with her again when she comes back. There's nothing wrong with him organically, just stiffness and failing

eyesight. He'd perk up again if he was restored to favour.'

Emma sighed. She thought the chances of persuading Marian against her own inclinations fairly slim, but she did not make the mistake of asking Max to intervene.

'Why do you choose this way of making a living?' he asked abruptly. He had heard the sigh and had a pretty shrewd idea she was restraining herself from asking for his help.

'You really care about the dogs in your charge, don't you?'

'No girl would stick the work for long if she didn't care,' she answered, evading the issue neatly.

'You might have something there,' he admitted, 'but you've skated quite skilfully round the point.'

'Have I?' She looked puzzled.

'Oh yes. I was intending to suggest that if you really cared, this sort of job could bring more heartbreak than pleasure.'

She gazed out through the french window, watching Flight and the setter playing on the lawn and, remembering Holly's warnings, was stripped of her adult assurance.

'I suppose so, if you allow your emotions to get the better of your common sense,' she replied, hoping she still sounded practical and well balanced.

'And you, of course, never do that,' he said, secure again behind his customary mask of amused indulgence.

She slowly transferred her gaze back to him, saw the half-mocking repudiation in his face, and said with a rueful return to honesty:

'I try not to, but I fall in love when I least expect it, which makes things difficult.'

'Do you, indeed?'

'With certain dogs, I mean. You find one that tugs

at your heart-strings for no particular reason of worth, and you come across the rare one that fills your eye and seems to have it all — like Flight. Look at him now! Hasn't he all the makings of a Champion, with personality plus?'

His eyes followed hers through the window to the Alsatian, the flowing, golden lines of his body etched against the sky in lovely symmetry from his proudly set-on head to his finely-moulded quarters.

'Yes,' he said, 'I see what you mean. And you've lost your heart again, and so it will go on.'

'Marian — Miss Mills — half-promised him to me, except for Kennel Club registration, of course,' she said, then added hurriedly: 'It was a sort of bribe really, I suppose, when I hesitated over the job.'

One eyebrow shot up.

'So you hesitated, did you, Emma Penelope? I wonder why? You struck me as someone badly needing a job that morning of our first chance meeting.'

'I don't know,' she said, frowning, 'unless it was all the rich set-up and the rather amateur approach. But I liked old Mr. Mills very much and, of course, I fell for Flight as anyone with half an eye would. He seemed too good to be true, like that fabulous offer to share him with her.'

'Which leaves Miss Mills as your stumbling block. I remember at the time you expressed some rather unfavourable views.'

'Yes, well ... I'd only heard the gossip, and I haven't much time for rich amateurs.'

'Then what made you change your mind?'

'Holly, I think.'

'Holly?'

'Miss Hollis, my last employer. She seemed to think it was time I got out and around and took advantage of the fleshpots.'

'I see. And do the fleshpots come up to expectation?' 'Of course. Didn't you yourself tell me that I would land a cushy job if I was taken on?'

'Fair enough, though I don't think you've answered my question. I'm beginning to think you're one of these confusing young persons who refuse to be docketed in one nice, uncomplicated compartment.'

'Is that what you do, Mr. Grainger — label people tidily, like your canine case-histories, and put them away in compartments?'

'Oh, I'm not so bureaucratic-minded as that, Miss Clay,' he said, mimicking her own preciseness. 'I was only trying to drop a hint in a roundabout way not to place too much reliance on extravagant promises —Flight, for instance. I wouldn't like you to come unstuck through losing your heart again to something out of reach.'

'Thank you, I'll remember. Now, I really should be going. I have the evening feeds to do.'

He made no attempt to keep her any longer and went with her as far as the gate. The bells from the village church began pealing their summons to Evensong, completing the illusion of home and peace and security with such a sharp stirring of nostalgia that she could not resist turning round for a last loving look at the house.

'Regrets after all? Perhaps even resentment for an interloper?' Max said with that sceptical little lift of the eyebrows, and she shook back her hair with an impatient gesture, feeling he was anxious to be rid of her.

'Not at all,' she answered. 'I can fall in love with your home without bearing you any Mr. Grainger. Thank you very much for the sherry.'

'You fall in love rather easily, it seems, Miss Clay. I shouldn't let it become a habit,' he retorted rather

unkindly, and she now had only a desire to get away from him as quickly as possible.

'I won't,' she told him rather coldly, and calling Flight to heel, ran through the gates and over the bridge with never a backward glance.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARIAN returned the next day in a contrary mood. Wherever she had stayed for the week-end and whether or not she had met Frank Dawson, the visit had dearly proved disappointing, and she was not pleased to find Corrie established in the house. She promptly turfed him out, complaining that he smelt, and Emma, although her heart bled for the old dog expressing such humble pleasure in the return of his mistress, felt it was not the moment to put Max Grainger's suggestion of persuasion into practice.

A day or so later, Marian made amends in the usual way, carelessly lavishing presents and small, solicitous favours, but for Emma a warning had sounded. It worried her to be obliged to accept bounties which were little more than bribes, and it was difficult to show gratitude for gifts which were simply sops.

'I'd much rather you didn't feel obliged to do this,' she said, having received a dozen pairs of tights with an awkwardness which brought a quick frown of displeasure from Marian.

'I don't feel obliged to do anything,' she retorted. 'Honestly, Emma! Anyone would think you were accepting charity. You haven't a decent pair of tights to your name, so why be proud?'

Emma sighed.

'I know that to you my wardrobe must seem very sketchy, but I have all I need for the sort of life I lead,' she said, trying not to sound as cross as she felt, and was aware that Marian was merely looking hurt.

'Well, you needn't be so prickly. No one would expect you to be very well dressed on a kennelmaid's

wage, and I only thought----'

They were sitting on the terrace finishing a late tea, and she broke off abruptly, as relieved as Emma herself to see a car circle the driveway and pull up at the front door. Her face lit up with surprise and pleasure as she saw who her visitor was and she waved merrily.

'Hul-lo, Max ... how nice to see you! It isn't often you come up to the house like an ordinary visitor,' she hailed him, beckoning him on to the terrace, and patting an empty chair beside her in invitation.

'I mustn't stay, but as I had to pass the Court I thought I'd just look in and return your handkerchief,' he said, nodding to Emma casually. 'You must have dropped it in the kennels and my Mrs. Mopp insisted on washing it out before it was returned. Well, Marian, did you have a good week-end?'

'No,' she answered crossly. 'Things went wrong. What kennels? Do you mean when you came for the inoculations? One of our maids would have washed it for Emma.'

'No, my own kennels,' he replied, and gave her a faintly quizzical glance as he sat down beside her. 'Emma Penelope went on a voyage of discovery, trying to locate her old home, and finished up in mine. Didn't she tell you?'

'It's simply that Mr. Grainger happens to be living in the house where I was born,' Emma said with composure. 'I found the way back by chance on Sunday, and Mr. Grainger kindly invited me in and gave me some sherry.'

She was aware when she finished that Max Grainger sent her a rather curious glance over Marian's head, and that Marian herself looked anything but pleased, and she wondered again if there was any truth in the rumours that she had a passing fancy for her rather enigmatical vet.

'Did he?' said Marian, and her voice became soft and a little flirtatious. 'Do you know I've never seen the inside of your home? You've come here on the rare occasions when I've been able to winkle you out, but you've never once invited me to Plovers Farm.'

'Not for want of inclination, I assure you,' he said, beginning to get to his feet, 'but I don't entertain at all. I'm incurably lazy when it comes to parties, I'm afraid, and after a hard day's work I like to just sit and read or do the crossword by my own fireside. You'd find it very dull.'

'Would I? All the same—'

'Look in for a drink if you'd care to, one of my free evenings, and bring Miss Clay with you. She has fallen in love with my house, she tells me. She falls in love rather easily, don't you, Miss Clay?'

'Stop embarrassing the poor child, and for heaven's sake call her Emma, and have done with it — we all do,' exclaimed Marian, the natural shrillness back in her voice, but Emma, familiar by this time with Max's apparent liking for uncomfortable remarks, remained unflustered by his blatant angling for a rise and merely wondered if it was also his masculine way of keeping Marian guessing.

'May I?' he asked.

'May you what, Mr. Grainger?'

'Call you Emma. We shall, after all, have become quite well acquainted by the time we've worked through all the dogs' possible ailments, imagined or otherwise.'

'Certainly, if you wish, but I hope you won't find you're called out for no reason. I'm not likely to waste your time or Miss Mills's money by bringing you here for a matter I can quite well cope with myself,' said Emma crisply, and saw him smile.

'Well, that will save you a few unnecessarily, Marian,' he said, preparing to take his leave. 'I'm sure Miss Emma Penelope Clay is very well able to cope —she's a most forthright young person.'

'Well, she doesn't know it all, as I've had to tell her,' snapped Marian, giving her kennelmaid a look which plainly told her to remember this was her proper station even though she had been found drinking tea on the terrace on equal terms with her employer.

'Incidentally, how has the old dog reacted to being in the house?' Max asked. 'You've kept him with you, I hope — I told Emma that was the best way to get him back on his feet.'

Marian had risen, anxious to see him to his car and have a last word in private, and she stood for a moment, glancing a little uneasily at Emma.

'Well, no,' she said, twisting her hands together like a little girl expecting to be scolded. 'Emma and Ireen think I'm cruel putting him back in kennels, but he's getting very smelly, Max, and I really do think the time has come when the poor old boy would be happier out of the way.'

He considered her gravely without replying at once, and Emma held her breath, wondering if he was prepared to swing the balance in Corrie's favour with a timely word of protest or condemnation, then she looked away as she heard him answer dispassionately:

'If you've no further use for him as a companion, you're probably right. It's not much of a life for the old chap, eating his heart out in kennels for the remainder of his days.

Well, let's have a look at him before I go, shall we?'

In a moment Marian was all smiles, and she even spared a look of regretful apology for Emma.

'I knew you'd see it my way, Max,' she said. 'So

much kinder, don't you think, than hanging on from pure sentiment like so many people who only think of themselves ...'

Her voice grew fainter as they left the terrace and Emma did not catch Max's reply, but rage filled her heart as she watched the two of them cross the lawn where the evening shadows lay long and sharp on the grass. Was Max Grainger so easily hoodwinked by flattery and a pretty face that he believed that Marian could have an unselfish thought for others, let alone an old dog that had become a nuisance, or was he simply shrewd enough to turn a blind eye to the whims of a rich client?

When she went down to the kennels later to see to the evening feeds and shut up for the night, Corrie's run was empty and Ireen's eyes swollen with weeping.

'Took him away with him,' she said to Emma's anxious enquiry. 'Miss Mills didn't want nothing done here — said she couldn't bear to watch an old friend go — lyin' bitch! I offered to have him and pay for his keep, you know, Miss Clay, if he could have stayed on here ... but she said she couldn't have someone else's pet taking up space and I couldn't have him at home because Mum goes out to work, too, so ...' Her tears started again, and Emma wept with her, as much for the poor, unhappy girl who had been

willing to spend her meagre wages on old Conic because she loved him, as for the loss of that familiar, faithful friend watching and waiting by the run gate.

'You think badly of me for having Conic put down, don't you, Emma?' Marian said when they met at breakfast, and her eyes had the soft, familiar look of brown velvet which always accompanied a bid for tolerance or approval. She would, in due course, produce a peace-offering in the shape of one of her

extravagant fripperies, Emma thought, and replied with polite finality:

'My opinion can hardly affect what you choose to do in your own kennels, as you've already pointed out, Marian, so let's not discuss it.'

After that, the subject was dropped with tacit agreement, and Emma felt she had at least scored a point by refusing to be drawn into personalities, but she did not find it so easy to put Max in his place when she met him by chance in the village a couple of mornings later. She had called at the chemist to collect a prescription for Marian and found him checking over an order for some veterinary supplies which had been delayed in transit.

'Good morning, Emma Penelope, you're looking very fetching in that blue get-up. I see you discard your workaday slacks when you come to the village.'

The blue get-up in question was a crisp cotton dress which she knew became her, but there was something which irritated her about the easy, casual little compliment, and she found herself replying with more asperity than was warranted:

'Kennelmaids do occasionally get out of their working clothes, and appear clean and reasonably well dressed like other people, Mr. Grainger.'

She merely felt foolish, however, when she saw his eyebrows lift and the little quirk of amusement at the corners of his mouth.

'I was not intending to imply that kennelmaids were either dirty or subject to peculiar attire, Miss Clay,' he said. 'I see your prickles are out again, so presume I am out of favour. How about furthering our acquaintance in the Moon where it first began?'

For a moment she struggled with her dignity, then began to laugh.

'You really have a very high-handed way with you

at times, Mr. Grainger, and you'll be late on your rounds if you stop for a drink at the pub,' she said.

'I've a half hour to spare, as it happens, and was going to look in for a beer, anyway,' he replied mildly. 'You might even mellow sufficiently over a glass of sherry to bring yourself to drop the formalities.'

'Calling you by your Christian name wouldn't alter my feelings, and I don't think Marian would like it,' she replied rather primly, and an odd expression crossed his face.

'Your feelings, of course, are your own business, but Marian's can hardly be of much consequence in the circumstances,' he said, and thinking she detected a note of rebuke in his voice, she wondered if he was politely intimating that whatever his relationship with Marian, it could in no way concern her kennelmaid. She tried vainly to think of an excuse to refuse, but he had a hand under her elbow and was already walking her along the pavement towards the swinging sign of The Waning Moon a few doors up.

'Now,' he said when they were seated with their drinks in the little bar parlour, 'will you kindly shed your prickles and give me another glimpse of little Emma Clay who used to live at Plovers Farm and proved such a delightful visitor that Sunday afternoon?'

The customary raillery had gone from his voice and he smiled across at her with such warm humour that she felt again that surprised sense of recognition which had sprung

between them as they talked together in the raftered room which, though dimly remembered, had somehow forged an invisible bond.

'It's on account of the old dog that I'm out of favour, isn't it?' he went on. 'You thought I should have persuaded Marian to give him a chance.'

'She would have listened to you,' Emma replied, her

eyes accusing. 'You could have talked her round where poor Ireen and I failed.'

'Yes, I could,' he admitted gravely. 'But I couldn't give back to the old chap the affection that would keep him alive. I could only condemn him to a further prolonging of hope and despair until in gentle protest he would have died. Wasn't it more humane to spare him that?'

Emma felt a lump rise in her throat and blinked rapidly to check any tears which might threaten to disgrace her.

'Of course you were right,' she said at last. 'It was just, I suppose, that I couldn't understand Marian's attitude. She doesn't care for her dogs, you know, they're just a status symbol while they're winning, and after that they've had it.'

'Perhaps the result of my good offices hasn't been so satisfactory after all,' he said a little wearily. 'You aren't cut out for the harder side of your job, as I think I've already told you. Now, I must be going. What days off do you have?'

'Wednesdays and every other Sunday afternoon providing there are no stud bookings. Why?'

'Obviously because I desire to pursue our acquaintance. Does that surprise you?'

'Well, I think it does, rather. You don't strike me at all as the sort of man to be bothered with uninformed young girls.'

'But I don't find you at all uninformed, Emma Penelope. On the contrary, for one so young, you have much, I suspect, that you could teach me.'

'Now you're laughing at me!'

'A little, perhaps, but don't let it trouble you,' he replied. 'Can I give you a lift back to the Court? I'm going that way.'

She wished he had dropped her at the gates as she

had suggested when, having been deposited at the house, she saw Marian coming down the steps, and knew by the expression on her face that she was both surprised and annoyed.

'You've taken your time, I must say,' she snapped at Emma, snatching the chemist's parcel from her with irritable haste. 'I want that bale of straw shifted before lunch. Max, you'll come in for a drink now you're here, won't you?'

'Thanks, but we've had a couple at the Moon, and I must get on,' he replied, and Emma thought in view of Marian's plain hints that kennel duties had been neglected in order to take time off, it was hardly tactful of him to mention the fact.

'I see ... oh, Max, as you're here, could you spare a minute to have a look at the pups? They're due for their second inoculation at the end of the week,' Marian said as he got back into the car.

'Sorry, no time now Emma tells me there has been no reaction, so they can wait till Friday. So long,' he said, and drove away.

'Are you by any chance setting your cap at Grainger?' Marian enquired in a soft little voice, before Emma had time to escape to the kennels.

'Of course not — how absurd!'

`Yes, isn't it? But you wouldn't be the first, you know. Max can make himself charming when he chooses to unbend, and kennelmaids are fair game, anyway, as you should know.'

`What do you mean?'

`Nothing. All the same, you might remember that I have prior claim to any attentions the eligible Mr. Grainger may see fit to bestow, and I imagine he knows which side his bread is buttered. Well, get cracking on those extra chores or you'll be late for lunch.'

Wilchester Show was being held the following week, where it was hoped Flight would pick up his second Certificate and, with luck, Best of Breed as well, and Emma worked on him with the anxious patience of a devotee. That Flight should win for the sake of the good name of the kennels was incentive enough for her conscientious heart, but there was also the private and personal wish to achieve the highest awards by reason of her share in him, because, thought Emma fondly, however doubtful the point of ownership, Flight was hers in spirit, for he had given his heart no less than she had given hers. He would watch for her as poor old Corrie had watched for Marian, but with none of the despair, his eyes liquid with love and trust, following her every movement, his pricked ears quivering in sensitive response to every inflection of her voice, his whole beautiful body one co-ordinated desire to please.

Emma loved the early mornings when she liked best to do her training, sure of Marian's safe keeping in her bed. She would kick off her sandals and rejoice in the wet coolness of the grass under her bare feet, and sometimes she would dance a little in sheer delight while the dog leapt round her, sharing in the pleasures of these early morning treats.

She was engaged in this childish but harmless occupation a couple of mornings after her meeting with Max Grainger, when an unexpected voice hailed her from a neighbouring field, making her jump guiltily. The thought that strange eyes might have observed and ridiculed her innocent capers filled her with embarrassment.

`Who — who is it?' she called, and at first did not recognize the figure in breeches and gumboots leaning against a haystack.

`Only me, enjoying a charming surprise perform-

ance. Do you often do this?' said Max Grainger, beginning to stroll across towards the dividing fence.

`Hul-lo, Max!' she cried, running to meet him, and it seemed natural and quite unextraordinary to find him there.

`What on earth are you doing here at this hour of the morning?' she asked, leaning her elbows on the fence and propping her chin on her hands.

'Sick cow at Gubbins's farm, hence the gumboots and general disarray,' he replied with a jerk of the head in the direction of the farm which lay behind him. 'Now, do tell me, Emma Penelope, what makes you leap and prance in abandoned glee at an hour when respectable young ladies are still in their beds?'

He looked different and rather alarmingly attractive with his dark hair ruffled and his chin bearing evidence that he had not had time to shave, but his voice was the same, lazily amused, with just a hint of the ease with which he could turn to a sharp set-down.

`Was I being abandoned?' she asked, with such innocent concern that he threw back his head in a burst of merriment.

'No, my literal child, you were gay and natural and wholly charming,' he said, and smiled delightedly at the colour which flooded her face.

`You're not used to compliments, I suspect, Miss Clay,' he teased. 'Have there been no young men around to make you pretty speeches?'

No, I don't attract young men very much, and the few I've met don't attract me,' she said.

`O-ho! Is your ambition to end as an old man's darling, then?'

`Certainly not! I have no ambitions where romance is concerned, in any case.'

`Haven't you? That, my provocative child, is a very rash statement — it's also something in the nature of

a challenge — but perhaps you knew.'

He really was a most disconcerting person, thought Emma, beginning to recover her normal attitude in the presence of comparative strangers, and he was looking at her in a very odd fashion.

'No, I didn't know. And if you've read something I didn't intend into my rather silly remarks, Mr. Grainger, I hope you'll forget it,' she said very stiffly.

'Good gracious me!' he exclaimed, observing her discomfiture with an interested eye.

'What's driven you back into the role of dutiful employee?'

'Well, I am an employee, and it's time I let the dogs out and did the morning feeds.

Come, my love, my gorgeous golden Flight, you must want your breakfast.' As the dog jumped up to lick her face, she held his head against her breast for a moment with such unconscious tenderness that the laughter left Max's eyes.

'He's your romance, isn't he? He and the others you've lost your heart to. That won't satisfy you forever, you know,' he said, and she looked up at him, startled.

'If you're trying to tell me not to build on ever owning Flight, I've faced that already,' she said, 'but while I'm here, there's no harm in pretending, is there?'

`That's not what I meant, but no matter,' he replied with a tinge of impatience. 'Does this coming Sunday happen to be the one you have off?'

The abrupt question flustered her, and she frowned, without giving and serious thought to the inconsequence of her answer.

'Yes, it is,' she replied, 'so long as nothing crops up. Why?'

'Why? Because I'm trying to arrange a date with you, you ridiculous creature. Would you be interested

in spending a Sunday afternoon pottering about your old home, listening to my edifying conversation and, of course, getting my tea?'

'Yes, why not?' she said, and to herself she added silently: Why not ... why not ... I just amuse him and for me he's only ... Well, what was he? A stranger she had met by chance, for whom she had felt an unwarranted aversion, or rather an antagonism born of the unpropitious moment, perhaps, rather than a personal dislike. It was, she discovered, rather difficult to continue to dislike a person who, when he chose, would seem to offer a little more than a casual passing of the time.

'Very well,' he said. 'You know your way now, over the fields and down the lane to the bridge — or shall I come and fetch you?'

`No, of course not,' she answered quickly, thinking of Marian's probable reaction to a date which afforded such a polite attention. 'Anyway, I may not be free. Week-ends are our busy time, and I may be needed here.'

'You can let me know tomorrow when I come over for the second inoculations,' he said, and turned with a careless wave of the hand and walked away across the field to the farm.

To Emma, the matter of her free afternoon seemed suddenly very important. She wanted passionately to renew acquaintance again with her old home, and she had to admit to herself that Max Grainger, for all the mixed feelings he could arouse in her, was beginning to stir a totally unfamiliar emotion. She asked Marian as casually as possible if she would be free to make arrangements for her time off, but Marian evidently had made arrangements of her own which dispensed with the services of a kennelmaid.

'Dawson's coming down for the day,' she remarked

airily. 'He thinks he's found me a good brood and wants to see what I've got here. There'll be no need for you to hang about — I've business I want to discuss with Dawson, and you'd only be in the way.'

Emma had a pretty shrewd idea that Marian had no intention of including her kennelmaid in the sort of lavish hospitality she had probably planned for Frank Dawson, and since she herself had no desire to meet him, it would seem that the Sunday programme was, for once, going to suit everyone.

When Max came to the kennels the next morning, she found herself eager to assure him that she would be free but, whether because this time Marian was present, or because when on duty he became automatically impersonal and rather brusque, he gave her no opportunity for private speech with him. He seemed to be extra sharp with his orders and appeared to be in a hurry to get away. Marian must have persuaded him to stop at the house for a drink, however, for it was quite some time later that Emma heard him start his car and drive away, and she knew a return of the old antagonism. Was he in truth the sort of man to make use of opportunity wherever it might arise providing nothing interfered with the more serious aspect of his professional life? Was it not only too probable that he shared Marian's belief that kennel-maids and their like were fair game, and she a gullible little girl not to have learnt her lesson by now? Nothing would induce her, she decided angrily, to keep that appointment on Sunday, neither would she be diverted in future by any chance meetings in the village.

When Sunday came, however, she was at a loss to know what to do with herself in a district where she had made no friends. To spend the day in her room where she could have found plenty to occupy her,

mending and reading, would make it virtually impossible for Marian to exclude her from lunch, and Marian had made it very plain that she wanted her out of the house.

'Dad's lunching at the golf club,' she said pointedly, 'and three's an awkward number for a meal, don't you think?'

'Have you fallen for Dawson?' Emma asked curiously, for she was aware that he had a certain attraction for women, and had even experienced it unwillingly herself a long time ago.

'The other way about might be a more complimentary way of putting it,' Marian retorted, but she looked smug rather than offended, and glanced at her reflection in a wall-mirror with every evidence of satisfaction. 'If you were thinking of offering one of your prim words of warning, you needn't trouble, my dear. I know Dawson's sort, and if I do find him attractive it doesn't in the least prevent me from making use of him. It shouldn't be long, actually, before I get my first judging appointment if I play my cards right.'

Emma looked at her with such open astonishment that she went a little pink.

'Well, why not?' she said truculently. 'I'm rich enough to offer my services for nothing, which is a help to most show secretaries, and I'm quite prepared to present challenge cups and specials to any society that wants them.'

'But, Marian, anyone can buy their way in like that with the smaller and less scrupulous societies, but it doesn't follow you can judge without experience. In any case, you've got to be passed by the Kennel Club, who require evidence of that.'

'So what? I own Champions, don't I, and belong to every Breed Club in the country? You may think I don't know enough yet to judge, but at least I know

the handlers and most of the stuff that's turned out from the well-known kennels, so would hardly be likely to make many bloomers on that score.'

'Judging the other end of the lead may be playing safe if you're in doubt, but it's not good judging — it's not, in fact, judging at all,' retorted Emma, unable to hide her impatience, and Marian gave her a distinctly frosty look.

'When I want a sermon from you, Emma, I'll ask for it. In the meantime, please remember that however superior in knowledge you think you are, you're still my kennelmaid and aren't paid to have opinions.'

'It doesn't stop me having them just the same,' retorted Emma, and went away before she could forget herself sufficiently to be really rude.

CHAPTER SIX

THE morning was fine and she took the short cut across the fields to the village, planning to have a sandwich lunch at the Waning Moon while she decided what to do with the rest of the afternoon. She cast a lingering glance towards Plovers Farm as she reached the stile, and wished that she had not been so goaded into rejecting the arrangement to go there. She turned resolutely left to the main road and once in the village, inspected the crowded car park of the Waning Moon with slight hesitation. She felt awkward at having to walk into the crowded bar, unescorted, but she was hungry, and even if there was no corner left in which to sit and eat her sandwiches, she could always take them away and find a secluded field.

She went in, thrusting her way resolutely through the little groups of regulars whose lunch-time habit it was to foregather there of a Sunday, and waited patiently to catch the eye of the landlord. Suddenly a voice behind her said:

'Well, fancy finding you here, Emma Penelope. Why didn't you tell me you had the whole day off?'

She spun round so sharply that she caught his elbow, spilling the contents of his glass down his well-creased trousers. Max Grainger was the very last person she expected, or wanted to see, and her clumsiness left her speechless.

'I'm — I'm so s-sorry,' she stammered at last. 'You made me jump — please let me buy you another.'

'You seem to make a habit of splashing liquid about, but it's no matter. It was only the heel-taps anyway, and since it was entirely my fault this time for making

you jump, please allow me to buy one for you. What are you drinking?'

It was infuriating, thought Emma, that he could switch with such ease from one personality to another, and the suspicion that he reserved his charm for off-moments when no one who mattered was around made her answer ungraciously :

'Nothing. I was waiting to get a sandwich, so if you'll just make way at the bar for me, I'll order you a drink as well.'

'Is this a brush-off?' he enquired. 'Why should you be so unfriendly since we're to meet later on in the afternoon?'

'But we're not. I simply called in here for a sandwich because there was nowhere else to go I shall take it away with me, I think, as this place seems rather crowded,' she said, and wished she had left the Moon alone and gone into the more humble Blue Boar at the other end of the village.

She was aware of him looking down at her with a rather odd expression, then he gave his order to the landlord over the heads of other damouring customers and said politely:

'Not? I understood we had made a date, provided you weren't required for kennel duties, and it seems you're not.'

'Yes, well ...' Emma said with that vague inconclusiveness which covers a lack of the right reply, and one eyebrow lifted.

'Far be it for me to persuade you if you have other plans,' he said, reaching for the glasses which were being held out to him. 'What are they?'

'Oh! Well, I haven't any, actually. I thought I might walk a bit, and perhaps find somewhere nice for tea. There isn't much to do in the country except that on a Sunday, is there?'

'You had already been invited for tea, but perhaps Plovers Farm is not to your taste, after all,' he said. 'Just as a matter of interest, why have you decided to give my casual hospitality a miss?'

'Well ...' she said, unhappily, 'it all seemed rather vague, and I wasn't sure I'd be free, anyway, and—'

'And you thought my invitation wasn't serious, so decided not to risk a possible snub,' he finished for her, and saw the colour rise under her skin. 'Was that it, Emma Penelope? You don't place much reliance on my good intentions, do you?'

'I'm never very sure what you do intend, Mr. Grainger – after all, I hardly know you,' she said, wondering how she could order her sandwiches and make her escape without getting involved in further awkward exchanges.

'No, you don't, do you?' he retorted. 'But we can remedy that later. In the meantime, we'll go in to lunch when you've finished that sherry, and you can question me further about my intentions – if that hasn't too ominous a sound.'

'You needn't feel you have to offer me lunch just because you've called in for a drink and found me here. All I want is a sandwich to take away,' she said, and swallowed the last of her drink in a hasty gulp.

'I always lunch here on Sundays, since I do for myself at week-ends, so you might just as well join me and enliven my solitary meal. Besides, I'm not going to let you off our date when you've already admitted that you've nowhere else to go, and I'm relying on you to get my tea, anyway. Let's go,' he said, and began manoeuvring her through the crowd without more ado.

Emma felt she was being weak to allow herself to be persuaded without further protest, but it seemed foolish to resist when the enticing aromas of food wafted tantalizingly from the kitchen, whetting her

hunger, and she had, for once, taken trouble with her appearance and knew she looked nice. She did wonder, as she took her seat opposite him, whether there had not been at the back of her mind the thought that she might possibly change her plans and look in at Plovers after all, should the afternoon prove too long, and dose on the admission came the sensible conclusion that she had made too much of a perfectly ordinary incident.

`That's better,' said Max, observing the change in her face. 'Now, perhaps you'll explain what you meant by saying you never knew what I intended.'

`I only meant your manner,' she replied, wishing to disabuse him of any unfortunate misconceptions he might be harbouring. 'You seem two different people, which is apt to confuse me. I'm never very sure, you see, which one of them to take seriously.'

`If you're wise, you'll take nothing seriously if you have doubts about yourself,' he said, and was rewarded for his ambiguity with that dear, unblinking stare which carried such a curious gift for disturbance.

`Doubts?' she repeated politely. 'You mean doubts about my work? You think I'm not efficient?'

'I've no reason to complain of your efficiency in the kennels, from what I've seen, and the doubts I was referring to have nothing to do with dogs,' said Max, sounding slightly irritable, and Emma was relieved when a waiter placed a large helping of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding in front of her and she could give undivided attention to the pleasures of eating. She thought Max watched her with a rather wry expression from time to time and hastened to say apologetically, as she scraped up the last of the gravy:

`I'm sorry to be so preoccupied with food, Mr. Grainger; kennelmaids don't often get asked out to lunch, and it makes them greedy.'

`Don't they feed you well up at the Court, then?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' she said quickly. 'The Mills have an excellent cook, as you must have discovered for yourself, and living as family is very different from the treatment you get in most kennels where the girls muck in together and quite often cook for themselves.'

`And yet, you know, I have a suspicion that you really prefer it that way. Do you?'

`Yes, in some ways. You know where you are and what you're employed for. It isn't always easy to be a friend of the family one minute and the kennelmaid the next.'

'Yes, I see. I should have thought of that. Marian hasn't, perhaps, the gift for combining the two.'

`Well,' said Emma judiciously, 'I imagine it can't be very easy if you want to blast a person you're paying handsomely for service, to remember not to hurt their feelings.'

`And are your feelings hurt?'

`Not really. I should have learnt by now to take the rough with the smooth after a varied selection of employers.'

'But you haven't learnt to harden your heart where your canine charges are concerned,' he said. 'You fall in love over and over and have no redress when it comes to the parting.'

`Well,' said Emma briskly, thinking there had been enough of these indirect probings into her emotions, 'It's better to stick to dogs, if you must lose your heart, and that, I'm thankful to say, is the extent of my love-life.'

'Another indirect challenge, Miss Clay?' he said softly. 'There's something provocative in a declaration of independence that pricks the average male's curiosity — or didn't you know?'

'I've been told,' she replied, going a little pink. 'But if you think I'm just shooting a line in order to – in order to—'

'In order to what?'

'Nothing. This is a very idiotic conversation, and I should like another helping of pudding, if it wouldn't scandalize the waiter.'

They sat for some time over their coffee. When they finally left the inn themselves it was beginning to rain and it was ludicrous to refuse to go home with her host, even had she wanted to.

The house seemed to welcome her just as it had before. She shivered a little in the thin frock she had put on, and Max insisted on lighting a fire in the raftered living-room, observing that a wet evening of an average English summer called for fires even in July. Emma, curled in a deep chair, watching the firelight grow to a rosy pink on the whitewashed walls, spared a thought for Marian impressing Frank Dawson with the opulent but tasteless splendours of Armina Court and silently wished her luck in whatever enterprise she had in mind.

'A penny for them?' said Max from the opposite easy chair.

'I was thinking of Marian and that rather terrifyingly well-appointed house,' she answered. 'She's got an important member of the Kennel Club down for the day whom she wants to get in with. He's supposed to be finding her a good brood-bitch which, I may say, she could do with. Her bitches are very second-rate.'

'Honest or a shark? Marian has a tendency to be gulled by a high price and one or two impressive wins.'

'Oh, Dawson's an honest dealer. He'll stick her for a good price, but he's too careful of his reputation to pull a fast one.'

'Frank Dawson?'

'Yes, do you know him?'

'I've run across him. Rather a fly chap with all sorts of irons in the fire. Steer clear of him, Emma, if he comes your way.' Max's voice was suddenly sharp, and she smiled to herself as she glanced across at him.

'I know all about Dawson. I worked for him,' she replied calmly, and was interested in the sudden frown which drew his eyebrows together in a dark, forbidding line.

'Did you indeed? When was that?'

'Oh, a long time ago. Actually it was my first job and I didn't stay very long.'

'H'm ... well, what about that tea you were going to get for me? Has your lunch sufficiently subsided to face bread-and-butter and rich plum cake? Come, and I'll show you the kitchen.'

The kitchen was as cosy and friendly as the rest of the house, with a brick floor, old-fashioned range and an enormous Dutch dresser laden with cottage china. Capacious cupboards were built into recesses, brass and copper pans gleamed between strings of onions and bunches of dried herbs, and there was even a rocking-chair and a rag rug of many colours.

'It's too good to be true!' exclaimed Emma, feasting her eyes. 'It's like the kitchens one used to read about in old-fashioned romances, and quite, quite wasted on a bachelor.'

'Well, that's a state that's easily remedied,' Max replied crisply, and was delighted to see he had made her blush.

'That was rather impertinent of me, wasn't it?' she said, feeling abashed, then caught the twinkle in his eye.

'Not at all. You're perfectly entitled to your opinion. Well, charmingly old-fashioned my kitchen may be, but we have a very up-to-date electric cooker as well

as that hideously extravagant range, so get cracking with kettle and teapot.' It was not only a new experience, but enormous fun, thought Emma, to bustle about in a proper kitchen, preparing a meal for the lord and master even if it was only a simple matter of tea. She enjoyed giving him orders to find this and that, not knowing where anything was kept, and scolded him soundly when he ladled tea into the pot without first warming it. The rain, pattering on the windows, only emphasized the comfort within, she thought, as they lingered over their tea in front of the living-room fire, and had no idea how contentment had lent a delicate charm to her sharp-boned face until Max said suddenly:

'You fit this house, Emma — as I suppose you should, since you were born here — you, as well as I, are two different people. You are altogether charming in that wide-skirted dress, with colour in your cheeks and those amazingly truthful eyes of yours. Are you going to spend your life working for others and giving your heart to dogs?' 'Well!' she exclaimed, not at all flattered by such an assumption : 'You've no reason to suppose that I shall be content to work as a kennelmaid for ever, and if you can find me charming in an off-moment, there's no reason why I shouldn't aspire to something higher.'

'Meaning matrimony?'

'Yes, if that's your only alternative to my present way of life, but really, Max, you do have a terribly masculine approach to quite simple problems.'

'Would you expect me to have any other, since I happen to be a man?' he enquired with irritating logic. 'Incidentally, what made you assume so readily that I was a bachelor?'

'You told me, that first time, you lived here alone and were looked after by a daily.'

'So I did.'

'Besides, even if you hadn't, there's something about a house that tells one.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know exactly, just a feeling — and of course no flowers.' The absence of flowers had worried her since there were so many growing in the garden, and she asked him curiously if he had never wanted to marry.

His smile was a little cryptic, but he made no hesitation in replying:

'Oh, yes. I was once engaged, in fact, to a very decorative young woman not unlike your glamorous employer.'

'Oh!' That, thought Emma, not caring for the idea very much, might be a pointer that he could have more than a professional interest in Marian. Wasn't it said that men tended to stick to type in affairs of the heart? 'Why didn't you go through with it, or is that an impertinent question?'

'Not at all. It's nice to know that in spite of this stern preoccupation with kennels you have your share of feminine curiosity. It was the lady who wouldn't go through with it, as it happens. Like my illustrious parent, she was ambitious for me. She, no less than he, turned her charming nose up at the veterinary profession.'

'You mean she turned you down because of that?'

'No, she gave me a choice. I wasn't through my Finals then and could have switched. She and my father ganged up on me, which was quite natural since they were both ambitious and good friends into the bargain.'

'So you chose your own way and to hell with them both! Didn't you mind?'

'Oh, I suppose I did at the time, but being both

young and probably bloody-minded into the bargain, I took the line that if the lady didn't care enough to back me up, she wasn't worth having.'

'She wasn't, either! 'What became of her?'

His mouth had a wry twist as if he had tasted something sour.

'She settled for my father eventually.'

'You mean she married him?'

'Oh, yes. Rather a comic situation when one's intended finishes up as one's stepmama, wouldn't you say?'

'I don't think it's funny — I think it's dreadful!' Emma exclaimed, sounding shocked and very young, and suddenly he was standing over her and had pulled her abruptly into his arms.

'You are so utterly absurd and so utterly sweet that you mustn't blame me if I abuse the laws of hospitality,' he said, and kissed her, experimentally at first, then with a rising insistence which she had no power, and no wish, to deny.

'You see?' he said, as he let her go and saw, with satisfaction, the colour in her cheeks and the sudden sparkle in her eyes. 'You're not so devoted to dogs that you can't spare a thought for other things.'

'That,' said Emma, shielding her hot cheeks with her hands, 'wasn't fair. Kennelmaids may be fair game, for all I know, but I — I'm not like that.'

'Like what, for heaven's sake? Did you suppose I was just taking advantage because you happen to be employed near by and I had an empty afternoon on my hands?'

'Well, weren't you?' she retorted, and he took her again into his arms and kissed her gently on the forehead.

'No,' he said in half-exasperated tenderness. 'You're

a prickly, provocative, and rather absurd young creature, but—'

The young setter, which had been lying on the hearth undisturbed by his master's manoeuvres, sprang up suddenly and rushed, barking, to the door as footsteps sounded outside followed almost immediately by the thud of the knocker being firmly applied to the front door.

'Who the hell?' Max exclaimed angrily, and Emma, no less disconcerted by such an inopportune interruption, smoothed down her disordered hair, and thought it was just her luck that Max should be called out to a case at such a very tantalizing moment. It was not, however, a call on his professional services, but something more upsetting from Emma's point of view. As Max opened the door to his unknown visitor, she heard Marian's voice saying coquettishly:

'So you are at home, Max! You said to look in for a drink, some time, so I've taken you at your word. May we come in?'

She walked into the living-room with an assured little swing of the hips and stopped dead when she saw Emma. Frank Dawson, following behind, had perforce to stop too, and Emma, furious with herself for the guilty colour which she knew was flooding her face, gazed back, too strange to such a situation to have the presence of mind to offer a casual greeting. It was Dawson who took charge, putting a wealth of amused meaning into his voice as he drawled lightly:

'Well, if it isn't Penny Plain! Marian, my dear, I think you've chosen an inopportune moment for your call.'

'Not at all,' said Emma, rallying. 'I was just leaving, anyway.'

'You'll get very wet if you're proposing to walk back in that thin frock,' Marian snapped, and her eyes lost their velvety look as they travelled over Emma, noting the pink cheeks and ruffled hair and the unsuccessful effort to swallow embarrassment. It was

only too plain, she thought, what Max Grainger had been up to, and a swift glance at Dawson confirmed that his thoughts were running along the same lines.

'Her host, presumably, was planning to drive her back later, so we've rather spoilt the party,' Dawson said. 'I must be getting along myself in any case, Grainger, so I'll say au revoir. I was only dropping Marian on my way.'

'Well, you must have a glass of something before you go,' Max said politely, and his face was once more the cool, slightly arrogant face with which Emma was familiar. Dawson, who despite his excuses, seemed in no hurry to leave, accepted a whisky and soda and made himself generally agreeable, and Marian, ignoring Emma, flitted round the room, exclaiming admiringly at what she found there, and reproving Max with mock reproach for not having invited her to Plovers before.

'So your tastes are not so prudish as they once were,' Dawson said to Emma under cover of Marian's little squeals of delight. 'I'm sorry if we barged in at an awkward moment.'

'The moment was no different from any other,' Emma replied with her nose in the air, and realized the implication of her remark when he laughed unkindly. 'I was going to clear away the tea-things. In fact, I'll do it now and wash up as well,' she added, but it was an unfortunate excuse, for Marian heard and observed somewhat waspishly to Max that she had no idea her kennelmaid was on such cosy terms of domesticity with her vet.

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'Another chance meeting?' she asked with an air of exaggerated innocence.

'Yes,' snapped Emma, thinking of their unexpected encounter in the Waning Moon. At the same time Max replied: 'Not at all. Emma and I had a date for tea.'

'Well, make up your minds,' said Marian with an artificial little laugh, and Emma escaped to the kitchen with the tea-tray.

'Really, Max, it isn't kind to amuse yourself with someone as green as poor Emma,' Marian said roguishly, arranging herself with studied elegance in one of the easy chairs. 'The average kennelmaid doesn't get much of a break, I imagine, when it comes to gentle dalliance, and Emma, for all her efficiency, is only nineteen.'

'Not so green as you might think, my dear,' Dawson interposed before Max had time to reply, and Marian made a little face at him.

'Of course, I was forgetting. Well, perhaps you don't have to walk so circumspectly after all, Max dear,' she said, and was far too satisfied with her own tolerant sophistication to be disturbed by anything she read into Max's expression.

Dawson, however, had a suspicion that they had interrupted more than an idle hour of flirtation, and the thought pleased him. He had an old score he would be happy to settle if it meant taking that priggish child down a peg or two, neither did he care very much for the little he knew of this rather superior veterinary fellow or, for that matter, the interest that spoilt little Mills girl had in him.

'Now, you mustn't tell tales out of school, my dear,' he said to Marian, managing to sound as roguish as she. 'I shouldn't have discussed your paragon of a kennelmaid in an idle hour, so let sleeping dogs lie. Talking of dogs, Grainger, I've found an excellent

brood-bitch for Miss Mills, and we'd both like you to give it the once-over before she decides. A veterinary certificate is always advisable when a large sum of money is involved, don't you think?'

'Presumably the present owner can get the animal vetted,' Max replied so shortly that Marian opened her brown eyes wide.

`But not so satisfactory as having your own vet's opinion,' Dawson said smoothly. 'Miss Mills has great faith in you. Can do?'

'Certainly. Bring the bitch to the surgery in Chode and I'll give her the once-over.' Max held out a hand for his guest's empty glass, but Dawson got to his feet.

`No more, thanks, I really must be going. And as regards the bitch, I'm afraid you'll have to make a journey into Kent. The owner won't send on approval, and I can't say I blame her with a valuable animal. Anything might happen in transit.'

'Then,' said Max, annoyance and barely suppressed hauteur lending a bite to his voice, 'Miss Mills will have to make other arrangements. We're far too busy for one of us to take time off to go driving about the country on unimportant missions. I'm sorry, Marian, but any reputable vet in the district can pass the bitch for you.'

Her face looked mutinous for a moment, then she gazed up at him with the confiding assurance of a pretty child well used to wheedling.

'That's churlish of you, Max,' she said. 'I never can prise you out of your shell and I was looking forward to coming with you and making it an excuse for a day out. If you feel you'll be passing up fees earned by a round of local visits instead of just one, I'm ready and willing to pay for your services on the same basis, so the firm won't lose.'

Had she not been a valued client whom it would be

impolitic to offend by plain speaking, he probably would have told her what she could do with her money, thought Dawson, watching his face with amusement, but he merely replied with polite patience:

It's not a question of money, but of ethics. An emergency might arise which only I could deal with, and an animal's life is more important than driving miles to perform an unnecessary function.'

`You have two partners, and you also have days off. What's to stop you taking me then? After all, you've made time for Emma this afternoon,' said Marian, beginning to sound querulous, and Emma, having had time over the washing-up to recover her sense of proportion, chose that moment to come back into the room. What, after all, was a kiss, she had asked herself severely, and had she really been in danger of making a fool of herself? But Marian's last remark seemed to suggest that they had been discussing her, and the puckish expression on Dawson's face did not tend to answer her own question with any assurance.

`Thank you for doing the chores, Emma. Would you like a drink?' said Max, but there was no warmth in his voice, and when she refused, he did not press her and refilled Marian's glass and his own, a dear intimation, she thought, that he wished to be alone with her.

`Well, I'll say so long, and thank you. Let me know what you decide, Marian, and if you can persuade Grainger, I'll fix an appointment,' said Dawson, making for the door.

'Oh, I think I'll be able to persuade Max, if I can coax him into sparing me one of his precious days off,' said Marian, settling cosily into her chair with the air of a guest waiting hopefully for the others to go. `Emma, there's no need to wait till Max brings me home if you want to get back. Frank will give you a lift, won't you, Frank?'

Emma had no particular desire to find herself alone with Dawson, but she was grateful for an opportunity to go before she could be made to feel in the way. She thanked Max rather primly for his hospitality and saw Marian's quick little frown at the mention of lunch. He came to the front door to see them off and at the last minute, flung a mackintosh over her shoulders.

'You can get plenty wet from here to the gate. You can return it next time you come,' he said, and smiled down at her with a faint, enigmatical question in his eyes, before standing aside to let her pass.

'Thank you,' she said politely, but she wondered as she ran down the path to Dawson's car if there would be a next time.

'She'll spike your guns, you know, Penny Plain,' remarked Dawson with soft suddenness beside her.

'I don't know what you mean,' she replied, edging away from him, and thankful that the distance between the farmhouse and Armina Court was so short.

'Don't you? It was only too evident that we had interrupted an amorous interlude, and Marian won't have liked that.'

'Even if it was true, Marian hasn't prior claim as far as I'm aware.'

'Possibly not, but she's predatory. She'll always want what's in danger of being snatched by someone else.'

'What a beastly thing to say! And aren't you rather presuming on a completely false assumption?'

'Am I? You dissemble no better, my dear, than you did two years ago. If I'm any judge, you were as willing to receive advances today as you were unwilling then; or possibly you have more experience now.'

'That's rather a mean little revenge.'

'Yes, isn't it? Wouldn't you like to call me a cad and have done with it?'

'You are, of course, aren't you?' Emma replied, rather surprised to find herself more curious than resentful, and he laughed.

'Of course, but in the best tradition, you know. You haven't lost that refreshing fillip to a jaded palate, I'm glad to find, my sweet. Pity you weren't older when you worked for me.'

Yes, thought Emma, she would have handled the situation better, and supposed she must have gathered a measure of experience, although not of the kind Dawson had hinted at, for he no longer filled her with the old embarrassment or even dislike.

'A friendly word of warning mightn't come amiss,' he said as he turned the car through the gates of Armina Court. 'You've landed a nice cushy job here with all the trimmings. I wouldn't like to see you out on your ear.'

'Why should I be out on my ear, Mr. Dawson?' she replied quite coolly. 'My private life is my own affair and has nothing to do with my qualifications as a kennelmaid.'

'Oh, quite, but when duty calls for a working partnership with someone who doesn't leave one entirely disinterested, the two might tend to merge, and if you poach on forbidden preserves, my dear Penny Plain, you'll be out, I don't mind betting.'

'If you're still harping on Mr. Grainger, you're making a large mountain out of a very small molehill,' she said, and felt rather pleased with the definition, but he only smiled and brought the car to a smooth halt at the front door.

'I'm not the only one to go scavenging in molehills,' he said. 'Our spoilt Miss Mills won't grudge you the possible loss of your heart in a hopeless cause, but if she suspects there's a chance of reciprocation, she'll be out for a scalp, whether she wants it or not.'

'Are you up to something with Marian?' she asked.

'I'm usually up to something, as you should know, my pretty, but at the moment only that nice fat commission on the deal I hope to pull off with your fair employer is on my mind. Run along in, Penny Plain, you're getting wet.'

He let her out of the car and she called a hasty goodnight and thanks for the lift, and went into the house, not waiting to watch him drive away.

Mr. Mills had supped early and was presumably, shut in his study, and Emma, thankful for her own company, foraged amongst the Sunday-night offerings of cold meats and salads on the dining-room sideboard, and took the plate upstairs with her.

She sat on her bed, eating without relish, thinking of Max doing for himself at week-ends with only his dog for company, and the image saddened her; then she remembered the twinkle in his eye when he had rejected her pity for his broken romance, and knew her regrets were wasted. He was independent of the social amenities, a lone wolf, content with the path he had chosen, and very capable of doing for himself without the solace of flowers or company. The thought depressed her unduly.

Just before she dropped off to sleep after an inexplicable fit of crying, she remembered old Holly's tart remark the night she had come back so brash and so heart-whole from Plovers Green. 'You might not feel so smug and charitable if you were to lose your best young man to a prettier face than your own,' Holly had said, and Emma had laughed, secure in her ignorance of a jealousy she had never known.

Well, she thought, thumping her pillow violently into a more acceptable shape, what of it? Her heart was given to Flight and all his predecessors who had, in turn, wrung tears from her, and if -she could imagine

other stirrings from a few chance meetings and one tender interlude, it was time she remembered her position and the supposed amenability of kennel-maids ...

The rain persisted for days, and Emma, no less than Marian, found herself infected by the depressing weather. Work in the kennels seemed an endless round of changing bedding, keeping the puppies dry, and rubbing down wet dogs after dispiriting hours of exercise in the rain.

When she had first come to work at the Armina Kennels it had been fun on wet days, browsing through the Kennel Club Stud Books with Marian, working out blood-lines and planning future matings, but Emma had soon realized that although Marian owned an impressive array of technical works relating to the breed, her interest was only skin-deep and she soon grew bored.

'Dawson was terrifically impressed with my kennels,' she said now, brightening a little at the prospect of discussing a man who, in his turn, had managed to impress her. 'He said this layout put his to shame, and Armina Court would make a simply splendid holiday home for dogs if one ever thought of starting something new.'

'A boarding kennel, you mean?'

'Well, he calls his a holiday home — sounds more posh, and you can charge fancy prices. I'm sick of this weather. Let's get Grainger up and enjoy a bit of masculine society. It's his day off, I believe.' She was apt to fly from one fancy to another and was never averse to trying to tempt her unsociable vet out of his shell. He seldom obliged except on business, but lately he had taken to dropping in now and again if his rounds took him in their direction.

'Go and ring him up,' Marian urged. 'Ask him to come over for drinks. Say I want his advice about this brood-bitch Dawson's got his eye on for me.'

It seemed a feeble excuse to make to a man who was presumably off duty, Emma thought, neither did she particularly relish the prospect of being politely snubbed with a firm refusal, but it seemed more politic not to argue.

She received the answer she had expected, and if she was disappointed she was also aware that he knew it.

Was this your idea, by any chance?' he asked provocatively when he had made his excuses.

'Certainly not! Kennelmaids don't invite their acquaintances to drinks at their employer's expense.'

'How prim you sound, Miss Clay. Prim and prickly. Didn't you want my company? I'd thought after the other evening we'd progressed a little further than mere acquaintances ... now don't bang down the receiver before I've finished speaking, it isn't polite.'

Emma was tempted to do that very thing. It was hardly fair, she thought, to remind her so unconcernedly of that weak moment of capitulation, but if she followed her indination, it would only tell him he had scored a point, so she said, instead:

'I will ring off, Mr. Grainger, when you tell me what excuse I'm to give to Miss Mills.'

Now you're sounding like a well-trained secretary. Tell her anything you like. Tell her the truth, if it comes to that — I'm a hard-working country vet not prepared to waste my precious leisure hours talking shop to pretty amateurs who have more money than sense.'

'Twopence coloured ...' murmured Emma rashly, and smiled to herself.

'Yes, Penny Plain, and very nice, too, if your only goal is that bowl of cherries.'

'What on earth are you talking about, Max? What bowl of cherries, for goodness' sake?'

'Oh, that sounds more like Emma Penelope, truthful-eyed and still filled with childlike curiosity. Life can be a bowl of cherries, so they say — just another version of that other adage. You, my child, are born to the plain variety, so don't let your ambitions be corrupted.'

'This,' said Emma, trying to sound disapproving, 'is a most ridiculous conversation. I'd better ring off.'

'Don't go,' he said, and his voice coming over the wire was, perhaps, slightly distorted to that note of cajolery. 'It's pleasant sitting here with my feet up, listening to your voice and imagining the funny little faces you're probably making when you disapprove of my remarks. You haven't been exercising the dogs in my direction lately. Have you found a more rewarding walk?'

'The weather's been against the evening walks and in the mornings I go a different way,' she said, and hoped her voice was suitably indifferent.

'Call in, another time. We can shut the dogs up in the kennels for half an hour and chew the fat together over a glass of wine,' he replied, quite undisturbed.

'I shouldn't dream of intruding on your leisure time. You've already refused Marian's invitation and made it plain that you prefer your own company when you're off duty.'

'You've got your nose in the air, I don't mind betting. The prickles are out again!'

There was laughter in his voice and a thread of that more unfamiliar tenderness, and she suddenly wished she was there with him in the friendly, rafted room which seemed to bring out a different and more gentle side of him.

'I really must go. Marian will be wondering what

on earth we have to talk about all this time,' she said quickly, and rang off.

Marian did wonder and, not at all pleased by Max's polite refusal to relieve her boredom, had some sharp little comments to make on Emma's flushed cheeks.

'Won't be bothered to come to the house, but evidently not averse to flirtatious exchanges with my staff,' she said acidly. 'You watch your step, Emma. Grainger's probably pestered by match-making mamas, being an unattached rarity in these parts, and I shouldn't wonder he has to take his pleasures where he finds them — all right, you needn't look at me like that! I was only dropping a gentle hint because I know girls in your position sometimes have to put up with a bit of nonsense.'

'Thank you, it isn't necessary,' Emma replied as coolly as she could, and Marian smiled at her with a satisfied return to good humour.

'Isn't it? It was pretty plain what had been going on that evening Dawson and I burst in on you,' she said, and Emma did not answer but made some excuse and went down to the kennels. Plain ... Penny Plain ... she thought as she ran through the rain. Hadn't Max just said she was born to the plain variety of life? Well, so she was, and if she chose to put up with a bit of nonsense when it meant no more than a pleasant passing of the time, it was nobody's business but her own.

'You haven't latched that gate properly,' she said sharply to Ireen, who was hurrying through her evening duties before catching her bus home to the village. 'One of these days Saracen will slip out and get at Flight and then you'll be in serious trouble.' She felt ashamed immediately she saw the girl's rather stupid face go flabby with sulky guilt, but she was proved distressingly right at the end of the week.

Ireen had again been careless in leaving a run gate unfastened, and Saracen, who was always waiting his chance, streaked out, making a beeline for Flight, whom Emma had just brought on to the lawn for his daily half-hour of ring training. In a moment the two dogs were locked in a snarling, spinning tangle of legs and teeth and flying fur, and Saracen, the bigger and stronger, already had his grip firmly fixed.

Emma flung herself upon them, shouting at Ireen to fetch a bucket of water, and managed to get her arm round Saracen's throat in a stranglehold which she hoped would be strong enough to choke him into loosening his grip. It seemed an age before Ireen returned with the bucket, her gasps and sobs a plaintive obbligato to the ferocious cacophony of sound around them, and Emma felt her own flesh tear as Flight's teeth met unwittingly in her arm as he strove to defend himself.

'Chuck it over them and seize Flight by his scruff when Saracen lets go!' she shouted to the dithering girl, who at last obeyed, drenching Emma as well as the dogs, and hurling the bucket at random, which fortunately caught Saracen on the muzzle with sufficient unexpectedness to unlock his jaws for the instant required by Emma to snatch off one of her shoes and thrust it between his teeth.

'Give Flight a belt with that choke and send him off, then throw it to me,' Emma gasped, finding it difficult to get her breath, and mercifully the girl, this time, was prompt and Flight, who was no hero when it came to standing his ground, fled yelping back to his own run. Emma, having deftly slipped the choke over Saracen's head and pulled it taut, beat him soundly with the end of the attached lead and led him away to his run.

Blood was dripping freely from her lacerated arm,

but Emma, in her anxiety for Flight, was unaware of pain.

'Is he hurt?' she asked Ireen, kneeling down beside the trembling dog and running anxious fingers over him.

'Oo-er — your arm, Miss Clay!' Ireen shrieked, going a little green, and Emma snapped impatiently :

'Never mind my arm — hold him steady, you ninny, and let me look ... poor Flight, poor boy ... it's all over now, so relax, my beauty. He's caught him here on the foreleg, Ireen — quite a nasty nip, but thank goodness it wasn't his throat. We'll clean it up and put on a dressing, but I think it needs a couple of stitches, so you'd better go to the house and ring up the surgery while I see to the dog. If Mr. Grainger isn't available, tell them to send anyone who is.'

'Oh, crumbs! Is he going to be lame for the show? Miss Mills won't half be mad!' Ireen exclaimed, going even paler, and Emma gave her a look that was half impatient and half sympathetic.

'Well, let's hope not. You'd left that gate unfastened again, hadn't you?'

'No, miss ... yes, miss ... I'm ever so sorry, miss.' Ireen looked ready to burst into tears and Emma said briskly:

'Well, the sooner we get a vet out here the better, so hurry along.'

While Ireen was telephoning Emma cleaned and dressed the wound, which she was thankful to find was not deep and, providing the leg did not stiffen up too badly, there was still a chance that with rest and care in the few days left to them before Wilchester Show, the dog would be fit to compete. His nerve had not been sufficiently shaken to refuse an offering of liver, she was glad to see when she settled him finally in his kennel, and only then became aware that she was

drenched with water, her legs were beginning to feel like cotton wool, and waves of sickness made it necessary to sit down hurriedly on a bench in the dog-kitchen.

'We're in luck,' panted Ireen, returning breathless from the house. 'They're getting on to Mr. Grainger who's at Gubbins' Farm over the way, so he should be along any minute. My, you do look bad! Shouldn't wonder you need the vet more than Flight.'

'It'll pass,' said Emma, adding that it might be an idea for Ireen to make a good strong cup of tea in the meantime for both of them, and the kettle had just come to the boil when Max walked in upon them.

'Well, where's the patient? Much damage done?' he said briskly, and Emma surreptitiously slipped an adjacent tea-cloth over her bleeding arm.

'It's Flight,' she answered, getting unsteadily to her feet. 'Saracen got at him, but it could have been worse. I've cleaned him up, but I think the wound needs a stitch. Will you come with me, please?'

She thought he looked faintly amused at her polite indication that he was virtually a stranger, but he said nothing and followed her out to the range of kennels, where he examined the dog with swift thoroughness, agreed that a couple of stitches were required and proceeded to set about the business with a few sharp orders to Emma and gentle words of encouragement to Flight.

'Will he be lame?' Emma asked anxiously as he packed up his bag. 'Wilchester Show is only a few days away and Marian has set her heart on winning that Certificate.'

He glanced at her with that swift lift of the eyebrows.

'Are you so sure of success if he's sound, then?' he remarked with what seemed to her a mixture of amuse-

ment and impatience, and she felt she was being censured for an unwarranted cocksureness.

'Yes,' she replied with a frank rejection of false modesty, and looked him in the eye.

'Flight's coming to his peak, and there's nothing in my opinion to touch him. If the judge is honest we shouldn't run much chance of being beaten.'

'And is the judge honest?'

'Oh, yes. There are good judges and bad judges, but most of them are honest, you know.'

'Well, I bow to the expert. You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?'

'No, not at all. I'm only sure of my father's assessment of a good dog, and Flight is that. There are always unforeseen hazards attached to showing, of course, and you haven't answered my question.'

'You would make an excellent advocate, Miss Clay,' he returned with annoying mockery. 'As to the matter of soundness, we will just have to wait and see. You may be lucky at that if the leg doesn't stiffen up too much, but if he's not fit, well, there are other shows.'

'Not in August. There's only Wilchester, and Chode at the beginning of September where we'd like him to get his title, that being, so to speak, on our own stamping ground, which would be right and proper, don't you think?'

She had forgotten, in the innocent pleasure of the one rosy dream she shared with Marian, that he was not impressed by the rewards of the show-ring, and was taken off guard when he retorted with some warmth:

'You're no more sensible than Marian, after all, with these trivial ambitions when there's famine and sickness and human distress and poverty — a hundred and one more worthy causes for the fulfilment of unsatisfied egos.'

He had turned as he spoke in irritable haste to take his leave, and in so doing, knocked against Emma's arm. The pain was momentarily so intense that a wave of nausea engulfed her and she went so white that Max looked down at her in alarm.

'Good heavens, child, I didn't mean to upset you to this extent by my doubtless pompous views!' he exclaimed, then his expression changed completely as the expedient tea-cloth slipped down her arm, revealing the lacerated flesh.

'Why the hell didn't you say you'd been bitten?' he snapped. 'Here, come back into the kitchen and sit down while I have a look.'

He put an arm round her, supporting her to the dog-kitchen where the kettle was boiling over on the stove.

'You're soaking wet, too,' he observed disapprovingly as he lowered her on to a bench.

'What on earth's been going on?'

'Ireen threw a bucket of water over us to stop the fight. I think I must have caught most of it!' she said.

He opened his bag again without further comment, selected what he would need with methodical care, then proceeded to deal swiftly and efficiently with the ugly-looking gash.

'I'll give you an anti-tetanus injection, but this should be stitched, so I'd better get you to a doctor,' he said, preparing a syringe, and Emma looked worried.

'I can't very well leave here till Marian gets back,' she protested, clinging to a confused sense of duty. 'Ireen's probably having a mild attack of hysterics somewhere, so—'

'So the chap can come to you, can't he?'

'What's to stop you stitching me up yourself?' she asked feebly. 'It would save time, and humans aren't any different from animals, are they?'

'Only so far as animals are trusting and a lot more sensible. Yes, I can do that if you wish, though I'm not sure if it's strictly ethical,' he replied, giving her a sharp look, then impatiently snatched the protesting kettle from the stove, filled the pot into which Ireen had got as far as spooning the tea, and added a generous dash of brandy from his medicinal supplies to the cup he poured out for her.

'Here, get this inside you. You may need a bit of stiffening if you really mean to submit yourself to my tender mercies. I suppose,' he said severely, watching the faint colour creep back into her cheeks as she sipped the tea, 'you were indulging in heroics again —hurling yourself into the fray as you hurled yourself under my car after a mongrel that didn't need rescuing.'

'It's hardly indulging in heroics to try to stop a fight when you're being paid to look after someone else's valuable stock,' she retorted, and his mouth relaxed in a smile of satisfaction at having successfully goaded her into healthy retaliation.

'I suppose not. Well, if you're ready, we'd better set about patching you up. I'll probably hurt you, so if you want to let out a yell, I won't hold it against you,' he said, and chose what he needed from his equipment.

Emma, however, found no occasion to yell, for he was both sure and gentle and accompanied his actions with the same soothing string of assurances he had used to the dog. He would, Emma found herself thinking absently, have made an excellent doctor had he chosen to follow his father's profession.

'There you are,' he said when he had finished and improvised a temporary sling from a length of bandage. 'Keep that arm up as much as possible and let the girl do any heavy work for a day or two. I don't mind betting you'll be stiffer than Flight by tomorrow.'

'As long as he's sound by Thursday, that won't matter,' she said, and he shot her a quizzical glance.

'It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that you'll hardly be fit to handle a dog in the ring,' he observed dryly, and saw the sudden consternation in her eyes.

'Oh, but I must be! Marian would never forgive me if — anyway, it's my right arm, and one takes any strain with one's left since the dog's always on the left side,' she said, and he grunted non-committally and began packing away his instruments.

'Will you — will you be looking in tomorrow for Flight?' she asked, not very sure of his support when it came to a question of the shows.

'I shall be looking in on both my patients,' he replied briskly, then unexpectedly touched her cheek with a gentle finger.

'The world won't come to an end, you know, if Marian has to pass over one of her little triumphs,' he told her with an odd touch of tenderness. 'You have a gallant, if misguided heart, Emma Penelope. Save it for better things.'

She looked up at him swiftly, her eyes widening in surprise, while at the same time she became aware of a familiar but inexplicable tug at her emotions. She was conscious of his eyes resting on her with an echo of the quizzical tenderness that had been in his voice and, remembering his occasional uncomfortable knack of thought-reading, felt herself colouring.

'You are rather charming when you blush, Emma,' he told her softly. 'Can it be that a mild compliment is still a novelty, or do I merely continue to rouse your animosity?'

'You have a very useful trick of confusing the issue, Mr. Grainger,' she retaliated, unconscious of a prim return to formality until he laughed.

'I don't suppose you have a notion of what you

mean, and it's time I was attending to my dumb but more uncritical patients, anyway,' he said.

Just for a moment he stood looking down at her, his expression softening again to tenderness as he contemplated her bedraggled appearance. Quite suddenly he stopped and kissed her.

'Go and get yourself dry,' he said, and went away.

She watched him go, tears beginning to fill her eyes. Delayed shock was quite sufficient to reduce anyone to a state of flabby inertia, she knew; all the same she wished that instead of being rather rude she had obeyed an earlier impulse to take advantage of his gentler moments and accept what comfort he had to offer.

Oh, well, she thought, beginning to clear up the remnants of soiled cotton-wool and lint, there were more immediate factors than her problematical relations with the disturbing Mr. Grainger.

'You old so-and-so!' she admonished the truculent Saracen as she passed his run on her way to the house, but he only flattened his ears and grinned at her falsely. He probably knew very well, she thought disgustedly, that his Championship status would protect him from fear of banishment so long as he continued to win.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MARIAN took the news better than Emma had expected, although she had some acid comments to make regarding the untrustworthiness of staff who were not reliable. Having satisfied herself that Flight's injury appeared to be slight, however, she tended to regard Emma's with suspicion.

'Making rather a song and dance about a mere scratch, aren't you?' she said. 'I shouldn't have thought a sling was necessary — or had you got ideas of enlisting sympathy in the ring on Thursday? It might be a gimmick at that.'

'Not the sort of gimmick to be relied on if your dog is unsound,' laughed Emma with a mental picture of herself and Flight hobbling round the ring like a couple of cripples, but she remembered that Marian's sense of the ridiculous didn't match up with her own when she was told a trifle sharply that there was nothing to giggle at.

'You know very well how important this show is to me, so don't get any ideas of being unfit to handle just to pay me out,' Marian said, and Emma looked as astonished as she felt.

'Pay you out for what, for heaven's sake?' she demanded, and Marian went a little pink.

'Oh, this and that,' she answered glibly. 'Not allowing you to have Flight in the house, perhaps, and — well, if it isn't being crude, a little bit of plain speaking over Max.'

It was one of several occasions when Emma regretted the fact that since she was an employee rather than a friend, she must restrain her tongue, but she managed

to reply with civility, ignoring the reference to Max:

'You are perfectly entitled to object to a dog in your own house. I don't own Flight, neither do I bear grudges. I'm terribly sorry such a thing should happen just before an important show, and I take full blame for carelessness,' she finished, thinking in all fairness that Marian was at least justified there. 'But don't worry. Animals heal very quickly and the bite wasn't deep. Anyway, Max will be here in the morning, so you'll be able to get his opinion.'

'Yes,' said Marian, looking suddenly smug. 'And you can keep out of the way, my dear. I'm not having you putting in your oar and making excuses, hoping to be backed up.'

Emma gave a little shrug, but held her peace.

She was much encouraged to observe, when she let Flight out of his kennel in the morning, that although going a bit short on his near foreleg, he was nothing like as

lame as she expected to find him, and the skin had drawn together so neatly with expert stitching that there was little or no blemish to be seen.

Her arm was stiff and uncomfortable but not unduly painful, and she had dispensed with the sling since it had only aggravated Marian's contention that a fuss was being made about nothing.

She knew by the outbreak of barking when Max arrived, and presently could see the little group moving on to one of the lawns — Ireen, with Flight on a lead, Max strolling casually, hands in pockets, and Marian beside him, dressed in her smartest summer frock and high-heeled shoes. Every so often she tossed back her bright hair a little self-consciously, and just for a moment Emma felt pity for such obvious efforts to attract attention, then she saw Max lay a careless hand on Marian's shoulder, heard him laugh appreciatively at something which had been said, and turned

her back on them. Who was she, she thought irritably, to feel superior when it was plain that a man could appreciate the implied compliment of dressing to please him? Presently she was aware that the inspection was over and they were strolling back to the kennels, and after a few moments Ireen came running down the passageway between the two blocks.

'You're wanted, Miss Clay,' she panted, perspiring freely in the relief of having handled the dog without undue criticism from Marian. 'Mr. Grainger is quite pleased with Flight, but he says he wants to see his other patient.' She giggled knowingly.

'Oh!' Emma scrambled to her feet with a faint sense of foreboding, and one look at Marian's cross little face revealed that not only was her morning spoilt but resentment and suspicion were fighting a losing battle with common sense.

'Why on earth couldn't you have rung up Dr. Grant?' she demanded when Emma joined them. 'It was hardly the thing to make use of Max just because he happened to be here.'

Emma said nothing, aware of Max's thoughtful gaze upon her, no doubt wondering why she had failed to admit to his professional attendance, but he merely said :

'Why haven't you kept to your sling? You're not going to hasten healing if you're more concerned with your appearance.'

Marian, probably heartened by this rather unnecessary setdown, unwisely chipped in before Emma could think of a reply.

'Haven't you got hold of the wrong end of the stick, Max?' she asked innocently.

'Emma rather fancied herself with her sling, getting Dad all hot and bothered and waiting on her at supper.'

'Oh, I see,' said Max in a different tone of voice, and Marian gave a little uneasy wriggle.

'I don't mean, of course, that poor Emma was putting it on,' she said hastily, 'but she can't let me down for Wilchester, and kennelmaids, after all, must expect the odd bite from time to time.'

'Very likely, but that doesn't make them any more immune to infection,' he replied dryly, removing the dressing from Emma's arm and inspecting the closed wound with careful attention. 'Looks healthy enough, but don't take any chances, Emma, and go back to that sling and rest the arm as much as you can, even if it does attract unmerited sympathy.'

He was unaware of Marian's quick little look of silent annoyance as he replaced the bandage over a fresh dressing, but Emma could not altogether suppress a smile.

However intentional he had been in arousing her own animosity a moment ago, he was evidently no less careful of Marian's feelings.

'You realize, of course, that Emma may not be fit to handle on Thursday,' he said coolly, having fixed a safety-pin neatly in place. 'It might be as well to lay on one of the professional chaps just in case.'

'Nonsense!' Marian said coldly, remembering suddenly that she was Miss Mills of Armina Court and her vet, no less than her kennelmaid, was to some extent dependent on her patronage. 'The pros will be booked up by now, and in any case Flight won't handle for a stranger. If the dog is fit to show on Thursday, there's no reason why Emma shouldn't be.'

Max made no immediate comment, but Emma saw his eyebrows shoot up as he reached for his bag. It was unlikely, she thought, that he would be discourteous enough to administer a snub or rebuke in the presence of an employee, whatever his private views, neither had it ever been easy to gauge his reactions to Marian's

changing moods. She felt, nevertheless, that she was in the way and said awkwardly : 'If you'll both excuse me, I must get on with my chores. Thank you for seeing to my arm, Mr. Grainger.'

'Don't go shifting bales of straw, Emma. Let Ireen do the heavy jobs. You can clear up here for a start —that's nice and light,' Marian said with a belated show of concern.

'Max, you must come up to the house for a drink — Emma, too, when she's finished here. I want to talk to you both about that bitch Frank Dawson has found for me.' Then, perhaps already anticipating a refusal, she dapped her hands and went on before he could answer:

'I've just had a marvellous idea! This woman doesn't live very far from Wilchester, and if Dawson can arrange for the bitch to be brought to the show, you could do the vetting and keep an eye on Flight at the same time. Consider it a professional arrangement, of course, but come as my guest just the same. It is your day off, isn't it?'

His eyes were amused. 'Yes, but I have a prior engagement.'

'Fiddle!' Marian exclaimed gaily. 'One can always get out of prior engagements. Just say you will, and I'll ring up Frank.'

'It may be that neither the dog nor the handler will be fit to go,' he reminded her discouragingly, evading very neatly, Emma thought, the necessity for an immediate answer, but Marian, whether or not she read weakening into his evasion, refused to be put off.

'Nonsense!' she said. 'I've more faith in you than that, Max, and in Emma, too. Now, what about those drinks?' she slipped a confiding hand through his arm, inviting him to shed his professional manner and become social, and slipped, herself, into the role of gracious hostess.

'I saw your father's name in the paper this morning — some case or other where he had to give medical evidence,' she said, beginning to urge him towards the house. 'I suppose when he dies, you'll come into the title, Max.'

'Good heavens, no!' Max exclaimed with unflattering relief. 'My father got himself into the Birthday Honours along with a bunch of jockeys and footballers and all sorts. That sort of knighthood dies with the holder, thank goodness.'

'Oh! ' Marian's disappointment was so obvious that Emma repressed a smile, but as she watched them walk away, she could understand Max's bitterness against what his father stood for. The subsequent action of the girl who had turned him down must certainly have soured him. All these things had fallen into perspective with time, he had

assured her, but she supposed he was what he was because of them; difficult to know, a lone wolf, a man proof against the trivial, insistent demands of a society he could well do without.

Whether Max's plain speaking had been effective, or whether her conscience pricked was a matter for conjecture, but Marian certainly behaved herself during the next couple of days, and when Max paid a professional visit the day before the show to give his ultimatum on Flight, she seemed torn between anxiety and a stubborn determination to do what she wanted whatever the verdict.

'You see?' she said triumphantly to Max as Emma ran the dog up and down. 'Not a trace of lameness and he's looking fitter than ever, so you needn't look down your long nose disapprovingly like that.'

He had been watching Emma, not the dog, observing the angle at which she was holding her injured arm and the quick little grimace of pain she made every

So often when the ground jarred her, but he smiled down at Marian looking up at him with such a charming air of confidence and answered lazily:

'My disapproval would scarcely matter, since you've made up your mind to go tomorrow, would it? Well, the dog seems sound enough. You will just have to take a chance he doesn't go lame in the ring, and don't blame me if he won't stand up to all that excessive gaiting you Alsatian folk go in for.'

'I won't, but his judge doesn't make us run too much, thank goodness.'

'Just as well. Frankly, I'm more concerned with the strain on the handler than on the dog.'

'Emma? But the arm's practically healed and she says it doesn't bother her at all. It wasn't much more than a nip, anyway, for all the fuss you made. Emma, come over here and tell our sceptical vet you're all right. He seems to have doubts.'

Emma handed Flight over to Ireen, glad to give the throbbing in her arm a chance to subside, but the anxious inquiry in her eyes was not for herself.

'Was he going sound, Mr. Grainger?' she asked. 'It's difficult to tell when one's handling, but he looked all right to me when Ireen took him round earlier.'

'Seems so at the moment, but what about you? That arm's hurting, isn't it?'

'Not in the least, and it's my legs that will matter, running, anyway, and there's nothing wrong with them.'

'Yes, I can see that. You have an admirable pair of legs, Miss Clay,' Max replied quite gravely, and Marian, who had missed the betraying twinkle in his eye, broke in with a brittle little laugh.

'Now, Max, you're not to flirt with my kennelmaid and give her ideas,' she admonished him playfully. 'She's said she's all right, and your main concern,

after all, is with Flight.'

'I'm also concerned for my other patient, since rightly or wrongly, I rendered first aid in lieu of a doctor, so I think, if it's all the same to you, Marian, I'd like another look at that arm. Perhaps we might go up to the house.' Max spoke mildly enough, but Emma caught the faint hint of arrogance in his voice, and Marian must have caught it too, for she went a little pink and said hastily:

'Just as you say, of course. Well, you'd better hold your inspection in the downstairs cloakroom while I organize drinks in the office,' said Marian rather huffily.

The cloakroom was large and richly carpeted like the rest of the house, and fitted with every conceivable modern amenity, but chairs were not included, so Emma sat down on the lavatory seat and smiled at Max.

'You aren't making either of us popular, you know. Your job was to okay Flight, not me,' she said.

'And if I don't okay you, what then?' he retorted, stripping off the dressing in one quick movement which made her yelp.

It would hardly go down very well with Marian,' she said, gazing with interest at her scar which looked like a thin pink worm.

'Neither would you listen, if I'm any judge. You're as hell-bent as Marian on winning that blasted Certificate.'

But for different reasons. Naturally I want Flight to get his title because I think he's a worthy Champion, but apart from that, I'm paid to do a job and I can't walk out on it even if I would.'

'You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you, Emma Penelope?' he said softly, and the thread of tenderness in his voice made her blink.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'No, I don't suppose you do. Well, this looks healthy enough, I'll put on another dressing and use strapping instead of a bandage this time, neater and less cumbersome if you mean to go haring round the ring against my better judgment. If I was your doctor I should certainly forbid it, and expect to be obeyed, what's more, young woman. As things are, I have no real authority if you choose to be stubborn, but time may remedy that.'

'Time?'

'The future, altered circumstances, propinquity or what have you ... are you feeling all right, Miss Clay? You seem to have gone a little pale.'

Emma was feeling a trifle dizzy trying not to read too much into his rather cryptic remark, but she managed to smile and reply in the same vein:

'Quite all right, thank you, Mr. Grainger. Hadn't you better be joining Marian for those drinks?'

'Very likely. You were also invited, you know.'

'Well, yes, but I don't think I will. Marian, I imagine, must have business to discuss with you, since she's chosen the office.'

'Very likely,' he said again a little dryly, 'if business and persuasion come under the same heading.'

'But I don't think you'd be easy to persuade against your better judgment,' Emma said slowly, beginning to roll up the discarded bandage. 'You're proof.'

'What an odd thing to say. Proof against what?'

'Not against anything — just proof. I can't explain it any better.'

He gave her a long, searching look and his eyes seemed suddenly very blue, but he said nothing, only smiled with a touch of wryness, traced the outline of her parted lips for an instant with an exploratory finger, then went out into the hall. Emma could hear

Marian's pleasurable little laugh echoing from the office before he shut the door and the house fell silent.

They made an early start the next morning, and although the day was disappointingly chilly and overcast, Marian for once forbore to grumble. Indeed, she seemed to be in such high spirits and was looking so pretty and confident that Emma, remembering the old nursery adage, crossed her fingers surreptitiously and trusted that the day would not end in tears.

As they approached Wilchester with its narrow streets and tall church spires, Marian began making up her face again.

'How do I look?' she asked Emma with eager expectation, as if nothing more trivial than commonplace chatter had passed between them.

'You look very charming, Marian,' Emma replied politely.

'Well, you don't look too hot yourself, but I suppose I've been selfish letting you do all the driving. You'd better have a good rest before you go in the ring,' Marian said, and Emma forbore to ask who, in that case, was to bench and groom the dog and be responsible for all the humdrum mechanics of showing.

She parked the car neatly in the nearest line, memorizing its position among all the others for a quick getaway, and let Flight out to stretch his legs, while she got together the show impedimenta. She watched the dog anxiously out of the tail of her eye for any signs of weakness, but he was moving soundly, so the leg had mercifully not stiffened up on the journey.

She went through the familiar routine, passing the dog through the vet's inspection, finding the marquee where the Alsatians were benched, settling Flight on his blanket and filling his water bowl, and looked up vaguely when a familiar voice addressed her.

'Holly!' she exclaimed then, on such a note of home-

sickness that she saw Miss Hollis's shrewd old eyes registering surprise and a certain grim comprehension.

'How are you? Have you got Shep here? Who's handling for you? Oh, Holly, I've missed you!' said Emma, and Miss Hollis observed her speculatively.

'I'm well except for the tiresome handicap of my gammy leg. Spink is handling Shep in one class, which is all I can afford if I have to employ a professional, and you don't look very well, Emma,' Holly said, answering Emma's questions with her usual brief meticulousness and ignoring the final observation.

'I'm all right — just a bit browned off at the moment. I think it's thundery.'

'What's the matter with your arm?'

'Oh, that — I got bitten separating Saracen and Flight — it's nothing. We've been more concerned with Flight, who got nipped, too, but he's going sound now.'

'The cocksure Miss Mills is banking on the Certificate, I suppose. Well, there's nothing here to beat you, all things being equal. I'm told Dawson is after him for America at a sensational price. Is she thinking of selling?'

Emma went a little white and put a protective arm round the dog as if Holly herself was threatening to take him away.

'Oh, you must be wrong!' she cried in hot denial. 'She's crazy for him to get his title, and then bring him out at Crufts in February with the pipe-dream of finishing up as Supreme Champion. He might at that, too, if the luck still holds. He's really fabulous. Where did you get this yarn about Dawson?'

'Oh, it's been going the rounds. Quite thick, aren't they? Dawson's probably banking on the possibility of the dog being beaten, when his offer might prove more than tempting. Marian Mills, as we all know, doesn't like to wait upon her triumphs, and Dawson's judging

Boxers here today, so will be on the spot to cash in.'

'I know. He has a date with Marian afterwards because he's arranged for a bitch he found for her to be brought to the show to be vetted.'

'No doubt he's hoping for a double commission, then, which should put him nicely in pocket. He's got his eye on Shep, too — possibly on the acquisitive Miss Mills's behalf since I've already refused her earlier offer.'

Emma stayed with Flight in the stuffy tent, studying her catalogue, trying to assess their chances against the dogs that were entered, and wishing she didn't feel so nervous. It was not usual for her to mistrust her own abilities as a handler, but Holly's speculations had unsettled her, her arm had not improved with the added exertion of driving a long distance, and her head was already beginning to ache with the noise going on around her, and when Marian presently brought Max into the marquee to take a professional look at Flight, she was disgusted to find herself colouring. She got the dog off his bench and out into the open to move him, answered Max's questions with the briefest replies and was uncomfortably aware both of his sharp glances and Marian's smug little smiles

'You don't look very fit yourself,' Max said when she had returned the dog to the bench and fastened his chain. 'That arm bothering you?'

'Is it, darling?' said Marian, her eyes wide and velvety with solicitude. 'I'm afraid I was rather thoughtless, Max, in letting the poor sweet drive most of the way, but he does so enjoy handling a good car when she gets the chance, don't you, Emma?'

'I would have thought it wiser to restrict her enjoyment to handling the dog on this occasion,' he replied with his customary dryness, but he looked down at Marian with an indulgent eye which would

assure her, Emma knew, that he found her much too pretty for his rebuke to be taken seriously.

'Yes, I was selfish,' Marian admitted with a little pout, and slid a hand through his arm.

'We were going to the bar for a drink before lunch, Emma. Come and join us.'

'No, thanks,' said Emma, 'I'll stay with Flight.'

'He won't grudge us your company for half an hour,' Max said with a smile, and she answered more sharply than she intended:

'Very likely, but perhaps I prefer his.'

She saw his eyebrows go up and a chilly politeness was in his voice when he replied, turning away:

'If that's how you feel we won't press you. Come along, Marian, and we'll do battle for a couple of drinks if we can fight our way through the crowd.'

Emma could have wept. If Max shared Marian's belief that she had been chasing him, childish rudeness might convince him that she was activated by jealousy rather than by a desire to persuade him to the contrary, and either way she had laid herself open to unflattering conjecture in her absence. She could picture Marian preening herself at the bar and offering gay little excuses for a gauche employee whose head had been turned by polite attentions.

Later on she found it curious that she remembered so little of her feelings as she went through the familiar routine. She had a vague impression of Max keeping a professional eye on Flight as they circled the ring, and of Marian beside him, dutching at his arm with nervous excitement, but for the rest she had small recollection, and even when she led the class and was finally placed as the winner, it was only the heartening burst of dapping from the ringside that brought her back to reality.

Marian had already ducked under the ropes and

was kissing her and indulging in squeals and extravagant praises, and she quickly handed the dog over and, leaving her to enjoy the congratulations without being obliged to share them, sat down on one of the benches, aware now that her arm was hot and throbbing and she felt rather sick. The rain which had held off obligingly now

began to spatter down in great thundery drops, and the whole aspect of the show-ground was changing under a sky torn with the first thin streaks of lightning.

'Better get under cover before this breaks,' she heard Max say behind her, and observing that Marian was still in the ring surrounded by well-wishers, realized he was addressing her.

'Will it be much, do you think?' she asked, looking up at him a little vaguely and he put a hand under her elbow, urging her gently to her feet.

'Blowing up for a stinker, I should say. You're not feeling too good, are you? I should have put my foot down yesterday and stopped you coming.'

Her eyes focused on him more clearly now and she became aware that his solicitude was probably no more than a professional assessment coupled with the knowledge that he had been right in the first place, for he was looking down at her with just the same clinical appraisal with which he had examined Flight.

'Nothing's got into me. I'm just doing my job and minding my own business,' she answered, roused unwillingly from her state of lassitude, and saw him frown.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE reached the marquee just as the storm broke, and it was as well she managed to get Flight on his bench and secure his chain when she did, for people came crowding into the tent in such numbers that it soon became well-nigh impossible to pilot a dog through to the benches without having it trodden on.

It must, Emma supposed, be one of those freak summer storms that one- sometimes read of, for never could she remember such a sudden fury of sound. More and more of the public forced their way in and as the pressure of humanity grew, Emma, who had managed to squeeze herself on to the bench with the dog to save her feet from being trampled on, experienced her first prick of alarm, an alarm evidently shared by the man benched next to her.

'This is murder!' he shouted to her over the dividing partition. 'If any more of the silly clots pile in here, the benches will give, and I wouldn't bet on the chances of this perishing tent holding together much longer, either.'

Even as he spoke there was an ominous sound of splintering wood from one of the supports, a woman began to scream, and in a moment there was pandemonium.

Emma had no time to think of herself, for Flight, in his fear, had got his chain twisted round his leg and was panicking to free himself. She tried to calm him with familiar assurances, but he seemed beyond recognition of her voice, and as she struggled vainly to release him, she became aware of a sudden burning pain in her arm and guessed she had probably burst her stitches. In the same instant the ropes, taking

the additional strain of people fighting to get out again, snapped from their stanchions and as the freed canvas billowed and rose, the faulty support, thrown off balance, cracked in two, collapsing one end of the tent.

The next few moments seemed so terrifying to Emma that afterwards she could scarcely believe that it was little more than five minutes before men from the St. John Ambulance unit were on the spot and dealing efficiently with the casualties which fortunately were few. But with the rapidly emptying marquee, Emma's own difficulties increased, for soon there would be no one left to give her a hand with Flight, who by

now had his chain so tightly locked round him that he was crouched in an immovable huddle, his ears flat to his skull and his eyes wild and staring. Emma struggled valiantly, expecting every minute to be nipped for her pains, but the chain was too taut for her to unsnap the clasp, and only pulled tighter when she tugged at the buckle of his collar. She looked frantically around for help, but the benches either side of her had already been vacated and she would have to leave the dog to fetch help and trust that he was too firmly shackled to struggle and do himself fresh damage.

As she started to push her way through the thinning crowd looking for someone who was not already occupied with a dog of their own, she suddenly saw Max coming towards her, scanning the benches as he passed, and pausing every so often to question a stranger. The next moment she found herself caught hard against him, and she could feel the slight tremor in the hands that held and steadied her.

`Thank God I've found you!' he said. `You're all right? You're not hurt?'

`No, I'm not hurt, but I'm frantic about Flight. He's

got wound up in his chain and I c-can't shift him,' she said, and went on weeping, quite unaware she was doing so.

`All right, I'll soon have him out. Where is he?' he said, adding in curiously roughened tones as she took him back to the bench: 'I couldn't remember your bench number and I thought you were under that pile of canvas. I've been pulling people out just in case.'

`What a funny reason — for p-pulling people out, I mean,' she said, the trace of a giggle mingling with the tears, and he gave her a sharp glance, followed by an even sharper slap on the cheek.

`Very amusing, no doubt, but save your humour till later,' he said, and she put a hand up to her cheek, surprised to find it wet; and instantly sobered.

`I didn't know I was crying,' she said. `I'm sorry, Max, for being a bit silly.'

`Well, I'm sorry for slapping you so rudely. Now, let's see to Flight and get him out of this mess. Lord, what discomforts you show maniacs endure for the sake of a bit of worthless cardboard!'

`Marian must be terribly anxious,' she said.

`Marian is being soothed by friend Dawson in the Members' Bar and is probably quite unaware of trivial events.'

`Trivial?'

`In a manner of speaking, of course. I didn't know myself that it was the Alsatian tent that had bought it till I came to find out. The Show Committee see no reason for cancellation and the bars are doing a roaring trade, so, true to tradition, the show must go on. Now, see if you can distract this poor chap's attention while I exercise a little brute strength on the chain.'

It seemed an age to Emma, but at last the dog was free and immediately sank back on his haunches and

began licking his leg. The wound had opened, of course, and Max examined it carefully, mildly cursing the fact that since he was off duty, his bag had been left at home.

'We'd better find one of the chaps on duty here and get this patched up,' he said, then saw the little trickle of blood that was dripping, unheeded, from Emma's arm on to Flight's blanket.

'You are hurt!' he snapped out. 'Why the hell didn't you tell me when I asked you? Indulging in heroics again, I suppose, rushing to the aid of the fallen.'

'I imagine I've burst your stitches, that's all,' she replied mildly. 'I don't know why you should always accuse me of indulging in heroics, either, Mr. Grainger, and it was you rushing to the aid of the fallen, not me.'

The involuntary smile which touched his lips was quickly suppressed, but amusement still lurked in his eyes.

'It's always a sign of displeasure when you revert to my surname, Emma Penelope,' he said, raising a corner of the blood-stained strapping to peer underneath, 'and if you're going to retaliate by accusing me of heroics, you can save your breath. There was fortunately little harm done except for cuts and bruises and a bit of hysteria, but things might have been nasty.'

'Things were extremely nasty,' Emma retorted somewhat tartly, and for a moment his eyes were grave and she became aware of the strain in his face.

'Yes,' he said, suddenly smoothing the fringe back from her forehead with a curiously tentative gesture, 'for you here, coping alone, it must have been a frightening experience. I'm sorry, Emma, if I seemed to be offhand. I had my anxious moments too. Now, if you'll stay with the dog, I'll go and find a vet, and incidentally a doctor. The storm's dying out and this end

of the tent's safe enough now. The contractors are already at work on the damage.'

'Why a doctor?'

'That arm of yours will have to be stitched again, I'm afraid, and this time we'll take the correct procedure. I won't be longer than I can help.'

Left alone in the almost deserted tent Emma felt very small and somehow bereft. It was a strange time, she supposed, to discover the state of one's heart and the unpalatable truth as well. That moment when Max had found and held her and she had felt the unsteadiness of his hands had seemed too real and too revealing to be no more than the natural reaction of any man concerned for the safety of an acquaintance, but if, for her, recognition had been dear and irrefutable however much she wished to deny it, the truth must be faced as well, and the truth burdened her and left her defenceless.

She turned her attention resolutely to the dog, a little shocked that she could have forgotten him in these unguarded moments of fruitless heart-searching, and mutely made amends. He was still trembling, but the terror had gone from his eyes, and he licked her face with the ingratiating eagerness he employed when he thought he had behaved badly, and proffered a conciliatory paw.

'You poor, dumb ninny ... don't you know none of it was your fault?' she said to him, almost in tears again, and he grinned at her self-consciously and dribbled lovingly on her skirt.

When Max came back he was alone and carried a hastily collected assortment of dressings. When the leg was roughly dressed and bandaged, he proffered the same office for Emma, a temporary measure, he told her, until she could be attended to in the St. John Ambulance tent.

'Better to wait till the queues have dispersed and someone can give you proper attention,' he said. 'In the meantime you might as well avail yourself of Dawson's privileges and find somewhere comfortable to sit in the Members' tent. Let's see how this chap is when he puts his foot to the ground.'

He coaxed the dog off the bench as he spoke and led him gently outside. Emma, following in their wake, was amazed to find that the rain had stopped, the gale subdued to a stiff breeze, and the sun struggling to make a watery appearance.

Judging was being resumed, and she could hear the ring stewards calling out the numbers and the loudspeaker taking up the usual assortment of announcements. With that sudden transition back to normality, Emma remembered her obligations, and her thoughts clicked automatically into place. Best of Breed had yet to be competed for, and if luck was still with them, the Non-Sporting Group; even perhaps, Best in Show.... So completely did habit take over that she was unaware of how futile her hurried explanations must sound to Max until she saw him looking at her with a quizzical expression.

'My dear child! You can't take this dog in the ring again today. He's dead lame — see for yourself,' he said, and walked Flight away and then back to her. It was only too true. Not only was he lame, but he was tucking in his tail and shying away from the passers-by, which alarmed Emma even more.

'If this has upset his temperament, Marian will out him,' she said bleakly. 'She said he was shy when she bought him, and he's never been good with her.'

'Well, it won't help to keep him knocking about here. Get one of the vets to certify the dog unfit for competition and they'll let you go early,' said Max, and in the same moment Marian came hurrying to-

wards them, waving and making signals of distress.

'For heaven's sake, Emma, you might have had the decency to come and let me know that Flight was all right! I've only just heard that the Alsatian tent collapsed, and I've been sick with worry,' she exclaimed.

She certainly looked anxious, Emma thought, but suspected it was more on account of a possible setback to the day's triumphs than concern for the dog.

'I'm afraid he's not all right,' she replied, trying to sound sympathetic. 'He got his leg caught up in his chain and he's lame.'

The angry colour swept up in a wave to Marian's cheeks and her eyes lost their velvety softness.

'What do you mean, he got caught up in his chain? Weren't you there to see to him?' she said sharply, her attention focused for a moment on the bandaged leg.

'Of course I was there, but I wasn't strong enough on my own. As it was we had to cut through his collar in the end.'

'We?' Marian seemed to be aware of Max for the first time, and she bit her lip, trying without much success to keep the spite out of her voice as she went on: 'Oh, I see. You'd persuaded Max to keep you company, evidently. We were wondering where you'd got to, Max, Frank and I.'

'He took the trouble to come and see if we were all right, as it happens,' Emma said with a slight edge to her voice, and Marian coloured again and gave a little sidelong glance up at Max, who offered no comment.

Emma, exasperated both by Marian's selfishness and Max's unhelpful lack of support, exclaimed impatiently:

'Oh, for heaven's sake! Marian, we might as well call it a day and get away now. A vet can pass us out if there's any difficulty about early removals.'

'Are you crazy? We can't miss Best of Breed and the

Groups — everyone says we're a cert ! '

'The dog's lame,' Max said quietly. 'If you're sensible, Marian, you'll get him home where he can rest and get his nerve back. He's had a bad shake-up.'

'Do you mean he's gone shy? I thought he was peeping and tucking his tail when I first saw you. Really, Emma, if you can't be trusted to keep an eye on a valuable animal in your charge for five minutes, you'd better—'

'I'd better go, were you going to say?' said Emma calmly, driven at last beyond caution. Max continued to preserve an interested silence, and Marian, catching a somewhat enigmatical expression on his face, said hastily: 'No, I didn't mean that, of course. I'm upset, that's all. I'd built such hopes on Flight for today. He might even finish Best in Show. Everyone's crazy about him. Max, can't you do something? Give him a shot, patch him up somehow, just to tide him over.'

Max, when he answered, spoke quite gently as if he was dealing tolerantly with an unreasonable child, but Emma, catching a familiar note in his voice, knew that he was suddenly not prepared to argue any further, and was growing impatient.

'No, I cannot,' he said very definitely. 'Even if it was possible to disguise that injury, you might do irreparable damage putting any further strain on the leg, and last but not by any means least, your kennelmaid's in no fit state to do any more running round the ring today.'

Just for a moment Marian looked chastened, then she said waspishly :

'Fiddle! There's nothing wrong with Emma that a bit of misplaced attention won't cure. You seem to forget, Max, that you're here as my guest, not nurse to my kennelmaid.'

Max seemed to freeze, and even Marian lost her aplomb and began to fidget before he answered her.

'The fact that I've accepted your hospitality for lunch and a ticket of admission to the show has accounted for my restraint in the matter of plain speaking so far, but I might remind you that I'm also here professionally on your behalf, and that hardly entitles you to resent a very natural consideration for someone you employ,' he said politely and gravely but with ice in his voice.

'You're quite right, of course,' Marian said, rallying quickly and taking refuge in submissive charm, her tentative smile embracing Max and Emma alike in an unspoken offer of apology. 'I'm stupidly upset, I suppose, but I'd set my heart on winning the lot today, and the disappointment has really been crushing.'

'Well, tomorrow is another day. You've collared that coveted Certificate, and there's plenty of time for other triumphs,' said Max, his stiffness relaxing, and she gave him a little secret smile of forgiveness.

'Yes, I must be good, mustn't I? Poor Flight ... my poor, beautiful angel ...' she said, suddenly remembering the dog and sinking on her knees beside him to give a pretty little display of concern, but he immediately shot away from her and hid behind Emma. 'Not a very encouraging reaction from one's own dog. He's never liked me, and Emma, of course, has made a fool of him,' she said in an entirely different tone of voice, getting up and brushing wet grass irritably from her dress. 'Anyway, we can't go yet, Max. You've already pointed out you're here on business. I'm thinking of buying that bitch and we can't get that over with till Frank's finished judging.'

'I'm here, as it happens, to keep an eye on your kennelmaid who shouldn't have come at all,' Max said so quietly and gently that Marian, no less than Emma,

thought she must have misheard him, then she flushed angrily and answered, trying to sound flippant and roguish:

'Now, that's not very kind, Max. I know you enjoy a little leg-pull from time to time, but poor Emma might take you seriously, and that's hardly fair. Let's all go and sit at the Boxer ring, then we can catch Frank as soon as he's finished.'

'That,' said Emma to Max, her cheeks flaming as she prepared to follow, 'was not only unkind and unfair, but it wasn't even true.'

'How do you know? You don't, I must confess, give your well-wishers much encouragement, Emma Penelope.' Max's voice as he walked beside her was still quiet and gentle, but she thought she detected the old note of ridicule, and because she was upset and still a little shaken both by her alarming experience and its equally distressing sequel, retaliated with the first thing that came into her head.

'I've learnt the hard way not to give well-wishers encouragement. Hasn't Marian warned you already that my head could be easily turned?'

'Fair game is your favourite expression, I think. I remember you hurled that at me very early on in our acquaintance. For all that, though, you weren't so resistant until you remembered to climb on to your high horse,' said Max, and just for a moment she had such a clear picture of that chance evening at Plovers Farm when he had taken her in his arms so unexpectedly and, as unexpectedly, sown the first seeds of tenderness in her heart, that she felt like weeping again.

'Even kennelmaids have the right to experiment with their emotions,' she said, hoping to take him down a peg. 'How can you tell if you like being kissed until you try?'

'Very true. And did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Like being kissed — by me, of course, that is.'

Now she knew he must be laughing at her, accepting with relief, no doubt, that her intentions had, after all, been no more serious than his, and managed to answer with airy nonchalance: 'I've quite forgotten.'

It was a pity, she thought afterwards, that she had to pick that moment to trip over Flight's lead and lurch against Max, thus ruining an otherwise excellent exit line, for he could do no less than save her from falling, and when he had steadied her and disentangled the lead he did not immediately let her go.

'I don't think you've forgotten, my dear, neither do I think you were doing anything so sensible as experimenting,' he said softly, and she looked away before he could read the truth which she knew must be in her eyes. No, she hadn't forgotten, neither could she any longer deny that same truth to herself, however much she wished it. It was, she thought bleakly, churlish of fate to arrange so freakishly for her first lesson in love. 'But I'm not very sensible, as I've told you before,' was all she could find to say, and hoped it was a vague enough observation not to be misconstrued.

'No, I don't think you are,' he retorted, a hint of laughter in his voice. 'And if it comes to that, neither am I at this moment. It's time I got you to a doctor instead of trailing round this show talking nonsense and risking that arm getting bumped. Come on, we'll see if the St. John Ambulance chaps are less busy now.'

By the time Emma's arm had been attended to and she had drunk the strong tea Max insisted on, the Boxer judging had finished and Marian was waiting impatiently by the ringside while Dawson dealt pains-

takingly with the usual queue of less lucky exhibitors wanting his opinion on their dogs.

'Where on earth have you two been?' Marian demanded crossly. 'I thought you were coming along with me to the ring.'

'So we were, but it seemed more important to get Emma's arm seen to first,' said Max, and she shot him a wary look.

'Oh, of course,' she amended hastily. 'Well, I'll try to prise Frank away from all those tiresome novices, and then we can go and have a look at this bitch.'

Dawson, however, was not to be hurried and waved Marian away with a firm dismissal. When he was finally free to join them it was only to say it would be another hour or more before the bitch to be inspected would arrive with her owner since he had made an appointment to coincide with the finish of the show as the bitch had not been entered. He expressed concern for Emma's mishap, eyed Flight's bandaged leg with a speculative eye, and suggested they all repaired to the Members' Bar to while away the time.

'Oh, let's go and drink and drown our sorrows,' snapped Marian. 'Isn't it absolutely sickening, Frank, that Flight's gone lame, just when I had hoped he might have pulled off Best in Show?'

'Too bad. Hasn't made you change your mind about selling, I suppose?' Dawson said, cocking a bright, acquisitive eye at her.

'We-ell, what sort of price could you get me?'

'A very tempting price, as I've told you before —providing he passes as sound, of course. Is that leg going to mend properly, Grainger?'

'No reason why it shouldn't, but today's mishap will set him back a bit,' Max answered shortly, and Marian said a little spitefully:

'That would never have happened if Emma had

been paying attention to her job. He wasn't hurt by the tent collapsing, he just got caught up in his chain.'

'Well, you mustn't blame the poor girl for that,' said Dawson, his eyes beginning to sparkle at any suggestion of malice. 'She probably had other fish to fry.' His eyes, bright and speculative, rested on Max for an instant, his face creased into its puckish lines of suppressed amusement. But it was too near the mark for Marian and she snapped back too quickly:

'Very likely. Emma is, unfortunately, rather susceptible, as you should know.'

There was a brief moment of embarrassed silence while Emma felt the colour rushing to her face, then Dawson said, wagging a playful finger:

'That's the sort of remark better made in private, my sweet, unless you want to be misunderstood. Now, I suggest we all repair to the bar and pick holes in the judges and winners to our hearts' content; it's the pleasantest aftermath of any show, don't you agree?'

It was Marian's turn to colour, and Emma, although she knew very well that Dawson delighted in stirring up mischief, was grateful for his intervention, but she was unprepared for Max's very definite objections.

'Emma should go home, she's had quite enough for one day and so has the dog,' he snapped. 'I'd advise you to make a start, Marian. I can quite well stop on and vet this bitch for you when it arrives.'

'Yes, of course, only — well, it's all been arranged —a sort of treat. It seems quite ridiculous to come all this way and not wait for another hour. Besides — well, I want to stay and enjoy myself — to make up for my disappointment over Flight.' Marian was a little girl again, looking from one to the other of the two men with a child's plea for indulgence.

'Then I suggest a simple alternative,' said Max briskly. 'Emma and the dog can leave with me now,

and one of the vets here can pass an opinion on the bitch. It's quite immaterial who signs the certificate providing he's qualified.'

But I particularly wanted you to — couldn't Emma take your car, Max, then you could stay and come home with me? That's the solution, of course! Why didn't we think of it before?' Marian said, but even her colossal self-confidence was shaken when Max replied with barely-concealed exasperation:

'Emma's not fit to drive, neither do I allow strangers to handle my car. If you want to stop on with Dawson, the obvious course is for me to remove both your dog and your kennelmaid and leave you free to return when you wish.'

'Well, really! If I'm just an obstruction to be removed, I can take myself home by train. In fact, I should prefer it,' Emma exclaimed, unwisely drawing attention to herself, and Max immediately turned a cold eye upon her.

'Don't be ridiculous!' he snapped. 'It's a dreadful journey. You can sit in the back with the dog if his company is preferable to mine, as you intimated earlier in the day.'

'Very well,' said Emma, feeling suddenly exhausted by the absurd argument, and although she was thankful for her release, she thought the expression on Max's face did not bode for a very comfortable passage home.

Marian was already drawing him aside, saying she wanted a word with him about Flight before he left, and Emma found herself alone with Dawson who was regarding her with mischievous curiosity.

'Well, that little problem's settled, if not to everyone's satisfaction, at least to mine,' he said. 'Our exclusive veterinary surgeon was a little narked, I think, by your reluctance to avail yourself of his offer of a lift.'

'He was narked because Marian was ditching him for you,' Emma retorted, well aware of his skill in twisting certain matters to his own advantage. 'You could hardly expect him to be enthusiastic when he'd given up his free time to please her.'

'Haven't you learnt anything about men, Penny Plain, since your salad days with me?' he asked softly, and because, looking up into his narrow, ageless face, she found she suddenly no longer resented or even particularly distrusted him, she could answer quite simply:

'Probably not, but at least I've learnt enough not to make the same mistake again.'

'Well, never mind,' said Dawson, 'I'll just wish you luck, and — make good use of that journey home if your funny little heart is at all involved. No hard feelings, now?'

'No hard feelings,' she answered, and found to her surprise it was true. He was vain and ambitious and often unscrupulous, but there was, nevertheless, something likeable about him.

'Well, good luck again and—' he stooped suddenly and kissed her— 'you won't grudge me that for old times' sake, will you?'

Marian turned at that moment, not liking what she saw very much, but glad of an opportunity to justify her complaints.

'It's really too bad,' she had said to Max, after asking his professional opinion on Flight's condition with the correct amount of anxiety. 'If Emma had used her wits she could have prevented this accident.'

'She could hardly have prevented the storm and the collapse of the tent,' he pointed out with some dryness.

'Of course not, but she could have stopped Flight from panicking if she'd been doing her job. There

have been other things, too — that carelessness over the gate, and the way she's deliberately set out to wean Flight away from me. I could tell you a hundred and one annoyances ... she's just a little too big for her boots on account of her father's

reputation, and I don't see why I should put up with being treated as a novice by my own kennelmaid....'

'Why do you keep her, in that case?' Max inquired dispassionately. 'You have a quite simple remedy if you're not satisfied.'

She glanced up at him uncertainly, aware that her complaints had been more of an outlet for her disappointment in the day than a genuine grouse against Emma, and replied with a little pout of discontent:

'I've had a mind to sometimes, but Frank won't let me,' she said, and was surprised by his sudden flash of anger.

'Dawson won't let you!' he exclaimed. 'What right has he, for heaven's sake, to dictate whom you employ?'

She dimpled demurely, pleased that she had quite inadvertently struck a spark of jealousy from him, and replied, wide-eyed:

'Well, you see, Frank is advising me over my kennels. He says I started off wrong and would be a fool if I got rid of Emma. He has a respect for her abilities as a kennelmaid even if she did once take his interest a little too seriously, and I have a respect for Frank's judgment.'

'His interest has possibly revived along with his judgment. It may suit his own convenience to hand out casual advice,' Max said, looking over her shoulder, and it was then that she turned in time to observe that quick embrace which Emma seemed to accept without any sign of distaste.

Marian felt her cheeks burn as the true cause of

Max's displeasure became apparent, but she was quick enough to seize her advantage.

'Perhaps you're right,' she said, beginning to walk towards the other two. 'I'm afraid poor Emma is easily led into exaggerated opinions of her own charms, but at any rate, it explains her reluctance to go back with you, doesn't it? After all, she did once work for Frank, and he's still a very attractive man....'

The journey home was indeed as uncomfortable as Max's earlier expression had promised. Emma's attempts at conversation were received with such icy politeness that, after a time, she gave it up, shrinking into her corner of the car to put a decent distance between them, and watching his averted profile in a vain attempt to read it.

'You needn't have been so snooty because I was trying to fit in with Marian's plans. After all, I'm paid to take orders and consider my boss,' she said with one last attempt to establish contact with him, but was not encouraged by his somewhat acid reply.

'I must have misunderstood your good intentions, then. Your objections struck me rather more forcibly than your consideration at the time.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't you? You made it plain enough that you didn't want to come back with me. What were you hoping for? A chance to renew past favours with Dawson?'

'That,' she said, 'was rather an unpleasant suggestion. Marian, I know, has dropped a few garbled hints which Dawson put into her head because his vanity was pricked, but you can hardly imagine, surely—'

'Can't I?' he countered as she paused, seeking for the right words. 'That little kiss he bestowed at parting had an air of familiarity, and your submission was

scarcely reluctant. Can I be blamed for thinking you know your way around rather better than I had supposed?'

'If,' she managed to say with admirable coolness considering the sudden turmoil of her thoughts, 'I didn't know you better, I'd be inclined to accuse you of jealousy, which would be absurd.'

'You don't know me at all, Emma Penelope, so reserve your conclusions until you do,' he said, but although he had addressed her with that familiar, teasing habit of coupling her two names, there was nothing of indulgence in his voice.

Flight in the back of the car gave a little whimper of pain as he turned to change his position and she leaned over the back of the seat to reassure him. She was conscious of pain herself as she moved her injured arm too carelessly, but managed to stifle the involuntary little gasp which escaped her.

'Jealousy, since you've brought the subject up,' he observed suddenly and ruminatively, 'can often be confused with common or garden injured pride. Nobody enjoys being snubbed.'

'You should remember that, Max, when you hand out your own particular brand,' she retorted. 'I hardly think you can complain of being slapped down.'

'No? Well, perhaps it's only the regrettable ego in all of us that reacts without rhyme or reason to a preference for another's company. You made it rather plain, my dear, showing such a marked reluctance to be driven home by me. Did you think I had designs on the kennelmaid's virtue to while away a tedious journey?' Emma sighed. Dawson had wished her luck and told her to make good use of the journey home, but she had too little experience in such matters to wean an angry man from a mood she could not begin to understand.

'You haven't answered me,' Max was saying, and she had difficulty in remembering, for the moment, what he had asked.

'You would have been willing enough to oblige, too, from what I hear,' he said before she could think of a reply, and suddenly fury filled her heart. So he had been listening to gossip, like all the rest of them, while he sat by the ringside with Marian ... that Spooner woman, dropping delicate hints of her pest of a husband's fatal attraction for the staff....

'What you've heard and what you choose to believe can't matter very much,' she said, grateful for the anger which spurred her on to hurt him, 'but whatever the accepted masculine view may be of kennel-maids, I'm not prepared to oblige, as you put it, just to make up for your personal disappointment. I can appreciate the fact that the storm mucked things up for you after you'd made a point of giving in to Marian, but you shouldn't have made such a thing about leaving early if you wanted to cut Dawson out.' He braked so suddenly that the back wheels skidded on the wet road, and Emma was unaware that they had come to a lay-by until he pulled in violently and shut off the engine.

'You stubborn little fool ! ' he exclaimed furiously. 'Haven't I already told you that I came today entirely on your account? Do you think I give a damn for the gossip of a bunch of tattling women with nothing better to do than show off their dogs and concern themselves with the petty scandals of their narrow little world? I've a very good mind to teach you that lesson you're so fond of throwing in my face.'

She huddled in her corner, shaken by the bitter vehemence of his attack, listening to the rain bouncing off the windows, and wondering if, after all, he meant to take toll for the day's mischief.

'Well?' he snapped out with barely controlled patience when she said nothing. 'Doesn't that threat alarm you, or don't you just care?'

'I — I don't know what you want me to say,' she stammered at last.

'Don't you? You could excuse yourself for past indiscretions — make out a good case for the follies of extreme youth — but perhaps, in the circumstances, excuses are a waste of time. I'm scarcely in a position to demand them since you owe me nothing but the casual obligations of acquaintance.'

Why should I make excuses?' she retorted coolly. 'I owe you nothing, as you've pointed out; my life is my own and the way I choose to live it is entirely my business.' He was still too angry to dose the subject by taking refuge in a brief, dispassionate retort, and replied with bitter sarcasm:

'Quite true, of course, and I apologize in that case for trespassing. But don't you think your friend Dawson is a little too old and a little too shop-soiled for a late revival of love's young dream?'

She felt the colour flaming in her face, and before she knew what she was doing, reached out and caught him a stinging slap across the cheek. For a horrified instant she thought she had succeeded in rousing him to make good that threat of teaching her a lesson, but the sudden movement he made was not towards her. He merely shifted his position behind the wheel to a more comfortable angle and switched on the ignition.

'I probably deserved that,' he remarked with such a startling absence of rancour that shame swept over Emma, quenching the momentary exhilaration of that brief, uninhibited action.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I've never done such a thing in my life before.'

'No, I don't suppose you have, Emma Penelope,' he replied with the old tolerant amusement, and was no longer a stranger. 'Well, they say there's a first time for everything, so I won't hold it against you. In fact, I may have learnt something interesting. Incidentally, hasn't friend Dawson already got a wife?'

'He's divorced now, and anyway I can't think what it has to do with you,' she replied, too tired to answer with more than a trace of resentment.

'Well, as to that, perhaps I feel responsible for you,' he said. 'After all, I got you this job and kept a weather-eye on you. I even stitched you up, if that can constitute a bond.' She made one last effort to state her independence and disabuse him of any lingering misconceptions.

'You've no need to feel responsible or, for the matter of that, to go on keeping a weather-eye, whatever that may mean,' she said with a prim return to composure.

'You'll have realized by now, I hope, that I'm well able to make my own decisions without any help, and if you don't happen to agree with them, there's nothing you can do about it.'

'You think not? Well, there's one thing I could do to test this vaunted independence of yours. I could ask you to marry me, since I haven't much faith in your elderly swain's intentions in that direction. Don't look so staggered, my poor child — I'll spare you the embarrassment of turning me down,' he said, gave her a friendly pat on the head as if she had been a puppy in need of encouragement, then put the car into gear without waiting for any comment and pulled out into the road.

CHAPTER NINE

EMMA remembered very little about the rest of the journey, for she slept, and only woke when Max pulled up at the surgery in Chode to attend to Flight's injured leg before dropping them both at the kennels.

'You're all in, aren't you?' Max said when he had finished, and his voice was kindly but quite impersonal. In his white coat, with the sterilized background of orderly shelves and surgical equipment, he was no longer a man subject to violent emotions and other human weaknesses, and Emma, only half awake, began to think she must have dreamt up the whole affair.

'Did you ask me to marry you, or was I dreaming?' she asked, knowing she must sound, not only absurd, but rather forward, and shrank into herself when he replied with bracing cheerfulness:

'No, I did not, so forget about this evening's rather confused issues and let me take you home.'

'Yes. Ireen will be wanting to get away. She doesn't like staying overtime,' she said, but continued to stand in the middle of the surgery as if she was uncertain of her next move. He observed her thoughtfully, while he changed the white coat for his jacket, wondering how much she had assimilated on the journey home and thinking how young she looked with those clear, truthful eyes gazing at him stupidly under the childish fringe and her lips, almost as pale as her face, trembling a little with fatigue.

'I'll give the girl a lift back to the village when we've settled Flight for the night, and you, Emma Penelope, will then go straight to bed,' he said, then

thrust Flight's lead into her unresisting hands, switched off the surgery lights, and propelled her gently out into the street.

When they reached Armina Court, however, Emma's sense of duty flickered into life. Marian had rung up to say she would be late back but might be bringing the new bitch with her, so a kennel must be prepared and someone waiting up to take over when she arrived. Ireen had seen to the kennel and mixed a feed in case, she said, but Miss Clay would have to wait up, as her mum wouldn't stand for missing the last bus home.

'Rubbish!' Max exclaimed impatiently. 'It won't hurt Miss Mills to put the bitch into a kennel and bolt the door, which is all she'll have to do. Leave a note for her. Miss Clay has had about as much as she can take, what with the storm and one thing and another. She should be in bed. And your mum is perfectly right. Get your things on and I'll run you home to save you the bus,' he finished briskly, and turned to Emma when the girl had gone. Now, no nonsense about waiting up, understand? Marian's bound to be late if she's dining with Dawson in Wilchester, and there's no earthly need to make a martyr of yourself on that score.'

'Martyrs ... heroics ... how you do harp,' Emma murmured.

'Yes, I do, don't I? Well, restrain your mistaken impulses for once and go to bed.'

'Certainly not!' she replied with a sharp return to efficiency. 'I'm paid to take orders and it's my job to carry them out. If one takes on this sort of work one expects the hours to be irregular.'

'Then the sooner you take up something else, the better, I would say. You're scarcely fitted to be a machine.'

'I'm not fitted for anything else, besides—'

'Besides what?'

'Nothing. I just wondered what you had in mind.'

'What I had in mind is best left to a more propitious time,' Max said with an air of dismissal, and, at that moment, Ireen rejoined them ready for departure.

When they had gone, Emma went back again to Flight to satisfy herself that he was comfortable and fit to be left and spent several minutes telling him aloud how clever he had been to win the Certificate and assuring him with complete solemnity that he would become a full Champion at Chode. 'Flight will win ... he must...' she found herself saying aloud.

She was up early in the morning, anxious to reassure herself that Flight was none the worse for yesterday's experience. He was still very lame, but otherwise seemed quite normal and polished off his breakfast with alacrity Emma watched the dog broodingly as he ate, weighing up the pros and cons for the future. She hoped that yesterday's exhibition of nerves was only temporary, but the trait was there in the breeding, she knew, and however sound he might be, if he showed shy in the ring his chances of that third Certificate would be lost.

She left him reluctantly and did the morning rounds, reflecting that it looked like being a day of perpetual cleaning and drying.

Marian, when they met at breakfast, seemed moody and affected by the weather.

'What a summer!' she grumbled. 'It makes me feel like chucking the kennels altogether and trying something new where the sun shines.'

Emma, by now, was used to these moods following any disappointment in the showing, but remembering Mr. Mills's hints of impending change, asked a

little anxiously what was in Marian's mind.

'Oh, something with more kick to it than this,' Marian replied vaguely, 'something that takes one out and about. In America, now, I'd be quite an asset to our export trade, because they'd go for me in a big way.'

'Is that what Dawson tells you?'

'Well, he should know, shouldn't he? He's a live wire, is our Frank — buying and selling in a big way, in with the Kennel Club, and holiday homes for dogs as a profitable sideline.'

'One to be exact.'

'Armina Court could be another,' Marian said, and shot a speculative look at Emma that was faintly mischievous.

'I suppose that's one of Dawson's suggestions, too.' 'Well, it's not a bad one, is it?'

Emma considered, trying to curb the impulse to offer a warning which could be resented.

'Well,' she said judiciously, 'I suppose it isn't. But what of Dawson? Would he be living here too?'

Marian, recovering magically from her mood of discontent, went into peals of laughter.

'Oh, Emma, if you could see your face!' she exclaimed. 'Were you going to come out with prim warnings? Even if he was, I'm not a simple little teenager whose head is turned by the proximity of any attractive male — anyway, I wasn't very serious. Why are you blushing? Oh! I'm sorry — I didn't mean to put my foot in it, darling.'

But she had, thought Emma, furious that her colour had betrayed her, and annoyed with herself for taking literally what was evidently intended as idle speculation.

'If you weren't serious then there's not much point

in discussing it, is there?' she replied somewhat coldly. 'Incidentally, I suppose you realize there's a chance Flight won't be fit for Chode?'

'Oh, fiddle!' Marian exclaimed, unalarmed. 'It's only a small setback, Grainger says, and it'll be up to you to see that he's fit, won't it? If you've finished your breakfast let's go down and have a look at him.'

'So you didn't buy that bitch after all?' said Emma as they walked down to the kennels. 'Dawson must be feeling a bit hipped at losing a nice fat commission.'

'Save your pleasure in getting one back at poor Frank, darling, he's bringing her down tomorrow.'

There was, Emma thought uneasily, as she attended to Flight that evening, a definite feeling of change in the air since yesterday. Max's unpredictable attitude, Marian's idle chatter about holiday homes for dogs, and now Dawson arriving and the possibility that an offer to oblige a client by delivering her purchase in person was not his only reason. When he arrived the next day, however, there was nothing she could quarrel with in his behaviour. He stayed a couple of nights and was an admirable guest, was attentive to Marian without undue flattery, and caused no embarrassment to Emma with mischievous observations when they met.

It was unfortunate, of course, she thought afterwards, that Max had to choose the moment for a professional call when Dawson had just lifted her down from a ladder and was still holding her, laughing, in his arms, but that should have been no reason, she thought, for such subsequent brusqueness and an attitude bordering on censure. 'I'm not satisfied,' he said when he had examined Flight. 'Didn't you notice the discharge? If you'd sent for me earlier, I could have bunged an injection into him and possibly saved a bit of trouble. As it is—'

'Do you mean infection has set in? I've been most careful when I've changed the dressing,' said Emma, her personal views forgotten, and he replied with curt impatience as he prepared a syringe:

'There's discoloration and a touch of discharge that should have given you to think, but possibly there have been other distractions. Are you staying long, Dawson?'

'That depends.' Dawson, propped negligently against the medicine cabinet, answered with a hint of provocation, idly watching Max prepare the injection with bright, amused eyes.

'You know very well you have to be in London tomorrow for a Kennel Club meeting,' Emma said rather too hastily, and he transferred his quizzical gaze to her for a moment.

'Engagements can always be broken if the inducement is strong enough, my dear — even an august body like the Kennel Club must bow to unexpected illness,' he said, and she would have replied with some heat if Max had not ordered her sharply to hold Flight still and stop talking. She obeyed him silently, and was relieved when Dawson took himself off, murmuring that it was twelve o'clock and Marian was expecting him at the house for drinks.

'Max, he only came to bring down that bitch for Marian,' she said, as he finished dressing the leg, and could have kicked herself for offering unnecessary excuses when he answered blandly:

'Naturally. Did you imagine I was assuming you had invited him?'

'Well, whatever you were assuming doesn't seem to have improved your temper,' she retorted, goaded into personalities, and did not much care for the frosty smile he bestowed upon her.

'Then I must apologize,' he said, beginning to sort

through his veterinary supplies, selecting the drugs he wished to leave with her. 'I'm afraid my temper is apt to suffer if I'm in danger of losing a patient through unprofessional carelessness.'

Emma's resentment died at a direct attack on her obligations and she gazed up at him with humble, horrified eyes.

'You can't think — you surely don't think Flight is any the worse because you weren't called in earlier? I honestly had no idea there was anything wrong,' she said, and her voice was suddenly young and uncertain.

'Well, he's certainly none the better for it,' Max said with no immediate attempt to soften his reply, then added in kindlier tones: 'Still, don't go reproaching yourself unduly — I daresay your preoccupation was natural. Now, give these tablets three times a day and one of the capsules last thing at night. Keep him quiet and on a light diet, and if his temperature rises send for me at once. The injection coupled with the antibiotics should do the trick, but I'll look in tomorrow in any case.'

She was comforted by the hint of assurance if not by the implied censure, and said as he rather brusquely took leave of her:

'Marian will want to have a word with you about this. Will you go up to the house and join them for drinks?'

'I think not. It would be a pity to intrude on a prearranged tete-A-tete, and my time's too precious to waste chatting,' he said, and Emma watched him walk away to his car, tears of chagrin stinging her eyelids.

She had just settled Flight in his kennel again and was wondering how best to tackle the unenviable task of breaking the news of a further setback to their plans for Chode since Max had declined to stop at the house and state his opinion, when she saw Marian

hurrying across the lawn with Dawson in more leisurely attendance. Now for it, she thought, but Marian appeared more surprised than concerned.

'Frank says Grainger isn't very pleased with Flight,' she said as they joined Emma. '... Doesn't seem any worse to me, does he to you, Frank?'

'Your estimable Mr. Grainger is possibly a bit of a scaremonger and likes to make sure of a series of lucrative visits,' Dawson said. 'I think, too, he was seizing the opportunity to upset Penny Plain, for reasons best known to himself. Dear Penny, you're looking thoroughly prim and disapproving.'

'Well, I don't think it's a joking matter if Flight's had a setback owing to my inattention,' Emma said, and glanced a little apprehensively at Marian, expecting a tart rebuke for carelessness, but whether Dawson had omitted to repeat Max's unkind accusation, or whether Marian chose to ignore it, she merely answered:

'Oh, don't be silly, darling! Whatever other mistakes you may make, no one can say you neglect your job, even if I did let fly a bit at Wilchester, and you're much too besotted with Flight to take chances. Come back to the house with us and have a drink I want to hear what you think of this bitch Frank has found for me.'

Dawson gave Emma an encouraging wink, and she went with them, grateful for their calm assumption that there was nothing to worry about, and inclined to believe that Max's attitude had indeed been largely due to some private grievance of his own. She would, she thought, take very good care that Marian was present when he made his examination tomorrow, and since Dawson would have left, there should be no reason for him to continue being churlish.

Her relief was short-lived, however, for when she took round the evening feeds, she found the dog listless and refusing all persuasions to eat; by nightfall his temperature had rocketed up and he made no effort to greet her.

Ireen had gone home, and Marian and Dawson were out for the evening; the surgery would be closed now, so Emma rang Max at Plovers Farm, praying she would find him in, and when he answered, could not quite keep the threatening tears out of her voice. 'I'll be right over. Take it easy, Emma Penelope, nothing's so bad as it seems,' he said, sounding again so like the Max she had come to know and unwillingly love that the tears spilled over. But she was dry-eyed and composed when he arrived ten minutes later, and obeyed his orders with cool precision.

'I'll have to operate. That chain did more damage than I suspected and there's always the chance of gangrene setting in unless the wound is drained. Cheer up, Emma, once we can disperse the poison it should be plain sailing. We'd better get cracking.' He picked the dog up and carried him out to his car, settling him gently and expertly in the back, and bidding Emma get in beside him to guard the leg from jarring on the short journey.

Emma did what she was told, sterilizing instruments, preparing dressings and, when the time came, watching Max operate with swiftness and skill, thinking how confident his hands looked, confident, gentle, and immensely reassuring.... He looked up as he finished, saw her white, anxious face, and smiled at her.

'All over — so you can relax,' he said. 'You were an excellent assistant, Emma — thank you.'

A little colour came into her cheeks at the brief measure of praise and she felt a weak desire to weep, to be held and comforted and told she was not to blame.

'Was it my fault, Max? Ought I really to have known earlier?' she asked, and he peeled off his rubber gloves and went to the sink to wash.

'No,' he said with his back to her. 'My mind was on other things, I'm afraid. I should have called in sooner and seen for myself. Now, I'm going to pour you a drop of brandy while this chap sleeps off his dope, then I'll take you both home.'

When she was ready to leave and stood waiting to give whatever help might be required of her in getting Flight out to the car, Max took her two hands in his for a moment, turning them over thoughtfully, then rubbing them gently to restore the warmth that had gone out of them.

'Cold hands, warm heart,' he murmured. 'Have you heard that one, Emma Penelope?'

'Of course, but it can hardly be true, can it?' she answered obliquely, and he gave her a rather quizzical look.

'Well, time will show, no doubt,' he replied with his usual curt dismissal of unimportant matters. 'Now, open the door for me while I carry our patient out to the car. When we've settled him for the night, we'll see about settling you, my dear.'

But she was obdurate as to how she intended to spend the night when, having deposited Flight in his kennel and covered him with a blanket, Max said he would take her up to the house.

'Certainly not!' she replied, sounding herself again and a little shocked. 'I shall sleep in the dog-kitchen where I can be on call. I can't leave him to regain consciousness and perhaps burst his stitches looking for me.'

'Very well, but first I'll satisfy myself about that bed,' Max said. He set up the bed for her, spread the

blankets, and even found a hot-water bottle from somewhere and boiled a kettle of water to fill it.

'How unexpected you are,' she said, watching his administrations with surprise. 'I never know whether I'm going to be slapped down or treated with unnecessary consideration.'

'Why unnecessary?'

'Because it is. Kennelmaids may have to put up with other sorts of attentions now and again, but they are used to foraging for themselves.'

He filled the hot-water bottle, gave it a suddenly vicious slap which made it gurgle, then thrust it between the blankets and turned abruptly to take her I, by the shoulders.

'If you're alluding to my behaviour coming back from Wilchester, by any chance, you might remember that you were free of those other attentions – but perhaps you were disappointed,' he said so cuttingly that she shrank between his hands.

'I'm s-sorry,' she stammered. 'I didn't mean to imply—'

'Didn't you? I think you did. Whatever my supposed indinations, I don't care to be lumped in with Dawson and possibly other philandering gentlemen of your acquaintance.'

'Well, really!' she gasped, bereft for the moment of the stinging reply she would like to have made, and was only thrown into further confusion of thought when he let her go and observed in a perfectly normal tone of voice:

'I can see you're itching to slap my face again, so I won't offer further provocation. Good-night, or rather good morning. I'll be calling about twelve o'clock to look at the patient.'

He bent his dark head as if he was going to bestow

one of those brief, unexpected kisses, but evidently thought better of it, turned on his heel and went out to his car.

The next few days were filled with too much anxiety to allow for the intrusion of other problems, and she was grateful even for Max's impersonal attitude when he paid his professional visits. Flight was a very sick dog, fighting the virus infection which had attacked him through the re-opened wound, and Max made it very plain that recovery was dependent largely on good nursing.

Perhaps it was as well, she thought, that Marian either did not appreciate the danger, or she preferred to leave the worrying to others. Her principal concern seemed to lie with the chances of recovery for Chode Show, and Emma, trying to reply patiently to endless pleas for reassurance, had difficulty sometimes in remaining civil.

It's his life that matters now, not the unimportant detail of whether he'll be fit to show. Don't you care about Flight?' she burst out once.

'Well, of course — I paid a lot of money for him. And Chode is important to me, Emma. I want to get that qualifying C.C. on my home ground. The press, the party afterwards — everything's been laid on.' Marian spoke so like a child who tries to be reasonable despite a conviction that adult opinion is against it that Emma refrained from further argument, only thankful that there was no desire to interfere with her arrangements, or take any share in the nursing. It was perhaps as well, she thought, that Marian's latest acquisition was occupying her time and attention to the exclusion of much else, to Ireen's deep disgust.

'If it wasn't for Chode Show coming on and hoping for that third ticket, she'd have him put down because she don't like sickness about her. I heard her say so,'

said Ireen, and Emma answered more cheerfully than she felt:

'Then we must be thankful for small mercies, mustn't we? There's small chance of him being fit for the show, but if we can keep him alive till then we'll have won time at least.' But the battle was won long before and, like all barely hoped-for benisons seemed, when it came so suddenly, like a small miracle to Emma

She had slept each night in the dog-kitchen. On the third morning she was wakened as usual by her alarm going off at four o'clock, and as usual she fell out of bed, fuzzy with lack of sleep, her waking thoughts dreading the discovery that the dog had slipped away in the small hours. As she unbolted Flight's door, her fingers clumsy with cold and fatigue, she heard for the first time an answering whimper; not the distressed sounds which fever and pain had wrung from him every so often, but the welcoming little whine of glad recognition, weak it was true, but familiar and joyous and infinitely heartening.

She flung open the door and there he was standing unsteadily on three legs in the straw, tail gently waving, ears ingratiatingly flattened in greeting.

'Oh, Flight, my darling! You beautiful, clever wonderful - boy!' Emma cried, dropping on her knees beside him and bursting into tears.

'Well now, that's a poor way to show thankfulness,' a voice said softly behind her, and she looked up, startled, to see Max standing in the doorway.

Just for a moment she felt no surprise. He was the vet in attendance, and it seemed no more extraordinary to find him here at four in the morning than at any other time.

'He's standing! He's out of danger! Look, Max, his

eyes are quite clear and he's trying to give me a paw....'

'Let me take a look at him. Lie down, old chap, we know you're better, but don't show off too soon,' Max said, and knelt down beside Emma, pushing her gently aside. He put a hand on the dog's quarters, slowly easing him back into the straw, tickled his ears reassuringly, receiving a gratified lick in return, and made a careful examination. Emma sat back on her heels and watched him, the tears still pouring unheeded down her cheeks.

'Yes, he'll do. Temperature's normal and the wound looks healthy. Let's try him with some grub,' said Max, getting to his feet.

Emma scrambled up and ran back to the dog-kitchen to mix a feed of milk and rusks and glucose. The dawn was breaking sullenly through the heavy clouds which promised another wet day. It should have been a morning like that other, with the early sun sparkling on dew in the grass and larks soaring joyously to the smiling skies, but it made no difference now to Emma, and when Flight had polished off his food to the last crumb and was plainly eager for more, she exclaimed with unconscious absurdity: 'Isn't it a glorious morning?'

'Well, not so that anyone would notice,' Max observed a little dryly. 'Why are you still crying?'

'I c-can't stop,' she answered, dropping the empty bowl in the straw, and quite suddenly found herself in his arms.

'All right, cry it out. It'll probably do you more good than being told not to be silly,' he said, and she was too grateful for the physical comfort of his steadying embrace to take exception to his words.

'Now — enough is enough,' he said firmly after a time, and proffered a clean square of handkerchief.

'What you need is twenty-four hours' sleep in your own bed, young woman, and I'm going to see that you get it. It's time you gave those deplorable slacks a rest, anyway. I've never seen such a bedraggled little scarecrow as you look now.'

'I'm sorry about my unglamorous appearance, but you have a gift for catching me at my worst,' she said.

'Have I? And you have a much more reprehensible gift for misunderstanding perfectly natural behaviour, so we're quits,' he retorted, but there was a quizzical look in his eye as if he expected to be taken up on this statement, and Emma, remembering her callow misconception at a much earlier date, began hesitantly:

'If you're thinking of Dawson—'

'Oh, to hell with Dawson! Do you have to judge every man by him, or have you reached the conclusion that you were a little hasty in the days when you turned down his advances?' he exclaimed crossly, and pushed her away.

'Then you know?' she said, steadying herself against the kennel door. 'I thought Marian had hinted—'

'Marian's hints are both obvious and rather silly. What do you think I am? A man to be influenced by the gossip-mongers? Dawson's manoeuvring was typical and only deceived Marian because it suited her. She's not only glamorous, but an invaluable future client, so one can hardly blame the chap for shooting a line.'

Tired as she was, Emma found herself unable to resist what seemed like an invitation to quarrel with him. How dared he admit, now, to knowledge of the true state of affairs with Dawson, having taunted her with it on that luckless drive home? He could talk glibly about her misunderstanding of natural human behaviour, she thought indignantly, but did he imagine she could have put any other construction on

the bitter words he had spoken then?

'It's quite absurd to imply that Frank Dawson is interested in me as well as in Marian,' she said, trying to sound cool and assured, and he replied on a hint of rising temper:

'Is it? Do you suppose he didn't know what he was doing when he advised Marian to keep you on? You can be forgiven for being misled at seventeen, my dear, but you're a big girl now and should know better, don't you think?'

'Yes, I should. I should know better than to be misled by anyone who thinks a few mild attentions and a kindly interest when it suits means any more than the natural tolerance one affords a confiding puppy,' she said, and saw the temper drain out of his eyes, leaving them tired and disappointed.

'Is that how you've thought of my efforts to further our acquaintance?' he asked quite gently, but she was beyond trying to respond to those bewildering changes of mood in him, and much too spent emotionally to do more than keep up a quarrel which had seemed to be forced on her.

'I haven't thought at all,' she answered, her nose well in the air. 'You should remember that I'm just a kennelmaid, Mr. Grainger, and as such, am quite used to people wishing to further acquaintance, as you put it. If you came up here just to quarrel with me, you would have been better employed sleeping in your own bed at this hour of the morning.'

His sudden snort of mirth did nothing to reassure her that her neat set-down had achieved the success she had hoped for, and was too tired to feel anything more than an irrational sense of inferiority when he replied more soberly:

'I didn't come to quarrel with you — that's doubtless something which has sprung from a measure of strain

in both of us. I've been over the last three mornings, keeping a watchful eye, and being there if needed, so am a bit short of sleep myself.'

'Because you thought I wasn't fit to be trusted to carry out your orders, I suppose,' she said, and he sighed and turned back to the dog, lying relaxed in the straw, rolling a watchful but trusting eye at them both and giving an occasional demanding thump of the tail.

'No such thing. I was keeping a solicitous eye on you, if you want the truth, but I doubt if that will assuage your injured feelings,' he said.

'You've been up half the night for the last three?' Emma asked, and could have wept again in his arms had he shown any sign of accommodating her, but if his explanation was comforting and indirectly complimentary, his reply was not.

'Don't distress yourself, Emma Penelope. It's all in the day's work when a valuable client's interests are involved,' he said, and went out into the yard.

She went back to Flight and set about making him comfortable for the day, knowing that the danger was past and he would recover, but her miracle had faded, or perhaps it had never been; the glory had gone out of the morning and she was left with the weeping skies.

CHAPTER TEN

BUT the weather changed overnight and summer came back as miraculously as Flight's return to health, Emma thought, watching the daily improvement in the dog with a thankful and humbled heart. He was still lame, but the wound had healed without a blemish, his coat shone bright again with health and well-being and he was putting on flesh.

'Clever Emma!' Marian said as she watched him racing over the lawn. 'Your nursing's certainly done the trick, as Grainger takes pains to inform me every time he comes, though it doesn't seem as if he affords you much praise in person. Have you fallen out?'

'No,' said Emma, 'but I hardly expected praise for doing my job.'

'No? I only thought – well, I expect you've sensibly decided that a man's passing interest is better ignored. He's a hard nut to crack, our enigmatical vet, isn't he? I've had a play for him myself without much success, I don't mind telling you now.'

'Why now?'

'Because you've retired from the field, darling, if you had ever seriously thought of competing, and a brush-off is easier to take if it's shared.'

'I never even thought of—' Emma began with outraged indignation, but did not finish the sentence as she observed Marian's smug little smile of disbelief. What was the use of protesting? It was unusual enough to have Marian admitting to failure without rubbing it in by excusing her own.

'Would you have married him?' she asked, remem-

bering her speculations on the possible shrewdness of Max's intentions, but Marian gave a hard little laugh.

'Marry the local vet?' she exclaimed. 'You must be an incurable romantic, darling. Grainger's all very well to bring to heel because he likes to play hard to get, but can

you see me a vet's wife? Now, to come back to Flight. How long do you think before he's moving sound? Will the lameness have worn off in time for Chode?'`

`With any luck. Now I've got him out on the roads again, steady exercise should do the trick.'

`And what about his temperament?'

`Well, that remains to be seen. He's a bit jumpy still, but he may be all right in the ring.' Emma spoke more confidently than she felt, knowing that time was required to nurse a doubtful temperament back to normal, and when she had started exercising on the roads, it became clear that more than the couple of weeks left before the show would be needed to give the dog back his confidence. Passing cars made him cower and tremble, and a sudden noise sent him shooting off at the end of his lead.

`It's really heartbreaking,' she said to Max when he paid one of his routine visits, `recovering so quickly after having nearly died, and then to go to pieces like this.'

'H'm ... move him round again, will you?' directed Max. `That lameness is not lessening as I expected,' he said when she came back to him. 'The leg's completely healed and the stiffness should have worn off by now. I think we'd better have an X-ray. Can you bring him into Chode?'

Her eyes widened.

'Do you mean you think there may be some permanent injury?'

It's difficult to say without pictures, but I had to cut

through a ligament to clear the infected area when I operated and it's possible it's knitted together short.'

`But that could mean permanent lameness, couldn't it?'

`It could, but in any case we'd better be sure. Can you bring him to the surgery tomorrow?'

`Yes, of course. What time would you like us to come in?'

`Twelve o'clock sharp, please.... You're still riding that high horse of yours through a forest of misconceptions, aren't you, Emma Penelope?' he said, and she was so startled by this sudden switch to personalities that she could only stand and stare.

'Well?' he said as though he expected a sensible answer to a far from sensible question.

'I don't ride high horses. I can't ride at all,' was all she could think of to say, and for a moment the old tenderness flickered in his eyes.

`Can't you now? Then you must be very careful not to take a tumble, mustn't you?' he said, and turned on his heel and walked briskly away.

It was Marian, however, who drove into Chode with the dog next day. It was unnecessary to take time off from the kennel chores when she could quite well go herself, she said, besides which, it would give her an excuse for a nice little private chat with Grainger, who had been somewhat inaccessible of late Emma had found him inaccessible too, but she suspected that Marian, for all her cool avowals of disinterest, had not entirely relinquished her efforts to bring her vet to heel.

Emma was swilling down the puppy-run when she heard the car return, and a few minutes later saw Marian almost running from the garage, since she was being towed by Flight, frantic to get back to Emma. She relinquished the lead as he nearly pulled her over,

and as soon as she was within earshot, shouted at Emma:

`Take him! You've successfully ruined him in every way, so you can make the most of his last few hours, and be thankful I'm not suing you for neglect! '

Emma went white, seeing Marian's contorted face. So the news was bad after all. Max had been right and had broken the disagreeable tidings himself.

'So Max wasn't wrong. The plates showed permanent injury,' she said slowly, trying to ward off the dog's affectionate onslaught, knowing this was no moment for a loving reunion which pointed so tactlessly to his unfortunate preference.

Marian began speaking in shrill, half-hysterical little bursts, her face as white as Emma's and her eyes hard and angry.

'He'll be lame for life ... one leg's shorter than the other and nothing can be done ... I wouldn't be surprised if Max made a mess of that operation, just as you made a mess of your responsibilities in the first place ... three hundred pounds down the drain and now not a hope of that third ticket ... I hope you're proud of yourself!'

Emma called to Ireen to take the dog away and sought vainly for the right words to use to Marian, but they would not come.

'What did you mean when you spoke of his last few hours?' she asked baldly, knowing it was the wrong moment to challenge a remark which might have been made at random in the first bitter flood of disappointment, but Marian, although she still sounded hysterical, was quite rational when she answered:

'Exactly what I said. Do you think I could bear to keep the dog here, a constant reminder of my bad luck and your carelessness? I believe you'd be secretly pleased knowing he's not worth selling and you'd have

him for keeps. Well, I'm not giving you that small satisfaction. I'm having him put down.'

'Very well,' said Emma, aware that she was shaking so much now that any minute her teeth might chatter, 'if you won't give Flight a chance, then I must warn you I shall go. That, I imagine, is hardly a threat that will carry much ice, but I will add, as a word of warning, that you won't find me easy to replace — not because I have any exalted opinion of my own qualifications on account of my father's reputation, but because the way you run your kennel is not going to attract the right sort of experienced staff.'

She finished on a rather breathless note as she realised her own temerity in speaking so bluntly to an employer, who, however tiresome, was still the provider of her bread-and-butter, and was astonished to see Marian's face begin to crumble like a child suddenly stripped of its self-conceit.

'How can you, Emma, when all my hopes are in ruins, thanks to your mismanagement and the — the jealousy of other exhibitors ... ? Haven't I the right to dispose of my own possessions as I think fit? Haven't I the right to call the tune when it's I who pay the piper? First Max speaking his mind, now you ... You wouldn't really leave me just when the luck's turned against me and I need a friend.'

'That's up to you,' Emma replied politely, marvelling as always at such a staggering preoccupation with self. Marian surveyed Emma now with a look halfway between hesitancy and calculation as if she was weighing up her advantages, but perhaps it was the steady regard of those disconcertingly truthful eyes which made her decide against the temptation to satisfy her sense of injury by taking it out on another.

'Well, you'd better come and see me in the office when you've cooled down,' she said with a very pass-

able imitation of a displeased employer willing to overlook shortcomings if proper humility was shown, and Emma, despite her misery, could not entirely suppress the grin which had deflated Marian's ego before now.

'You'll smile the other side of your face when Grainger comes for your precious Flight!' Marian said nastily, and flounced across the lawn to the house.

Emma turned back to the kennels, her heart sick within her. Max had refused to execute the order, but he was coming in a few days. Had not Marian already intimated that his partners would change his mind for him rather than lose a valuable client to a rival practice? But Max was proof, she thought, reverting to that unexplained word which seemed to describe him for her. He would not be swayed if his convictions were challenged ... hadn't he long ago stood out against his father ... even against the girl he had hoped to marry? But Max Grainger was unpredictable ... or was it just she who had found him so because his moods were unexpected and his intentions so painfully obscure ... ?

The evening was less awkward than she had anticipated. Marian had evidently decided to ignore the whole business for the present and chattered away with her usual inconsequence, but her eyes were suspiciously puffy and she cast sulky looks at her father every so often. No reference was made to Flight by either of them, but when they left the dining-room Marian said:

'I'm going to put through a call to Frank now. I want him to get that young dog of old Hollis's for me. He has a very good chance of the ticket at Chode, I'm told, now Flight's out of the running.'

She went off to the office where she liked to conduct

her business calls in the approved executive style, and Emma stared unhappily at Mr. Mills.

'She doesn't even care that Flight is out of it. All she minds about is having something she can boast about because she's shot a line to the press and a party's laid on, and whatever else happens she must carry on the honours at Chode because she's the local celebrity as regards kennels,' she said bitterly, and the old man pushed her unceremoniously into his study and shut the door.

'Sit down and don't talk so daft,' he ordered, pushing her back into her chair. 'I've had enough of this dog nonsense from Marian without having to put up with it from you. Now, give over, and remember what I said. Things have a trick of working out if you only let them be, and that don't apply only to dogs where you're concerned, young woman, so hold your horses.'

She might have asked for elucidation of this last observation if Marian had not chosen that moment to interrupt. Her call to Dawson had evidently proved satisfactory.

'He's going to tackle the old girl at once, and is coming down tomorrow,' she announced and, catching Emma's rather dazed expression, added brightly: 'Don't look so stunned, Emma. Frank was suitably sympathetic over this shattering end to Flight's career, but he quite agreed that there were other fish in the sea if we looked for them.'

Dawson arrived in time for lunch the next day, but Emma made excuses for herself and picnicked in the dog-kitchen, unwilling to be drawn into arguments and future unpalatable plans. She had got over her old reluctance to meet him, but he was too sharp a business man to have sentimental thoughts about an animal stripped of any commercial value, so she was not best pleased when he wandered down to the

kennels alone later in the afternoon and asked to see Flight.

She brought the dog on to the lawn and reluctantly complied with the request to move him round. Dawson watched attentively, his knowledgeable eye missing very little, ran expert fingers down the damaged foreleg and grimaced ruefully when the dog shied away from him.

'Pity,' he said. 'He's got it all if it wasn't for that injury and a faulty temperament.'

'The temperament could be got right with patience,' Emma said stonily.

`But not the leg, unfortunately. I've seen the plates and there's no doubt about the injury being permanent. Rotten bad luck, but that's the way it goes.'

The next day started badly with Ireen late for work and having forgotten some errand she would have executed in the village for Marian. She was duly sent to the office and hauled over the coals, whereupon she had apparently lost her head, been insolent and unrepentant and, having succeeded in getting herself dismissed on the spot, had spoken her mind with appalling freedom.

`Well, that's it! I'm fired and I couldn't care less,' she announced with unaccustomed glee to Emma, returning from her interview still filled with the glory of rebellion. 'But I've given her something to think about. "You're a bitch," I told her, "a scheming bitch, no better than a murderess, killing dumb animals what have never done you harm just for meanness.... All you ever think about is what's best for the spoilt Miss Mills," I said. "You took poor old Corrie from me, and now you're going to take Flight from Miss Clay after you'd given him, only of course you'd never meant it in the first place.... You ought to have the R.S.P.C.A. down on you for cruelty," I said, "and

you'll never make a go of this game in a month of Sundays the way you carry on," I said.'

Ireen paused for sheer want of breath, and Emma, still young enough to be impressed by such reckless courage, prompted eagerly:

'And what happened then?'

'Oh, then that Mr. Dawson came in and told me to shut up, but I think he was trying not to laugh. Miss Mills she burst into tears at sight of him and asked him to protect her, and he said "Hop it," so I hopped it, and I expect he's drying her eyes and stroking her down the right way at this minute. Coo, you should of heard us! I haven't felt so funny in the head since I took the measles and talked silly, my mum says.'

It was a relief to be able to laugh until the tears came, Emma thought, wiping her eyes. She shouldn't be laughing at all, she supposed, since the matter had its serious side, and wondering if her pent-up emotions had made her a little hysterical.

'Mind you, I'll be sorry to leave you, miss,' Ireen added soberly. 'You've been real good to me and covered up for me too. I told the young madam that, too, after the way she tried putting the blame on you, the other day.'

'Well, never mind now,' said Emma. 'Now we'd better get some work done or we'll both be in trouble if we're found gossiping over cups of tea.'

But no one came to inspect the kennels, and for once she felt thankful for Dawson's presence. He would at least keep Marian out of the way and he was well equipped to supply soothing doses of flattery and consolation when he chose. He would be leaving that evening, so Emma again made her excuses and stayed in the kennels for lunch. Ireen who, strictly speaking, should have taken herself off promptly on instant dismissal, had gone up to the house for her usual hot

midday meal in the kitchen, and Emma, with Flight lying beside her, began to ponder seriously on her own situation.

She must have sat ruminating longer than she supposed while she waited for Ireen to return from lunch, for it was nearly half past two and Ireen had planned on catching the three o'clock bus, and she came bursting into the dog kitchen as Emma started washing up, clearly big with fresh news.

`You'll never guess!' she babbled, her pudding-face moist with excitement. 'Mr. Grainger is here — came to lunch, and what a carry-on!'

Emma dropped a plate and turned slowly round from the sink. If Max was here it could be only for one reason.

'He's come for Flight,' she said dully.

'Well, whatever he's come for, he ain't agreed to her instructions,' Ireen retorted. 'She'd taken him to the office after lunch and the door was ajar, so I sneaked along the kitchen passage to listen. She must have been on at him about taking Flight away, for he was saying, ever so icy, "I'm not obliged to carry out instructions that conflict with my own standards. There is no just reason for this decision and I refuse to be a party to it." She says, all silky-like, "If you're squeamish, Max, then turn it over to your partners — they know which side their bread's buttered." He says, haughty-like, "My partners are in agreement with me; we don't deprive animals of life when there's a perfectly good chance of them finding another home." Then she says, really nasty, "There are other vets who aren't so bloody-minded, but if I go to one of them they'll have my custom in future, so you'd better think again! " Then Mr. Grainger fair tears a strip off her. "Do you think we give a damn for your patronage, Marian?" he says, all fiery, but cool with it, too. I couldn't wait for any

more, and I'd better get cracking now, miss, if I'm going to catch that bus. So long, and keep your pecker up — Mr. Grainger ain't going to take your precious boy into custody today.'

But he did. Long after Ireen had gone running for the bus, Emma saw Max walking slowly across the lawn. So certain was she, now, that he had only come with the kindly intention of reassuring her before he left that she welcomed him joyfully.

'Hi, Max Things seem to have been happening around here! Do you want to see Flight?'

'I've come for him,' he replied, and she stood stock-still, puzzled but not yet alarmed by his ambiguous answer.

'But you won't need to take him away, now,' she said, and he answered with what, to Emma, seemed like a clumsy attempt at humour.

'I've had my orders.'

'Your orders? But I understood—'

'Dear Emma Penelope, don't look at me like that! I assure you I intend no violation to your tender susceptibilities. If you would trust me instead of getting ready to mount that high horse of yours, we would both be very much more comfortable.'

He stood there looking at her, tall and dark and a stranger again, his black eyebrows lifted in a quizzical suggestion of faint reproof, his hands thrust indolently into his trouser pockets, and rebellion and a bitter disillusionment welled up so suddenly in Emma that she was hardly conscious of what she was saying.

'So you couldn't stand out after all!' she flung at him. 'The Mills contract is too good a connection to be thrown aside for the sake of one dog's unimportant life ... who's to quarrel with the ethics of it, anyway, when an animal is painlessly destroyed in the kindest, most scientific manner? Oh, you make me sick! You

don't care for the injustice of a perfectly legal action any more than Marian does, when it becomes a question of politics!'

'Have you quite finished?' The words dropped so icily into the already icy little silence which had fallen when she stopped speaking that she was shocked into a more sober frame of mind. He was looking at her now as he had looked at her in the car coming back from Wilchester, with the same barely controlled anger and something more besides. If it had not been for the arrogant set of his jaw and the telltale whiteness

which appeared either side of his nostrils she could almost imagine that for an instant there had been the bitterness of pain in his eyes.

'Max—' she began, not at all sure how she meant to go on, but he gave her no opportunity.

'Let's not prolong the agony. If you're too squeamish to hand over your charge, I'll go and collect him myself. You, meantime, can shut yourself in the dog-kitchen and have a good old-fashioned cry,' he said so sarcastically that she felt herself flushing.

'No, I'll fetch him,' she said, and went into the tack-room to get a lead. She brought the dog out of his run and handed the lead to Max.

'Are you going straight back to Chode?' she asked, and it was as near as she could bring herself to seek for more specific information.

'Yes, I'm taking evening surgery for White.'

'I see. Well, goodbye, you silly old sausage, be a good boy,' she said, giving the dog a careless pat, then watched them both walk away. Flight looked back once and gave a little puzzled whine when she did not follow, but he was fond of Max and, receiving an encouraging caress behind the ears, went with him cheerfully. Emma watched them out of sight, heard the car start up, then the note of the engine dying away down

the drive, and only then turned back and locked and bolted the empty kennel.

She wept, not only for Flight who had stolen her heart, but for Max who had stolen it too but, unlike the dog, had successfully retained his own. Flight she would never see again and must mourn because she had no choice, but for Max she would not mourn. She would chalk it up to experience as other girls had to, and find another job far away from the scene of her childhood which had lured her back so disastrously....

When at the end of the day she could no longer avoid meeting Marian, Dawson had already left, and Marian was mixing cocktails in the drawing-room.

Mr. Mills joined them shortly and although the conversation skirted round the day's events, Flight, to Emma's relief, was not mentioned. Marian, however, relieved her own mind with some acid remarks about vets who aired their views indiscriminately and grew too big for their boots.

'You look tired, Emma,' she went on with an unusual flash of solicitude. 'I hope that frightful girl's departure isn't going to put too much work on you.'

Had she forgotten, Emma wondered, on what terms a continuance of the job had depended?

'I think I should tell you definitely, Marian, that I won't be stopping on,' she said a little nervously. 'I naturally wouldn't leave you in the lurch until you've found someone else, but I'd like to go as soon as possible.'

She had expected protests, even indignant accusations of ingratitude, but Marian merely looked a little smug and not very surprised.

'Well, of course, we were rather expecting this, weren't we, Dad?' she said. 'We'll be sorry to lose you, of course, but as things seem to be working out, I will probably be making some changes, anyway.'

'Oh!' said Emma a little blankly, then hastened to add: 'Well, I'm glad my going won't inconvenience you.'

'You sound a little narked,' Marian said with a hint of her old waspishness. 'Did you think you were indispensable?'

'No — no, of course not.'

'Now, lass, don't fly up in the boughs!' Mr. Mills said pacifically. 'We've had enough upsets for one day, lord knows, let's not stir up more trouble.'

'I wasn't trying to stir up anything,' Marian said, sticking out her under lip and looking injured. 'I only thought Emma didn't seem very pleased at the way things had shaped.' 'Pleased! You expected me to be pleased?' Emma exclaimed, her good resolutions evaporating at such a monstrous conception.

Mr. Mills cleared his throat suggestively.

'Didn't you talk to Grainger when he came for Flight?' he asked, mentioning the dog with rather unnecessary tactlessness in the circumstances, Emma thought, since they had all been at such pains to ignore the subject.

'Of course. But it was scarcely a very social chat once he had made his mission plain,' she said, and he gave a gusty sigh.

'In fact you quarrelled,' he said impatiently. 'Hardly that! But it wasn't an occasion for a cosy get-together, either.'

'Oh, aye.... Well, Marian, the lass can't be blamed for feeling as she does, so let be. Reckon it's time we packed up arguing and let things work out the way they will. Isn't it time we ate?'

'They'll ring the gong when it's ready,' Marian answered absently, then looked at Emma a little roguishly. 'Dear Emma you're so hasty with your

judgments, aren't you? Dad and I are going to London tomorrow, incidentally, and will be staying the night, so you can have the place to yourself and brood to your heart's content.'

It seemed strange in the kennels without Ireen, and stranger still in the empty house. Marian and her father had left early after breakfast.

She wrote a long letter to old Holly after tea and took it to the nearest post-box at the cross-roads above Plovers Farm. She resisted the temptation on the way back to keep straight on down the hill, but when she had climbed the stile to take the short cut back across the fields, she sat down in the stubble to rest. She would not come this way much longer, she thought, sitting in the stubble and absently rubbing her arm to relieve the irritation, trying to resist the desire to scratch, and out of the tail of her eye saw Max swinging a leg over the stile.

She watched him walking leisurely towards her and despite the bitterness she had felt for him yesterday, knew a treacherous little stab of pain and longing.

'Hullo ...' she said a little blankly as he came to a halt and stood looking down at her.

'That arm is overdue for attention. You'd better let me whip those stitches out or they'll be causing trouble,' he observed casually, and she replied with the first idiotic thing that came into her head:

'You can't do that here in the middle of a cornfield!'

'Of course not. You'd better come back with me to the house.'

'Your house?'

'Naturally. It's hardly very sensible to go back for my bag, then walk all the way to the Court, is it?'

'I suppose not.'

'But then you aren't very sensible, as you've told me

before, are you, Emma Penelope? Come on.'

He held out a hand to pull her to her feet and she took it unprotestingly. It was, she thought, at least a sign of good-will when he addressed her as Emma Penelope.

He made no effort at conversation as they went down the lane and Emma walked beside him wondering a little sadly if this would be the last occasion that she would visit Plovers Farm.

'I'm leaving Marian as soon as she finds a replacement,' she announced abruptly. 'Are you?' he said, but didn't sound very surprised, and as she walked up the path to the house ahead of him, he asked suddenly: 'Haven't I seen that dress before? You wore it, if I remember, that first day you came searching for your old home, none too pleased to discover the identity of the present owner.'

'That's not true! I was only surprised, as anyone would be, and you were very civil about my gatecrashing — or rather it was poor Flight who did the crashing, chasing a hen into your flowerbed.' Her voice faltered slightly, remembering the dog in the full vigour of his life and beauty, and Max thrust her into the small room off the kitchen which he used as a dispensary and told her rather sharply to sit down and not to chatter while he got on with his job.

She sat silently while he performed the small operation with speed and efficiency, rather resenting his supposition that she might treat him to a scene. He hurt her a little, for the flesh had healed too quickly and the stitches left too long. He swabbed a tiny speck of blood away and unexpectedly stooped and touched his lips to the scar.

'Why did you do that?' she asked, but if she hoped for a romantic reply she was disappointed.

'An infallible nursery formula — kiss it and make it

better,' he said with a smile, and ordered her back to the living-room for a glass of sherry.

'You think I'm a child still, don't you, Max?' she said, looking at him over the rim of her glass with grave, unhappy eyes, and quite suddenly he seemed to discard that familiar attitude of careless fondness as if he had been waiting for a particular moment.

'No, Emma, I don't, though you've done your best to remind me.... Prickles and high horses and ridiculous notions about kennelmaids; blowing hot and cold, and exhibiting a flair for misinterpreting human reactions and behaviour which would never occur to a well-adjusted adult.'

'Well!' gasped Emma. 'Of all the nerve! You slap me down and pick me up and then slap me down again so that I never know whether I'm coming or going, and then you accuse me of blowing hot and cold and mis — misinterpreting whatever it was!'

He leaned back in his chair regarding her steadily, while a slow smile touched his mouth and finally reached his eyes.

'Yes, well ... perhaps I've been a bit blind, too. I hadn't allowed for the odd defences of the very young, just as you seemed unable to recognize plain, common or garden jealousy when you got a taste of it!' he said. 'My not very edifying behaviour in the car that day should have warned you that I'm by no means proof or insulated or whatever this strange image you've built up for me may be.'

'Well, I knew of course something had upset you, but I thought it was Marian and you were taking it out on me.'

'Marian? Didn't you believe me when I said the only reason I'd come to that confounded show was to keep an eye on you? You made it so plain that you preferred anyone's company to mine despite your encourag-

ing little lapse when the tent collapsed, that I was reduced to behaving with a lamentable lack of sense and discretion. You see, I flattered myself that I had been conducting my courtship rather well, and had been given a few heartening signs of reciprocation, so when you virtually accused me of being no better than some of your gentlemen friends who have passing designs on kennelmaids, my ego received something of a jolt.'

'Courtship?' echoed Emma.

'A good old-fashioned word, if out of date. How would you define that particular state of hope and expectancy?' he said, but she was too chary now of snatching at miracles because she wanted to believe in them to commit herself, and replied, taking refuge in prim sedateness:

'I wouldn't know. Marian set me right on any mistaken ideas I might be harbouring on the way to the show that day. She pointed out the embarrassment that can be caused when a few mild attentions are taken too seriously and reminded me of the habit silly young girls had of losing their heads.'

'And that, translated, means?'

'It means that she said I was chasing you — setting my cap is the polite word, I believe, and I wouldn't be the first — which I don't suppose I am,' Emma snapped back, goaded into naturalness, adding, with a hasty retreat again behind her defences: 'I'm sorry if I did embarrass you, Mr. Grainger, but I wasn't to know you'd complained.' 'Well, for heaven's sake! ' he exclaimed, springing out of his chair and pulling her to her feet in one violent movement. 'Are we back where we started? Mr. Grainger, forsooth! And what the hell do you mean by suggesting I'd complained? Haven't you got into your head yet that I'm trying to propose to you, you

little idiot? What do you want me to do? Go on my knees for failing you over the dog? Is that what you can't stomach?'

'No — no, not now,' she answered in confusion, still unsure that she was hearing him alright, and because she was more exhausted than she knew from the conflicting struggles of the past days. She wanted to weep and be comforted, as much for her own shortcomings as the pain he had been unable to spare her.

'I will apologize now for my outburst yesterday, Max,' she said. 'I shouldn't have spoken as I did, because you were only doing your job, but I was so sure, you see .. well, anyway, I'm sorry. I think perhaps I hurt you.'

'Yes, you hurt me deeply with those unjustified taunts, but it was understandable, I suppose. What you should apologize for is your lack of trust,' he said, and she replied with the sharp bitterness of a wound scarcely healed:

'It wasn't my lack of trust that did the damage, it was the smack in the face when I was proved wrong.'

The tenderness was suddenly back in his eyes and a forbearing patience.

'That's a smack in the face comes to all of us at one time or another,' he said quite gently, and there was a faint twinkle in his eyes. 'Now, shall I hold your high horse while you dismount, Miss Clay? Better to climb down with dignity than be tumbled off, as I've told you before, and I warn you I'm quite prepared to tumble you off myself if there's any more nonsense.'

She began to weep, partly in defeat, and partly because the expression in his face was at last plain to read, and he took her into his arms, murmuring the endearments, and asking the anxious questions that assured her at last she need hold out no longer.

'I'm not proof, you see,' he said gently as her arms

went round his neck, 'not proof at all when it comes to falling in love at an age when I should have long since settled down.... Your old home will rejoice to have you back, Emma Penelope, and I, after a hard battle, will come to my reward if you will have me... '

Out in the kennels the setter gave an impatient bark and she said drowsily, lifting her head from Max's shoulder:

'Can't Rusty come in? He won't take kindly to me as his new mistress if he's shut away in disgrace.'

'Ready to lose that tender heart yet again to the first dog that comes along?' he said. 'I warn you, I'm not sharing your affections with Rusty, so restrain those ill-considered impulses. I'll go and let the perisher in.'

She filled both their glasses while he was out of the room, then paused by an old wall-mirror to examine her reflection with shy curiosity, wondering what another might see there. For a moment she did not recognize the face that stared back at her, so unfamiliar did it seem with that strange touch of incandescence which lent it a fleeting moment of beauty. Penny Plain . . . she murmured, remembering, suddenly, so many disconnected things, and sat down again to wait impatiently for Max's return.

She heard his voice and the excited scamper of Rusty's feet in the passage, but Max must have checked him from too vigorous an onslaught, and she called to him encouragingly. At the sound of her voice the door burst open, and a frenzied golden streak of living bone and beauty hurtled across the room and into Emma's arms.

For a moment she was shocked into immobility, and a horrid suspicion that she was momentarily deranged, then with an answering cry, she flung her arms round Flight's neck, babbling incoherent words while she

felt his warm, wet tongue licking up the tears which began pouring down her face again.

'Well now, it was worth a bit of underhand misrepresentation to witness that reunion,' Max said from the doorway, and Emma was aware that he must have been watching them for some time. She sprang to her feet and ran to him, crying and laughing by turn.

'But I don't understand! What happened? Did you sneak him here and pretend you'd carried out Marian's orders, and how on earth do you hope to get away with it? Oh, Max, I could hug you — I could hug you and never let you go!'

'Well, there's nothing to stop you!' he retorted mildly, then caught her up and sat down in the nearest chair with her on his knees. 'I'll explain if you try to be sensible and don't start leaving me immediately to shower blandishments on your first love, but before that, might I be allowed to take you to task for those very unjust accusations you levelled at me when I came to collect what was lawfully mine?'

'But how was I to know? Why didn't you tell me?' she protested, those same bitter accusations returning in half-remembered snatches.

'I did try to reassure you when I first arrived, but I suppose with your usual penchant for misinterpreting good intentions, you didn't get the message. Later, I was too hurt and angry to explain.'

'But how could I have thought anything else? You said you'd had your orders.'

'So I had — orders to collect the dog and drop my cheque in the post in the morning.'

'You've bought him? But how did you ever persuade Marian?'

'Well, as a matter of fact it was your friend Dawson who did the persuading. I never liked the chap, but he has a pretty line in dealing with spoilt beauties.'

He'll make her a good husband.'

'Do you mean she's going to marry him?'

'I shouldn't be surprised. This holiday home idea is going ahead, I understand, if the lawyers find everything satisfactory. It would seem quite a shrewd move to consolidate the partnership in other ways, wouldn't you think? I imagine the capricious Miss Mills,

for all her desire to distribute her favours and collect scalps in return, is a highly moral young woman in the stricter sense of the word.'

'Yes. Yes, I think she probably is. Max, I'm no good at Marian's game. I've never loved anyone before, and I can't pretend....'

He glanced down at her, but he could not see her face pressed against his shoulder, for a tangled sweep of hair was falling across it, and his hold tightened a little.

'Who wants you to pretend, my foolish love?' he asked softly. 'It was that very quality of truthfulness and tender simplicity in you that stole my heart away.... Never pretend with me, again, Emma. you can forget those protective prickles and that proper pride ... they've served their purpose....'

'Yes ... they've served their purpose ...' she echoed on a deep sigh of fulfilment, and turned her mouth up to his.

Much later, she said, returning to more prosaic matters and sounding a little anxious: 'I hope you didn't pay a ridiculous price for Flight. He's my love and treasure, but he's not worth a great deal now.'

'He's worth every penny of his price to me. He was my trump card, you see.'

'Your trump card?'

'Well, if I'd needed a bribe, I had one up my sleeve. The dog — my home — both of which you had fallen in

love with.... I wouldn't have hesitated to use them both shamelessly if you'd stood out against me.'

'Dear Max ... didn't you know I could never have stood out against you? I'd already added you to the inaccessible idols at whose feet I had laid my heart,' she said softly, then slipped off his knee and went to stand by the open windows and look out at the garden bathed in the evening sunlight, trying to recapture the mood of that first uninvited admittance to his home ... the home which long ago had been hers and which was offered to her again.... I've fallen in love with your house, she had told him at parting, and he had countered with the salutary retort that she would seem to lose her heart rather easily.... Had she been losing it then, she wondered, not to his home, but to him?

He had risen and joined her at the window, aware, with a delicacy she had yet to discover in him, that she needed those moments of withdrawal, then turned her gently round, cupping her chin in one hand to tilt up her face for a long, grave instant of scrutiny. He saw her eyes hazy with thoughts that he could not share and his own became demanding.

'What is it?' he asked with faint roughness. 'Are you shutting me out again?'

She reached up to smooth away the two little lines of tension which had appeared either side of his mouth, and the discovery that for him, no less than for her, there could be moments of pain and uncertainty seemed to answer all the doubts and questions of the past.

'I've never shut you out, my dearest dear,' she told him with loving simplicity. 'It was always the other way round, only now I think I can understand.... Will you go on slapping me down when we're married?'

'Most certainly I shall if you drive me to it. And talking of slapping reminds me, young woman, that I have a score to settle with you,' he said, and she smiled, knowing that he was relieved at being able to slip back momentarily into the more familiar role he had chosen to present to her for so long. It would be a little while, she realized in her

new-found wisdom, before he was able to bring himself to expose his innermost self without armour.

`I wonder why Dawson bothered,' she said with seeming irrelevancy, but he only smiled in comprehension and answered:

`Do you? He told me afterwards that he owed you a good turn. It was his way, I think, of cancelling out idle mischief. He said to tell you that ... that you'd understand.'

'Oh! ' She gave a soft little sigh. 'I've been wrong about so many things, haven't I?'

`Well, you couldn't be blamed for some of them, I suppose, but—' his voice changed to the brusque, uncompromising tones he used in his professional capacity – I catch you getting on that high horse again where I'm concerned, or slapping my face for want of a little self-control, you'll be taught a lesson you won't forget in a hurry this time, so be warned, Miss Emma Penelope Clay.'

`Yes, Mr. Grainger,' she replied with mock meekness. try to give satisfaction, but there's one thing against you if I don't, I'm afraid.'

`And what's that?'

`You won't be able to sack me!'