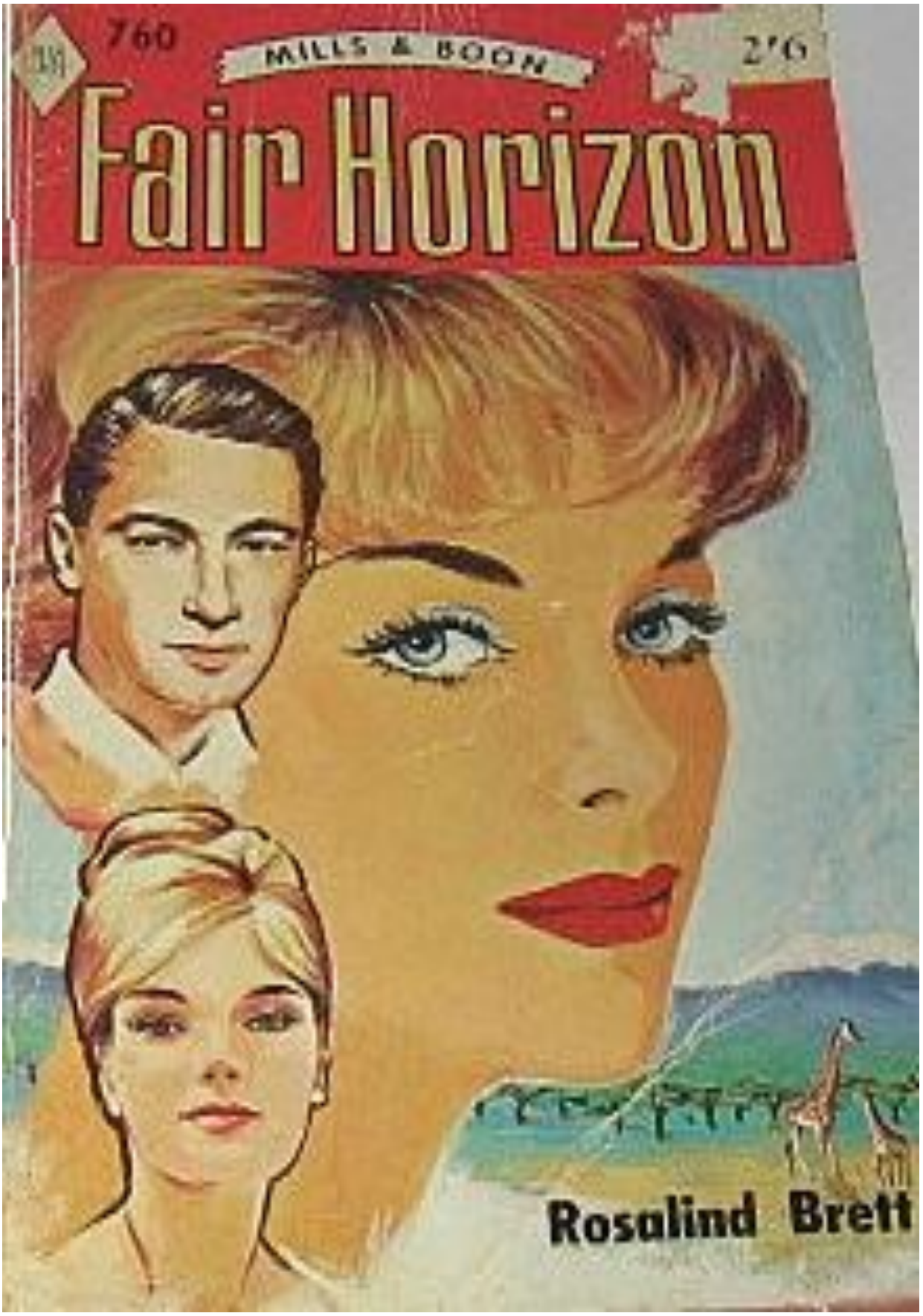
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Fair Horizon
Rosalind Brett

Fair Horizon by Rosalind Brett

Karen had come to Kenya ready and eager to fall in love with this exciting, dramatically beautiful country. This was where her much-loved cousin Elizabeth had come to live with her husband Justin, and it was at their coffee farm that Karen was to stay as governess to their small son Keith. What Karen hadn't bargained for was falling in love with Mark Howard—brilliant, charming Mark, a dedicated engineer. Bridges and roads were his dominion; always building, always moving on to new, untamed territory, he had very little time for the quiet, settled life of the farming community. And it was to this man that Karen gave her heart, knowing full well that with her lack of experience, her gentle, unsophisticated approach to life, she stood no chance of winning his love.

CHAPTER I

THE best feature of driving in an ox-cart," remarked Elizabeth, "is the rhythm. After an hour or so, when your bones have loosened up, you sway with the oxen. You might be in a ship."

Karen failed to see any connection between the sea-voyage which had ended at Mombasa four days ago, and the pitching of the little wooden cart which she shared with her cousin and two large trunks, behind a sextet of hefty brown beasts whose aroma was decidedly of the earth. The small dusty boy at the head of the ox-team, hurling blood-freezing imprecations to encourage speed, was part of the unreality of this startling land of Kenya.

"Will Justin be annoyed that we didn't wait at Guaba for the car?" she asked.

"Justin's never annoyed," Elizabeth reassured her comfortably. "Mind you, there are times when a philosophical husband can be more infuriating than a plague of ants, but, on the other hand, he's quite often a blessing in a country like this, where you're at the mercy of the climate and the geology. You'll find he hasn't changed much since you last saw him."

That was the spring, reflected Karen, when she herself was thirteen. She had stood on the quay at Southampton, between her own mother and Elizabeth's, who were sisters, staring up at the two faces which even at that distance had appeared to smile through tears.

Elizabeth and Justin had married only a month before, and their wedding gifts, packed in tin boxes, lay in the ship's hold, solid adjuncts for the home they intended to create in the tropics. Karen remembered slipping a hand into her mother's and another into Aunt Mary's, and feeling both the larger hands tighten over hers as the ropes were cast off and the great ship began to move. Fiercely, she had fought down the lump in her own throat. She had always been fond of her cousin Elizabeth, and she was glad for her to be happy with Justin . . . But she did wish they would take her with them to the coffee farm in Kenya, even if life was going to be a struggle for them at first.

As soon as letters began to arrive, the household of three cheered up and when, about a year after their departure, news came of the birth of Elizabeth's son, Keith, Aunt Mary looked only for the time when she would see her daughter again and the little grandson. But, before that could happen, poor Aunt Mary died, and Karen and Mrs. Ainsley were left to carry on communications with Elizabeth Paterson.

At that time and until a week before she had left England, Karen was a secretary in a shipping-office and doing spare-time duty in the hospital staff-restaurant which her mother superintended. When Dr. Marsden, the elderly house-surgeon of the hospital,

paid more and more social calls to their little flat in Maida Vale, Karen hoped and suspected that his interest in her comely mother might develop along more than friendly lines. Their marriage announcement coincided with a long letter from Elizabeth, asking Karen to come out to Kenya.
Jolting along in the ox-wagon, Karen smiled at the recollection of her own sudden, intense excitement on that day four months ago, when one

climax had followed the other; in a mood of deep and grateful happiness for her mother's remarriage after so many lonely years, she had slit open the letter from Elizabeth, and the tenuous dream which she must subconsciously have cherished ever since that day at Southampton eight years ago, took definite shape in her mind.
"Don't worry about how you're going to earn your keep, my dear," wrote her cousin. "Keith is a little barbarian with too much intelligence, but at seven he can't read a word. You'll have your hands full knocking the alphabet and multiplication tables into him, I can tell you. But, if you should find an hour to spare at any time, Tustin will shamelessly heap his office-work upon you. I expect you wonder what I do with my days, and all I intend to answer is—come out and see. You'll love this country, Karen. Do come."
Elizabeth had met the ship. For a long, astonished moment, she and Karen had stood a yard apart, the dark, placidly smiling woman with good features hidden beneath a sun-toughened skin, and the fair girl in a natural linen suit, her lips slightly parted, her eyes wide and blue as the Kenya sky.
Karen knew that where men were concerned she could
use no tricks — no guile ... for she had never
learnt any! Her affair of the heart held all the
bitter-sweetness of uncertainty .
Why do nice girls fall in love so unsuitably?
Then each had cried the other's name and wholeheartedly and unaffectedly they had hugged one another.
After that, neither could talk fast enough. They spent a day in the sticky heat of Mombasa and another in cosmopolitan Nairobi, before taking the branch-line to Guaba,' the nearest point to the coffee farm, where Justin was supposed to have met them. But apparently since the Patersons had last had occasion to use the train from Nairobi, the time-table had been overhauled, and the two women found themselves with two and a half hours to kill at a wayside halt in the middle of a plain burnt brown by a merciless sun.
"Oh, heavens!" said Elizabeth. "If we wait here, Justin will find two tidy heaps of bones in a large grease-spot and a couple of cabin-trunks. I'm going to ask that boy to conjure me a conveyance."
Karen stared to the right and to left, backwards and forwards. It looked as though there were no habitation anywhere within a hundred miles. She listened to Elizabeth practising first a mixture of Swahili and English and then a spatter of Kafir on the porter, and was amazed, within ten minutes,

to see emerging from a cloud of red dust a primitive wagon and team led by a small boy. It was as if the message had gone out over invisible wires and the reply to it had risen straight up through the earth.
THE country had changed since Guaba. Although the road had risen slightly the whole way and outcrops of pink granite scarred the earth,

trees grew fairly thickly and, where they were densest, a lush, dampish smell pleasantly tinged the atmosphere. Already Karen was beginning to appreciate moisture in these arid lands.
"I hope they've made a good job of your room," commented Elizabeth. "Mark had cleared out most of his things before I left but he was sleeping there till last night, which means that the final polish had to wait till today. So long as the bed-linen is fresh and there's a bowl of flowers, you won't mind, will you? That's about as much as Justin and Jimmy, our houseboy, will rise to."
"Of course not. Who's Mark?"
"Mark Howard. He's been staying with us for about six weeks surveying a bridge site over the river and building a house near it. Our offspring adores him; when Keith grows up, he's going to build bridges as big as Mark's all over Kenya, irrespective of railway lines and rivers."
Karen smiled. "Are they building a bridge near the farm?"
"No, it's down at Grassa, but ours is the nearest place to his site. Mark's built bridges all over South Africa, and several on the Continent, too. He's quite a big noise in the realm inhabited by civil and structural engineers. I should imagine his brain is beautifully marked out and measured, like a blue print. For all that, he's a bit of an enigma. Gives you the feeling that he's been everywhere and seen everything . . . If he dislikes you he weighs you up in a glance that makes you feel as big as a sixpence."
"He sounds a little unpleasant. How did you stick him for six weeks?"
"It's funny, but he grows on you. He's very charming to me, and he and Justin get on well. Keith, without awe of anyone, has annexed him as an only uncle, and I must say that Mark is long-suffering with the little monkey. As a parting gift, he's bought Keith a pony."
They reached a slight eminence and she tugged down the brim of her hat to shade her eyes, and gazed in front, pointing. "There's Justin, bless his heart, pelting along in the oil-burner—that's the bush car, a box on wheels," she explained in parenthesis. "I wonder if Keith is with him?"
But Keith, Justin informed them, when he had given Karen a bone-cracking handshake and his slow, endearing smile, had attached himself to Mark for his last day. They'd both be back at about six. Less than half an hour later the car drove past a short belt of orange-trees ending at a five-barred gate which creaked somnolently to and fro in the breeze. Karen saw a log-house embedded among masses of brilliant bloom, a rich thatch of banana leaves protruding a couple of yards all round to give ample

shelter and coolness to the veranda, and a background of thick, dark-leaved trees. Though Elizabeth had described the interior of the house in her letters, it was not a bit as Karen had imagined it. The ceiling, for instance, immediately caught her attention.
"Why canvas?" she inquired.
"For two reasons. Canvas lets through a certain amount of air but it deters large insects and snakes. Thatched roofs have drawbacks; they constantly need repair and they harbour pests—but they're quiet during storms and wonderfully cool. This is the room in which we live, work, and have our being. I hope you won't get tired of it."
Large and cedar-smelling, the room was simply furnished in teak and tapestry; one end of it, complete with divan suite, faced french doors on to the veranda, while a dining-suite and bookcase occupied the rest of the space. The door to the left of the back wall led into Elizabeth's bedroom. She opened the one to the right.
"This is your room, Karen. They haven't done too badly with it, have they?"

Karen stood in the middle of a waxed floor, surveying the white painted room and soaking in the fragrance of the vase of sweet-peas and pinks on the dressing-table.
"It's lovely," she said. "I can still smell cedar."
"I'm not surprised. Most of the house is built of it. In the first place we used it for cheapness—cedar grows abundantly in this district—and now we're glad we did. It seems that cedar is about the only timber that is disagreeable to the palate of the termites. Do you want a bath yet?"
"I think I'll unpack one of the trunks first."
"Good. Bathing here is a major operation, except when the river's high."
LEFT alone, Karen forgot the trunks in her absorption with the short, multi-coloured view from the window. The garden was small but
perfectly planned, rising in brief terraces that spilled profusions of scarlet salvia and sapphire morning-glory; pools of unidentifiable orange and yellow and white seeped along the stone walls and cascaded to the edge of the square emerald lawn.
The garden ended at a fringe of red-hot poker aloes where spears flamed against the flawless sky. Behind them, apparently, the ground dropped away for in the distance the billowing tops of the coffee trees looked like an unending stretch of crumpled green velvet that one might dance upon in the moonlight or in the misty dawn. Karen, her perceptions new and keyed up, quivered with the strangeness and beauty of this country to which she had come to live.
She had just bathed and changed into a candy-striped dress when sudden sounds invaded the living-room—the excited yelp of a terrier, tumbling chatter in a treble voice, Elizabeth's attentive soothing. Karen stood in the doorway, surveying the small dishevelled figure who wriggled on his perch

at the edge of the dining-table, while his mother dabbed blood from his knee and pressed on an adhesive plaster.
"Mark dared me, so I had to do it. He said I recovered like a gentleman."
"Perhaps Mark will be just a weeny bit sorry if you break your neck on that pony," his mother returned calmly.
"You've got to learn the way to fall!" came her son's reply with great scorn. "It's all a matter of presence of mind." A pause, followed by a polite query, "D'you know what presence of mind is, Mum?"
"I can't say that I'm familiar with Mark's brand."
"Well, Mark says that presence of mind mimi—miminises hurt." "Good heavens."
"And that means," proudly, "that I might have broken my leg this afternoon if I hadn't used my presence of mind." Keith drew a deep, satisfied breath and raised his head. "Oh, hallo." He grinned at Karen, and nudged his mother.
Elizabeth looked up, smiling. "Karen, meet Keith in his most typical position. He's worn a groove in this table. Get down, darling, and do take Tuppence outside and tie him up. Then ask Jimmy to carry the small bath round to your bedroom the veranda way and I'll come and clean you up a bit."
"So long, Keith," said Karen. "See you later."
He didn't move at once. His hands dug into his pockets, and his round face with the indeterminate nose was set in stubborn lines that contrasted ludicrously with the dusting of freckles over the upper half of his face. He regarded Karen unblinkingly.
"Mummy told me that you're going to teach me to read and write, but Mark says you can't learn anything properly without wanting to. I hate books."
"Oh. I rather got the impression that you wished to grow up like .. . Mark."
"I do."

"Ask him how old he was when he started school."
"I have. He was seven, like me, but he went to an exciting school, where his father was the teacher. He learned enough in Nairobi to go to an English university when he was big."
Karen was growing a little tired of the infallible Mark Howard. "Let's start on a matey footing, shall we?" she said. "We'll read and write together in the mornings and, in the afternoons, you can turn professor and show me how to know an eland when I meet one."
He stared. "Don't you really know?" She shook her head and he grinned, displaying an engaging gap between his top teeth. "I'll take you down to Snake Hole if you like, and show you a crab spider as big as Tuppence. He lives under a rock and I reckon he's a million years old."
"The bath, darling," Elizabeth reminded him patiently.

Obligingly, Keith unbuttoned his shirt. "Can you ride a horse?" he asked of Karen.
"Not yet, but I mean to learn."
"I'll teach you," he said, at last obeying his mother's injunction and making for the door. "One of the first things you must practise is how to fall."
KAREN, amusement accentuating the faint dimple at the left corner of her mouth, shook up a plump cushion and sank into a chair opposite
an open window. Already dusk was closing in, cooling the air and releasing a blend of tantalising scents. A tall figure paused outside on the veranda, his back to the room. For some reason Karen stayed very still, watching the exceptional width of shoulder in the light khaki jacket, and the economical action with which he smoothed the hair back from his temples.
That swift twilight was almost gone. Night sketched in, purple shading to black, and one by one the night sounds stole in from the thickets and hills and from the garden below. The shrill chirp of cicadas, the hoarse note of bull-frogs, the metallic whisper of the flying beetle; then the wailing of distant hyenas, and an intermittent prolonged roar which Karen apprehensively attributed to a lion. They were noises which she was eventually to become as accustomed to as the withering sunshine.
Behind her Jimmy brought in the lamps.
The man turned from the veranda into the room. "Well, well!" he said in a pleasantly mocking voice that seemed to pluck a string somewhere in Karen's heart. "A gazelle in the lounge. I've seen less probable sights in Africa. How do you do, Miss Karen Ainsley."
Karen fought an annoying impulse to stammer. "How do you do .. . Mr. Howard."
While he called the boy and asked for drinks, she stole a long glance at him. A face not so much strange as different; very lean, the skin stretched tightly across his cheekbones to accentuate the framework of his jaw and the longish, slightly humped nose. A Roman sort of nose, all arrogance, spiced with a trace of contempt.
There was only charm in his attitude as he took the twin chair to hers and faced 'her across the window space. "Let me see. You're related to Mrs. Paterson, aren't you?"
"Elizabeth and I are cousins."
"Oh, yes. She used to take you to school each morning. You sat astride the back of her cycle and once got your scarf chewed up in the spokes." He smiled—a faint lazy movement of chiselled lips. "Most young things go in for hero-worship. Was Elizabeth the object of yours?"

"To some extent," Karen admitted. "I always wanted to do the things she did, and no one else's opinion meant so much to me. But all that came to an abrupt end when she married Justin and sailed for Kenya."

"Not quite; you followed her—but without the husband. That was a rather serious omission. This side of Nairobi young men are many, but hard up." As Jimmy brought in the tray, Mark uncrossed his long legs. "Martini, or a long drink?"
"I'd prefer lime."
Expertly, giving the task serious attention, he mixed a small fruit cocktail and topped it with the sweetened juice of fresh limes. "Harmless and invigorating," he commented. "I drink half a dozen of these in the course of a day." With studied indolence he re-seated himself "I suppose your first reactions to our country match everyone else's . . . superb, thrilling, marvellous, and all the other adjectives?"
"Yes, but I climbed down a few steps this afternoon. Your roads are terrible, and an ox-cart is not the best means of travelling along them."
He laughed outright. "Did Elizabeth do that to you? That was wicked of her. In a year's time, possibly less, you'll have a fine metalled road into Guaba, and probably right through to Nairobi. That's part of my contract."
At that moment, Keith bounded in wearing pyjamas, his face shining with soap beneath a tousle of straw coloured hair. "It's always bedtime," he groused, straddling the arm of Mark's chair. "Do stay till morning, Mark."
"Can't be done, I have to sleep at Grassa tonight."
"Grassa's grand . . . and that cunning little house. I built some of it,"
he told Karen. "It's wattle-and-daub and I sloshed on chunks of the daub." "I'll say you did," from Elizabeth, who was at the door. "We had to lever
it out of your ears with a pick-axe. Say good night and come along." "Will you be here again soon, Mark?" Keith begged.
"Sure to. You're my nearest neighbour. Don't try any stunts on the pony unless your daddy's with you."
"Karen wants a horse."
A tiny pause. "Does she? We'll have to find her one."
"She can't ride yet."
"Then we'll have to look for an affectionate little filly with dainty legs and good mariners." The laconic tone seemed to add, 'Just like herself.' He patted the boy's shoulder. "Cut along now. Good night, old son."
Keith leapt to the floor, flung a defiant glare at Karen which dared her to kiss him, yelled a swift good night, and bolted.
Justin came in, called for his customary glass of beer and lit a pipe. During the ensuing conversation, which was mainly of crops and the market, Karen was silent, and inevitably, like steel to a magnet, her attention was drawn to Mark. His fingers, curved around his glass, were thin and strong. His brows were thick and straight, and several shades darker than his hair. He was a study in browns, his skin a mahogany tan, his hair a rich chestnut, those dark brows; and his eyes . .. a nut-brown, Karen decided, flecked with green. For all his easy charm, there was a lone-eagle element in him.
When Elizabeth announced that dinner would be served in twenty minutes, he got up and said he must go.

"Not before dinner!" exclaimed Elizabeth.
"I'm afraid so. It's seven miles of tricky road in the dark."
"It won't be any darker in an hour's time."

He smiled. "I left instructions for someone to fix my meal. I intended to bring Keith and go straight back."
"I believe you're downright glad to have a house of your own," she accused him.
"I believe I am," he said. "You mustn't mind. I'm that sort of chap."
He paid Elizabeth a couple of compliments on the way she had cared for him, cast Karen a slightly ironical bow, said good night, and left them.
After dinner, when Karen went to her room for the gifts she had unpacked earlier, she hesitated in front of her mirror and peered at her reflection in the lamplight. A clear skin, steady blue eyes, a short nose, pale hair that sprang back from a broad white forehead, and a wide red mouth that curved generously and was sensitive. Moderately good-looking, in a sweet way—but she knew that so far as men were concerned she could use no tricks, for she had never learned them. And she had gathered from the men she had met on the voyage out, especially the older, travelled type, that they liked tricks. Even plain women managed to interest and attract men by a practised laugh or the subtle touch of cool fingers.
The younger men at the shipping-office where she had worked had liked her. They had confided to her their ambitions and love-affairs, but that only meant she was a sympathetic listener. Her upbringing, an only child living alone with her mother since her father's death when she was five, had prevented the sort of experience which might have endowed her with the sophistication that a man like Mark Howard looked for in women.
A slow flush crept up from Karen's neck. What was wrong with her? Why on earth should her thoughts run on such lines? What did it matter if there were nothing about her to attract that cool, charming egoist?
SET lessons with Keith were not due to start for a week, so for the next few days Karen familiarised herself with the lay-out of the farm and
helped Elizabeth in the dairy. As farms go in Kenya, Justin's was not much of a proposition. Five hundred acres, of which three hundred were planted with coffee, about a hundred under maize, and the rest given over to a medium-sized herd of native cattle. Living was fairly cheap, for they produced most of their own food and entertained only desultorily.
"For the first five years," said Elizabeth, her sleeves rolled high while she skimmed milk, "our finances looked sick. Then the coffee trees came into full bearing and prices were good, so we began to pull round. This is our third successful season, and for the first time we're completely solvent."
"Didn't it worry you during the early years?" asked Karen.
"Not deeply. Justin had it all planned—hand-to-mouth for five years and then gradual expansion. I always said that I'd celebrate our first profits by indulging in an evening-dress, but I never did."

"Not much use for one here."
"I don't know. We have a few neighbours, most of them in our own financial category. They give occasional parties, and every year when the coffee's picked and despatched we go down to Nairobi for a week or two. The Winchesters are next to us—we passed their farm on the way up from Guaba. I think I'll ask them over for dinner on Saturday. We mustn't let you get bored."
"No chance of that. Everything's so new and startling."
"Still, you're young and used to office life. Besides, you must meet plenty of men. If Kenya really gets under your skin—and I rather think it will—you'll want to marry and settle here. There are lots to choose from. It wouldn't be a bad idea," she added

laughingly, "to ask a married couple and one bachelor each weekend. Be rather fun sorting the possibles from the not-on-your-lifes!"
Just then Keith came tearing along the path to the dairy. "Mark's here!" he sang out. "He's been to Guaba to collect supplies, and he's staying to lunch. Daddy asked him."
"Oh dear," groaned Elizabeth, starting off, "and I'd planned ham and eggs for three and a half. I must run."
Karen had paused, and Keith stopped, too, eyeing her curiously. "What's the matter? Don't you like Mark?" he demanded.
"I hardly know him."
"Then why have you gone huffy-looking?"
"Have I? Perhaps it's the sun. There, is that better?" Her smile drew an answering grin.
"C'mon," he said. "I'm hungry."
But Karen let him race on without her. An extraordinary lassitude seemed to have entered her bones. Almost, she turned and slipped back through the gate into the pasture. But, as she neared the house, another sensation ousted the reluctance. She heard his voice, lazy and sardonic, and her heart quickened. So did her footsteps .. .
AFTER a couple of false starts, Keith settled into a routine. From nine till twelve each morning, with a ten-minute break for milk, he sat on one
side of the veranda table and Karen on the other. From the first she set a timetable. The primers which Elizabeth had ordered from Nairobi were modern and well illustrated.
Naturally, Keith enjoyed the afternoons most. It didn't occur to him that when he and Karen wandered among the wild figs, chanting multiplication tables or discussing the origin of coal, he was still learning. He took her down to his beloved Snake Hole and made her lie flat and hang over the edge of the huge green bowl and search for grass-adders and hissing yellow-backs. He probed a tussock of bog myrtle with a stick till a brown spider the size of a man's hand ambled out to see who was disturbing him.
"His name's Caesar," Keith told her. "I christened him once with a drop of lemonade. He was cross over that."

He was exactly the normal, healthy son of Elizabeth and Justin one would have imagined, for which Karen was thankful. A gift for teaching was not a strong part of her equipment, and a problem child would have worried her. As it was, she saw the time approaching when Keith would be setting the pace, not she. It was a subject she often debated with her cousin, but Elizabeth shrugged it off with a laugh. "You'll have to get together with Roy Strasmore and work something out."
Karen liked Roy Strasmore. He was fair and slim and young, equally enthusiastic about his work as district education officer, and making the most of his leisure. He was stationed at Guaba, in a little white house with an iron roof, beside which stood a single sere palm, the only tree in miles. Small wonder that his weekends were spent with the Winchesters or the Hardings or the Patersons.
"I never thought about trees till I came to Guaba, where there aren't any," he confessed to Karen, after dinner at the coffee farm one evening. "In the same way, I never cared a hoot that the farm youngsters were growing up little barbarians till I was put in charge of a group of schools. It's ageing to try to coax money for new schools. They just haven't any."
"Timber's cheap enough, and I'm sure the parents would lend their own workmen to do the building. They'd buy the books, too. You'd only have to get Government sanction and a teacher."

'"Only'," he groaned. "My poor, sweet innocent. You remind me of the girl I left behind me—you're so naïve."
`The girl I left behind me' was the one dark thread in the bright pattern of Roy's existence. To Karen he had confided that Glenys was the spoilt darling of rich parents. He liked Kenya so much that he wanted her to come out and marry him, but she wouldn't.
Roy was not downcast for long. "We'll call a parents' meeting," he said. "D'you think Elizabeth would arrange tea for about thirty next Saturday? That's a convenient time for most people."
Elizabeth, her eyes amusedly aware of the two young heads bent close together over a matter of mutual interest, thought it might be arranged. "Not only parents," she amended. "Everyone should be hooked in, even temporary residents like Colonel Williamson and Mark Howard—especially Mark."
Karen, a sudden quick beat in her temple, looked up. "Why Mark Howard?"
"It's his glorious country, isn't it? We settlers are sinking our all to cultivate his precious soil and give point to his roads and bridges. Besides," she added illogically, "someone ought to relieve him of a little cash. Wealthy bachelors always annoy me."
"Elizabeth's right," Roy said seriously. "Quite apart from his money, Mark has power in Nairobi. But he's impatient of settlers and their problems, and I rather think he'll refuse to take part in anything so inconspicuous as an infants' school."

'We can ask him, anyway," Elizabeth concluded. "I'll send a note down telling him we need his advice on an important issue. That ought to fetch him."
Early the following week the note was despatched to Grassa, and the boy returned to the farm—without an answer. A little depressed, Karen helped with the ironing and mending. Mark hadn't been up since the day he'd dropped in for lunch, three weeks ago. Keith had ridden down with Justin and reported that the steel was going up for the bridge and that Mark had shot jackals and hyenas from his doorstep.
The Indian fundi who had supervised the building of Mark's house and made the furniture, had now fixed a small log room in the branches of a gum-tree near the river, which gave an uninterrupted view of Mount Kenya. The view made no impression on Keith, but the log-room, he sighed blissfully, was a dream hidey-hole for adventures.
Karen was beginning to realise that she, as a relative of the Patersons, belonged to the farming, rather than the sporting element in the district. The distinction was a clear-cut difference in outlook, leisure and income. Mark chose his friends from among the Government forestry men and the game hunters living in the surrounding hills. His weekends were often spent on safaris into the forest below Grassa. The Patersons gleaned this news from returning parties who occasionally stopped at the farm for the loan of petrol.
One bush-car outfit had included two very pretty girls who had subsided into grass chairs on the veranda and demanded drinks. Karen, standing nearby, heard one say to the other, "Mark's exasperating; terribly exciting and charming—but exasperating." To which came the reply, "I know. He simply jibes at emotion. You just can't stake a claim on him."
A remark which pleased Karen, yet at the same time tinged her thoughts with despair. If these girls, with their expensive good looks and glib assurance, could make no inroads on Mark's self-sufficiency, he must be the most hopeless of confirmed bachelors.
Today, as she ran the old-fashioned flat-iron over numerous small shirts and drill knickers of Keith's, she could almost see Mark's face before her, mocking yet kind as

he listened to her replies to Keith's questions about London and the River Thames.
"Why is it," Mark had inquired during a pause, "that settlers are so steeped in sentimentality and nostalgia for England? How can one hope to be entirely successful if half one's being is left in the old country, pulling all the time? Kenya's Africa, not England with an African background. I believe that all settlers should be compelled to take an oath of allegiance to the country before being admitted."
Though his nose had crinkled in a smile, Karen had known he was not joking. His love of his country struck deep into his roots, and, rather naturally, he considered that only the best in the way of men and material should be used for its expansion. It was an aspect of his personality with which she could readily have sympathised had he given her the chance.

WHEN Elizabeth yawned and said it was time she took a bath and changed, Karen slipped out for a walk with Tuppence, the terrier.
"You can take the car if you like," her cousin called after her. "Mid-week is a good time to practise on the brakes. You're less likely to meet other traffic."
Just as Elizabeth had thought it necessary for Karen to gain experience in the dairy, Justin, in his solid fashion, had more or less insisted that she should learn to drive. Both stated that the more one knew of the ordinary tasks of life, the better one was able to cope in emergencies. The bush-car was not an ideal learner's vehicle, but Karen was getting used to its idiosyncrasies.
Cautiously she backed it from the shed and out on to the road. Involuntarily she turned right, away from Guaba. The terrier sat beside her quivering with excitement and that peculiar fear which invades all little things in the presence of big, unknown ones. Tuppence adored human beings of all sizes; zebra, wildebeeste and giraffe, however, scared him silly, and even a pretty gazelle or a graceful young duiker affected him oddly.
When she had the car running as smoothly as the road permitted, between podocarpus and cedar on the one side, and Justin's coffee trees on the other, Karen reflected that it was good to drive off alone once in a while. Solitude had the advantage of giving one all the time in the world to absorb the colours of the dry red earth and the dark-leaved trees, the dappled sunlight across the track, the sudden slabs of grass mottled with pinks and splashed here and there with yellow gladioli. On lucky days, a startled herd of oryx or a disgruntled ostrich might leap into sight, and at any hour of the day you could see impudent colobus monkeys nipping along the branches or dangling for closer scrutiny.
The Paterson farm ended at a fence of wire and blue-gum wood and for a mile or two gums and palms and thorn-trees grew densely, intertwined by thick parasitical vines which sent out huge flowers of unbelievable brilliance and beauty. Then came bamboos, stiff and harsh, their roots buried in decaying moss. Suddenly there was the river, not tropical as she had imagined it, but cool and pinkish-grey, rippling over boulders and widening here and there into still pools. Not quite English, though, for the vegetation grew tall and rubbery, and the trees spread like umbrellas of green woollen embroidery. Grassa could not be far away.
Karen stopped the car, vexed with herself for having come so far in this direction. It would be difficult to turn on this narrow road so close to the river. Tuppence hopped out and darted over to admire his reflection. "Come back, you little wretch," Karen cried.
For a further entranced moment Tuppence stared into the water, before pushing off daintily to swim to the other side. Karen ran to the ledge of rock and used all the dog

blandishments and endearments she had ever learned. Tuppence looked back regretfully, but kept on swimming, and she resigned herself to waiting till he tired. But he had decided to explore the other bank.

Idly, Karen followed his movements and walked with him, at intervals calling his name. The river twisted and she saw a bridge composed of four huge-girthed trunks lashed together and embedded each side of the river in rust-coloured mud. A much more solid affair than the suspended log bridges she had seen before. This one begged to be used.
Half-way across, the high heel of her white gaberdine sandal caught between two of the tree-trunks and stuck. It would have been easy to wrench it out, but only at the risk of ripping the material covering the heel and these were the coolest and most comfortable shoes she possessed. With a small exclamation of annoyance, she drew out her bare foot and sat down to pick away the bark that gripped her shoe.
"Hallo! There are nicer places to paddle than this." Karen started. Mark, with a couple of lazy strides from among the trees, had reached her side, and now stood above her, grinning.
"I'm not paddling. My heel got caught in these logs. Do you carry a penknife?" Karen asked.
Mark squatted, opened a blade, and began whittling away the stringy bark. She watched his hands, one using the knife and the other grasping the back of her shoe, and thought what characteristic hands they were, and how lucky that she was wearing her nicest sling sandals. But his next remark was dampening. "I know the raw material situation in England is acute, but it's worse than I imagined if they're reduced to turning out shoes like this. They let in just about everything—dust, wet, insects, and there's ample room at the toe to admit a young snake."
"The women in Nairobi wear them. That's where I bought them."
"Nairobi." He dismissed the capital of Kenya with a shrug. "Much goes on in Nairobi that wouldn't go down in the Guaba district. Here's your shoe, and you may count yourself fortunate that the heel is intact. Next time, remember that this sort of bridge is intended for lorries and bare feet."
"I think it's absurd to leave the tree-trunks rounded like that."
"You do?" he said quizzically "I've managed very well with this sort of temporary bridge all over Kenya and elsewhere, but I'm always open to suggestions for improvements."
"Oh!" Karen turned slightly pink. "Is this your bridge?"
He nodded. "If you listen hard, you'll hear my boys working just round the bend."
Without a pause he went on, "The logs are left raw for two reasons. They provide ruts for lorry wheels and they're safer in the rains." He straightened, waited for her to strap on the shoe, and offered a hand. "What are you doing so far from home?"
"Only going for a run in the box-car."
"Do you carry a gun?"
"No"—apprehensively. "Justin says I must learn to shoot."
"Don't you want to?" His smile mocked a little. "Not much, I haven't that sort of nerve."

"Still, it's best to know how, in case you're ever in a spot. I've a light gun you can try now, if you like. My house is just through the trees."
WITH a sensation of uneasy bliss, Karen felt his hand on her elbow, helping her across to the other bank. The he stalked at her side among
the thorn-trees, to the clearing where his house stood on the edge of a short stretch of new road which apparently was to link up with the stone bridge when it was

constructed. The house was a stout little dwelling, grass-thatched, without obvious corners, and set up on strong, cement piles.
"More than a temporary house, surely?" Karen ventured. "It looks built to last a lifetime."
"When I've finished here—in eight to ten months—it will serve as a rest-house. Water's laid on through a pipe-line, and I take a portable dynamo for lighting wherever I go." He leapt up the steps half a pace ahead of her and thrust wide the door. "As you can see, the furnishing might be less primitive, but anywhere is home so long as 'Old Bill's' with me"—indicating an easy chair of outsize dimensions and sickly hue.
"Hanim!" he called. "Drinks. A lady." In an aside to Karen he added, "Hanim's half Arab and very dignified. When he comes in he'll weigh you up and mix you a drink. He's an infallible judge. I predict he'll divine your preference for non-alcoholic lime."
Sure enough, the tall, slim servant in a spotless kanzu—the usual long white garment worn by houseboys—prepared two tumblers of lime and soda, but in his master's he added a peg of whisky. "Would the bwana's little sister like biscuit?" he enquired softly.
Mark looked amused. Karen declined, and Hanim withdrew. Mark said, "I wonder what the sly blighter meant by that? He must know that if I had a little sister she couldn't possibly look like you. I shouldn't be surprised if he was gently conveying to me his opinion that you're a nice girl—too nice to be treated as other than a sister!"
When her glass was empty, he loaded two guns and took her outside and round to the back of the house. To a tree he tacked a square of white cardboard. "Twenty paces to start with," he said. "Your paces, not mine. Now take aim, holding your gun like this. Take your time and fire when you're ready."
The shot went wide, but the explosion was less paralysing than Karen had expected. "Try again"—calmly from Mark.
A few minutes later, when he had reloaded and she had again taken position, he stood behind her and bent to sight the target over her shoulder. His arm came round to feel her wrist. "Slacken off and uncurl your index finger. You're too rigid."
She bit her lip. He hadn't the faintest notion what his nearness was doing to her nerves, and she desperately wished some fluke would magnetise one of her shots to the target. She fired, twice.

"All right," he said abruptly, relieving her of the rifle. "You've lost what little grip you started with. You'll do better in time, but I'm afraid you're not the stuff that crack-shots are made of." After a short silence, during which she kept her head bent, he tacked on, "Don't brood, Kitten. You can probably toss a pancake better than some of us. Is it tactless of me to mention horse riding on top of that?"
She had to smile at the humour in his tone. "I've tried Justin's gelding a few times. Mr. Winchester is going to sell me a little native pony."
"The native breed are thick-legged and sure-footed—safe for a beginner. If you cotton to riding, I'll look round for a filly for you next time I'M in Nairobi." He looked up at the gilded tree-tops. "It's getting late. Think you'll manage to drive back alone?"
"Of course, if only I can turn the car."
She had forgotten Tuppence The terrier, bedraggled of fur and spirit, crouched behind the steering-wheel, whimpering. Karen scooped him up. "Poor little Tupp, all alone in the jungle. Perhaps you'll know better than to scamper off alone next time."
Mark reversed the car and got out. "Nice of you to call," he smiled. "Come again some time."
Her hand on the wheel, Karen hesitated. "You didn't answer Elizabeth's note this morning."

"I hate turning down a neighbour offhand, so I decided to do it by halves."
"You know what she wanted to see you about?"
"I guessed. Young Strasmore was at the Hardings' yesterday when I dropped in on them, and he dragged me into a discussion on schooling." "You don't agree with his plan?"
"As a Government official, he ought to know better," Mark replied with a trace of acidity. "He was put in this district to modernise the existing educational facilities, not to sit in judgment upon them. His job is to report the need for schools and to leave it to his chiefs to do the rest. Everything will come in good time."
"Meanwhile, the children must run wild."
"There are boarding-schools in Nairobi."
"Would you send a seven-year-old child to a boarding-school?"
"They can't learn independence too early. I'm not called upon to make the decision, thank the stars." A teasing note was audible in his voice. "It's rather a pity there aren't more sweet girl-cousins to come out and drill the youngsters. The only snag to it is that in time you'd all marry struggling young settlers and swell the number of ignorant imps." He gave the car an impersonal pat as he finished non-committally, "You do intend to marry and settle here, don't you?"
Unconsciously, Karen's fingers tightened over the wheel. "I haven't thought about it yet."
"You will," he told her, a cynical twist to his mouth. "Marriage is an incurable disease in Kenya."

Her lips parted, but before she could speak he said: "You'd like to know how I've kept clear of it? I never stay in one place long enough for complications to set in. I'm a selfish beggar, anyway. If I were to sink my individuality for long enough to reach the point of marrying someone, it's ten chances to one that we'd both regret it—unless she were something unique in the way of women." Hands well down in his pockets, he stood back. "On your way, now. The sun's dipping, and I don't fancy a lost kitten on my conscience."
Karen carried away with her his gesture of farewell, a cool nod and an aloof smile that he might have accorded to any casual visitor. For the second time since coming to Kenya she wished she were beautiful—or at least sophisticated.

CHAPTER II

AT the meeting the following Saturday, it was unanimously decided that Roy should submit a petition from the parents to his office, asking, at
the most, for an equipped school and a teacher, but leaving the gate open for lesser benefits if the greater were not forthcoming. The reply was prompt and discouraging. In due course, it stated, Guaba's requirements would be met. It must be appreciated, however, that the needs of other more populous districts were primarily urgent.
"Dash it," Roy grumbled, "they seem to have misunderstood the offer to build at the parents' expense!"
"What they say is true enough. Education is a terrific problem in districts like ours; and I think that, on the whole, it's being tackled very well," said Elizabeth reasonably. "But what's to stop our going ahead with the building and employing some sort of instructor between us, if we can get one?"

"Yes, if we can get one," he echoed, a trifle gloomily. Then he looked at Karen, who sat across the room embroidering a luncheon-mat. "Is it more than you'd care to take on, Karen?"
She was surprised and a little curious when Elizabeth answered for her, "Karen's good with Keith, but she's not a qualified teacher. We really want someone who's not the marrying sort."
Roy laughed. "That lets out Karen. She's definitely hearth and home. We might advertise in Nairobi and keep on advertising till we land something."
"Our first task is to build. Do we have to get permission to use that corner site we all agreed on?"
"Legally, I suppose we should, but I feel certain no objection will be raised if we go ahead. I do wish we'd managed to enlist Mark Howard," he

complained. "Building is in his blood, and he'd be no end of a help in designing the school and ordering materials."
As neither Elizabeth nor Karen could offer consolation on this point, the subject was changed.
The rains were a month overdue. Whenever folk met together the all-absorbing topic was the drought. The nights were cold Each morning dawned like a new revelation—cool, with a tang of bog myrtle. The distant hills were scarved with mist that disintegrated in the sunshine. Only at midday was it believable that Guaba lay less than a hundred miles from the Equator.
Roy Strasmore suggested a trip into the mountains before the weather broke. "We might even get a little way up Mount Kenya and camp for a night."
"I'd prefer my bed," said Elizabeth, "and so would Justin, I'm sure. Can't you two be satisfied with a day out?"
"It's not the same. Camping on Mount Kenya can be fun. In fact, we might spend a long weekend there—two nights."
"I've done it all once," was Elizabeth's verdict. "Go and ask John and Evelyn Winchester to join you. They're game for almost anything."
Eventually it was arranged. Little Mollie Winchester, just four, would come to the coffee farm for three days, and Keith was placated with the promise of a long ride on Sunday.
On Friday evening, Karen went down to help load the bush car. As it was dark, she walked, and carried a hurricane-lamp; over her other arm was slung a rainproof and a rug. Moths winged in the glow of the lantern and fireflies jewelled the lower branches of the trees, waving eerily in the night breeze. She saw the beams of an approaching car before its noise was audible. It might be Roy, coming to pick her up, although she had asked him not to, or one of the Hardings on the way to consult Justin; they, too, grew coffee. But when the car slowed to meet her, the odd leap of her heart told her at once that it was Mark. He thrust open the door. His voice was sharp, almost angry. "What the deuce are you doing out here in the dark?"
"Strolling down to the Winchesters'. We're starting tomorrow morning for a trip up Mount Kenya."
"Who planned it?"
"Roy, and John Winchester. We're leaving at dawn."
"Don't they realise that rain is on the way?"
"Rain?" Her face lifted to the studded heavens, and she added softly,
"The air is warmer and there isn't a cloud anywhere. This is just as I imagined a real African night sky. I've been here two months and I'm still struck with sudden awe whenever I remember that this is East Africa, and that I live here."

Mark, head and shoulders above her, let a full minute elapse before answering, on a brief, exasperated sigh, "Look here, this expedition will have

to be postponed. The rain may hold off for the weekend, but I doubt it. You've yet to experience our roads in a torrent, but Strasmore and Winchester should know better. Get in the car and I'll drive you there."
The car was warm. Carefully Karen lodged the lantern between her feet, the coat and rug hugged against her.
"Are you really keen on mountains?" Mark asked when they were moving. "Or are you stirred by the usual visitor's passion to do and see everything within the shortest possible time?"
"I'm not a tourist," she reminded him, "and Guaba has been the limit of my experience since coming to the farm. I thought it very kind of Roy to give me the chance of going along."
"Exceedingly generous," he agreed dryly. "Not a selfish spark in the fellow's make-up. How is the school going?"
"Slowly, worse luck. I don't see why we can't have a log building; it would meet our needs quite well."
"I don't know," he shrugged. "Might as well build to last while you're about it. Think how sweet it will be in about ten years' time to refuse a Government offer to put up the regulation school! Besides, cement walls are cool, and from what I've seen of the children in these parts, they'll need plenty of inducement to sit still for half an hour, let alone rack their brains while the sun's shining."
She smiled, and her arms closed more tightly about the inanimate bundle on her lap.
"We've got boys clearing the land, but the trees are old and stubborn, and they seem to be rooted in rock."
"If you like, one of my contraptions can uproot and cart away the timber," he suggested carelessly. "I'll send the logs with mine, and you can use the proceeds towards expenses."
"That would be awfully good of you," she said quickly, "especially as you were against the project."
"Theoretically, I'm still against it. Settlers have no business to run the country in their own way. Much of this haphazard expansion will tend to distort the pattern of the country's ultimate development, and then you settlers will start jibbing over that!"
"Why are you so down on settlers?"
"I'm not down on them, as a whole. It's the modern brand that gets me. They consider that a year in an agricultural college entitles them to call the country their own. As for handling natives, how can they, without a knowledge of the lingo? Few of them bother to pick up even a smattering, yet they expect untutored boys to understand exactly what's wanted of them."
"Were your parents born in Kenya, Mark?"
"Both were English," he said. "My father did exploring and anthropology in the days when there were still things to find out. When he married, he set up home near Nairobi, which was a one-horse place then, and went on safari fairly often. In a tussle with a lion he lost an arm, which cut out big-game hunting. Inaction irked him, so he started various ventures—mining

and forestry—and as a sideline he ran a school. I knew no European people till I was fifteen, when we moved right into Nairobi. My parents died a few years ago, within a month of each other, but I still keep the house in Nairobi."

Karen's mind filled in the blanks of the bald description, though not satisfactorily. Still, the fact that he had told her anything at all about his youth was flattering. The smallest indication of Mark's trust was worth all the confidences of young men like Roy Strasmore.

MARK pulled into the drive. John, Evelyn and Roy lounged in deck chairs on the veranda. "Is that you, Karen?" called Evelyn. "Come on
up and have a drink. We're debating conflicting meteorological reports. What's Justin's opinion?" Short-sightedly, she leaned forward. "It's too big for Justin. Who's your swain? Oh, it's you, Mark. Can you two squeeze onto the lounger? What will you have?"

Mark waved Karen to the long wicker chair and lowered himself onto the veranda rail. "Whisky and soda, please," he said. "I hear you've decided to have a go at mountaineering. You know there's rain about?"

"John says so, too," put in Roy. "One can hardly believe it on a night like this. Anyway, it's not likely to be much. Before the long rains start, there's always a warning shower or two, and we can soon turn back if the roads get squelchy."

"A chancy business, with women along," observed Mark.

"Evelyn's as good as a man on safari," her husband contributed. "Karen's new to it. Perhaps she'd like to step down, this time?"

"I certainly wouldn't," Karen said warmly. "A soaking won't kill me."

"Stranger things have happened." Mark's tone had hardened. "If you're here for life it won't hurt you to wait a couple of months before scaling Kenya."

Surprised at her own obstinacy, Karen said, "If Evelyn's going, so am I!

"That's the girl," said Evelyn. "Why not come with us, Mark, and give us the benefit of your knowledge and experience? We'd like to reach the snow line, if it's possible."

Apparently, he thought this remark too fatuous for comment. Accepting his drink, he shifted so that his back rested against the veranda post. Karen saw his outline chiselled upon a wine-dark background. How sweet it was, to be able to look and look, and no one the wiser.

"We'll leave as planned, anyway," said John. "Ten to one it won't rain at all, but if it does, we'll scamper home like rats."

They talked of other things, and it was at least half an hour later that Mark, having uncrossed his legs and drained his second drink, said he thought he'd get along. "If you've finished with this young woman," lazily indicating Karen, "I'll drop her at the Patersons' on my way." A small pause. "It happens that I'm going into Nairobi tomorrow. We'll set out together, if you like."

"A grand idea," said Evelyn. "Will you pick up Karen and bring her down? Come before seven and we'll all have breakfast together."

NEXT morning, Karen got up in the opalescent dawn. Keith, in crum- pled pyjamas, his mouth pursed with dissatisfaction, lolled in her bedroom doorway, watching the final touches to her toilet. "I bet you'll be frightened if there's a thunderstorm on Mount Kenya," he said.

"I expect I shall," she admitted equably.

"It wouldn't frighten me."

"Of course not. You're a man. Next time we go there'll be no risk of storms, and you shall come, too."

"I don't want to go," he snapped out. "I'd rather ride with Daddy to see Mark."

For the moment Karen deemed it wiser to remain silent. She got into her jacket, slipped an extra hanky into the bulging bag and gripped it under her arm. Keith followed her to the door of his mother's bedroom. Karen knocked.
Justin was still snoozing happily in his bed under the window, but Elizabeth luxuriated over an early cup of tea. "I hope the weather holds," she said. "You're taking a complete change of clothes, in case of accidents, aren't you?"
"They're in the suitcase that Roy collected yesterday."
"Have a good time, then. The air on the mountain is somewhat rarified. If Roy proposes up there, tell him to come down to Guaba and say it again, before you accept."
"If he does," said Karen lightly, "I shall insist on his dispensing with the first fiancée before taking on a second."
"Oh, that," Elizabeth waved her fingers dismissively. "Since you've been here he's remembered the expensive Glenys about once a week, if that. There's the car. Cheerio, pet. Keep your feet dry."
When Karen saw Mark standing at the foot of the veranda steps, hatless, his thick brown hair springy in the milky rays of the morning sun, his eyes and mouth smiling, her heart moved with the delicious pain of love.
"Good morning, Kitten. You look sparkling." His glance went beyond her, to the small figure planted squarely on the top step, the boyish brow thunderous. "Hallo, old son. Wish you were coming?"
"Are you going?" Keith demanded with a touch of hoarseness. "Some of the way."
"Will you be back today?"
"No. I may be gone several days."
"You—you didn't say."
"I didn't know till the mail came up yesterday. Sorry, boyo." He opened the car door. As Karen moved to get in she felt the impact of the tough little body, the flailing of his arms.

"It's you," Keith cried. "Mark lived here till you came and took his room. You've spoiled everything and now you're making him go with you—"
He was struggling in Mark's firm grasp, sobbing angrily, incoherently. "That's enough," said Mark. "You're getting above yourself. Apologise at once."
"I—won't."
"Don't make him," begged Karen. "He'll get over it."
Mark carried the boy into the house, and when he returned he was smiling a little grimly. "We've made too much of that lad. If he can't take his disappointments better than that—"
"He's only seven."
He shrugged off the subject, but for the rest of the day Keith's outburst seemed to lie between them like a path of thorns.
WHEN, after breakfast at the Winchesters', it was suggested that Mark should take a passenger, he chose Roy, saying that the women would doubtless prefer to ride together in the bush car.
Beyond Guaba the views were extensive. Ahead, the thin silver line of the sky, and on each side the changing colours of maize fields, banana groves and grassland dotted with purple pigeons and an occasional pompous secretary bird. Signposts of civilisation became more frequent—fields of wheat and barley, gates leading to farmhouses, grazing cattle, interspersed with a tract of forest timber where monkeys cavorted, or a stretch of scanty grass over which roamed zebra and wildebeeste, those

inseparable companions of the plains. Dominating the landscape rose Mount Kenya, coolly remote, the snowy peaks glistening against a brooding grey-blue sky. To Karen, even its fern-clad lower slopes appeared impenetrable.
They lunched late, beneath a mango which spread an oasis of shade along the banks of a stream, from which water was drawn for coffee. Afterwards they lay on their backs, steeped in contentment.
"Do you branch off at Mbini?" Evelyn asked Mark, and, when he had nodded, added, "That means you'll leave us round about four. Can't you really come with us?"
"I have to welcome a friend from Sweden this weekend. Hanim's gone ahead to perk up the house."
"Oh, well, I suppose it can't be helped, only it does seem to be getting stickier, and there's the cloud lid going down on Kenya. I thought an extra car might be useful."
"Thanks," he said tersely. "If you women had any sense you'd spend the weekend in town."
"We can't now. We haven't brought the right sort of clothes. Never mind, darling," reaching over to pat his head. "You mean well, even if

you do have old-fashioned ideas about women being under cover when there's moisture in the air. If we're not in Monday's paper you'll know we got through."
Mark said, "I notice your menfolk are keeping quiet."
"I'm not worrying yet," yawned Roy.
Mark said no more. Later, when the two cars parted company he bade them an abrupt goodbye. For a second his eyes met Karen's, but his were dark and enigmatic as quartz. She hoped her own revealed as little.
Night was closing in when they reached the rest house owned by a colleague of Roy's who had gone home on leave. Rain was falling, a light mountain shower more like a hot drifting mist, which got inside one's clothes and damped the spirit, too. The but was a simple structure of local stone roofed with reeds and daub that let through a continuous spatter of rain in one corner.
Everyone was tired. After a meal and a brief chat, the men went outside to sleep in the bush car, while Evelyn and Karen composed themselves on their mattresses. About midnight a storm broke over the valley. Evelyn sat up. "Good heavens, just listen to that. I suppose we ought to congratulate ourselves on having got here first."
"Will it last long?" Karen wanted to know.
"I don't think so—it's too violent—but the rain may go on for days." "What do we do in that case?"
"Stay put till there's a lull. If this storm belt is moving westward we're in for a lively journey home. Ah, well," philosophically settling back into her blanket, "we brought food for four days so we shan't starve till about Wednesday."
BUT in the morning the air was clear and sweet, and above them towered a blue gossamer mountain capped with diamonds of glistening snow. The majestic vistas on either side were painted in pastel, while below hung the vivid green bowl of the valley.
"Stupendous," breathed Karen. "Do let's climb."
The two men, having undoubtedly indulged in an exhaustive discussion in the bush car, had decided to abandon the original project of camping at five thousand feet. "If we had any sense, as Mark Howard would say, we'd start for home while the sun shines," said John. "As we haven't, we'll spend today climbing as far as possible, and come back here for the night. If we're lucky, we'll be home by sundown tomorrow."
It turned out to be a morning full of small, delightful adventures. At one point they had a view of a huge facet of the mountain, green with ferns except where tiny waterfalls

foamed over ledges and gushed down to join the numerous streams. In a forest of camphor and podocarpus they found drifts of yellow flowers and minute butterflies, while overhead monkeys and gay plumaged parrots darted among branches that shut out the sky.
All the time they were climbing. Through mighty timber to small wattle

bush, through thickets of bamboo, and rough scrub which bloomed scarlet and orange, and up out on to a plateau. The mountain was no longer the single peak it appeared far off, but a series of wild, snow-covered heights bathed in an alpine blue light that turned to a hard grey as clouds rolled up, shedding still more snow over the jagged, icebound precipices.
"I really will have a go at the snow line one of these days," Evelyn said regretfully. "I could spend a whole month exploring up there."
"Just now, my sweet," interposed John, "I doubt whether it's wise even to stop for lunch. We've flouted common sense, and we're about to pay for it."
Sure enough the rain came, a deluge that washed in rivers over their feet as they hurried, Evelyn anchored by a rope to John and Karen to Roy. In the forest, drenched to the skin, they sheltered and ate, laughing at their own foolhardiness. When they moved on again, Roy held Karen back. "You look pale," he said anxiously. "Sure you're all right?"
"I'm no wetter than you are."
"I feel rotten about this. It was mad to ignore Mark's warning. Even John knew the rain was coming, but he just didn't care."
"It won't take so long to get back. Then we can change and get warm. I'm all right, Roy, really."
For the rest of the descent he kept tight hold of her, shielding her from the ferocity of the rain in exposed places. When at last they reached the hut, the floor lay under three inches of water and their bedding was saturated.
"Of all the joys in mountaineering," stated Evelyn an hour later when, quite dry and sipping mugs of beef tea, they squatted on boxes round the rough blackwood table, "this beats the lot. Wouldn't Mark be amused if he could see us ! I expect he thought we'd rush off home after the storm this morning." She paused ruminatively. "Didn't he say he was expecting someone from Sweden? John, do you remember George Sanderfield?"
"Yes. Mark's pal, who died of black water fever on safari about a year ago."
"He had a Swedish wife."
"So he did. Ingrid or Astrid, or something. A rather ravishing blonde. She and Mark were often together. People said he'd have made a play for her if she hadn't been George's wife."
"People will say anything," replied Evelyn. "Still, it does look interesting, doesn't it, his having the house in Nairobi polished up for his best friend's widow."
"His visitor may not be a woman at all," Karen inserted, her voice low and tremulous. "Mrs. Sanderfield's the only Swedish person he knows well enough to lend his house to—I'm sure of that. We've known Mark ever since he came to Kenya. How funny if, having escaped English and American heiresses and hordes of disillusioned young wives, he should tie up at last with a Swedish widow."
Karen ventured no further rejoinder. The healthy tiredness of her body

was developing into a dull exhaustion. All the glow had faded from the expedition. There might be no foundation at all for Evelyn's conjectures. On the other hand, Karen

couldn't help recalling his preoccupation during lunch and his swift goodbye as he swerved along the road towards Nairobi—and his guest from Sweden.
THE drive home to Guaba through roads transformed into gurgling red rivers, under a sky split by ceaseless lightning and loosing an endless cascade of rain, was a nightmare that Karen lived through but hoped to forget. For a few days afterwards she sniffled and sneezed, and Roy and Evelyn did likewise. Only John, "the insensitive bullock" as Roy termed him between atishoos, escaped unscathed.
To everyone's satisfaction the rain persisted. Justin waded out in top boots to superintend the planting of his seedlings, and quite often Karen went along, too. The air was so fresh, the sight of abundant new growth so heartening, that a trip round the Shamba represented a daily excursion into a continually changing world.
The cattle looked sick and sorry for themselves, but the grass upon which they fed grew thick and tender, and it was not long before the dairy became the busiest building on the farm. Elizabeth seemed to spend the bulk of her time separating milk and packing butter ready for delivery to the co-operative creamery at Guaba. In the evenings she checked the returns and smiled happily over mounting profits.
Now, observing Justin absorbed in his flowering coffee trees and Elizabeth in her dairy, Karen experienced the onlooker's envy of their exhilarating struggle with this country of contrasts. They were living proof that, contrary to common belief, one did not need money so much as courage and patience and resolution, to wrest a living from the soil of Kenya. Barring a mistimed drought and the usual diseases, Justin was in for an excellent coffee season.
The bitter-sweet scent of the thick snowy blossoms permeated the house like an airborne stimulant. Even Keith, his disappointment forgotten in the surge of new life, tramped the dripping garden and licked the rain from his lips. He loved sloshing along the streaming paths, dragging his homemade boat and singing to himself.
This year Justin, in his unemotional fashion, was happier than ever before in the rains, for he had decided to reduce his maize acreage by half and plant fifty experimental acres with blue gum and Tasmanian blackwood, both quick-growing trees which would yield early returns as timber. Karen helped him to carry out the plants, eight or ten to a box, and watched the workers follow instructions in the lashing rain that ran to the roots of the seedlings and made them grip and sprout into immediate pinkish-green growth. With both Elizabeth and Justin she stood fearfully on the veranda in the evening darkness, hoping that the glimpse of stars between wispy

clouds was only temporary. Everyone wanted the rain to continue undiminished in quantity and vigour. For Karen, the rains also held a deeper, sweeter significance, for while they persisted Mark could work only desultorily, and consequently he was a frequent visitor to the farm.
The road to Nairobi was completely impassable, a condition against which Mark inveighed, but without vehemence, about once a week. Sometimes he arrived in the high lorry soon after breakfast and stayed the whole day. Then, Keith was excused lessons and everyone helped in some capacity.
"Why don't you try flax?" Mark asked Justin one day when the two men stood, as men will, staring rather pointlessly over the emerald land beyond the wire fence which enclosed the plantation. "I believe in mixed farming, the bigger and more varied the better. You rely too exclusively on coffee. If we had another locust year you'd find yourself in a spot."
"I'd have to fold up," said Justin simply. "That's why I'm planting timber."

"But timber's long-term stuff, even the quickest growing, and fifty acres won't take you far, anyway. Flax is seasonal, and pays well. If I were you, I'd increase my acreage each year and try different crops."
"If you were me," said Justin with blunt good humour, "you couldn't afford the risk. I'm not a confounded bachelor with other irons in the fire."
Karen, leaning against a nearby tree, found herself listening intently for Mark's reply.
He laughed. "You can't blame me for that. And I'd like to see what you'd do to anyone who tried to relieve you of your domestic responsibilities! I've never know a fellow to wallow in them with such relish as you do."
Justin's heavy features took on a faint smile. "We're different types, Mark, or perhaps it's a matter of temperament. I'm a slow thinker and cautious. I'd give a lot to have a cool, searching mind like yours."
"Believe it or not," said Mark, only half-bantering, "a mathematical brain has disadvantages."
Justin's shoulders lifted, characteristically. "Women being the illogical sex, it's certainly no asset in marriage. If you ever get married, old chap, you're in for fireworks. Can't have it all your own way then."
"If I ever get married," echoed Mark with deliberate cynicism, "I shall have reached that besotted state—heaven help me!—where it doesn't matter who is boss."
Following which devastating pronouncement, all three tramped home. Later, when the rain which had been falling all day gave way to a storm of unusual violence, they gathered in the living-room over tea and scones, and Mark reverted to the theme of planting. It was odd, thought Karen, how he could stick to a definite line of thought while the house rocked and reverberated to the cannons of thunder, and rain avalanched into the garden with supernatural force.
"If I were staying in this district indefinitely," Mark was saying, "I'd buy

land and do farming as a sideline. Some flax, a few banana groves, oranges, and a large acreage of ground-nuts. I wonder you don't try ground-nuts, Justin. They're crying out for them in Europe."
"I've thought about it. Someone sent me a pamphlet on how to grow them and where to buy the seed. It looked easy enough in print."
"It is easy. Elizabeth or the kitten here could do it." Karen was not sure that she cared to be written off as 'the kitten'. Mark went on, "We'll go into it together if you like. It shouldn't be difficult to get early possession of the piece alongside this place. In fact, we'll take over at once and start planting while the deal is going through."
"Sounds good," said Justin. "I can't spring the capital, but I'll manage the ploughing and sowing for you."
The men continued their planning while Keith listened.
Elizabeth's knitting needles flashed in the sluggish firelight, and Karen was attacking the third of a set of luncheon mats, the material for which she had bought in Nairobi three months ago, on her second day in Kenya. There was always so much to do and see that she doubted the likelihood of the set ever being completed. But it was good to sit and embroider in this little world shut off by the elements, with Mark just across the room, his expression keen and calculating over the new proposition.
Owing to the condition of the roads, he had to leave before dusk. "I don't quite get his idea," said Elizabeth, when he had gone. "Why the sudden interest in farming?"
"It's not sudden," replied Justin. "He's always enjoyed finding fault with my methods. After all, he was reared pretty close to nature."
"But why now, any more than last year, or next?"

"It may be only a whim. He's probably bored and looking for an outlet. His sort can't bear inaction." A diagnosis which Karen suspected to be true, though her heart wished otherwise.

CHAPTER III

AS the storm had worn itself out and set the feminine nerves a little on edge, the weather cleared for a few days. A decided coolness
set in, due to the cloud blanket which hid the sun. Keith and Karen got back into the routine of lessons, and Roy Strasmore made the journey up from Guaba and spent a night in Keith's room.
Next morning, he invited Karen to make an inspection of the school site. They jolted over roads washed clean to the jagged rock base and silted in the dips with slippery wet mud. "My poor springs," groaned Roy. "This old bus creaks in every joint, and I daren't buy a new one till my life gets back on an even keel. I wish you were in love with me, Karen."
The unexpectedness of this remark brought a bubble of laughter to her lips. "How would that restore your equilibrium?"

"You're here, and now—and very sweet. If you loved me, I'd break with Glenys, marry you, and together we'd make that little house on the plains a place to go home to, not to run away from."
"You forget one important point. You'd have to love me, too." "I'm not sure that I don't."
"You would be if you did—which sounds ambiguous, but it's sense if you work it cut. Why don't you break with Glenys anyway? You and she can't possibly be in love, or you'd have stood the test of separation."
"One doesn't jilt a girl like Glenys!"
"No, but you might diplomatically suggest that she should jilt you. I'm
sure you'd feel happier if you were free."
"I don't know. A fellow in my sort of job needs a wife—one like you."
"You'll know her, Roy, when you meet her, and I bet she'll be nothing at all like me."
He glanced at her curiously. "For a moment your tone had me wondering. As you spoke then you sounded exclusive, as though you were reserved for someone else."
Her answer was a smile. Privately, she pondered Roy's comments. His light allusion to marriage had reminded her of the young men in the shipping office in London—how remote were those days now!—who had confided to her their set-backs and conquests in the field of love. Roy, too, found her a good listener. And Mark—who was not given to unloading his private affairs to anyone—would the time ever come when she'd learn just a little of what lay behind that aloof, charming facade?
Down at the crossroads, which branched to several farms, the school site presented an encouraging appearance. The foundations had already been dug and several natives, spared from their usual work in the fields, mixed concrete and tipped it into the channels.
"If the rain has cleared for good we'll have the whole building complete within six weeks," said Roy. "You and I ought to go into Nairobi for equipment, and to engage a teacher."
"I thought you planned to advertise."

"There's one person I'd like to try, first. Some people I used to stay with in town had a daughter who was training in Cape Town for teaching. A couple of mails ago I heard from Mrs. Lawson that Nova is back in Kenya. What her plans are I don't know, but I mean to find out. If she's the right sort we'll offer her every inducement to come here and take over."
"You've never seen the girl?"
"No." He smiled disarmingly. "In the picture that stood on the piano in Mrs. L awson's lounge she was dark and thin—not very old but eaten up with teenage ideals at the time it was taken, I should say. It's possible she still has them, of course, but I'd prefer to engage someone born and bred in the country. Less likely to jib at conditions."

AT the weekend another spell of rain set in, and this time there was no Mark to banish the fretting monotony. Mark had taken advantage
of the dry interval to make a trip to Nairobi. He, who could read weather portents days ahead, must have known that more rain was on the way, and apparently he had no intention of wading through another month of damp boredom.
The days dragged, leaden as the teeming sky, till three weeks had passed. Then the long rains petered out, and the sky took on the cool blue of June, while the dark hours became incredibly chilly Just after tea on the third day of brilliant sunshine, a man came running with a message from Mrs. Harding. Her husband had badly injured himself at the sawmill and she'd be grateful for assistance.
"We'll both go," said Elizabeth promptly to Justin. "Harding's a heavy man. We may need your help, and besides, a worried woman always feels better with a man about. Karen can stay here with Keith. You won't mind, will you, pet? And if we're late, don't get anxious. Elsa Harding's the nervous sort."
Karen saw them off in the bush car and went back indoors to take up Gulliver's Travels where she and Keith. had left them the night before. Presently, the room darkened, and Jimmy moved quietly from one end of the room to the other, setting a match to the two lamps.
"Bedtime," Karen said, laying the book aside with a yawn. Reading aloud always made her sleepy. "What do you want for supper?"
"A glass of milk and four cookies. Do I have to clean my teeth tonight?" "Every night," she answered decisively.
When Keith had gone through his ritual and the house was quiet, Karen sat with her sewing, the fire warm upon her legs.
The crunch of a car on the drive broke into her reverie.
"Jimmy," she called, "will you make the coffee and lift the casserole from the oven?"
Her work thrown aside, she got out a supper cloth and cups and saucers. They'd be glad of an early meal after the ordeal with poor Elsa Harding. But a second before the door swung open she knew that neither Elizabeth nor Justin stood there. Spoons grasped in one hand and the sugar bowl in the other, Karen stayed momentarily transfixed.
Mark said, "Sorry to intrude, Kitten. I've brought you an unexpected guest. Inga, this is Miss Ainsley—Mrs. Sanderfield."
In a small voice Karen said, "How do you do? Won't you come in and sit down?"
Inga Sanderfield smiled, a practised widening of full red lips, and gracefully sank her long slim figure into a well-cushioned corner of the chesterfield. The slate blue of her short-sleeved linen suit accentuated a sultry quality in her eyes. Her features were longish and perfect; her hair, worn in a heavy coil right round her head, had that silky, wheaten quality peculiar to Scandinavian women. Yes, Karen told herself, Inga was

beautiful. The exquisite texture of her skin, the pink of her cheeks, the whiteness of her teeth, combined to

remind one of the eternal loveliness of the snows of Sweden. But snows had been known to hide volcanoes.
"Where's Elizabeth?" asked Mark. "I want to ask her to put Inga up for the night."
Karen took a startled glance at her hands which still gripped spoons and sugar bowl and moved to the table. "She and Justin are at the Hardings'. Mr. Harding had an accident. I—I think we can manage to sleep Mrs. Sanderfield. She can have my room and I'll use the camp bed in Keith's."
"That's a relief. You'd like a wash, wouldn't you, Inga?"
"Please." The voice was husky and alien. "You Will wait, Mark? I wish for a few more words."
"Of course I'll wait."
Languidly, with a backward smile at Mark, who was helping himself to the coffee Jimmy had brought, Inga followed Karen into the bedroom. "There's fresh water in the jug, and the pink towels are clean," Karen said quickly. "I'll change the bed linen when you've finished. Is there anything else you'd like?"
"No. No, I think not. You are kind."
Karen said, "Well, if there's nothing else you need—" and left Inga to tidy up.
IN the lounge, Mark said, "Fixed Inga up? It's good of you to give up I your bedroom. I dare say the Winchesters could have taken her with less trouble—their place is bigger—but Evelyn probes. I don't like your having to do this, especially for a stranger." For the first time he looked directly at her. "What's wrong, Kitten? You look as though someone had stroked your fur the wrong way."
"Don't call me that!" she cried.
Frowning, he set down his cup. `You're very temperamental all of a sudden. What's wrong?"
"Nothing." Except that she was obscurely angry at him for bringing Inga to the house. "Would you prefer sandwiches with the coffee, or will you wait and have dinner with us?"
"Neither, thanks." He was still gazing down at her, the green very apparent in his eyes. "Kenya's not such a catch after. all, is it, when you're stuck on a plantation in the rains miles from anywhere. But I hardly thought it would bring you to screaming point. Why don't you take a week off in Nairobi? There's nothing like a spell in Town to make you appreciate the quiet places."
She refilled his cup and turned away. "Have you had a good holiday?" she asked offhandedly.
"Not too bad, but I dislike living in hotels. Inga offered to turn out of my house while I was there, but I couldn't let her do that. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"The usual."
"It's made you rather short-tempered." He picked up her piece of embroidery. "What's this thing you're always stitching?"
"A luncheon mat. I'm making a set."
"How many?"
"Twelve altogether."
"Towards your trousseau?"
"For Elizabeth. One generally waits till there's a fiancé in the offing before embarking on linen for a trousseau."

"You've been here about five months, haven't you?" with a faint smile. She nodded.
"No strings yet?"
Karen's mouth set, painfully. He had spoken with playful mockery, wrinkling his nose in a way that made her want to lift a finger and smooth it over the arrogant curve and perhaps brush it lightly across his lips. No strings, when her heart itself reached out to bind him. She managed a stiff, responsive smile. "In view of your ideas on women and marriage, you won't blame me if I refuse to answer that."
"Which means that you can't give me a straight No. I hope he deserves. you. Come on, now. Forget the tribulations of young love. If you could but realise it, this business of relations between the sexes is a comparatively simple problem at twenty-one. It is as you grow older and more critical that complications crop up."
"Is that the reason for your armour of cynicism?"
"Don't you like it?" he grinned. "It's a quality you could do with a little of yourself. You take everything far too seriously Like most settlers, you came here determined to do your bit to help the country. A laudable ideal, but the efforts have to be harnessed."
"I suppose you're hinting at the school," she replied coolly. "If you're still so set against it, why do you help?"
"Can't you guess?" he said softly, teasingly.
Karen wished it were true that he did it for her. She didn't know if she was glad or sorry that Inga chose that moment to come back into the room. "That is much better," she said, "to have washed off the Kenya dust. Tired, Mark?" The final inquiry was infused with solicitude. "It is very wearying to drive so far without a break, but you are indefatigable. I envy you."
"You needn't, my dear Inga. Take another look in your mirror," he advised. "Perhaps you had better tell me those last few words that were on your mind."
Inga cast an oblique glance at Karen. "If you are going now, I will come to the car with you. Miss Ainsley will excuse us?"
"Certainly," said Karen swiftly. "Good night, Mark."
"Good night, little one."

AS they walked out into the scented night, Inga took Mark's arm. "I like your country. It is so sunny and vital." "We have everything. If you should feel homesick for Sweden you can live in an igloo on Mount Kenya for a couple of months."
She shook his arm. "Always you joke. I am serious tonight. You know why I come to Guaba?"
"Frankly, I don't. The Patersons can only put you up for a night or two—and at some inconvenience."
They had reached the car before she spoke again, and now there was a tremulous note in her voice. "You are my only real friend in Kenya. Oh, yes, I know there are many in Nairobi who come to my parties and call me friend, but they are acquaintances that come and go. Where will they be when my money is ended?"
"Is it like that?"
She heard the concern in his voice and was clever enough to answer with a wordless gesture of helplessness.
"I hadn't guessed," he said. "George always had plenty. You must let me help you."
"I knew you would say that, but I will only be helped—how is the English? —to help myself. I have been thinking about this land you have bought for planting. May I buy a half share and help to run it? I mean it, Mark. Since I decided to come back to Kenya it has been in my mind to go partners in a farm. You I can trust."
"I'm not a farmer."

"You I can trust," she repeated with a tiny, bleak shiver, and the hand she laid on his quivered ever so slightly.
"Don't worry," he said. "We'll sleep on it and talk it over again tomorrow. I don't see why you shouldn't farm, if you want to."
With a husky good night in Swedish, she turned and left him.
In the kitchen, Karen was trying to concentrate on whipping a bowl of cream to serve with the tinned compote. Rigidly she kept well away from the window, but Inga's flush when she came in, and the sparkle of triumph in those sultry eyes, confirmed her conviction that this woman was determined to marry Mark. And with her mature beauty and experience and tricks, Karen could think of no reason at all why Inga Sanderfield should not succeed.
Inga Sanderfield stayed two nights. The whole of the day following her arrival she spent at Grassa with Mark, and the next morning she started back for Nairobi in his car, driven by the imperturbable Hanim.
"Her accent's rather fascinating," remarked Elizabeth. "Quite a change from Continental broken English."
Her husband gave his slow laugh. "She called me Yustin."
"And told you that farmers are the salt of the earth," retorted Elizabeth. "Don't preen, darling. She's like that with all the men, except Mark Howard. He needs more subtle handling. Her clothes are lovely," she added inconsequently.

"Was George Sanderfield wealthy?" Karen asked for something to say.
"According to Evelyn Winchester, he was a man of leisure and a staunch friend of Mark's. Apparently Mark and he were on safari together when George caught blackwater fever. Somehow Mark got him back to Nairobi alive, but the poor fellow had had a lot of malaria, and the blackwater finished him."
"Was Inga there?"
"She was at the Cape with friends. Mark went down by plane and brought her back. After that he held her hand through all the proceedings, flew with her to Cairo, and put her on a plane for home."
"I wonder why she has returned to Kenya?"
"That's anyone's guess, but it's Evelyn's opinion that she and Mark have been corresponding. The year demanded by convention has passed, and she's once again in circulation. Quite a situation, isn't it?"
ROY had received instructions to report to his chief in Nairobi. "I hope they're not thinking of transferring me to another district just as the
school is taking shape," he said to Karen. "I don't think they will, but if they do, will you go ahead with it as far as you can? I'll get back and help you whenever it's possible."
"What about the teacher you were going to look up?"
"I'd forgotten her for a moment. Look here, can Elizabeth spare you for a few days' visit to Nairobi? We did say we'd go together. Even if I'm transferred. I'll bring you back, and if you're there we can decide things. Besides, you've been so patient and understanding that I'd love to show you round Nairobi, if you'll let me."
"It's nice of you, Roy, but—"
"No buts. We'll both ask Elizabeth."
Elizabeth, of course, was delighted with the idea. "You're not planning a quiet wedding, are you?" she demanded, her eyes twinkling. "As it happens, I mean to be in on it."
"No such luck," groaned Roy theatrically. "The woman won't have me."
It may have been the complete contrast with the quietude of the farm that made Karen so grateful for the week in Nairobi. She stayed at one of the smaller hotels in an

avenue lined with palms and eucalyptus. Her bedroom looked out over a garden rioting with tropical and sub-tropical plants such as plumbago, frangipani, hibiscus, datura, and coral vine, and straight below lay a small bed of pink and red carnations, whose scent rose strongly, especially in the cool of evening. Each night she danced with Roy and others in one of the hotels, or at the club, and the days were crowded with sightseeing, short drives round the city, and a couple of polo matches.

One evening at the club, she saw Inga Sanderfield surrounded by friends of all ages, predominantly male and adoring. To Karen she accorded a non-committal nod, but later she deliberately crossed the room between dances, to flicker her sultry glance over Karen's simple dress and to

inquire after Mr. and Mrs. Paterson. "Never will I forget their kindness to me," the thick, sweet voice stated. "I hope one day they will come to my house in Nairobi, so that I may show them my gratitude."

Just as Karen thought she was going, Inga alluded to Mark. "We keep in touch, of course, but he never mentions his bridge. How is it going, the perfect piece of engineering?"

"I haven't seen it."

"No? I thought you and Mark were friends. He called you `Kitten'."

So she, Karen Ainsley, had caused a pang, albeit brief, in the breast of Inga Sanderfield. Karen could have laughed at the absurdity had it not possessed an element of heartbreak. For a moment she was tempted to look enigmatic and shrug her shoulders. Instead, she said, "We have no reason to go to Grassa, though Keith, the little boy, rides down often. Mark visits us about once a week."

"So frequently?"

The nerve of the woman! Nevertheless, Karen explained, "Mark is taking on a farm next to Justin's. The two men have plenty to talk over."

"Ah !" A small, comprehending smile. "The farm. Our farm—Mark's and mine. It is going to have success, that farm."

"You and Mark are joint owners?" Her own voice sounded distant in Karen's ears.

The blonde head inclined. "Soon I will come to inspect the ground-nuts. My friends tell me I am lucky to go in on—how is it?—the bottom floor, with Mark as my partner."

As Karen could summon no reply to this, Inga strolled into the middle of a nearby group, leaving behind a sting and a gust of expensive scent.

it seemed, was to be withdrawn from Guaba for two months, during which time he would act as relief to a colleague in Mombasa who had gone sick. On the Friday morning of that week, he drove Karen out to the Lawsons' villa on the Nyeri road.

In contrast to her homely mother, Nova Lawson was thin and dark-eyed, and about Karen's age. She had- come back to Kenya, she told them frankly, because she had failed her finals and refused to stay and take them again. "My parents have already given up enough for my education," she said a little defiantly. "I'm a receptionist at an hotel in town, and I like the work."

'You'd rather teach, though," said Roy, assuming his most winning expression. "You look the sort who'd wade through finals with no trouble at all."

Nova's short, thick lashes lowered. "Others told me so, too. Perhaps that's why I did no last-minute cramming. Well, I had to give it up. I'm not sorry."

Roy plunged into his proposition. Karen, listening and watching the girl, noticed a guarded, eager light creep into the thin face. "You'd take me on without a degree?"

"I bet you know a heap more than I do," said Roy.
It was finally arranged that Nova should give notice at the hotel and let Karen know when she would be free to start at Guaba. She would live with the Winchesters, but the living-room at the schoolhouse was hers, too, whenever she felt the need for privacy.
"That's grand," exclaimed Roy, when he and Karen were driving back to Nairobi. "Not a bad girl, is she? A bit of a dark horse, I should say, but genuine." After a pause, he added, "I wonder why she fluffed her finals? A girl like her wouldn't need last-minute cramming. I'll wager there's more to it than she has ever told her mother. From what I've heard she made rings round everyone at college. I suspect there was a man."
"Be thankful we have her. Her private life isn't your business," Karen defended the absent Nova.
"Quite right," he agreed cheerily, "it isn't. What shall we do today, Karen? Cut everything and picnic in the wilderness? I know a marvellous spot by a mountain stream where you can dip your toes and scoop out rainbow trout with your bare hands. At least, I believe I remember it. Anyway, it'll be exciting trying to find it."
Most outings with Roy were exciting. He had that faculty, which is the envy of the more prosaic, of converting the smallest incident into a moment of enjoyment. His whole outlook was so singularly uncomplicated that one wondered why he clung to the legend of Glenys.
After lunch they set out for the fabulous stream. Very soon they left the main road, and for about thirty miles travelled along a stony road that climbed and dipped between farms and small forests of timber. Then Roy chose a leafy by-path which was little more than a track through mimosa and whattle and thorn trees.
It was nearly five-thirty when at last, dusty and triumphant, the car pulled into a small glade on the bank of a boulder-strewn river, whose waters ran clear and shallow.
"Not a fish in sight," said Karen, stretching luxuriously, "but it's certainly a heavenly place, if we did have to swallow half the dust in Kenya to get here. Do open the flask of tea, Roy."
Like exuberant children, they walked into the stream, a cake in one hand and a cup in the other. The few fish they disturbed were small and drab-skinned. "If they're rainbow trout, I'm a chameleon," commented Karen. "Still, you meant well, and this really is a wildly beautiful reach of river. Doesn't the water feel good round your ankles?"
It was no time at all before', the parrots screeched their homing notes and shadows filled the glade. Roy stuffed wet feet into his shoes, alarm in his eyes. "Let's start for town. I simply must find the road before it's dark. This is really a full day's jaunt. Hop in."
W ITH more speed than was wise on the tree-lined track, Roy got going.
Crazily, the car lurched over the tussocks and they had retraced the
greater part of the lane before darkness brushed in from behind and nightjars

and fireflies came out. In the car's beams the bright orbs of many small beasts were transfixed, and huge night moths and flying beetles cracked and spattered against the windscreen.
Roy groaned softly to himself. "What a prize fool! Even if we find the road we shall be stuck. D'you know what I've done?"
"Not run out of petrol?"
"No, but just as bad. When we stopped back there the radiator had boiled nearly dry. I meant to fill up from the stream, and forgot. Wait a bit. Did we leave any tea?"

"About a cupful." Both of them wailed as they saw the good tea poured away, even in so good a cause.
Presently, Roy said hollowly, "I've a nasty feeling that we've hit a different track. These trees are mahoganies—look at the size of them."
"What do we do now?"
"Keep going. All paths lead somewhere."
This one eventually brought them to a rough granite road along which they bumped for a mile or two before the engine seized.
"Gosh, I'm sorry," said Roy, his jauntiness gone awry. "It's too silly for words. There must be plenty of water in this district or you wouldn't see so many trees, but how we're to find it with only the stars to help us—" He slithered out of the car. "Let's walk a little way. We may spot a farmhouse light"
They did spot a farmhouse light, but not until both were tired and exceptionally cold. The farmer, a middle-aged man who lived alone, gave them goats' milk cheese with bread and thick black coffee, and when they were warm he drove them in his own car to where Roy's stood, pathetically small and dust-shrouded and thirsting for the can of water that was tipped into it.
"You're sure you won't stay the night?" the man asked. "It's a good fifty miles to Nairobi, most of it rough and slow going—the deuce of a journey in the dark. We're off the main road here."
"Good of you to offer," Roy answered, somewhat restored. "But I have an early appointment tomorrow with my chief, and besides, they may have the police out if Miss Ainsley is reported missing. Good night, sir, and thank you."
It was after ten when they left the farmer, and nearly two o'clock when Roy stopped the car outside the completely darkened hotel in Nairobi. "They've locked me out," said Karen sleepily.^
"Can you get up to your room the back way?"
"The boys are cream-washing the bedroom verandas, so there ought to be a ladder about."
Entry by way of the veranda was alarmingly easy. Roy went up first, and switched on her bedroom light. Karen followed, whispered good night and waited till he had descended and removed the ladder.
Karen slipped off her linen frock and pulled her wrap close about her. She

would have liked a warm bath and a glass of hot milk, but though she knew that others rang for the night porter, it was more than she dared herself. So she went to the carafe for a sip of water and found, leaning against it, an hotel note intimating that Mrs. Sanderfield had telephoned at eleven p.m. and called in person at twelve-ten. A pencilled note on the back asked that Miss Ainsley get in touch with Mrs. Sanderfield before leaving Nairobi. Dazed with weariness, Karen slid between the sheets, to dream of Inga spearing rainbow-trout with a pearl-handled knife.

CHAPTER IV

IT was about noon the next day that Karen looked up Inga in the telephone- ' directory and failed to find her. Of course. The house was Mark's. Her skin prickled as she read his name and address in print. Howard, Mark Crayshaw, Tanya, Carlyon Drive. A conviction took hold of her. She never wanted to see that house, outside or in. Always

for her, the atmosphere would be tinged with expensive perfume and a husky, foreign voice.
Jerkily, she spoke to Inga. "Oh, yes," came the confident tones. "You are out very late last night, the boy tell me. Perhaps you come not at all?"
"Perhaps," said Karen, detesting the mature playfulness. "What can I do for you?"
Inga chose to ignore the suggestion of sarcasm. "There is a small packet, rather important, which I should much like that you give to Mark when you go back. Parcels are sometimes lost in this post. You will come to lunch and I will give it to you."
"I can't do that," said Karen firmly. "My time is fully booked till I leave tomorrow morning. If you will send a boy with the packet, I'll give him a receipt for it."
A moment's silence. Then, "Very well. You sound a little distrait, Miss Ainsley, but I understand. Late nights . . . Nairobi . . ."
"If that's all—goodbye, Mrs. Sanderfield." Karen was trembling as she made her way out to a grass chair on the veranda.
The package came, small, oblong, carefully sealed and addressed. Karen slipped it into her suitcase and accepted an invitation to lunch with a young couple just in from Uganda.
Next day, Sunday, Roy drove her back to Guaba, and left her at once so that he could do some packing and make arrangements to close his house for a couple of months. Elizabeth shot questions at Karen. Did she go to the races? Had she danced? How were the shops looking?
Karen said, "I believe you miss living near a town more than I do. Justin must take, you for a holiday as soon as he can leave his trees, and

you'll have to abandon Keith and the dairy work to me. We'll get through all right."
"Don't tempt me," begged Elizabeth. "Not yet." They talked most of the morning, while Keith cleared off to the Snake Hole, fearful that his presence might remind them of lessons. It was just after lunch that Karen referred to the package which Inga Sanderfield had entrusted to her.
"Mark was here on Saturday morning," Elizabeth informed her. "It's unlikely that he'll come again before next weekend. Did the Swedish lovely say it was urgent?"
"Not urgent. Rather important, she said."
"Justin might take it, unless you fancy the drive yourself?"
"I—think I do."
She stepped into a cold bath and out again; put on a striped silk frock and brushed her light curling hair back from her temples. The treatment by the Nairobi hairdresser had put lights where none had been before. Still only moderately pretty, she admitted ruefully to her reflection. There seemed no getting round that dewy, innocent look, try as she might to modify it.
Karen set off in the bush-car. Although this was only her second trip down the road to Grassa, she recalled every bend and landmark. The group of aloes at the foot of a podocarpus, the pungent pool of bog myrtle; even the solitary duiker who bounded away among the trees was one she had seen before—or his first cousin Here were the river and log bridge. Karen switched off and waited a second before sliding out on to the grass. Her low-heeled white shoes took the logs without mishap. Over there, through the trees, was Mark's house. If he was out she would follow the road down to the bridge. Almost she wished she might find the house empty, in order to stretch this sweet expectancy to the limit.
But while she was crossing the clearing to the house, Hanim appeared. "Greetings, memsahib," he said with his usual dignity. "I go tell bwana."

Karen had reached the veranda when Mark came out, his grin more candid than she had ever seen it. Her heart gave its familiar twist. As she smiled up at him, a sudden scented breath of air lifted a tendril of hair and blew it against her forehead.
"You look like a nice little girl come to a party," he mocked gently. "Is the present for me?"
She put the packet into his hand. "Mrs. Sanderfield sent it."
He turned it about, and then dropped it into his pocket. "My wrist-watch. She had it cleaned for me. Well, Kitten?"
"Very well," she assured him from the bottom of her heart.
"I told you a break would do you good. Now that you've had it you don't even object to my calling you Kitten."
"In fact I like it," she said.
"A drink now, or would you prefer to wait and have tea?" "Tea is more in my line, please."

He called Hanim and asked him to have tea ready at four. As they went down the steps he took Karen's elbow. "Come and have a peep at my bridge. It's at a messy stage at present. Like most young things, it can't make up its mind how to combine beauty with usefulness. It doesn't realise, poor structure of steel and stone, that it has to mellow and grow into the surroundings before it can lay claim to beauty." Strolling at her side he went on talking in similar vein, his voice quizzical and friendly. It was the most natural thing in the world that his arm should slip about her shoulders and his hand close firmly upon her upper arm. Natural, yet it filled her with a confusion of joy and breathless longing which stunned with its violence. Could he possibly be so entirely unmoved as he chose to appear?
JUSTIN, John Winchester and other fathers of school-age children took
turns in supervising the completion of the school-house. When the stage of white-distempering the outer walls had been reached, Mark drove down with Karen and Elizabeth, Keith tagging along, too.
"Pretty good," Mark stated, and the /icing inflection in his voice was praise indeed. "I like the half-way panelling and the cool green ceiling. But you ought to have plugged the walls for maps, and so on, before they were distempered."
"We remembered too late," said Karen ruefully. "There were other silly omissions as well and it looks as though we shall have to have home-made tables and chairs instead of the desks we decided upon. We can't find anyone who knows what goes into the carpentering of a school desk."
"I'll bet my Indian fundi knows—I've never caught him out yet."
"Why you couldn't have come in on the thing officially from the beginning, I don't know," complained Elizabeth. "Oh yes, I'm well aware that in principle you still disagree with privately built schools . . . and that you're a champion splitter of hairs. You're a fraud, Mark."
He laughed. "Women can't see any difference between deliberately flouting the Government, and giving a helping-hand to neighbours."
"You're not what I'd call a neighbourly soul though, lately, I must say, you're improving. Can it be that you seek a change from Hanim's cooking, or is it the lure of someone's pretty eyes?"
"I prefer variety in my dishes," he admitted with a wink. "But I always feel especially good when a contract has passed the half-way line. This one at Grassa is going extraordinarily well. No hitches in supply and very little sickness among the men. It looks now as though I shall finish weeks short of the time, which is unheard of."

Truculently, Keith chimed in, "If that means you're going to leave earlier, I hope the bridge breaks in the middle and has to be built again."
"Hush," said Elizabeth. "Can you imagine a Howard bridge caving in?"
"I meant struck by lightning," Keith amended hastily. "Though I think I'd rather it smashed the school."

"You little horror. You've been pretending to look forward to going to school."
"The school is Karen's—the bridge is Mark's," he replied naively, and scuffed his way outside.
Karen, bright colour in each cheek, picked some spots of paint from the window.
"That boy of yours is not too well mannered, Elizabeth," said Mark, an edge to his voice.
"I'm sorry," she answered sincerely. "He does seem to let go sometimes when you and Karen are together. He's very fond of her really, but I think, in his childish way, he regards her as an intruder between you and him and he's a little jealous. It's entirely ridiculous, of course, and I will try to break him of it." She paused. "In fact I'll go out and tackle him now, before he forgets what he said."
Karen remained half-facing the window. "You shouldn't allow yourself to be hurt by such a trifle," Mark said irritably.
"I'm not hurt."
"You are. It's stamped all over you and I hate to see it. If the thoughtlessness of a seven-year-old can do that to you, how are you going to react if something big should hit you? Sensitiveness can be very much overdone, you know, and cause one a heap of unnecessary misery." When she remained silent, he added, "You're the sort who always learns the hard way, aren't you?"
"I suppose so. It comes from growing up alone."
"Not entirely. I grew up alone but you wouldn't call me hypersensitive. I think I must have recognised quite young the folly of allowing individuals to play too great a part in my life. Without going too deeply into the subject, it's obvious that once you allow others to get really close, they're the cause of quite a bit of pain."
His half-serious tone drew Karen's gaze to his eyes, nut-brown and baffling.
"Pleasures, too," she said. After a long second in Which, surprisingly, her glance did not waver, she asked, 'Why do you discount human relationships, Mark?"
He shrugged. "They're too flimsy. Two of my friends were killed in Burma. A third died of a fever here in Kenya."
"And . . . women?" she queried, at last lowering her lids.
"A problem that I've been tempted once or twice to have a shot at," he answered promptly, the whimsical touch back in his expression.
"I thought you knew all there is to know about women."
"The sanest of us have our wild moments," he grinned. "It's when the moment hangs on that we're in danger. Don't worry your sweet head, Kitten; I don't usually have mine in broad daylight." He ran his hand over the cedar panelling. "I'm not saying," he added softly, deliberately, "that I didn't want to do something that would put that child's gaffe into its proper perspective, when you went all pink and quivery a few minutes ago."

Her pulses quickened. "Do .. . something?"
"Kiss away the hurt," he jeered gently.
Blankly, her heart suffocatingly near to her throat, Karen looked out at the short expanse of red, root-pitted earth strewn with brick and granite rubble.

But at that moment Elizabeth came back. "He's penitent but not yet apologetic," she said. "One can't expect too much from a single scolding. If you two are ready, I'd like to get back to my dairy."
Keith was sitting in the dust close to the car. As they approached he got up and opened the doors. "Karen can sit next to Mark," he said, with an air of grave magnaminity. "I'll come in the back with you, Mums."
Realising that this was the nearest he could come to an apology, Karen accepted without question. As the doors slammed and Mark turned. on the ignition, she heard him make a faint sound of amusement. Everything, apparently, was back to normal.
WHEN they reached the farmhouse, Mark laid a detaining hand for an instant on Karen's wrist but did not speak till Elizabeth had hurried
off, followed by Keith. Then, "Have you met Colonel Williamson?"
"Yes, once. He called in for half an hour at the Hardings' anniversary party some time ago."
"You've never seen his house?"
"Only from the road— a few yards of roof above the trees."
"Will you go there with me to dinner? Charles doesn't entertain or go out much, but he likes company and I promised I'd take you."
"He doesn't know me."
"He soon will. You'll like Charles. He's unmarried and in his dangerous forties." His fingers snapped airily. "A far wiser proposition as a husband than any of your young Government officials. Charles mentioned next Thursday. Will that suit you?"
"Yes. I'd love it."
"Good. I'll let him know. If I don't get up here again before then, be ready at seven-thirty. All right? So long, Kitten."
Karen watched the car recede and then made her way slowly indoors to her bedroom. At last he had singled her out. Dare she hope that she had invaded the hard-defended fortress of his privacy? True, he had alluded to Colonel Williamson as an eligible bachelor, implying that she might ultimately benefit matrimonially by friendship with him, but wasn't that typical of Mark —to excuse what he might deem a weakness in himself? Why should he consider it weak to need the companionship of a woman now and then? Not only the companionship, her heart whispered, taking sudden wings. His voice came back, soft and mocking: "Kiss away the hurt." Four notes of heavenly music. For a little while she forgot Inga.
But Inga had not forgotten Karen or a conversation which she had had with her when she was staying at the coffee farm. Inga had said

patronisingly, "You, Miss Ainsley, retain the notions of your grandmother. You do not believe in sending children to boarding-schools?"
"I am a firm believer in the home influence," Karen told her. "It would be too distressing to have one's children grow away from one at the age of eight or so."
The Swedish woman had shrugged. "To some women the love of children is more than the love of a husband. Me, I would send my children away to be educated—I would not want the bother of training them. And, also, I would wish to be free always to follow my husband. I like the excitements of a roving life."
"Most of us," said Karen, "feel the need of a settled home. And if children had to live away from their parents for several years a great deal is missing on both sides. Family relationships seem so very important to me. But, of course," she added, inevitably, visualising impossible joys with Mark, "when one loves a man enough one accepts such heartaches."

Inga had smiled enigmatically. "I do not think you will have to make the choice, Miss Ainsley. Settlers do not move far from their homesteads."
KAREN compared her two evening dresses. Both looked young and demure, not at all suitable for dinner with two sophisticated bachelors.
Later, when Elizabeth was consulted, she raised her dark, expressive brows. "We settlers, of course, don't dress for dinner engagements. We simply wear our best Sunday tuckers, if we have them, and a row of pearls or a brooch to divert attention from the five-year-old neckline. If I were you, I'd wear your black chiffon. It's stylish but non-committal."
In the end Karen decided to take her advice but not for Elizabeth's reasons. Way down in her mind hid a tiny hope that other evenings with Mark would follow, occasions when the two evening dresses might come into their own.
The week would have dragged interminably had not Nova Lawson arrived at the Winchesters', eager to be initiated into her duties and to add her knowledge and experience to the final ordering of books and equipment. Nova, still carrying a secret in her dark brown eyes, sat with Karen on a packing-case in the private room attached to the school-house, and worked out lists and a curriculum for the first dozen or so children, the sevens, eights and nines.
"The one ten-year-old is a girl, thank goodness," Nova said. "She can work alone in this room but what about the half-dozen in the fourto-six group? Can you take those till I get running smoothly?"
"I'll try. We never intended you to carry the whole school alone right from the beginning."
"I suppose the numbers will grow," returned the other briefly. "It's just what I need. Life was beginning to catch up on me in that horrid hotel."

Karen asked no questions. She went on talking about the children and the unfortunate fact that most of them were too individualistic through living on remote farms.
Inevitably, her calm acceptance of the other girl as a friend and collaborator had its result. Over a smoky cup of tea brewed outdoors and consumed upon the veranda steps, Nova unburdened a little.
"This chance means a lot to my people. They were badly shaken when I flunked the exams and Mother felt the humiliation deeply when I took the hotel post. Like most proud parents, she'd boasted of my prowess. In fact, I didn't know how to come home—" She tailed off and sipped the thick, milkless liquid.
"No one is quite so good as a mother at such times," Karen helped her. "They go on believing in you."
"Yes, mine did. It was often a strain to keep the cause of the fiasco to myself. A man, of course."
So Roy had guessed it first time. Karen nodded sympathetically.
"I met him at a party in Cape Town," Nova said broodingly. "He laughed at my ambitions and they did appear futile when he talked about marriage. All that last winter when I should have been attending lectures and studying, we had fun together. Then only two weeks before the Finals started, he went abroad, without even saying goodbye."
Comment was superfluous. Karen nodded comprehension.
"At any rate, it's taught me that men aren't to be trusted. I'm finished with them," Nova ended.
"Don't say that. There are good and bad."

Sceptically, Nova answered, 'Mostly bad. I met plenty in my last job and a lot of them were out for a good time and no handcuffs."
"You'll meet a different kind here."
Nova smiled in the slow, rather bitter way she had.
After that, Nova's disastrous love affair was allowed to slip back into the well of the past. Her interest in the school filled her life, and she seemed content to sew and read, or to walk up to the coffee farm for a chat during her leisure. Karen liked her, but she thought it a pity that the thin, wiry Nova's taste in clothes was so strictly utilitarian. Her straight black hair was raked back into a loop on her neck, adding ten years to her bony little face.
ON Thursday evening, Karen dressed for the dinner party at Colonel Williamson's. When she was ready she carried her coat and bag into
the living-room, where her cousin was now preparing a supper trolly for herself and Justin.
Elizabeth brandished a knife. "You look lovely, pet. All glowing and vital. What a pity you're not going out with someone a little more human than Mark. Still, I believe Colonel Williamson is not averse to the ladies, and he's been heard to wish himself married." ,

When Mark came in, followed by Justin, Elizabeth poured out drinks. "Martini," she told Mark. "Suit you?"
"Admirably, thanks." As he raised his glass, he flickered a teasing smile over Karen's black dress and burnished hair. Her colour deepened.
The tolerant humour in Mark's expression did not escape Elizabeth. She tingled with sudden alarm. This invitation to Colonel Williamson's, Karen's sparkle and flush and Mark's good-humoured mockery. Was he playing with her? Mark was holding Karen's coat for her to slip into and Elizabeth summoned a hasty smile. "Don't keep her out too late, Mark. She's in your charge."
"Do you suspect me, Elizabeth, knowing the care I take with your son?" "As if there were any comparison!"
The sound of his car had completely died before Elizabeth's complacency returned, and even then she went on pondering her young cousin's undoubted pleasure in Mark's company. Karen might be no more than one-and-twenty but she was not a fool. She was as capable as the next woman of weighing up the futility of letting herself fall in love with that tall, good-looking, hawk-nosed builder of bridges. Unfortunately, commonsense and the early pangs of love seldom go together. And Mark certainly had his fascinations. His frank avoidance of marriage might tempt some women to whet their weapons. Inga Sanderfield, for instance.
Meanwhile Karen was happier than she had ever been before. Mark in a white dinner-jacket was suave and charming and dangerously attractive. As they drove along the narrow, tree-walled road, following the powerful beams through a tunnel of darkness, he talked carelessly of other climates; the desert, the Far East, South America and Canada. "When my present job is finished, I have to make a big decision," he said, as though in continuation of a train of private thought. "I've been asked to join the board of a South African construction company as technical director. If I accept, it will mean living in Johannesburg."
"Would you like that?"
"I'd loathe it."
"What's the alternative?"
"Carrying on as I do at present, with my own office in Nairobi and roving commissions."

"Then—if you'd loathe living in Johannesburg—"
"It's not so simple as that. Sometime soon, I ought to think of settling down somewhere but, unless I start my own contracting company, there's not much chance of a permanent home in Kenya." A halt in the crisp tones and then, "Forget it. Can't imagine what dragged all this out of me on a night full of stars and on such an occasion. This is an occasion, you know."
"Is it?" she said quietly, her hands locked tight in her lap.
"Can't you feel it?" he asked, faintly derisive. "Or don't you dare?" The same words in a different tone might have twisted her heart with delicious anguish. His tantalising laugh broke the short silence. "Frustration is bad

for the digestion. Why not let yourself go for once and say what you're thinking?"
"I haven't eaten since lunch," she replied, borrowing a shred of his mockery. "Besides, you'd probably consider my thoughts negligible."
The emphasis flicked him. "Why do you say that?"
"Well, my fuzzy sentimentalism is anathema to the materialist. I'm not begging to be scoffed at."
He smiled. "You're learning quite a lot of the answers, aren't you? I'm not sure that I like being labelled a materialist, especially by a slip of a girl in black chiffon."
"But it's true, isn't it?" she returned. "You haven't much faith in the purely abstract."
"By purely abstract you mean Love, with a capital L. Women always do." He swung the car into an even narrower lane. "As a matter of fact, I do believe in love, because I know, from positive experience, that it does exist. But not in the way you like to visualise it. Deathless devotion is a tall order when you're dealing with frail human nature."
"It's happening all the time," she said softly,
"How do you know? I wouldn't mind betting that any honest man who's been married five years would agree that a lifetime is a deuce of a while to remain faithful to one woman."
Karen was nettled. "Your friends might, but I could name a few who wouldn't."
"Who, besides the imperturbable Justin?"
"Most of our neighbours."
"Sweet little Kitten," he said with a mock-pitying grin. "Who am I to _shatter your faith in the human species?" As usual, the discussion ended on a good-natured jeer, and with Karen wondering if it would ever be possible to dislodge his cynicism. This evening there was no time for conjecture, for the lights of Colonel Williamson's house gleamed through the young forest of acacias, jacarandas and mimosa trees which crowded his front garden.
THE Colonel came out on to the veranda to meet them. Of average height, slim, and fresh-complexioned, he looked quite young in the shadows, but
under the bright glow of the several lamps in his lounge, the lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth were etched indelibly and combined with the white wings at his temples to add a hint of dissipation to his middle-aged good looks.
During the evening, Karen remembered that he had a reputation for philandering, though apparently since he had come to live in this district some while ago, his behaviour had been impeccable. He was by no means wealthy but his house was evidence of a gracious style of living.
Charles Williamson's dining-room was furnished in delicate imbuia and

beamed with solid black green-heart wood. His lounge, carried out in maroon and natural linen, the floor highly waxed between Mirzapore rugs and the walls a restful oatmeal, was an example of inexpensive good taste in the wilderness. The single ornament, a dainty sylph in bronze offering on tiptoe, her arms upstretched, a black bowl cascading exotic blooms, was repeated in a cleverly arranged pink crystal mirror.
"You're admiring my bronze lady?" Charles asked later in the evening, noticing the direction of Karen's gaze. "I like her, too. She keeps me young."
"It reminds me of the entrance-halls of the hotels in pre-war Rome," said Mark, "except that the figures there dispensed with the drape. She's entirely out of proportion, you know," he tacked on critically. "Those elongated limbs on a live woman would qualify her as a freak exhibit."
"If such ornaments were true to life," Karen submitted, "no one would buy them. I think she's graceful, and the whole piece is charming."
"Thank you," said Charles. "We'll ignore Mark's comments and advise him to stick to his realism. Do you swim, Miss Ainsley—or may I call you Karen?"
"Karen, please. Swimming is the recreation I miss most in Kenya. The stretch of river nearest the farm is choked with growth, so we can only dip and dry off."
"If I have a few men idle some time, I'll send them up to clear a hundred yards of the river near the farm," Mark promised off-handedly.
"You must both come over for tennis," Charles said. "Now that we're really acquainted, Karen, we'll go all out for one of those nice comfortable friendships that are indispensable to happiness in this or any other country."
"H'm," Mark inserted. "I seem to have heard that somewhere before. Luckily this young woman is only half' as naive as she looks." He slipped the cuff back from his watch. "I'd better be taking her home, Charles."
"So early? Very well, if you must. What will you have as a nightcap?"
"Nothing at all, thanks," said Karen. "May I powder my nose and get my coat?"
"Of course."
Mark opened the door for her and remained standing, while Charles poured whisky and soda. "Your young friend is attractive," said the older man, offering a glass. "Not beautiful, but refreshing."
"And comparatively unsophisticated, in case you're interested," Mark informed him between sips.
"I'm not—not in the way you mean. Does she intend to stay and marry in Kenya?"
"I'm just a friend of hers, old chap, not her Dutch uncle."
Karen reappeared, smiling. Mark helped her into her coat and thrust a hand under her arm as they went out to the car.
"How soon will you come again?" asked Charles. "Next Saturday, for lunch and an afternoon's tennis?"
"I'd like to very much."
"You'll come, too, Mark?"

"Sorry, I have to chase into town," he said.
`He'll see Inga,' Karen thought instantly.
As they entered the dark chasm of the road, Mark did not switch on the interior lighting. Karen snuggled into her corner, loving the drowsy warmth and his nearness, and wishing this drive might go on forever. She watched him surreptitiously, tenderness in her eyes, longing to press her face against that firm, close-shaven chin.
Tonight, all things were possible. This was the beginning of all the dear adventures they would share, the exchanges of sympathy, the small excitements and foolish,

unforgettable incidents that go to make up a deep, everlasting friendship. And Inga? Inga was a chilly breath on the brow; in the morning's light she might be an icy blast. But this was now.
He turned his head and looked at her. "It's a grand night, isn't it?" "Heavenly," she whispered. "Just heavenly."

CHAPTER V

THOUGH she used the bush car whenever it was available, Karen's chief I means of transport was the little native pony, Bambu. Some time ago, Mark had asked whether she wouldn't rather ride something with more class and spirit, and she had replied frankly, "I've grown too fond of Bambu to get rid of him and it would hurt his feelings to be landed with a well-bred pasture companion."
Mark, of course, had teased her unmercifully but it made no difference. She knew where she was with Bambu.
From the pony's back, she viewed some of the most breathtaking vistas in the country. Fields of pyrethrum and sky-blue flowering flax, the sinister beauty of a soda lake rimmed with pink flamingos, a herd of impala, imperial horns erect, static on the plains, and the remote, virginal peak of Mount Kenya being divested of its shroud.
Her most contented hours were spent riding round with Justin. His mature coffee trees were reddening with ripe berries and the new small ones planted to replace diseased stock, sprouted sturdily, each within its wigwam of poles laced with grass. Between the groves, the boys were continually at work uprooting bold native weeds and using the heaps as mulches.
The huge acreage of ground-nuts on the adjoining land had made up for the late start. Justin thought they might average seven hundred pounds to the acre, which would cover costs and leave -a margin of profit. Next season, the land would yield even better, with lower overheads.
"Trust Mark Howard to pick a winner," said Justin without rancour. "When Elizabeth and I began farming, you couldn't make pin-money on ground-nuts. Mrs. Sanderfield is in on a good thing."

Karen withheld her opinion. Inga's two visits within the last fortnight had filled her with vague foreboding. A couple of days ago, Mark and the Swedish woman had stopped at the farm on their way back to Nairobi. Inga had spent a night with a house-party at Colonel Williamson's, and Mark, too, had been invited there probably at Inga's request. The way she had looked at him in Elizabeth's living-room, her fingers lingering close to his wrist and her long, darkened lashes veiling her dusky eyes, sent- tremors along Karen's spine. When Mark asked after Bambu and teasingly alluded to him as a rocking-horse, Inga slipped her arm inside his and stood smiling aloofly at Karen. 'As though,' Karen fumed to herself, 'I were some half-developed nitwit with a childish crush on her man.'
If Mark had disengaged himself, even gently, unobtrusively, Karen would have minded less. But he was in one of those maddening, bantering moods and it almost looked as if the situation intrigued him. He said they must be going. "Coming out to the car, Kitten?"
It was not too pleasant, watching him make Inga comfortable in the front seat but, when he looked down at Karen before getting in himself, her jealousy dissolved in a

glorious uprush of emotion. The warmth of his hand over hers, his smile, half-lazy, half-intimate, accelerated the riot of her heart. Then he was gone in a swirl of dust and she was left to brood upon Inga's next move.
The brief farewell between Mark and the English girl had not escaped Inga; neither had it perturbed her. Over a woman like that, so sweet and unselfish, so patently unfitted to handle a man of Mark's worldliness, she intended to waste no qualm. It might be politic, though, to erase from his mind any picture he might retain of pleading eyes and tremulous lips. "You will stay in Nairobi tonight?"
"A week ago I made a tentative dinner appointment for this evening. I shall drive back to Grassa tomorrow."
"That is disappointing. A young sculptor, a countryman of mine, is in town for a few days. I would so much like you to see his work."
"It'll keep till the morning. If you like, I'll call in for a drink at about eleven, just before I leave. Will this fellow be there with you?"
Her eyes gleamed. "Would you prefer that he were there?"
He grinned. "You mean for the sake of appearances? At eleven in the morning, in Nairobi?"
"You are forgetting that the house is yours, Mark, and people love a thing to talk about. However," with a rippling laugh, "if you are not disturbed, I am not also. I think you will like that young man's work. It is delicate, and fine drawn—"
Mark was interested, as she had known he would be. This evening, she must get in touch with the man who chiselled wild animals from Carrara stone.

WHENWHEN Mark's car drew up outside the house in Carlyon Drive next morning, Inga was ready for him. She had made a little bet with herself
that she would persuade him to stay with her for lunch. Her informal gown in pale rose stood out richly against the background of carved dark wood and pale tweed upholstery, and accentuated the faintly artistic atmosphere created by a central table displaying sculptured leopard, buck of different kinds and wild birds.
As Mark came into the room, she stood up, noting his appreciative glance, which was not entirely for the lounge—his lounge. "It's as hot as Hades this morning," he said, "but you look delightfully cool."
"A strong drink, or will you join me in iced tea?"
"Iced tea sounds good."
The servant brought the tray and a silver kettle and Inga made the tea and served it in tall glasses. Clear as amber, fragrant with fresh mint, cool and acid with lemon, and extravagantly sweetened to his taste. The cheese sticks provided a perfect accompaniment.
He relaxed, entirely contented, and reached for an alabaster gazelle. "Clever," he said, turning it. "Is the artist coming?"
"No," she said regretfully. "He is at work on a commission in the garden of a Government official. He is sorry not to meet you."
"A pity. These sculptures are fascinating—I don't remember seeing anything quite so ambitious."
"I suppose Mark," Inga said, with nicely balanced hesitation, "you could not stay to lunch? I might get him here."
"Impossible, I'm afraid. I've already left it late to start back. Tell him I'd like to see more of his stuff next time I'm in town."
"He will be gratified." She took a fresh glass, filled and flavoured it and set it in the place of the one he had drained. Then she sat back and regarded him, the poised

hostess in his home. It was then that she noticed the package which had slipped from his knee into his chair. The sketchy wrapping, a sheet of tissue, had split, and she could see what appeared to be cornelians and agate and amethyst set in metal. She gestured. "You would like more wrapping for your trinket? The boy will see to it."
He retrieved the package. "Shop assistants never wrap goods properly unless you chase them. This box has sharp corners—it needs a cardboard container." Carelessly, he dropped the thing into his pocket.
A studded cigarette or jewel-box, guessed Inga, and he is taking it back with him, perhaps to the honey-haired Miss Ainsley at the farm. Inga began to think furiously.
"So you return to your bridge, Mark. It is isolated, your place?"
"It won't be, in a year or two. A township will grow up round Grassa."
"I am thinking in the present—for you. It must bore you to have only Charles Williamson for a friend."
"There are the Patersons and the Winchesters fairly near, and the Hardings are only twelve miles away. I go into Guaba once or twice a week

for supplies and make a practice of calling on one of them each time! He had emptied his second glass and was again examining the buck. "They are good for the vanity—these farmers?" she inquired lightly.
"For the soul and the soil," he amended. "They are steeped in domesticity and crops. Perhaps I like them because their way of life is so different from mine. They're settled and solid, whereas I'm always on the move."
Studiously casual, Inga said, "Miss Ainsley is of the same stock—what you call settled and solid. She will make the excellent wife for a. settler."
"How can you tell?" He shrugged. "English woman on the whole are wonderfully adaptable. They've travelled with their men and stuck to them in the queerest places and come up smiling. Miss Ainsley probably has all sorts of reserves tucked away that she's scarcely aware of."
"Quite true," Inga conceded, "but her inclination is to the home. She has told me once how much it would hurt her to move from place to place, to have no real home."
Just faintly Mark's tone changed. "Women often say things without meaning them."
"Yes," she admitted generously. "Most of us employ the fib at times. But it is not necessary to lie to another woman on such a topic. Why should we doubt the word of a girl who confesses a desire to live in comfort and peace in her own little house?" She smiled disarmingly. "You are surprised, Mark? But I am not! She is a nice girl, that Miss Ainsley, and I hope she will get the fine, stodgy husband and settled home that will complete her happiness. It would be too sad if she chose unwisely."
"Too bad for both herself and the man," he agreed curtly.
"How I wish we could have this whole day together. Lunch—and the races—and dinner somewhere bright and enchanting." With mock mournfulness she sighed at him. "Your old bridge, Mark."
"The bridge will still be there tomorrow, and the day after," he said and Inga turned aside to hide the glint of triumph in her smoky eyes.
THE school was now complete. With the aid of native boys, Mark's fuiredi had made a dozen desks in solid teak, and the necessary furniture
for Nova's private room in warm-hued podo wood. The school grounds were fenced and dug, and a wide paved path had been laid between the five-barred gate and the front entrance. There were even a cycle shed and a pyramid of rope to be cut into lengths for tethering ponies among the trees. The school cupboards, a gift from Colonel Williamson, already held neat piles of printed primers and exercise-books,

stacks of pencils, crayons, paint-boxes, coloured raffia, cut-outs, skipping-ropes, trays of sand and an assortment of educational toys. Everything was new. Nova Lawson said it made her feel a different woman just to stand in the main schoolroom and smell the fresh wood, and to visualise how it would look a week ahead, when lessons began. In a few days, Roy was due back in the district. The official opening,

quite a grand affair with eats and drinks provided, had been arranged for the day after his .return, and Colonel Williamson had consented to perform a small ceremony. Mark had been asked first, as soon as he was back from Nairobi.
"But for your help, we'd still be struggling at the bricks and mortar stage," Elizabeth told him one day, meeting his car on the road. "Do sink your principles this once and declare us open."
"Charles Williamson will make a sparkling speech and talk to the toddlers afterwards," he said.
"You will come to the opening, won't you?"
"I think not. You can do without me."
"Karen will be disappointed if you don't. Please come, Mark."
"Can't be done. I shall be some miles away on the other side of the river for a time. We're extending the road."
"Oh dear. But you'll be returning each night to Grassa?"
"Probably."
"Then will you come, to the little dinner party we're giving on the evening of the opening day?"
"Sorry, Elizabeth. I shall be working hard and late."
Exasperation lit the dark eyes. "What's the matter with you, Mark? You can't let Karen down like this. She's counting on you."
"It's time she learned never to count on anyone." And he drove away. More angry than she cared to show, Elizabeth went back to the house. Over the past few months, she and Justin had had quite a lot for which to be grateful to Mark. He had sent up many loads of logs and a few bags of precious potatoes. Often when he came back from Guaba he left a twenty-five pound sack of fine white flour at the farm, and once he had brought her a roll of floral linen and several yards of pure silk. Then there were the two ox-teams purchased for working his own farm; he had begged Justin to "keep them fit" till they should be needed. And, recently, a fine stretch of river had been cleared for bathing. All this, apart from what he had voluntarily provided for the school. Mark was generous enough with his money and goods, but his personality remained baffling and withdrawn—the more bewildering because just a short while ago she had been sure he was beginning to unbend.
An hour later, when Elizabeth went into the house for tea, Karen was there, with Nova Lawson. "Nova's had some news," said Karen. "Her mother is coming for the opening. Wouldn't it be nice if she could stay for the festivities? D'you think the Winchesters might put her up?"
"We'll arrange it somehow. She must certainly attend our party." "You've asked so many already," Nova put in hesitantly.
"We can seat twenty. As a matter of fact, Nova, your news has come at the right time. I've had one invitation turned down already, and other refusals may follow."
Karen, setting out cups on the tea tray, asked idly, "Who's turned us down . . . the Hardings?"

"Oh, no," said Elizabeth clearly. "It isn't the Hardings. They'll be there all right. Mark came by soon after lunch and told me that he'll be working too far away to attend our gathering." She watched Karen's back as she added, "He can't come to the dinner party, either."
Slowly Karen poured tea. "I rather thought he might make the effort. Did he say when he'll be up here again?"
"Not for two or three weeks, I should say."
When Karen handed the cups, Elizabeth gave her a swift, penetrating glance. No drastic change in her expression, thank goodness, though she was a trifle pale; but she and Nova had just walked up from the school in the sun, which was enough to tire anyone. It was unusual, though, for her not to eat a cake or even a biscuit with her tea. Bother Mark and his high -horse. Perhaps it would be best if he stayed away from the farm altogether.
Sometime later, after Justin had come home, Karen drove Nova to the Winchesters', and stayed for a chat with Evelyn. It was not till she was back in her own bedroom, changing into a clean dress for dinner, that she allowed Mark to engage the whole of her thoughts.
Elizabeth's bald announcement had stabbed deeply; the more so, perhaps, because, while half expecting it, she had desperately willed otherwise. Now, there was no evading the purpose implicit in his coolness this last week or so. Her companionship had palled and he was relinquishing his claim to it in what he considered the kindest way. She didn't blame him. All along, she had regarded their friendship as precarious, something to be grasped for as long as he proffered it and strengthened by every means in her power. It was just unfortunate that she knew too little about men in general and his sort in particular, to draw him into the deeper and more lasting relationship that she longed for.
ROY returned to Guaba mightily pleased with himself. Confidentially, he had learned that a surveyor might be calling in a few weeks' time to examine the new school. If it lined up with official requirements, there was every hope of the school being incorporated into the government education scheme.
"They were down on me like a load of bricks for wasting so much of my time on this corner of my province," he said blithely. "Which means that from now on I shall not be able to give you two girls much help. Still, you seem to have done marvellously without me, and anyway, my weekends will be free."
The formal opening of the school delighted all sixty of the guests. Colonel Williamson, in a tropical suit with a carnation in the buttonhole, his iron-grey hair smartly brushed back, made a short, amusing speech. Afterwards, he chatted with the farming folk and their children, and eventually worked his way round to where Karen sat perched on a school desk with her cousin.
"An achievement to be proud of," he said with a friendly smile and an embracing wave of his hand. "You and young Strasmore started a big thing,

for I'm quite certain the population will grow fast in these parts. There are three new families coming this way within the next month."
"Guaba will have to spread itself into a decent up-country town and provide us with a club," remarked Karen.
"Pity we can't start one on co-operative lines, like the school," put in Elizabeth.
"Nairobi's too far for a weekend jaunt, and young people like Karen, Nova, Roy, and his friends have to stay at home or rely on invitations. They seldom have a chance to dance through the small hours."

The Colonel nodded comprehendingly. "A club in Guaba would return substantial dividends. I'd be tempted to start one myself if I were staying on indefinitely in Kenya."
"You're leaving?" they asked simultaneously.
"Yes, but I'm not sure when. My lease has five months to run. In that time, I'm hoping certain difficulties will have smoothed themselves out. Some friends of mine are coming out for a long weekend next Friday," he said. "I'd very much like you to spend the days with us, Karen. My boy would collect you each morning and I'd drive you home myself each night. Will you come?"
"Thank you. I'd love to."
ELIZABETH'S dinner party that evening, a comfortable, non-dress occasion and the largest upon which she had as yet embarked, was completely
successful. When the meal had ended, the guests streamed out into the fragrant darkness while the room was cleared and the gramophone set going. All the records were old, and many of them soughed like the wind, but the rhythm emerged triumphant.
Next day, Elizabeth yawned happily about her tasks. It had been an exciting, homely party; the first, she rather thought, of many more in the district.
Her cousin's function over, Karen's immediate problem was Charles Williamson's house-party. An eagerness to meet a new set of people was overawed by her anxiety about clothes, for she knew that Charles's guests would be of the leisured, sporting type who, if they owned farms at all, employed managers to run them.
As it turned out, the dinner with Charles and his friends on Friday evening was a small affair. Charles himself seemed uneasy and twice regretted that, as the party was incomplete, the safari he had scheduled for tomorrow would have to be abandoned, unless they'd care to go without him. Obviously, he couldn't be away when the last guest arrived. Two husbands and wives decided to make a car-load and drive into the bush below Grassa. The other three guests chose a lazy day pepped up with tennis.
It was these three whom Karen joined the following morning at about eleven. They played tennis on the cropped grass, lunched in the garden, played again, and drove several miles to bathe in a pool fringed with ferns and rock flowers. At about six, they dropped Karen at the farm to change for dinner.

As she slipped into her long blue dress, Karen hoped that during their absence Charles's final visitor had arrived. Strange for a man of his age and type to allow himself to be so put out.
"How are you making out with the social register?" quizzed Elizabeth
from the doorway. "Not so different from us working folk, are they?" "They're just ordinary," said Karen flippantly. "I like us better." "Roy's here."
"Roy?" Karen turned. "You mean there, in the living-room?" "Right here!" he sang out. "Hurry up."
"This house!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "No privacy anywhere. Are you coming, pet?"
Roy, conventionally attired for the evening, laughed and bowed to Karen. "Your escort, ma'am."
"You might have told me you were invited to Colonel Williamson's tonight" "Would it have heightened your anticipation if I had?"
"Naturally."
Comically, he beat his head. "Forgive me, dear heart, I did what I thought best."
"I still can't think why you two don't make a match of it," said Elizabeth plaintively. "You're good for each other, and there's nothing like marriage to extract the sting from past follies."

"Are you referring to Glenys as a past folly?" he queried.
"Who else?" she countered. "You've only to look at Karen to see that she hasn't one."
Roy wouldn't notice the swift lowering of lids and the clench of slim ' fingers over the silver evening-bag. With exasperation, Elizabeth added, "Seven months in Kenya, and I don't believe she's even been kissed!"
"Oh, I say, that's a grave accusation!" cried Roy. "Defend yourself, Karen."
"Why should I?" she challenged lightly. "Far more fun to keep you guessing. Shall we go now?"
Charles met them at the foot of his veranda steps. His smile had lost the perfunctory politeness of yesterday and he' clasped Karen's arm as they went inside.
"Come into the lounge for a cocktail," he murmured. "You know everyone now. Inga Sanderfield is the only newcomer today, and you and she are already friends."
Karen quelled an impulse to seek behind her for Roy's hand and hold on tight, as one might grab for support at an elder brother or a nice cousin. For a minute, the room seemed crowded. Then Inga separated from the rest, tall, superbly beautiful in sea-green, her head, with its circlet of wheaten braids, held high.
"Good evening, Miss Ainsley . . . Mr. Strasmore. Appropriately you are come together. They look sweet as a couple, do they not, Mark?"
Karen shivered. She saw Mark straighten from a lounging position

against the wall and come forward. "Good evening," she said, before the coolness in his appraisal could hurt with words. "I'd like that cocktail, Charles."
LATER, when her head had ceased to buzz, Karen considered that she , slid passably well out of a situation fraught with unpleasantness,
though she could still tremble at the faint antagonism in Mark's smile and the supercilious tilt to Inga's chin. After dinner, she'd make an opportunity to tell Charles that tomorrow, Sunday, she must help Elizabeth in the dairy.
Luckily, at table Karen was placed between Roy and a man whom she had partnered earlier at tennis. Mark, a little way down on the same side, she could have ignored if only her heart hadn't played tricks when his sardonic laugh filled a pause.
In the general move, she escaped outside, but Charles's garden, packed with trees and climbers, was not the kind one dare explore in billowing tulle. She did find a bench away from the lights and sank into it with a little sigh. Close to her hair, cicadas chirped and leaves whispered. The cool sweet air laid beneficent fingers on her brow, easing the ache of bewilderment and loss. 'One can't lose something one has never possessed,' she upbraided herself sternly. 'This was inevitable and you must have known it from the beginning. Take hold of yourself, now.'
By the time Roy came out to find her, a modicum of courage had oozed back into her veins. "I told them you'd play bridge," he said. "It was that or gossip."
She would be safe playing bridge. "All right, if you'll partner me." As she stood, her dress puffed out from the waist and caught a thorn. "I'm hooked up, Roy. Can you help? Careful! Don't tear it for heaven's sake."
He bent close, working gingerly with his fingers. "I can't see," he mumbled. "Do you think you could stay just like this till I fetch a torch?" The next second he gave a grunt of triumph. "Done it—though I'm afraid there's a nick in the stuff."
"So!" came Inga's thick, husky voice. "This is an hour rather soon for the tete-a-tete."
"I wouldn't say that." Lightheartedly, Roy took his cue. "Night comes early in these parts."
Mark was with Inga, standing nonchalantly behind her shoulder, his face, as far as Karen could see, an impersonal mask.

"My skirt caught on this bush," she said hurriedly. "Roy released it for me."
"No excuses," laughed Inga. "We saw. Did we not see, Mark? The school- teacher very, very close to the education officer! It is perfect, that."
"Hardly our concern," Mark said carelessly. "African nights are reputed to encourage that sort of thing. Would you ladies care for a drink out here?"

His manner and tone were a blade in the heart. Karen moved a step or two along the path. "Thank you, no. We were just going in to play bridge."
"Stay with us." Inga sat down and spread her dress over the bench. She glanced up at Mark, her head posed to display the white curve of her throat against the dark background. A superb show -woman in every sense, she used her coquetry with an air of irresistible candour which combined with her fair, alien features to magnetise men much less vital than Mark. "Let us talk of ground-nut farms and the schools and the new club we soon are promised in Guaba."
"Is that a fact?" asked Roy. "A club in Guaba?"
"We were discussing it this evening before you came," Mark answered. "Apparently," he looked at Karen, "someone made the suggestion to Charles Williamson the other day and he has persuaded one of his friends to rent a large house there and try it out as a communal centre. It's going to be nice for you," laconically, "not to have to traipse into Nairobi if you fancy a night out, especially when the road is widened and surfaced."
"Almost civilisation," agreed Roy. "I wouldn't mind settling in this district for good."
"Nor I," said Inga, "though I prefer to live in a city, and Kenya is much too hot. South Africa is a fine country and the towns are modern. I have many friends at the Cape."
KAREN recalled the single occasion when Mark had confided about the directorship he had been offered in Johannesburg. With a sudden
inward flash she knew that Inga, too, was aware of his indecision, but, whereas she, Karen, had felt incompetent to venture an opinion, the Swedish woman was waging a definite campaign.
Defensively, she was about to take Roy's arm when Charles appeared. "So here you are, Roy. I thought you were fetching Karen for bridge." "We're just coming."
"And you, Inga—and Mark?"
"Mark and I have farm business," Inga told him with a throaty laugh. "Later, we will come in and dance."
Charles smiled at Karen and offered his arm. "I haven't yet told you how lovely you look tonight. I almost wish I weren't host, so that we could find another bench and talk—but not of ground-nuts!"
"She is a little young for your experiments, Charles," said Inga sharply. "But eminently capable," said Mark, "of holding her own."
Not in the least disconcerted, Charles patted the hand on his arm, then turned to Roy. "Are you coming with us, Roy?"
A minute or so later they reached the short lawn in front of the house. "Inga Sanderfield's rather stunning," Roy remarked ingenuously. "Is she going to marry Mark Howard?"

"I don't know," replied Charles brusquely, "but Mark seems a willing victim. Possibly he was the reason that Inga came back to Kenya. She doesn't belong here—never will. If you'd seen her in Sweden, as I have, you'd know her for an entirely different woman."
Karen made a bid for a change of subject. "You've been to Sweden?" "I spent three months there last year."

Now they were on the veranda and Charles stood aside for Karen to enter the house. She glimpsed his face, set in a polite smile which did not completely hide the twist of bitterness at the corners of his mouth. She did not know that her own lips were taut in a similar smile, for she had just realised the significance of what Charles had said. If he had guessed, as his tone implied, that a serious affair would develop between Mark and Inga when she came back to Nairobi, he probably had good grounds for it, for he had known them both for a number of years. Mark must have been in love with Inga while she was still another man's wife.

The knowledge set the seal of finality upon Karen's painfully stretched emotions. She refused to remember Mark's teasing friendliness and the good humour with which he bore with her ignorance of his country, and taught her the things a good settler should know. His interest in the school, she assured herself, was the professional engineer's, his generosity the outcome of being wealthy and a bachelor. Now that he had shown so clearly that he had little further use for her companionship, she saw him as ruthless, cruel, without a spark of tenderness. But her heart wouldn't believe it .. .

OUTWARDLY, events were moving smoothly. School started with a flourish at eight-thirty each morning, and Karen's little ones finished
at twelve, while the over-sevens broke for half an hour and then went on with lessons till two o'clock. At first, Karen waited to ride home with Keith, but as soon as he grew accustomed to the journey up from the crossroads she left him to manage alone. His expert handling of the pony Mark had given him, made her own occasional nervousness on Bambu look like, unnecessary dithering, which came of not having learned to ride in childhood. Kenya was a great country for the fearless, she thought.

Following Elizabeth's example, other farmers in the district began to entertain more freely. Besides the usual dinners and dance parties, there were picnics along the river and impromptu tennis and golf tournaments, followed by a cold supper. Once three car-loads travelled west to view the blue and white beauty of the Falls, still another aspect of the multiple personality of Kenya.

Very gradually the hard lines about Nova's mouth were giving way, but, though she allowed Karen to draw her into the social life of the neighbourhood, her enjoyment of it was constrained and reluctant. She much preferred being alone with Karen, or, at most, making up a foursome with Roy and one of his friends.

The spate of entertaining had set Elizabeth yearning for new clothes. "Previously, I've held out till our annual couple of weeks in Nairobi, but this time I really can't go on till after coffee-picking."

Justin felt around in his pockets for hit pipe. "Of course you must have new clothes," he agreed. "Spend a week in Nairobi with Karen. I'll look after the dairy."

"I've a much better suggestion," offered Karen from her seat at his desk, where she was filing letters, invoices and receipts. "The coffee trees won't vanish if Justin leaves them for a little while, and I know far more about the dairy than he does. It's time you two had a second honeymoon."

Elizabeth stopped dead m the centre of the room. "What a lovely idea," she said quietly.

Justin made a complication of filling his pipe and said nothing. But presently both of them went out to the veranda and Karen stayed at the desk, knowing what they were discussing and glad from the bottom of her heart that she had thought of it. She didn't look up when Elizabeth re-entered, and the quick, warm kiss on her cheek came as a surprise. "You pet," her cousin murmured. "We're going to take you at your word."

When Nova was asked she said Yes, she could manage without help at the school for a week or so, and would be only too pleased to sleep at the farm with Karen. John Winchester agreed to come up and confer with the farm foreman every couple of days, and Keith promised to be a good boy so long as they promised in return to bring him back a set of carpentry tools—his very own, and not baby-size, either.

ON a Saturday morning, with the trees dark against a flawless blue sky and the road ribboning away all pink and dusty before them, Elizabeth and Justin set off in the bush car for a ten days' spree.

"See that she buys an evening frock, Justin," was Karen's final injunction. "White for preference. Brunettes with tanned skins do full justice to white. Goodbye, both of you. Happy days."

"That's that," said Keith matter-of-factly as the car disappeared. "Mums looked pretty, didn't she? I suppose she's excited." He kicked his way up the garden beneath a riotous harmony of passion-flower and solanum which arched the path, and skipped up on to the rockery. "Shall we do some gardening?"

"Come and help me in the dairy first. I'm afraid it'll take me twice as long as it takes your mummy."

"It's just routine," he remarked airily.

Watching him clamber from ledge to ledge amid tawny and carmine pools of flowers, Karen envied his upbringing. Karen's stories of England, while avidly absorbed and questioned, inspired Keith with only a mild longing. It must be boring to have to play indoors half the year, and what sort of country was it to have no snakes, no buck or zebra, no bright-feathered parrots or stately ostriches, and where trees and flowers died

right off for months together, and it rained all the year round, and snowed!

In spite of the perpetual beauty around her, Karen herself was often victim of an overwhelming nostalgia for England. There were times, chiefly at night, when she would have given anything to be lying in her walnut bed in the flat at Maida Vale, knowing she would awaken to the twitter of sparrows in the old lime tree and the frequent clatter of buses along the main road. Yet she was aware there could be no going back. She was no longer the carefree girl who had left England eight months ago.

At this moment, though, Karen was very much the Kenya housewife. For a few minutes she lingered in the small orchard and tentatively handled the golden fruit of the orange and grapefruit trees. Apricot and peach spread weighted branches, and squat guavas and loquats lined the path, which ended at a tangle of green silk banana leaves.

The dairy was enclosed within a circle of pawpaws which, in the early days, Elizabeth had planted with care and regularly watered, not knowing they would thrive almost on warmth alone.

The cans of milk were lined up inside the dairy, ready for separating. The dairy-boy, in white shorts and singlet, lifted and poured the cream into the churn, then the skim milk into fresh buckets ready for cheese. Karen worked steadily. The boy churned, singing softly to himself. At eleven o'clock she left him to it while she went into the house for a cup of tea. Scarcely had the kettle boiled, than Keith burst in. "Karen, what d'you think—"

"I did think you were going to help in the dairy."

"Sorry, I forgot. I saddled Trix and rode down the road a little way," he said breathlessly. "They're widening and making the new surface. It's grand!"

"The road from Grassa to Guaba?"
"Of course. What other road is there? Mark says his boys will be knocking off work soon as it is Saturday, but they'll pass our house on Monday. I wish I needn't go to school."
"You're not missing school for that," she answered mechanically. "Was Mark breaking for tea?"
"No, he'd only just come."
"Would you like to take a flask to him?"
"Yes, and a couple of those honey scones you baked yesterday. Aren't you coming?"
"Not this time."
He followed her to the pantry and back again. "It's a beautiful road," he added persuasively.
"Not this time," she repeated, lowering the teapot. Carefully she wiped the flask with a napkin, popped in four lumps of sugar and a dash of milk, corked it and screwed on the cap. "Wait and bring back the flask, will you?"
She hadn't seen. Mark since the dinner at Charles Williamson's. Justin,

who had gone down to Grassa with Keith, had said the bridge looked nearly complete, though Mark had told him there was still a good deal to do after a slack period of measuring the strain and stretch. It seemed that, owing to an inconsistency in the subsoil on the farther bank of the river, he had been forced to make slight alterations to the design. Any time now a technical director of the construction company by whom he had been commissioned, was expected down for a final conference, and he was keen to get the roads in the immediate neighbourhood into first-class condition for testing the bridge.
Resolutely Karen walked back to the dairy. The first butter, a glistening mound set upon a muslin on the tiled shelf, was ready for weighing and wrapping. By lunch-time her arms and shoulders ached abominably, but the tidy stack ready for despatch to the co-operative depot was a pleasant panacea to physical discomfort.
When at last she sat down to lunch, Keith had finished eating and gone off again. Jimmy told her that the "bwana makubwa"—the big master—had come in but could not wait. She was to let him know at once if she needed assistance of any kind. Her heart warmed and her tiredness fell away. Only a conventional offer of help from Mark, yet for the time being it gave point to existence and spread a balm over the bruised places in her mind.

CHAPTER VI

THE days were long and exhausting. Nova brought her sewing and armfuls of exercise books to correct, but all Karen felt fit for in the evenings was a doze near the fire.
"You're doing too much," Nova said. "Justin didn't intend you to run his boys, too."
"The farm foreman and the herdsman came for instructions. I have to tell them something, and there are always small troubles. Either a cow goes off milk, or a leopard breaks into one of the bomas during the night. This morning I had to superintend the mixing of cattle-dip. Justin's very particular about warding off all chance of rinderpest and East Coast fever."
"John Winchester took on that responsibility."

"He hasn't been up and I don't care to remind him. You're not to, either, Nova. We shall get through. It isn't for long."
Early in the first week, Hanim brought a note from Mark.
"Today I heard from Keith that you and Miss Lawson are sleeping alone at the farm. I thought justin would have arranged something with the Winchesters. Hanim has instructions to spend each night on your veranda."
Hanim, quiet and dignified, nodded when he saw her refold the sheet of

paper. "Memsahib?" There was a world of understanding and knowledge in the polite inquiry.
"Thank you, Hanim. It will be a comfort to know that you're here."
The next Saturday, Roy drove up to the farm. After a few facetious comments about the splendid new concrete road, he came to the point. "I thought you girls might like to try out the club in Guaba," he said. "They have cards and billiards and dancing. Quite a jolly crowd collect there. Can Keith go down to the Winchesters for the night?"
"He's already in bed, and I'm too tired to dance, anyway." Observing Nova's faint disappointment, Karen went on impulsively, "You two go. I shall be quite happy here, with Hanim on guard."
With mock apprehension, Roy said, "D'you think I'll be safe with Nova? She's a bit of a man-eater, you know."
"Just the influence you need. In fact, it cuts both ways. We'll all go together next weekend."
Nova changed into a cyclamen-silk dress, and Karen joined her in the bedroom, her eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. "Let me do your hair for you, Nova?"
"Heavens, no! There's nothing to do."
"Your usual style doesn't suit this frock. Keep still a minute."
Deftly Karen combed and patted. "You see? Looser around your face is much more becoming."
"It feels strange." But a flush had crept into her sallow cheeks. "I used to do it something like this." Sharply she swerved from the mirror to hang up her skirt and tidy the room. Marvellous what a change of hairstyle did to a woman, thought Karen, especially in the way of lopping off the years. In her embarrassment, Nova looked almost elfin.
Roy blinked and, surprisingly, remained silent.
"You're quite sure you'll be all right, Karen?" Nova demanded urgently. "Absolutely. I shall go to bed early. Don't leave the club before the fun's over." .
BUT when they had gone, Karen felt restless and wide awake. She was stuck off the ninth of her luncheon-mats, and there was nothing on the
bookshelves she had not read except a treatise on coffee growing and a heap of pamphlets about ground-nut cultivation. She lay back in her chair, and at once her eyes focussed on a large ginger spider scrambling through a conveniently sized hole in the canvas ceiling. Just lately the canvas had rotted in several places, and dark blobs showed where she and her cousin had patched it. Elizabeth said the stuff should have been thickly coated with paint or gum in the beginning; now it was too late, and sometime soon the canvas would have to be completely renewed in all the rooms.
With startling suddenness a cry from Keith broke the stillness. "Mummy —ooh, Mummy!"

Electrified, Karen grabbed up a torch and dashed into his bedroom. "What is it? Mummy's away. Have you forgotten?"

He was sitting up in bed, rocking, both hands clamped round his jaws, his eyes streaming. "My tooth a-aches!" he wept.
"Oh, goodness! I'll bring a lamp. Try not to make too much noise. We'll get it better." But she wasn't sure how.
"It hu-urts!" he bellowed after her.
"Poor old chap," she called from the bathroom trying to remember whether Elizabeth had ever mentioned a toothache remedy for Keith. Back in his bedroom she questioned him. "Bear up, darling. It's not so bad now the light's here, is it? What does Mummy use for toothache?"
"I never had it before. It's orful!"
"I know. Let's rub a little iodine on to your gum, shall we? Show me just where it is."
By the time he had been persuaded to open his mouth, both he and Karen were worn out. Like most small boys, Keith had never taken kindly to pain, and toothache is one of the least tolerable of the everyday agonies even to the more mature. Though she wished desperately that he would stop wailing for a minute and let her take a good look, Karen had every sympathy with him. It must have been a vicious pain to awaken him so suddenly from sleep. At last, more by luck than design, she caught a glimpse of the offender: the first small double tooth to the left had a round brown cavity in the centre.
The usual temporary remedies such as filling the hole with a shred of cotton-wool damped with a spot of whisky were hopeless with Keith. In pain he could be as mulish a little brigand as you'd find! He wouldn't even swallow half a crushed aspirin disguised in a mountain of jam.
He pulled away from the arm she had put round him. "If Mummy was here, she'd know what to do," he gulped. "She wouldn't let my tooth hurt and hurt."
"I'm not going to, either," Karen said, firmly covering him with a blanket. "Now try to be quiet while I find something to put you right." She went straight into the living-room and got out notepaper and envelope. She had recalled that most of little Molly Winchester's front teeth were missing at the early age of four, and guessed that Evelyn had experienced many an evening like her present one with Keith.
So she scribbled: "Keith is frantic with toothache. Have you anything that might help? I'd be so grateful."
Then she crossed to the french window and, drawing back the curtain, looked out. There was Hanim, gazing into the night. She opened the door. "Hanim!"
He came swiftly. "Memsahib?"
"Do you know the Winchesters' shamba, about three miles up the road?" "Yes, memsahib."
"I want you to go there and give Mrs. Winchester this note." "Bwana makubwa say not to leave this shamba till daybreak."

"You must, Hanim. The little boy is in pain."
Immediately the dark head bent. "Pardon, memsahib. I will be quick."
She heard him gallop away over the new road, and then slipped back to Keith's room. The boy was sprawled across his pillow, whimpering miserably. This time he did not despise the arm Karen offered, nor did he reject the handkerchief with which she dabbed at his eyes. "I've sent for something to make it better," she comforted him. "Hanim won't be long."
Keith shuddered on a sob and raised his flushed, tear-stained face. "Did Hanim hear me cry?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't," she prevaricated. "Not that it would matter if he did. Toothache's nasty enough to make anyone cry."
"Hanim wouldn't cry."
"Perhaps not, but Hanim's a stoic."
"What's a stoic?" Keith mumbled unhappily.
Karen, her glance on her wrist-watch, put all she knew into her reply, embroidering to add interest, and Keith listened, punctuating with sniffs and dry sobs till she had finished, when he began to groan again. With overwhelming relief Karen heard the slam of a car door. Evelyn had come herself, thank heaven; that was more than she'd dared hope. She rose from the bed and flew into the living-room.
The visitor was Mark .. .
"Hallo!" said Mark, who was fishing things out of his pockets. "How long has Keith been making that row?"
"About half an hour," Karen answered breathlessly. How mad that her heart should sing and her knees tremble. "I sent Hanim over to the Winchesters."
"I'd told him to come to me if there should be any trouble. Sounds as though that tooth is giving the poor kid real bother. D'you want to be in on the operation?"
"What are you going to do?"
"Pull it out, probably. It's certain he can't go on suffering and I expect it's a first tooth. I'll take the responsibility," he finished reassuringly.
His tone cooled her. She followed him into the small bedroom. Keith's straw-coloured head emerged from the tumbled bedclothes like a dejected puppy's.
Miraculously, Hanim appeared from the kitchen with a pan each of cold and hot water. Karen could see that master and servant had worked together in similar circumstances many times. They shared a like expression: purposeful, half-smiling. It almost vexed Karen the way Keith opened his mouth at Mark's first -command and didn't close it more than half an inch when the forceps were lifted from a bowl of disinfectant.
But it was to Karen that he turned for solace when the deed was done.
She held him till the bleeding had stopped, then bathed his face and
gave him a warm drink.. When she bade him a second good night and

took the lamp, the round face on the pillow offered a crooked smile. "Won't Mums be surprised! Shall we write it in a letter?"
"It'll be much more effective if you give her a wide smile the minute she's back," Karen assured him.
MARK was in the living-room, apparently doing nothing. Karen set down the lamp.
"Can I get you a drink?" she asked formally. "No, thanks. Why are you here alone?"
"Nova's gone to the club at Guaba. I persuaded her as Hanim was here. I—never did thank you for sending Hanim. He is the sort of person one can respect, and like."
The arrogant nose twitched. "He likes you, too. He still calls you my little sister, which, come to think of it, is about the highest tribute he'd pay to any woman!" As he looked across at her, eyes gleaming with laughter, the lamplight glanced over his cheekbones, accentuating their leanness. "Is Keith settled?"
"He'll go off to sleep now."
"You're not looking too chipper yourself."
"It's only tiredness. I'm not yet broken in to dairy work."
"I can see that." He came closer, picked up her right hand and examined the wrist. "Badly swollen. Sure you haven't damaged it?"

His touch burned. Hastily, she withdrew her hand and plunged it into her pocket.
"Elizabeth warned me. She had the same trouble years ago." "Doesn't Miss Lawson help?"
"She will tomorrow, as it's Sunday. There are only three days next week before Elizabeth comes back."
"What time do you start in the dairy?"
"About nine."
An instant's pause, then he said noncommittally, "I'm hung up while my boys are on the roads. If you like, I'll drop in three mornings next week and give you some help."
Karen murmured her thanks. The cautious little glow within her flared suddenly into a bright fire.
"Come and sit down," he said, himself taking to the arm of a chair near her. He had a companionable air. "Tell me what you like best about Kenya."
If only she dared answer foolishly in a monosyllable! Safer to assume that he alluded only to the colony, not to its people. "No one thing. The country as a whole has tremendous appeal for most of us."
"Do you enjoy farming?"
"Yes, but it's not in my bones, as it seems to be in Elizabeth's. I shouldn't care to have to do it for the rest of my life."
"What would you like to do for the rest of your life?"
Again she daren't tell him. "I'm not ambitious—or much different from other women."
"A bungalow, a garden and children to look after?" he queried sardonically.

`Y es, yes,' cried her heart, 'so long as it was your bungalow, your garden, and—'
Quietly, she answered, "Don't tease, Mark."
"I'm not teasing," he said, but took it no further. Instead he added, "I'm staying till Keith is sound asleep."
She leaned back and half-closed her eyes. Sweet and spiced with danger were these precious minutes- alone with Mark.
They sprang alert simultaneously to the crunch of a car on the road, and laughing voices. In one lithe movement, Mark was up and at the door. "Hanim! Tell them to wait out there. I'm coming."
"Already the memsahib is here, bwana."
Mark muttered something and turned back. "I had visitors down at the bridge when Hanim came, and they've followed me here." As the french door was pushed wide, he spoke more loudly, "Here's your good friend Charles Williamson—and Inga."
"The house is very quiet," remarked Inga Sanderfield, pausing just inside the door. "What happened to the toothache?"
"The toothache is no more," Mark answered. "I played bogy man with forceps and Cousin Karen lent gentle hands and soft sympathy, with the result that the child now sleeps."
"And everyone is happy?" Inga's displeasure smouldered faintly in the depths of her eyes, but the smile she turned upon Karen scintillated. Then her thick gold brows rose and she laughed with frankness calculated to disarm. "I understand. You were lonely, and with good reason. It was mean of the education officer to drive out with Miss Lawson this evening. That is what I think when I see them together."
For a moment Karen was taut. How did one cope with such veiled accusations when convention demanded that claws remain sheathed and the smile ever-ready?
Charles broke in, "You look strained, Karen. We others shouldn't have bothered you. You are working hard and children can be very wearing."

"Both of them conditions about which you can know little, Charles," Inga took him up, with a hint of malice. "Our friends are waiting in the car, Mark."
He was filling his pockets with the things which he had dropped on the table as he came in. "We'd better go back to your place, Charles."
Singly, they said good night to Karen. Charles warmly, Inga with an arrogant inclination of her head, and Mark briefly.
After they had gone, Karen's quickened pulses began to settle, but she did not move till Nova came in, her usual stilted smile softened by a careful glimmer of happiness.
NEXT morning, Keith cheerfully displayed the new gap in his mouth to kitchen-boy and herdsman. Nova, brisk and normal, helped in the dairy
and prepared a cold lunch. In the afternoon, Charles came over and took tea
with them on the veranda. Almost at once he apologised for last night's

intrusion. "Inga has come down this weekend with two married friends," he explained. "I'd invited Mark over for dinner, and afterwards, as there was a moon, we all drove down to look at the bridge. We were taking a drink with Mark when Hanim appeared. After Mark had left, we hung on for a while till Inga grew restless and asked me to bring her here."
"It didn't matter," murmured Karen. "I ought to have known how to handle Keith alone."
Charles gave her one of his kind, protective smiles and, after admiring the vacant gum, asked Keith how he liked school. Karen, reclining in her deckchair, watched the man and idly wondered. Difficult to believe that he had built for himself the reputation of philanderer. His behaviour to herself had always been impeccably charming. "What are your visitors doing this afternoon?" she asked.
"Resting, ready for tonight. As a matter of fact, I'd very much like you to join us this evening. We're taking a picnic up-river in a couple of canoes. Have you ever been on a moonlight picnic?"
She shook her head. "No, but I think I'd better wait till Keith's parents are back, thank you, Charles." She did not ask if Mark were going. No need; Inga would see to that. African moonlight on the river. Thank heaven Charles and ethers would be there.
When Charles got up to go, he bent over her. "Stay there. The young man will see me off. So glad to see the pink back in your cheeks."
Nova, who had hardly conversed at all with Charles, now raised her feet to the chair he had left, and stared after him as he wound down the path to his car. "That man has changed. Before I left for Cape Town he was one of the bad lads of Nairobi. In those days he was wealthy, but he drank and gambled his money away. He was always likable, though, and would go miles out of his way to do a kindness. I feel rather sorry for him."
"I'm sure there's no need."
"He seems to have changed lately. Evelyn Winchester says his present income is small, and he has to choose between marrying money, if he can find some, and picking a woman to whom money is not everything. I shouldn't be surprised," she added casually, "if he has you lined up in the second category."
"That's absurd. He must be nearly fifty."
"You're judging by his grey hairs. He can't be more than forty-four." Nova paused. "One might do worse. He has a mature charm. I wouldn't go down at all with his type, but you're the forgiving sort who'd never remind him of his past misdeeds."
"You're not advising me to join my life with one of the sex you despise, are you?" Karen inquired, smiling pointedly.

Nova took an interest in the cannas that reared crimson trumpets above the veranda wall. "Life's odd," she said. "It knocks you down with

one hand and offers balm with the other. The trouble is that once you've been let down, you're wary."
"Looked at another way," said Karen, "if you're down, you've nothing to lose, and you might gain a lot by testing the balm."
"You're a sport, Karen. I shall always be glad I met you."
For the rest of the day, Karen read a book Charles had brought, and tried to keep from wondering whether Mark would come over tomorrow morning, as he had suggested. in fact, he arrived just before nine, said "Good morning," in businesslike tones, and asked after Keith, who had gone to school. "Now to the dairy," he said. "Will you sit and direct operations?"
An hour or so later, he washed his hands and pulled on his jacket.
"I'm going to make some coffee," she said. "Will you stay for a cup, or some other drink?"
"Not today, thanks," he answered, looking away towards the trees. "I'll be along at the same time tomorrow. So long." He slipped into his car and drove off, and Karen was left leaning against a veranda post, baffled and hurt, and wishing she had told him to stay away if he considered her a nuisance.
On Tuesday it was the same. "Any use offering you a drink?"
"Too early, thanks. Same time tomorrow." And he was striding down to the gate.
In the afternoon, John Winchester came to the farm and Karen thanked him for a belated offer of help. "We've got through very well and there's only one more day."
"Nova told us you were managing without trouble or I'd have ridden up before."
Karen smiled and reassured him. Having satisfied his conscience, John climbed back into the saddle and cantered home.
Keith, his feet set wide, gazed up into Karen's face. "Is it nearly teatime?"
"Yes. Hungry?"
"A bit. Isn't there time for me to go to the bridge?"
She shook her head. "It won't have changed much since yesterday."
Keith kicked a stone. "I heard Mark tell Colonel Williamson that he'll be glad to finish with this district. Mark's not half so nice and exciting now as when he first came," he said broodingly. "The way he snaps sometimes you'd think everything had gone wrong with the bridge, instead of right."
"We all have off days."
With childish inconsequence, Keith sighed blissfully. "This time tomorrow, I may have my tools. Mums is sure to bring me some fine smooth wood to use—she always thinks of things like that. When's your birthday, Karen?"
"In a couple of months."
"I'll make you a work-box," he promised.

THE following morning, Karen met Mark in the garden. "There's nothing to do in the dairy today. About half an hour ago, the van collected our milk and cream for the hospital at Kisuri. I wasn't aware it was our turn or I'd have told you yesterday and saved you the journey."
For a second he was silent. Then, "In that case, I'll take the cup of coffee you've been offering each day. I breakfasted at five this morning."

"Of course." She turned into the house and he followed. Leaving him in the living-room, she passed through to the kitchen and prepared a tray. Chicken sandwiches, a dish of thickly buttered spice buns and coffee.
Mark drained his first cupful in one go. "I needed that. We were firefighting half the night. One of the boys built a fire inside his hut and razed eight others."
While he ate a little, she flipped over the leaves of a magazine. He drank a third cup of coffee, then stretched his legs out before him, his glance distant and speculative.
"I want you to know that I'm deeply grateful for all that you've done for me since Saturday," she said.
A trace of the old mockery glinted underneath his smile. "Keith's almost as much my relative as yours."
"I wasn't referring only to what you did for Keith. My wrist is much easier for the rest."
"I'd noticed that. How are you doing at the school these days?"
"It's flourishing. Nova's an excellent teacher and she has the confidence of the parents. We were awfully lucky to get her."
His regard was steady and tantalising. "Why do you haul in someone else when I ask you a personal question? I'm not interested in the redoubtable Miss Lawson."
Karen looked at her fingers rustling the glossy pages. "You're not so desperately interested in the school, either, are you?"
"You mean because I haven't been down there since before the opening?" His shoulders lifted. "Hardly the place for a bachelor, is it?"
"You might at least have attended the opening. In spite of your principles the building and furnishing were three-parts your work." She lifted her head and met his glance. "It was odd, the way you dropped . . . everything so suddenly."
"I explained to Elizabeth that I was working away at the time."
"If you'd wanted to, you'd have come, wherever you happened to be," she stated simply.
"Were you hurt?"
"Most of us expected you to be there."
"Were you hurt?" he repeated, his tone unbearably soft.
Her lids flickered. "A little, but disappointments are part of life. Since then, I believe I understand you better."
"Oh, really? How, in my absence, have I revealed myself?"
He was laughing at her and she took refuge in a responsive smile and a shake of the head. "I'm not begging for jeers," she retorted.

"What if I promise not to jeer?"
"You can't help scoffing when you're in the mood."
To put an end to his probing of the topic, she stood up to replace the sugar-bowl and cups on the tray. She felt him regarding her, his expression shrewd yet enigmatic and, when Jimmy had come in and gone again, he still did not move. A delicious uneasiness settled over Karen. She had a conviction that on her sagacious handling of the next few minutes depended her whole future. Unfortunately, sagacity had deserted her.
The commonplace nature of his next remark brought her an absurd relief. "Do you miss the London entertainments?"
"No; I thought I should, but here there is so much outdoor amusement that evenings indoors consist of a sleepy half-hour with a book after dinner and then to bed." She added, "Not always, of course, but five evenings out of seven."
"You prefer it that way?"

"Well, yes. I like an hour or two round a log-fire after a hot, sunny day. It gives one a sense of home that is otherwise lacking in the tropics."
Impersonally, he commented, "Home is anywhere if you're in the right company."
"One's own four walls and a cabbage-patch," she countered. "I'm one of those idiots who plant acorns and watch them grow."
"I plant bridges," he said in a curious voice, "and then pass on."
Somehow, merely through changes of tone, the conversation had taken a disquieting turn. Karen told herself that she was becoming ridiculously sensitive to his inflections, and distorting them quite out of perspective. Or perhaps the fault lay deep in her consciousness. After all, he looked no different, except for a slight thinning of his mouth. But there was something. She could feel it stinging in the atmosphere. "Shall we see you at the weekend?" she asked.
"I have to go to Nairobi. In case I'm not back for a week or two, will you ask Justin to go ahead with harvesting the ground-nuts? Tell him arrange the transport."
"All right."
"Goodbye, then."
"Goodbye." A week or two. Her heart quailed ...
ELIZABETH came home bursting with vigour. In ten days, she and Justin had done everything one could in Nairobi and now she was
eager to slip back into harness and chat, between jobs, of the dresses and shoes she might have acquired with limitless means. On the whole, though, she was satisfied with her purchases.
"It's your turn now," she told Karen. "I don't think any of the parents would mind if you shut up school for a week, so that you and Nova could go together. We're not bound by rules, and most of us would prefer the

children to have a week's holiday frequently, rather than an endles vacation once in three months."
Nova thought otherwise. "In the matter of holidays, I intend to follow the government schools. Set terms, with exams, stimulate competitioi between the children, which is important." She added that, in Karen' absence, she had begun a system whereby she could deal with all twenty odd children herself, so Karen was free to go off for a holiday whenever she liked.
"An efficient young woman, our Nova," commented Elizabeth later, "but a trifle soulless. It's hardly fair of her to take the school so entirely out of your hands."
"It was an interest," Karen admitted, "but I don't mind giving it up. I haven't been trained as Nova has. And I really would like to go to Nairobi fairly soon. It's Mother's wedding anniversary in six weeks, and I may have to buy something too hefty for air mail."
"I'd forgotten that. If we can't get you there any other way, Justin will put you on the train at Guaba."
But a couple of days later, Colonel Williamson solved the difficulty. He had to see his lawyer in town next Tuesday, and intended travelling up on Monday. He would be delighted to have Karen's company and to bring her back the following Sunday.
It was not until she was packing a suitcase that Karen realised how badly she needed another break. Farm life in Kenya, she reflected, was a series of interminable stretches on the shamba; day following day with scarcely the suggestion of a Sunday in between, except on the rare occasions when someone offered a lift to the mission church in Guaba. Naturally, the monotony accentuated out of all proportion the small excitements of entertaining or being entertained.

For the married women, occupied with household and other duties by day, and resting with a book or mending basket in the evening, existence was more than tolerable; most of them were part owners of a portion of Kenya soil, and had growing children besides to compensate for what, even in this climate of light and colour, must sometimes seem a dull life.
Karen was afforded no such comfort and now, apparently, not even the school needed her assistance. Sometime soon, she would have to think up a means of earning her living. Certainly she could not go on staying with Elizabeth as other than a paying guest, and her bankbook was beginning to look sick and sorry. What sort of work was open to a girl in Kenya? Apart from teaching, almost nothing.
KAREN'S depressed silences soon made their imprint on Elizabeth. 'S seedy, pet?" she inquired. "No. Why?"

"This mood isn't like you. Sure there's nothing on your mind?" "What could there be?" Her cousin smiled affectionately. "You need more thrills. You're only young once, you know, and staying here on the farm with Justin and me you're missing your chances. I was certain when we asked you to come out that you'd be at least engaged within six months. Is there really nothing doing with Roy?"
"We've never been more than friends. As for other men—well, I'm not fluffy or siren enough to attract them."
"Don't be a goose. Men play up to the fluffies but the more sensible ones don't marry them. Look at me, for example! You're too reserved, Karen. You're prettier than half the women here and why you don't pick on someone and go all out for him I can't imagine. Men take a girl at her own valuation and it's up to you to set the price high."
Karen shook her head. "You don't really mean that. You know as well as—better than—I do, that love is something which grows between two people without forcing."
From Keith and Nova, Elizabeth had gathered that Mark had been attentive during her holiday. Perhaps it was unwise to let her cousin go to Nairobi while he was there but, on the other hand, Karen's family hotel was discreetly removed from the club and Nyeri racecourse, where people of Mark's means congregated.
Karen left the coffee farm with Charles Williamson in a dispirited frame of mind. For some hidden reason, she shrank from meeting new people and taking up with former acquaintances, and her desire to see Mark was tarnished by the certainty that where he was, so would Inga be.
"Are you comfortable, Karen?" Charles asked solicitously.
"Very. This is the first time I've travelled over the new road."
"So far it only reaches Guaba. One of Mark's reasons for visiting Nairobi just now is to get permission for an extension to where this road joins the Nairobi-Kisumu road. It would be smooth-going the whole way then and the journey would take half the time. He's a great engineer. It will be bad luck if he goes south."
"Isn't he sure yet? Indecision doesn't sound like Mark."
"One never knows but he still hasn't closed with the South African company. I believe he has private business to settle first."
Charles was not a man one could accuse of envy, yet what other explanation was there for the bitterness in his expression as he summarily sought a different subject?
At three that afternoon, he left Karen at the small hotel in which she had stayed on her previous trip to Nairobi. "Tonight you will want to rest," he said, "and I shall be tied up most of tomorrow. I'll ring you on Wednesday. My hotel is the Ashley, if you should wish to get in touch with me."

She thanked him and saw him start off before following the boy who had taken her suitcase. Tea was brought up to her bedroom veranda and she did not come down till dinner was being served. She just couldn't afford sun-

downers on the terrace this time. A couple of residents whom she remembered nodded vaguely, as though uncertain where they had seen her before, but she was not sorry to have been given a small table to herself, overlooking the garden, dark now, and starred with fireflies.

DURING the following days, she shopped for her own needs and her mother's gift, which was a pair of typically Kenyan watercolours done by a well-known local artist. They were expensive but her mother would delight in having them appropriately framed and hung in her new house at Hampstead.

It was odd how, in a city where every possible diversion was available and shops displayed attractive goods, that week dragged for Karen. Twice she was invited for car trips with fellow residents and, one afternoon, someone offered a lift out to the Lawsons' place. Nova's mother listened proudly to the tale of her daughter's clever handling of twenty children ranging from four to nine and several older ones to whom she was giving special coaching.

On Thursday evening, Karen dined with Charles at the Ashley. Later they danced for half an hour in the adjoining salon and then Charles begged her to accompany him to Inga Sanderfield's. "As you know, Mark has lent her his house for a stay in Nairobi, so she does his entertaining for him. They have guests this evening, and I was invited. I told them you were in town and that we were dining together, and both Inga and Mark suggested that we go along for a drink and a chat."

"I'd rather not, thanks. It's been a lovely evening, Charles."

"Do come. I'll bring you back early."

"No, really. It's awfully kind of you."

Charles's persistence forced her to pretend the first dull throb of a headache.

"Oh well, I've no option," was his final remark. "But you must definitely spend Saturday evening with me at the club. You're much too sweet to be allowed to tuck yourself away!" With a flourish, half-gallant, half-serious, he raised her hand and pressed his lips to the fingertips.

Karen was beginning to loathe her pastel-pink dress. It was not old-fashioned and it cleaned beautifully, but there was no getting away from its demure outlines, which gave her small, clear features a primness she would rather be without.

In desperation, she bought some rose-coloured sequins, and most of Friday she spent fashioning them into a small garland of flowers which could be stitched to the waist of the dress. Nothing, she despondently told her reflection in the mirror could disguise the fact that it was her old dress doubtfully pepped up with sequins.

On Saturday evening, Charles called for her at seven-thirty, and drove straight to the club, where they took cocktails on the terrace. He was very well known, and several times Karen intercepted knowledgeable smiles. While he remained in Kenya, Charles Williamson would never quite live down his wild oats, but he was not disliked for them.

The table he had reserved was in an exposed central position and made even more obvious by the huge basket of deep red roses which stood at one corner. Karen and Charles sat at right angles to each other, and the Malay waiter brought champagne and hors-d'oeuvre. As the meal progressed, Charles was charming and attractive. Once, between courses, while describing an amusing incident at the races that afternoon, he laid his hand lightly on her wrist and kept it there for a few seconds.

The waiter was serving poulet aux asperges. Over Karen's shoulder Charles smiled and inclined his head. She turned, and mechanically turned back again, her appetite gone.

CHAPTER VII

A MOMENT or two elapsed before she inquired, "Have Mark and Mrs. Sanderfield been there long?"
"They were here before us but I hadn't caught their eye. The chicken is good, isn't it? Don't you care for the wine?"
"Yes—yes, of course." It might as well have been water.
Charles had beckoned for his bill when Mark and Inga paused on their way out. "You notice the roses, Mark," she slurred huskily. "Red, very red, like the heart's blood. In Sweden they have a meaning. And in Kenya, too?"
His tone was negative. "In Kenya, my dearest Inga, red roses mean that someone has taken the deuce of a lot of trouble to grow them. Are you coming yet, Charles?"
"Yes. If you're ready, Karen?"
The natural movement was towards the terrace. Out there, the peeling bark of eucalyptus trees scented the night air. Banana leaves soughed gently together, and the pale glow of the stars silhouetted the grotesque branched palms down near the roadway. Karen shivered, not altogether from cold, Inga came beside her at the low wall, and the men split up, Charles at Inga's side and Mark at Karen's.
"You have cool, fragrant nights here, Mark," Inga said. "Nights that should not be neglected. Charles agrees, do you not, Charles?"
"One has to like the nights here—there's so much of 'em," he observed. As always with Inga, his manner was direct. "I didn't know you two were coming tonight or we might all have dined together."
"Tomorrow," she said, dangerously calm, "you are going back to Guaba. Not once this week did you dine or lunch with me. We are not enemies, Charles?"
"What a question Inga! One never quarrels with a beautiful woman. I'm sure you and Mark have been too engrossed with his associates from Johannesburg to notice my absence."

"And you with Miss Ainsley from the coffee farm?" she rejoined, not altogether playfully.
"Exactly," Charles admitted suavely. "Will you excuse us while we dance?"
Karen felt Mark take a firm but impersonal grip of her arm. "Sorry, Charles," he said curtly. "Our young friend has just consented to dance with me."
As he led her into the brilliantly lit ballroom and slipped an arm about her, Karen felt the blood singing up into her throat and flooding her cheeks with a flush that seemed merged with the lovely web of pain that swathed her heart.
LIKE most tall, lean men, Mark danced easily, managing Karen on the crowded floor as though she were so much thistledown. Once, when an
energetic couple circled close to them, his arm tautened across her back to shield her from threatened impact, but the instant the risk was past he slackened and she felt his chin jerk up, away from contact with her hair. "Seeing rather a lot of Charles, aren't you?" he murmured.
"I'm alone here. I appreciate his kindness very much."

"Even to holding his hand in a public dining-room?"
"That's unfair," she said unevenly. "The gesture was Charles's and probably he doesn't even remember he did it."
"You're too modest," he said. "Charles admires you and why not? You're pretty enough to deserve a second glance from any man. But Charles isn't quite your type. His years and experience make him a dangerous playmate."
That seemed to be that. She wasn't going to quarrel with Mark over Charles Williamson.
"Why didn't you tell me last week that you were coming to town?" he next inquired.
"It was Elizabeth's idea. Life had gone rather flat and Charles offered the lift, so I accepted."
They danced for a minute. "And what is your excuse," he went on steadily, "for refusing to come to Carlyon Drive for a drink the other evening?"
" I took it to be the sort of invitation that calls for conventional refusal." "I don't believe it," he bit out.
His grip on her fingers was painful. As the music crescendoed for the end of the dance, she felt an anger in him; no, not so much anger as throttled violence, from some inscrutable cause.
In silence, he led her to the lounge, where Charles and Inga were seated. "Hallo," said Charles politely. "We thought we'd lost you."
"You both have the look disagreeable." Inga offered Mark her hand; the sultry glance darkened. "Dance with me, darling, and I will soon have you happy again."

As they glided away together, Karen looked at Charles. "Is anything wrong?" he asked.
"No, but I'd like to go back to the hotel. There's no need for you to come though. I'd hate to spoil your evening."
"I'll take you. I can come back later if I feel inclined."
In the hired car, he was quiet and he said good night in the small foyer. "We'll start back to Guaba early tomorrow. I always enjoy Nairobi but it's a good place to leave."
He might have added, 'Especially when you are broke and the woman you love treats you like a tramp.'
HAVING decided to walk back to his hotel, Charles dismissed the car and set out along the wide, tree-lined avenue in the aromatic darkness.
Well, it was over. Inga's reply had been an unequivocal "No". Not that he had expected anything else, or would have dared pose the question but for the ineffable sweetness of those weeks together in Stockholm a year ago. What had she said?
"They will always be my dearest memory, Charles. For us, the world stood still. Let us leave it like that."
She could be as beautiful and cold as the snows amid which she was born; she could also yield, like the snows in Spring.
He had first met Inga the day she had married George Sanderfield in Mombasa. Mark was in Burma at the time and George and he had had to rejoin their regiment three days after the wedding. Up in the desert, George had read out bits of her letters and Charles had wished he wouldn't; he didn't want to be reminded of Inga. Yet when George was invalided home with a stiff knee, life became blank and pointless and Charles longed for the end of the war when he would return to Kenya.
It was about six months before George had died, that Inga confessed to having married him for his money. Charles was not shocked; he had always moved with a fast crowd to whom money spelled almost everything. Rather, he saw Inga as a lovely

impoverished woman driven by Fate into marriage with a stolid, unimaginative game-hunter. He was actually in Cape Town when Mark brought the news of George's death. Charles could still feel a slight stab of shock when he recalled his next meeting with Mark and learned that Inga had returned to Sweden. By that time he was practically down to living on his Army pension, and he had actually been forced to sell his final block of shares to finance the trip to Stockholm. But it had been worth it. Lack of funds had driven him back to Kenya—lack of funds and Inga's promise that she would join him within a few months.

So he had taken on the house above Guaba and put out innumerable feelers for a job. And, somehow, by remaining clear of expensive Nairobi, he had managed to cling to his self-respect. He hadn't bargained for Inga's complete switch-over to Mark. But what more natural? Released by a year's deference to the dead, Mark now considered himself free to approach

George's widow. It was possible that he, too, had been earlier captured by Inga's blonde beauty, but had suppressed his feelings in the belief that one doesn't trespass on the territory of one's best friend. Despite his cynicism, Mark was the sort who would push his code of honour to the extreme. It was also true that, if he loved Inga, he would move heaven and earth to have her. Well, he wouldn't have to move heaven and earth. Inga was his.

"You see, my darling," she had said in that maddening, husky voice, "George's income died with him. The family send to me a small allowance. If I marry again, that, too, will come to an end."

"So once again you're out to snaffle money!"

"Not fair Charles. I am very fond of Mark."

"Why shouldn't you be?" he'd muttered wretchedly. "He's young and good-looking . . ."

"Hush." She had softened, miraculously. "To me you are the more handsome. If you could provide for me in the way I have grown used to, I would marry you. But I cannot face poverty, Charles. I will tell you something. When I begged Mark that he would let me share the groundnut farm, I did it for you and me. I had heard reports of extravagant profits in ground-nuts." She gave a hopeless throaty laugh. "The profit is there but it is small this first year, and not so big the second. I tried."

"Yes . . . you tried."

"We shall stay friends?"

"No. The day your engagement to Mark is made public I shall leave the country."

She was shaken. So much so that, when he took her into his arms, she had made no protest, had even clung, and he knew that at last she realised that the other women who had passed through his life were wraiths compared with herself.

ARRIVED back at the farm, Karen found Elizabeth immersed in a new project—poultry-keeping. This was part of the expansion upon which

Justin had figured during the years of struggle. They had always kept a few hens in a lean-to attached to the dairy but now the idea was to erect cedar henhouses, a separate incubating-shed and a mush-shed for storing and mixing the grain and potatoes and meal. The site chosen was the pasture at the end of the garden.

As soon as arrangements were complete, a crate containing fifty threemonths-old chicks and another of young turkeys were opened into the wire-netting enclosures. Two hundred eggs were set in the trays of the incubator and an oil-stove kept burning there. Karen suddenly found herself overworked. In striped gingham and a white apron, she mixed the buckets of feed and filled the wooden troughs in the runs. The

chicks had to be watered and their health watched; the eggs in the incubator must be turned and the oil-stove refilled daily. At this time, it was difficult to

borrow Justin's boys. Most of them were out in the fields, burning and turning-in the stubble ready for the next crops of maize and lucerne, and others were finishing off the harvest of ground-nuts from Mark's acreage.
In about a fortnight, Justin would start coffee picking, and he was beginning to look anxiously at the drying-shed, and to wonder whether rats had got at the jute bags, and if it wouldn't be better to alter the arrangement of grading bins. The whole farm vibrated with the climax of the coffee season, and the several sidelines which had to be kept going.
With childhood's bland disregard of time and convenience, Keith went down with a severe rash. Unwisely, but lavishly, he had fed upon the unripe bananas which clustered among the rich green leaves of the huge plants at the end of the orchard, with the result that practically the whole of his body was covered with red welts and he was laid out by colic. Distracted by symptoms to which at first she could attribute no cause, Elizabeth neglected dairy, chickens and housekeeping. Mrs. Harding, who had once been a children's nurse in Uganda, questioned Keith, diagnosed banana-rash and prescribed a herbal remedy. His illness lasted a full week.
By the time Elizabeth was free of the sick-room, coffee picking had begun and there were the pickers and casual labourers to provide with rations and the ox-teams and drivers to be fed. At sundown, all outdoor work had to cease and Elizabeth, Justin and Karen slumped exhausted into their chairs, ate dinner and went to bed, often before nine, for they had to be up for six o'clock breakfast.
Thus it was a full month after the week in Nairobi that Karen made her first visit to the club at Guaba. Justin had insisted. "We'll all go," he said. "There's that new evening get-up of Elizabeth's beginning to attract moths and all three of us hating the smell of drying coffee, chickens, and cheese. We need a change."
"One of us must stay because of Keith," stated Elizabeth.
"That's taken care of. Mark Howard's servant, Hanim, will come on guard for the evening."
"You can't ask Mark a favour of that sort."
"It's done, my sweet. I put it to Mark yesterday and he agreed to it right away. Keith adores Hanim."
A short pause, after which Elizabeth voiced the question that trembled at the tip of Karen's tongue. "How did you see Mark yesterday? We didn't."
"He's taken to riding the other side of the river and entering the plantation from the back. I thought I told you."
"I don't remember. Why does he do that?"
"He reckons it's shorter."
"He wouldn't be trying to avoid your womenfolk, by any chance?" she inquired sarcastically.
"Why should he? He always asks after you, but mostly he's in a hurry. That technical chap he was expecting is here, staying at Colonel
William-son's, and Mrs. Sanderfield comes down every weekend. Mark is teaching her to ride."

"I suppose that means she's not returning to Sweden," said Elizabeth tartly. "Has Mark told you how much longer his bridge will take?" "About three weeks, to clear up."
For a sickening instant, Karen's heart seemed to cease its beating.

"After that," said her cousin equably, "he'll go wild in Nairobi for a spell and then take a contract elsewhere—unless he really does decide to go down to Johannesburg. What about his farm?"
Justin poked speculatively at his pipe. "He mentioned that yesterday. Apparently he and the Swedish woman have to confer about it. In any case, he'll want me to go on managing the place."
"Oh, he will!" Elizabeth was exasperated. "His is three times the acreage of ours. Why didn't you tell him that we have enough to do?"
"Because, my dear woman," drawled Justin, twinkling, "his terms are much too generous. On the salary he's offering I can even afford an assistant and come out well on the bright side. There are plenty of young settlers begging for work on farms simply for the experience before they invest in land of their own. Mark's giving me a free hand—ground-nuts alternating with mixed crops—pyrethrum, flax, maize, and so on. He talks of banana-groves and sisal later on."
Slightly mollified, Elizabeth pondered a while before remarking grudgingly, "We're awfully lucky, really, to be Mark's nearest neighbours. This extra money will mean a first-class education for Keith as soon as he's old enough to leave us, and less scraping than we've been used to."
"While Mark's here we'll borrow Hanim and have several nights out," Justin said carelessly. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it six months ago."
DURING recent weeks Karen had scarcely seen Nova Lawson so, the afternoon following Justin's decision to take them to the Guaba club, she saddled Bambu and rode down to the Winchesters', hoping to arrive just as Nova came home from school. Evelyn, who never worked like other settlers' wives, lolled over a pile of magazines in the lounge. "Oh, hallo," she said lazily. "I can't remember the last time I saw you. Have some tea?"
After the usual questions about young Mollie and the farm, Karen inquired for Nova. Offhandedly, Evelyn lifted her shoulders. "She's had a camp-bed put in the living-room at the school, and mostly sleeps there. Can't say that I'm sorry. That young woman is too oppressively business. like, though recently she seems to have slackened off. She's made herself a semi-evening frock, not a bad effort, either. Plenty good enough for the Guaba club."
"Does she go there often?"
"About once a week—on Saturdays. Roy Strasmore squires her, though I believe that's only because there aren't any other girls about. But it's had a remarkable effect on Nova's appearance." Karen's original inten-

tion—to invite Nova to accompany them to Guaba next Saturday—was set aside. Let Roy go on taking her to the club.
She talked for a while to Evelyn, laughingly declined a half-serious invitation to join an expedition to the snowline on Kenya, and eventually got back to the little native pony and trotted home between the wild figs and flowering creepers.
"Roy doesn't bother us much," she remarked to Elizabeth that evening.
"He came up while you were in town. He's finished with the glamorous Glenys and bought a new car on the strength of that and an increase in salary. He was very fluffed with himself and said I must be sure to tell you but, what with banana-rash, chickens, and the rest, I forgot." After a short silence she added, "The two of them seem to have shut you out of the school entirely, for which I'm jolly thankful. I really don't know how we'd manage without you, now."

That was Elizabeth's way of phrasing her disapproval of Nova. But Karen couldn't blame the other girl. Both she and Roy were salaried and keen on their profession and she herself, a voluntary helper, could have no permanent place in their schemes. The farm chores were a little more to her taste. Yet when she thought back over the school's inception she felt a brief pang, and guiltily wished herself back in the early days, when she and Keith enjoyed lessons on the veranda and spent afternoons wandering down to the river or to the Snake Hole. And when Mark was half exciting dream and half beloved reality.

They drove in to Guaba early on Saturday. There was plenty of time for a short stroll along the main street, two parallel lines of stores, a post office, and a small Government building. Half a dozen avenues of houses encircled the shopping centre and to avoid dirt and noise the railway junction- was a mile away from the town. Guaba was the typical up-country township set amid plains where game roved in herds and farms were widely spaced. It would grow, as all such places grow, and, in a very short while, the blue-gums planted along the roads would provide much needed shade. Just now, in the darkness, with only a few lights burning and a nip in the air, the township had an arid, starved appearance.

Inside the club, however, the atmosphere was distinctly warm and friendly. The dinner, simple but excellently cooked and served, provided such a change from shamba food that the dining-room was crammed most of the evening. There was a billiards room, table tennis, whist and bridge, and in a long, newly erected annexe one could dance to amplified gramophone music.

Karen joined in an impromptu table-tennis tournament, and after an inglorious defeat accepted her partner's invitation 'to dance. "We may do better at that," the young man said humorously. "We can't do worse." So they danced and he fetched her a drink, and then they danced again. Karen saw Elizabeth stepping round with Justin and other men, laughing-

eyed, her cheeks aglow. She looked so young and sparkling that Karen was reminded of the girl she had hero-worshipped as a child,

The ballroom, thick with smoke and incredibly hot, filled to capacity. Karen slipped outside. In the garden she discovered a pool ringed by tree-ferns about whose roots grew balsams and blue lilies. A lovely, awesome spot cupped within outcrops of granite rock. Strange to think that it must have been here long before Guaba was thought about, an unknown patch of natural beauty now incorporated into the club grounds.

She heard a sound and turned; Roy's laugh was familiar. But she did not see him at once. Then, near a young cedar a little way off, she glimpsed two figures, Roy's and a woman's. His laugh sounded again but its quality had changed, gained intimacy. Before Karen could move it happened. An embrace that wrenched at the core of her being. She fled over the grass and up to the terrace. Halted for breath, she could not resist looking back the way she had come. The couple were drifting towards the club, arms closely linked. The woman was Nova. Nova, in sapphire georgette and her black hair flowing. Karen backed into the shadows. So already they had reached that stage. 'The magic of Africa,' she thought bitterly, 'that bewitches everyone except me.' The next moment, she reproached herself. This was just what she had hoped for Nova.

ELIZABETH and Karen were packing the surplus fruit for dispatch to a cannery in Nairobi. "This has been our luckiest year yet," said

Elizabeth, slipping a sheet of tissue over the bottom of a shallow box. "Last year we hadn't any fruit to speak of, and the year before the apricots and the peaches had worm. Isn't it nice to think of all this stuff going to England?"
"It certainly is."
Jimmy came out to the shed with the news that bwana Strasmore had arrived. "Go in and talk to Roy, pet," said Elizabeth. "Give him a cup of tea and send me a tray."
Roy, spread in a lounge chair near the open french window of the living-room, gave her a preoccupied smile.
"Don't get up—you look so relaxed."
"I wish I felt that way," he said, as she sank into the centre of the chesterfield.
"We were fruit packing—Elizabeth's finishing off. It isn't often we see you in the middle of the week, Roy."
"Or at all," he said. "You must think me a bit of a blighter, Karen, for not coming since you've been back from Nairobi, but the time has just slid by."
"I understand."
"You always do," with a grateful grin. "That's why I'm here today—to unload into your receptive ear."

"Not about the school, surely?"
"No," he answered emphatically. "Our Miss Lawson is only too competent at running the school. It's a private problem. You know," the grin was embarrassed now, "a matter of Cupid's dart."
She nodded sympathetically. "Nova?"
"Yes, Nova. Has she told you about that fellow in Cape Town?"
"I gathered that she lost her head over someone and was completely disillusioned. But if you're in love with her—"
"She's off marriage."
"Your persistence will win her over."
"It's funny about Nova," he said. "When I boarded with the Lawsons, I used often to look at her photograph and think that one day she'd be some man's handful. But most of the fire has been quenched. All she wants is to vegetate and teach children, which suits me, too, though I'd rather a couple of the infants were my own."
"Naturally, you would. It'll come, Roy. Give her time."
Presently, Elizabeth came in and Karen set aside her cup and plate. "It's been a lovely break," she said, "but the chicks will be cheeping their heads off for their supper."
Roy would have gone with her but Elizabeth detained him. "Do me a favour, will you? Drop in at the Winchesters' on your way home and tell John my fruit is ready to go with his tomorrow morning. I'll send it down before dark. And Roy," her tone lowered though by now Karen had left the house, "we're giving a little birthday party for Karen on Friday week. Dinner at seven and a dance and sing-song. Will you bring Nova, and ask that young colleague of yours to come as well? There'll be the Hardings and the Winchesters and one or two others—about sixteen altogether."
"Thanks. I'm glad you didn't leave me out, much as I deserve it."
ALMOST every day a lorry load of cement or equipment passed the farm on its way from Grassy to the storehouses in Nairobi. Keith,
who had ridden down last Sunday, said that 'Old Bill', the huge armchair, had disappeared from Mark's house. The rest of the furniture he proposed to leave for the use of himself and anyone else needing a lodge for safaris. Hanim brought to the farm a large case full of books and gramophone records. From him Karen learned that his master was now in Nairobi. Shortly, when the whole bridge was cleared and the

construction camp demolished, he would come back for a final inspection and, after that .. . Hanim lifted expressive shoulders and smiled with his usual composure.
On Saturday morning, a note came from Colonel Williamson, inviting Karen to lunch and tennis. Her first impulse was to refuse; she felt so entirely out of key with Charles and his world. But Elizabeth coaxed her into changing her mind.
"I'm very pleased you could manage to come," Charles greeted her.

"We've met so seldom lately. I've called in at the Guaba club a few times but apparently missed you. Shall we lunch in the garden?"
The thick shade of the Cape chestnut was pleasant, the meal light and well served and, if Charles's humour held a note of constraint, he was still suave and charming. They walked in the cedar forest behind the house, crossed a rivulet by stepping-stones, and climbed a wooded slope where the puff-ball blossom of the gums splashed scarlet between the sere gold of fading mimosa. On a felled camphor-tree they rested. About their feet seeped mauve and pink balsams and delicate ferns, with here and there a cascade of maidenhair veiling a patch of wild orchids. "This is a breathtaking country," she said. "I shall never forget it."
"It has almost everything in its favour," he agreed, "but chiefly for the young. I must be getting old, I think. The everlasting sunshine and profuse growth are beginning to tease my nerves. Except for leaving my friends, I shan't be sorry to turn my back on Kenya."
"When Will that be?"
"Within the next couple of months, but I've promised to give up this house in two weeks' time."
"So soon? I'm sorry."
He smiled at her. "I hope it's true—that you're sorry. You're very sweet, Karen, and you've helped me more than you realise."
She laughed, a little ruefully. "That seems to be my vocation. It's going to be lonely in these parts, with you gone—and the bridge finished." She hesitated before asking, "Has Mark decided about Johannesburg yet?"
"I believe cables are passing backwards and forwards. It's a tempting proposition that he can't ignore. And there's Inga, of course." Frightening, the way he said it, coupling Inga and the business proposition.
"Is Mrs. Sanderfield still living in Mark's house?"
"No, she's with friends now, and Mark is established in the house but the arrangement isn't likely to last long." His voice dropped a tone. "Isn't it odd how some men have everything? Not that one grudges Mark the reward of his own toil, but—" He broke off. "Pay no attention to my grousing. Perhaps I'm feeling sore at leaving Kenya. Shall we go back and try out the tennis court?"
CHARLES did not again refer to leaving the country till he was driving ES home soon after tea. "I shall be busy packing and disposing of
surplus goods for the next two weeks," he said, "but I'll make time to slip over and say goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Paterson. I'm counting on meeting you in Nairobi before I saiL"
"I can't promise to come."
"But you must, my dear. You must be among the guests at my farewell dinner."
Because, at the moment, two months was a very long time, Karen demurred no further. She thanked him for the afternoon's pleasure and waved him off.

On the whole, she thought, as she made her way up the path, the hours with Charles had proved disheartening. Before she had changed her tennis frock, Nova Lawson's voice was audible in the living-room and, when Karen came in, Nova smiled at her—a rather awkward, defiant smile, which revealed quite as much as it was intended to hide.

She talked to Elizabeth and Justin and even deigned to notice Keith who, as a pupil, was expected to retire to a quiet corner with a book. When she got up to go, Karen rose. "I'll come to the gate with you, Nova. In fact, I'll drive you home, if you like."

"Thanks, but I cycled. Do come a little way, though."

Nova walked, one hand guiding the bicycle and the other in the pocket of her dress, and Karen strolled at her side, keenly aware of the homing birds, the first venturesome bats and the trees against the warm, living African sky.

"Roy told me he'd spoken to you about . . . himself and me," Nova said into the silence. "I don't have to warn you not to take him seriously."

Karen ignored the hardness of the other's tone. Purposely, she answered lightly, "I think he'll make you a splendid husband. You have similar interests and experiences, and a great deal to give each other. You do care for him, don't you?"

"I'm not going to marry him," Nova said abruptly. "When I first came here, I vowed to have nothing at all to do with men. You altered that by inviting me to the farm and for picnics. For some reason, you and Roy didn't ring the bell together so he picked on me, the only other unmarried girl in the district." She shrugged. "That was no obstacle to friendship but marriage isn't based on that sort of foundation. Besides, I've no intention of marrying for years yet, if at all."

"Perhaps not," Karen conceded reasonably, "and anyway it wouldn't be fair to take on Roy while you're still bitter over the other affair. Roy deserves better than that."

Nova was annoyed. "You're on his side, of course. He needs a wife and you're going to help him to get one. I suppose you're disgusted at the change in my ideas . . . no handcuffs!"

"Nova," Karen smiled into the closed face, "confess that you're piqued. In your own mind you're convinced that Roy proposed to you on the rebound from another woman but it isn't true. He hasn't seen Glenys for nearly two years."

"He remained engaged to her!"

"He was bound to a glamorous figure, not to a woman of flesh and blood. Remember this—Roy liked you when you dressed like a frump and treated him as a child. How, many men would stand for that? Why, even before he knew you, he was attracted by your photograph in your mother's lounge."

Nova slowed, almost stopped. Deep colour dyed her cheeks. "He .. . told you that?"

Karen nodded, and followed up the advantage. "Glenys has been a

pasteboard myth with Roy for a very long time. Can you say the same about the man you once loved?"

Nova responded rather heavily. "I don't know. That business in Cape Town was short but hectic. It finished with such a bump that my girlhood seemed to give out at the same time. Roy's brand of lunacy was putting me right. Then suddenly one night he kissed me, and everything changed. You wouldn't understand, Karen, but when a man you're fond of kisses you for the first time, you see just how close you've grown to him, you see the promise of Heaven, and it's terrifying . . . and beautiful."

Karen's hands were clenched tight, her jaws stiff, but she managed a rejoinder. "I'm sure in time you two will be happy together, Nova."

At the crossroads, they said good night and Karen turned back. It was difficult not to reflect a little bitterly upon the injustice of a Fate that distributed favours so unevenly. If she could only see Mark sometimes, hear the familiar tones of his voice .. .
MID-WEEK, a large parcel arrived by messenger from Charles Williamson. It contained the bronze nymph offering a black bowl, which Karen had admired in his lounge, and was accompanied by a card which read:
"A token of friendship, not of farewell."
By great good luck or sound judgment, her mother's birthday gift, a fine row of graded pearls with a diamond clasp, arrived by air-mail on Thursday afternoon. On Friday, her birthday morning, Elizabeth presented a box of lingerie and Keith a work-box upon which he had obviously spent much care and thought. Karen knew better than to thank him more profusely than she thanked Elizabeth, but she was aware that his eyes shone with pride when she gave his contribution the place of honour on the small table which held the bronze nymph.
In the afternoon, he rode to Grassa while his mother and Karen prepared as much as possible of the dinner. News had reached the farm via Jimmy that Mark had come back overnight, and Keith was loath to lose a single chance of visiting the bridge during his last days there.
With Keith out of the way, his mother and Karen prepared butter-curls and whipped cream, and decorated the trifles, which were returned with speed to a dim, tiled shelf in the pantry. Keith returned and dragged a crumpled envelope from his trouser pocket. Elizabeth opened it and smoothed the sheet. After a minute, she glanced at Karen. Her smile had gone; anxiety came into the dark eyes. "What a nuisance," she said quietly. "Mark Howard is back for four days. He says his larder is depleted and asks if it is convenient to come to dinner each evening, starting tonight."
A full minute elapsed before Karen replied jerkily, "That means an extra place this evening. Oughtn't we to warn him we're entertaining?"
"I told him," Keith chimed in cheerfully. "He said twenty-two is a wonderful age."
Elizabeth crumpled up the note and flipped it into the waste-bin. "Run

along and wash," she told him "There's an iced cake for tea."
There was no discussion, not even an exchange of conjectures. Mark's generosity to Elizabeth and Justin could not be rewarded by the refusal of a few meals. Karen's nerves were humming like taut wires. Everything but the fact that she would soon see Mark again, slid away in a nebulous background. Four evenings with Mark. Dreamily, she watched Keith dispatch his three slices of cake. Later she changed into cream linen, over which she tied an apron before relieving Elizabeth in the kitchen.
Hot and dishevelled, Elizabeth spared a moment to turn in the doorway and offer a compliment. "I'm glad you chose to wear that frock. It goes so well with your tan. Makes you look healthy and natural. Don't go near the oven in it, though; the veal's spitting like a dozen cats."
"You haven't left much for me to do."
"Perhaps it's as well," with a comical quirk of the lips. "You're not seeing much lower than the stars tonight. I do hope everything's going to be lovely for you."
"You're a darling," said Karen impulsively. "Take plenty of time over your bath and leave the rest to me. I'll get Keith to bed so that you can slip in and say good night when you're dressed."
AT a quarter to seven, Roy and Nova drove up with the Winchesters. Then came the Hardings and Roy's friend, and another young couple

newly settled in the district. When Mark entered unconventionally by the french window, Karen and Roy were busy pouring cocktails. A full glass was lifted from Karen's fingers.
"Thanks," Mark drawled mockingly. "That's what I call service. Here's to you, Kitten. May you have a year of surprises—pleasant ones."
Her heart performed its familiar plunge, her lips quivered faintly, while her gaze moved swiftly over his face and the thick chestnut hair. It was the first time he'd called her Kitten since .. .
"Are these your gifts?" He indicated the small filled table. "I see Charles has spread himself. So you'd told him it was your birthday?" Carelessly, he placed a square packet among the rest. "I got that for you some months ago and have hung on to it ever since. No, don't look at it now. Pour me another drink and tell me how you propose to spend the twenty-third year of your life." His tone and expression, while gentle and indulgent, held an indefinable quality that set her tingling more than ever.
Elizabeth announced dinner and Justin served wine. Later, he proposed a toast, to which Karen smiled acknowledgment.
In spite of the chill air, after dinner Mark and Justin withdrew to the veranda, just outside the door. Karen could see them, Justin seated in a grass chair and Mark perched on the wall nearby, deep in some discussion. Once Mark looked back into the room, his gaze roving till it rested on Karen, where it paused, before he went on talking.

When it could be managed unobtrusively, she picked up his gift and slipped into her bedroom. Within the cardboard carton lay a small box of beaten yellow metal, the inside faintly burnished and the outside crusted with semi-precious stones. Closer inspection showed that the metal was gold, fashioned with primitive tools by a native, an exquisite piece of craftsmanship.
Mark said that he had bought it for her some months ago. Why hadn't he given it to her then? Through a natural reluctance to bestow an expensive gift upon a casual friend? Then, why had he bought it for her in the first place? Quenching an idiotic impulse to touch her lips to the metal, Karen thrust it into a drawer and returned to dance with the others.
Mark had come in, but apparently he considered the space too confined for activity, for he lounged in an armchair. Elizabeth went over and spoke to him. He rose from his chair and tried to insist on her taking it but she shook her head.
Mark sank down once more, pulled Elizabeth to sit on the arm of the chair and, for a few minutes they remained thus, chatting and laughing, the best of friends. 'Jealousy of one's own cousin,' thought Karen, 'is painful and humiliating.' What had happened that she could no longer approach him with similar ease and confidence?
Mark suffered little from such repressions for, after a while, he got up and wound his way across the room to where Karen sat, and bent over her. "Come outside," he whispered peremptorily. "I want to talk to you."
She obeyed. Had Mark commanded her to walk a tight-rope she couldn't have said no. But out in the cool, heady darkness, he seemed in no hurry to break the rustling silence. In fact, it was Karen, treading lightly half a pace ahead of him along the path, who spoke first. "I love the little gold box, Mark. It is native work, isn't it?"
He nodded, "When I first acquired it, I felt sure you'd like it. Afterwards, I doubted." With one of his abrupt changes, he added, "You weren't going to ask me to come this evening, were you?"
"You were in Nairobi. Naturally we counted you out."

"But you knew quite early today that I had returned."
"I—we thought you might not care to come."
"You might have given me the chance to refuse. After all, we've been close neighbours and friends for some time now."
"Not recently," she returned with spirit. "In fact you've avoided the house whenever you could."
"I'm sorry if I've seemed offhand," he told her bluntly, "but this last month there's been plenty on my mind. I've had to make a decision which will affect my whole future."
"You've made it?" Involuntarily Karen had stopped and was gazing up at his face in the darkness.
"Practically," he said crisply. "Interested?"
She was seized by a panic of foreboding. She couldn't bear ill news—not

tonight. Mark wouldn't know how she both dreaded and longed to hear his news. She managed a shrug. "I hope you'll tell me—some time."
As she moved he gripped her arm, tight. "Don't run away," he said sharply.
"I wasn't going to. The air's rather cold."
"We'll sit in my car for ten minutes."
So she sat with him, entranced and motionless, waiting for whatever else he had to say, and vaguely aware of a discord within him that reached out, ready to hurt. This was like the moment of silence before the breaking of a storm.
" half an hour ago," he said, "Elizabeth told me that you're thinking of returning to England."
His expression was dark, unreadable. Quickly, her glance turned away towards the black silhouettes of the trees. "It had to come," she answered. "I'm no longer needed here."
"So you are deserting?" he remarked softly, tauntingly.
"I can't stay on indefinitely with Elizabeth."
"She's not happy about your leaving. I rather gathered," he said deliberately, "that there was some suggestion of girlish heartbreak."
"Did Elizabeth say that?"
"I gathered it," he emphasised, "and not entirely from Elizabeth." Karen's utter stillness convicted her.
"Bad luck," he said grimly sarcastic, "and an open confession of poor taste on the part of the young man, if I may say so."
The young man? her brain echoed stupidly. He thought—what did he think? "There's a misunderstanding," she said, low-voiced. "I can't explain, but there is."
"Are you in distress of some sort?" he demanded swiftly. "Do you need help?"
A resentful, bitter emotion shook Karen. He could suppress the cynicism in a flash if he imagined her in financial straits. "I wouldn't come to you if I did," she was stung to retort.
That provoked him; it might even have stabbed, the way his hand closed over the wheel. "We haven't much in common any longer, have we?" he observed coolly. "Perhaps it's of little importance if our ways are to diverge very soon. I apologise if my coming here has spoiled your birthday; it was quite unintentional."
The trembling in Karen was like the pounding of the sea. His closeness was subtle torture. Presently she was able to say, "They will be wondering where I am. I must go in now."
Before her fingers could grasp the handle, he was on the drive and slipping the door open for her. Her vision blurred. She stumbled, was caught by the shoulders in a vice

that bruised. For an unending moment, his eyes, narrow and glittering, moved over her face, studying her. Then his arms dropped to his side. "Tears," he said harshly. "He isn't worth it."

Blindly, she turned and ran up the path to the house. In the lighted room she felt Mark behind her, heard him say, "Elizabeth, I've been thinking. I can't spare the four days down here. I must get back to Nairobi and send someone else to straighten up at the bridge. You won't have to share any more meals with me."
"Aren't you going to take a break now that the job's completed?" "Not just yet. I'm winding up at Nairobi."
"Winding up?" Justin whistled. "Closing your office?"
"Yes, and selling the house." He gave a metallic laugh. "It does a man good to burn his boats once in a while and start afresh."
"Are you leaving Kenya?" demanded Elizabeth.
"Perhaps. You must keep the farm going for me. I may decide to build a house on it some time. If I can, I'll come down and see you again before I go. In any case, I'll write." Five minutes later, with no more than a nodded good night to Karen, he drove back to Grassa.

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT day, when she could reason more clearly, Karen told Elizabeth of her plan to leave Kenya almost at once. "You've been kind and I've
loved it, but obviously I can't go on living here with you."
"I know how it is," Elizabeth replied. "Regrets are futile but one can't help having them. You're quite sure you wouldn't like to try for a post in Nairobi?"
Karen shook her head. "There's nothing there for a girl like me. One day I'll come out and see you again, Elizabeth."
"Of course you must!"
Both knew it for a conventional promise.
Having reached a decision, Karen felt easier. The worst of being a woman was that when you loved, it seeped into every corner of your life. The only way to lessen her sort of pain was to cut herself off entirely from the source of it, which she intended doing with the utmost speed and the least possible ostentation.
On Monday evening, Roy and Nova came to the farm together. No need to question why: both were flushed and smiling. "We're going to be married," Roy said. "I'm driving into Nairobi tomorrow for the licence.;'
Amid congratulations, he left most of the talking to Nova, who was by far the more composed. "Roy would prefer not to wait till the holidays, so we are arranging an early wedding," she said. "We want you all to come—Keith, too. And, Karen, I'd like you to be my bridesmaid."
"That's sweet of you, Nova."

"Not a bit. We both feel we owe you a great deal." Calmly she went on explaining their plans, betraying herself only when her glance met Roy's, and clung.
"We'll help in any way we can," said Elizabeth briskly as they went out. "The sewing-machine. is completely at your disposal." Elizabeth had to be brisk. Emotional undercurrents affecting people she was fond of always made her miserable, and this

was particularly the case with Karen. Bother Roy and Nova, why couldn't they have waited a while before appearing at the farm so pleased with themselves and full of marriage talk. As though poor Karen hadn't enough on her mind without being badgered to smile and hold the flowers at someone else's wedding.
For the hundredth time since last Friday's party, her thoughts went back to Mark's announcement. From rumours gathered previously at the Winchesters', she knew that he and Inga were often together in Nairobi and that, in the Swedish woman's set, their engagement was taken for granted. Not only had Inga been clever enough to catch Mark, but seemingly she had also had her way regarding the move down to South Africa. It must have needed diabolical cleverness to wring all she wanted from a man of his kind. On the other hand, it was patent to those who knew him that, if Mark ever allowed himself to love a woman, there was nothing he would not do for her sake. Elizabeth had so desperately wanted everything to come right for Karen, but who could possibly have foreseen this calamity?
NEXT day, Charles Williamson came over to say goodbye. He stayed for only a short while and, when he left the farm, he referred once more to seeing Karen in Nairobi. She smiled. When the time came, she would write him a line of good wishes and farewell.
The Mombasa shipping agents to whom she had written could offer nothing for six weeks but suggested that their agents in Nairobi might be able to fix her up almost as cheaply by air. Planes were returning to England so light that reduced fares were often available. Karen decided to make inquiries when she went up for Nova's wedding.
Perhaps it was fortunate just now that Justin brought in a young acquaintance straight from England to train as his assistant. Bill Norton, full of ingenuous eagerness, slept in a but in the garden and joined the family during the day. His presence, though harmless, put a brake on intimate exchanges.
One day, just after tea, Karen saddled Bambu and rode down to the bridge. It was the first time she had seen it complete. Its white splendour spanning the pink-tinted river, in a setting of wild beauty, filled her with a vicarious triumph. Mark had conceived and built this thing; his heart and brain had co-operated to produce a superb feat of engineering. The bridge was Mark.
An inexpressible yearning hurt her throat. Would Inga respect his passion for building lovely things? Would she realise how much of the man went into his work and never reproach him with it? Up to a point, Inga was

his kind of woman; through travelling, she had acquired a cosmopolitan veneer, and yet she contrived to offset the sophistication with her Scandinavian background. An incalculable woman, who could melt from icy displeasure into husky sweetness that might captivate the stoutest woman-hater. And Mark wasn't a woman-hater. If he were, he would avoid women, not trouble to be charming and teasing and all the other qualities that were so poignantly, unforgettably Mark.
"Memsahib!"
She turned. "Greetings, Hanim. I thought you would have returned to Nairobi with your master."
The tall, slim servant bowed. "It is the bwana's order that I remain here. The memsahib has not before seen the finished bridge?"
"No. It's perfect."
"May I offer the memsahib a cool drink?"

She smiled. "Thank you, Hanim." She followed him so slowly that, when she entered the house, he had already mixed a fruit cocktail with lime. After serving it, he hesitated, uncertain whether she wished him to go. "You must find it lonely here," she said.
"Yes, it is lonely, but soon I join the bwana. The little bwana, Keith, come sometimes to play in the tree-house." He stopped, before continuing diffidently, "I am very happy to see the bwana's little sister. Once, I ask him why you come here no more. He was angry."
Karen emptied her glass, took a quick look round the living-room and moved to the door. "Thank you for the drink, Hanim. I'm afraid this is goodbye."
"The memsahib is leaving the coffee-farm?"
"Leaving Kenya. My home is in England, you know."
His dark face was serious. "May I ask when you go, memsahib?" "Within perhaps a month."
"Does the bwana know?"
"Probably. He seems to learn most things. Goodbye, Hanim."
IT was Elizabeth's suggestion that Karen should accompany Roy and Nova to the Guaba club a couple of nights later. This was the last
weekend before the wedding for, the next Friday, they would all travel to Mrs. Lawson's villa on the Nyeri road ready for the ceremony the following day. Elizabeth watched the car vanish down the road and then sauntered back into the house. Justin and Bill were at the sheds and Keith in his bed.
Contrary to habit, Elizabeth subsided, empty-handed into a chair. She was so tired and dispirited—at a time when she should have been brimming with energy and gratitude for the excellent season they had had, and the promise of greater prosperity in the year ahead. But she knew that she couldn't feel right till Karen was back with her mother and picking up the threads without too much heartbreak. Thank goodness there was no evening meal to prepare. The men had eaten high tea and would be

satisfied with a cold supper at nine-thirty. She could doze now and make up for her laziness later.
It was thus that Mark, entering as usual by the french window, came upon her. For a long moment, she stared at him, without stirring. Then she jerked upright. "You came in so quietly that I thought I must be seeing things. Take a seat and I'll get you some refreshment."
"I don't need it." His demeanour was puzzling, his glance, as it roved from door to window, shrewd. "Are you alone?"
"More or less. Justin and Bill are doing some repairs in the main shed, and Karen's gone dancing."
"I see." After an undecided second, he sat on one of the dining-chairs
near the table. "Stay there, Elizabeth. I'll wait for a word with Justin.
I hear from Hanim that your cousin has definitely decided to sail away." "All good things come to an end some time."
"When does Karen leave Kenya?" he asked abruptly.
She looked startled. "Don't you mean 'Kitten'? I've never heard you use her name before. We shall fix it up in Nairobi next weekend."
"I believe you'll be glad for her to go, Elizabeth."
She frowned. "For her own sake, I shall."
"She's still unhappy?" he queried curtly.
On her guard, Elizabeth gestured helplessly, and said nothing.

He thrust back his chair and looked down at her, his eyes curiously harsh and green. "I must get back, Elizabeth."
"Aren't you going to wait for Justin?"
"No, I'm driving back to Nairobi tonight!"
ON Friday, they all said goodbye to Bill and set off in the bush car for Nairobi. It had been decided that Justin should motor back on Sunday
with Keith, leaving his wife and her cousin to book a passage to England and take the train back on Tuesday. To Karen, the journey was unreal. Even while she struggled to share Elizabeth's mood of spurious gaiety, she was conscious of the dead weight of departure in her heart.
The wedding, next day, was simple. After the cake had been cut and tasted, Roy had a private word with Karen. "I stayed at the Ashley last night and met Colonel Williamson at breakfast this morning." His look was anxious. "I hope you don't mind, but I told him you were staying here with Mrs. Lawson for three more nights. He said he'd like to see you."
"I intended writing him a note some time," she admitted. "But I shan't mind seeing him. Charles is all right."
"I couldn't make him out. He talked a lot and was off his food. In fact he ordered a whisky and soda for breakfast and then Mark Howard showed up, looking equally fed-up, and ordered a brandy. I was the only one eating anything and drinking coffee."
Karen's smile faded. "Does Mark know I'm here?"
"I think so. Yes, I remember that Williamson mentioned it."

At about four, the young couple drove off to a country club about forty miles outside Nairobi, for a brief honeymoon. Standing between Mrs. Lawson and Elizabeth, Karen waved and called her good wishes with the others. But her jaws ached with the smile that never reached her eyes.
Early on Sunday morning, Justin drove into town for a conference with Mark. When he returned at about ten o'clock he answered Elizabeth's queries with a mystified frown.
"His house is sold and his business connections signed over to another man. Everything has turned out just as he wanted it, yet he's thoroughly wretched. I don't understand Mark at all."
Before noon, Karen and Elizabeth were saying goodbye to Justin and the little boy. It was Mrs. Lawson's habit to lie down after lunch, so Elizabeth and Karen stayed on the veranda, dozing in deck-chairs. Shattering the peace came the sound of a car.
Elizabeth sat up. "It's Colonel Williamson. I don't think we need disturb Mrs. Lawson."
Charles looked hot and perspiring but, as he stood in the shade of the veranda wiping his forehead and hands, he was smiling with more than his usual conventional good will.
"Do sit down," invited Karen. "Roy told me that you might be calling."
He sat down and accepted a drink. "This isn't the best time of the day for a social call but I've been so busy. As a matter of fact, since leaving Guaba I've had the most astonishing luck. Unknown to me, Mark Howard has been pulling strings, with the result that I'm called to Paris to take up some highly interesting work. It's just my sort of job and I do enjoy living on the Continent."
"How exciting for you," said Karen warmly. "When do you go?" "At the end of next week, by air."
Karen had never seen him so pleased and expansive. "It's great luck, your being here just now," he said. "I'd been wondering whether I dare ask you to make the trip from

the farm especially for my farewell party next Thursday. I hope Strasmore was mistaken when he said you're travelling back on Tuesday."
"No. Elizabeth can't leave it later."
"What a pity, still, I've another plan. Will you and Mrs. Paterson join one or two friends and myself for dinner at the Ashley tomorrow evening?"
They accepted and Charles laughed—he seemed unable to do anything else. Thereafter, his conversation was of the races and polo, though it was easy to see that his mind dwelt almost exclusively elsewhere. Just before he left, Charles broached the topic which Karen had not dared to mention. "Did you see the report of Mark's new project in last week's Journal? I had an idea all along that he wouldn't leave Kenya."
Before Karen could answer, Elizabeth exclaimed, "Then why has he sold his house?"
He shrugged. "I suppose he wants something more modern. His father built that place about twenty years ago. Mark owns land a few miles out, so possibly he'll build there."
At eleven o'clock that night Karen went to her bedroom. She could

hear the others in their rooms, Mrs. Lawson humming rather tunelessly, and Elizabeth next door, hanging away her clothes in the wardrobe. A floorboard creaked and a tiny tap was followed by the entry of Elizabeth. On to the dressing-table she dropped a folded newspaper. "You might like to read the article about Mark some time. Mrs. Lawson found it for me."
She flopped into a chair, crossed her legs, and gathered her blue candlewick wrap over them. Her glance rested on her cousin, sitting tailor-fashion on the bed. Her honey-pale hair was drawn back into a ribbon; there was a vulnerable look about her bared temples, where the veins beat. Entirely young and very appealing. If only Mark could see her like that. After a few more minutes talk she patted her cousin's shoulder, and wished her good night. For a little longer Karen stayed on the bed and then, inevitably, she was drawn to reach for the newspaper Elizabeth had brought.
"Howard to Form Construction Company," said the heading. The distant phrase seemed to hang in the air before Karen grasped it. Her eyes moved over the half-column of newsprint.
"Mr. Mark Howard, having declined an invitation to a seat on the board of a well-known firm of constructional engineers in Johannesburg, has nevertheless agreed to join them in the formation of a separate company in Nairobi."
Karen creased and re-creased the paper between her fingers. She acknowledged now that she was afraid to go into Nairobi tomorrow, afraid of seeing Mark—with Inga. An appalling dread of the future claimed her. Days, weeks, and years, blank and pointless because Mark was not there.
HER heart was still heavy next morning when she dressed for the trip into town with Elizabeth, and throughout the interview at the shipping agents. She chose her plane and paid her deposit.
At six o'clock they set out for Charles Williamson's cocktail party. Charles himself opened the car door for them. "So glad to see you," he said heartily. "Do come inside."
Through the vestibule and, the lounge into a small room to where half a dozen friends of Charles's were already taking a first drink. According to Charles, only eight had been invited, but there seemed to be a great many more present. "Where's Inga?" someone asked plaintively. "She ought to be here, Charles."
Charles laughed spontaneously. "We were out shopping till rather late. She won't be long now."
Inga! Instinctively, Karen searched the room for Mark, forgetting that he would stand head and shoulders above most of the people here, and that, in any case, she would

automatically have felt his presence. No, Mark was not here yet. Perhaps he would bring Inga. Torn between yearning and dread, Karen found Charles. "You won't mind if we go now, Charles?"
"But, my dear, you've only just come! And you must certainly stay to meet Inga. It may be for the last time."

"Will Mark be with her?"
"Mark?" Karen saw a comprehending kindness. "I ought to have thought. I'm so sorry I didn't invite him but he's given us so much of his time." His voice lowered conspiratorially, and his eyes gleamed. "I'll let you into a secret—and won't these people kick themselves for missing the fun when they notice the wedding-ring! Inga and I were married this morning and Mark was our chief witness. Not a word, now!"
For thirty seconds Karen was- incapable of speech. When eventually it returned, her tones were weak and not very clear. "Congratulations, Charles. Wasn't it—rather sudden?"
"Not really. We planned it as soon as I received the Paris offer. Inga's mad about Paris. We'll have marvellous times."
She was saved from further reply by an exclamatory chorus of welcome to Inga, who sailed up to Charles's side, sleekly gowned in black and white, her blonde crown in braids held coquettishly on one side. Karen never afterwards recalled what passed between herself and the Swedish woman. Karen slipped out to the balcony, subsided into a woven gilt chair and clutched the arms.
Meanwhile Elizabeth, her boredom miraculously erased by the wedding-ring on Inga's finger, avidly questioned Charles. Good-naturedly, he explained. "Find Karen," he finished quietly. "I've telephoned Mark. He's on his way."
Elizabeth did not hesitate. She had seen Karen vanish through the glass door and she herself took a different exit, one which brought her out through the lounge to the front entrance. She saw the big car turn into the courtyard and Mark step out. Throttling her impatience, she waited till he leapt the steps. "Elizabeth! Has the party broken up already?"
She shook her head. "Not a chance. It's my guess it'll go on till midnight now that Charles's news had percolated."
"Is Karen in there?"
"Naturally. The poor child's being defeated by other people's wedding-bells. First Roy and Nova and now Charles."
"Karen should never have gone to Strasmore's wedding," he said furiously. "That sort of experience is more than flesh and blood can stand!"
"Is it?" Elizabeth's tone rose with cautious excitement. "Why?"
"Use your imagination! She had to stand by and watch him marry someone else."
"Roy Strasmore?" she echoed. "What are you talking about? Surely you don't think Karen is or ever has been in love with Roy?"
"Who else?" he demanded brusquely. "She admitted there was someone."
Elizabeth stared at him and answered slowly, her head tilted, "Yes—who else?"
His eyes glittered. "Tell me all you know!"

"Find it out for yourself," she told him and gestured towards the side of the hotel. "Karen's on the balcony of the private reception-room."
“KAREN !" A second earlier Karen had not believed her eyes and now she was

just as dubious of her hearing. But Mark was there, vaulting over the balcony wall, smiling with devilry, his eyes gleaming. Her heart stopped for a suffocating moment and broke into a race.
"Aren't you glad to see me?"
"But, Mark, I don't understand—"
"I do—at last. Karen, the time we've wasted!" He grasped her wrists and pulled her up. "We're taking a walk. Not a long one—just far enough to cut out the risk of interruption. Hold tight." She was being lifted and swung out into the garden. For a heartbeat her face was close to his jacket. Then she was standing, his hand tight on her elbow, urging her forward.
"Here's the path. A little way down to the right there's a summerhouse. Here we are. Now, how shall I begin?" he said a trifle thickly. "Explain, or tell you I love you?"
She had to keep looking out at the stars and the trees. They were real; this couldn't be.
"It's so impossible," she breathed.
"Sweet Kitten! I've been a brute to you without meaning it—even more so to myself. You see, I got things tangled up. You know how I felt about marriage before you came along—"
"And afterwards!"
"Yes, but not for long. Only a week or two after we met you began to come between me and my blueprints." He made a small, savage sound. "I could say all this a thousand times better if I kissed you first. Karen—"
"Please, Mark, this is important."
He had pulled her up against him. "Nothing's important, except that we love each other." He was kissing her, hard and hungrily, with a passion almost as cruel as it was tender. Minutes later, she saw his head outlined against the studded sky. She leaned back in his arms, raised shy fingers to stroke his cheek. The joy of being able to whisper "Darling!" just below her breath, and to feel his heart thudding against her so urgently.
" PERHAPS now you'll understand how it was," he said. "You made my cynicism look like plate-glass armour. One delicate tap of your heel and it was shattered. I was giving in, with private enthusiasm, when I learned that you wanted a settled home, and a school round the corner for your children—"
"Who told you that?"
"Inga. Was she lying?"
"No." It was a struggle but she must be just to the woman. "I don't quite remember how the discussion went, but I'm sure I finished by saying

that I'd give up everything—whatever the heartbreak—to be with the man I loved. She forgot to mention that?"
"Yes," he said grimly. "She forgot."
"Inga was out to marry you."
"She needed money. She was George's widow and I felt bound to help her. If I could have offered her cash the whole thing might have been clinched earlier. As a matter of fact, I'd reached desperation over Inga when Charles Williamson opened up and told me they loved each other but couldn't marry because he was without an income. What a relief that was. I was able to help him find a good job in France."
Karen was beginning to understand many things, among them the futility of jealousy. Yet jealousy, in some degree, is inevitably present when one is in love. Gently, she freed herself. "Who brought you here tonight?"

"Charles, by telephone. I've had a ghastly weekend, battling with the need to see you and a determination to stay away from the Lawsons' villa at any cost. Early this afternoon I made inquiries at the shipping agents and found that you had booked an air-passage. I—cancelled it and arranged to follow you back to the farm tomorrow. The indecision was more than I could bear any longer."
At last she said, "Was it quite fair to accept Inga's word against me all those weeks ago?"
"Perhaps not, but what she said hurt like the deuce and I decided to sit back for a while—an onlooker. Then you began to look weary and depressed—it was round about the time young Strasmore started paying attentions to Miss Lawson—and I connected the two."
"Mark, how could you!"
"I know it looks crazy now, and I could shoot myself when I think of what I went through over it." Emotion roughened his voice. "You took such pains to deceive me and loving you made me ridiculously sensitive. Your caring for Strasmore seemed very plausible and both you and Elizabeth were obstructionist where I was concerned."
"We couldn't divine what was in your mind."
He laughed briefly, a trifle harshly. "Hanim did. He scarcely let a day pass without alluding to the `bwana's little sister'."
Tremulously, she smiled up at him. "What will he think of us now?" Mark smiled fondly and bent to kiss her again.
"We must plan a house," he said. "There's a piece of land beyond Limuru—just far enough from town. We'll settle, Karen, in the way you've always longed for, and if business should take me away for a spell—"
"I'll go with you," she said swiftly, "wherever it may be."
"Yes, you'll go with me," he pronounced decisively.

THE END