

2 DARING LOVE NOVELS

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JANUARY 25¢



TOO MANY
KISSES
BY CAROL HOLLISTON



ESCAPE FROM
DESIRE
BY VIDA HURST

ABRIDGED FROM 2 EXCITING BOOK-LENGTH LOVE NOVELS

2 DARING LOVE NOVELS

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★ ★ 2 EXCITING ROMANTIC NOVELS ★ ★

ESCAPE FROM DESIRE

by Vida Hurst



Sherry Hamilton asked herself how Bill Madden could be so selfish! She would gladly abandon the promising career, which had been so important before she met Bill. But now he insisted she give up Sherry Anna, the baby she loved as much as she did him.

Wouldn't it be simpler to marry darling, gay, Marvin Edwards who loved her and the baby? Perhaps—but in her heart was the knowledge that she would never stop loving Bill!

Condensed from the novel originally entitled "Maquerade" by the same author.

TOO MANY KISSES

by Carol Hollister



She had given up everything to live with Sam—her lovely home, her family and friends, and the luxurious existence that was hers before she met him. And in an hour of anger, he had driven her away.

Now how could she make him understand she had not run away to another man, but had only gone to escape his jealousy? And how could she return to him when he had once told her, he hated her and wished her dead?

Condensed from the novel originally entitled "Beautiful Butterfly" by the same author.

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Love—romance—marriage. Next words to Sherry Hamilton whose life was promising her fame and fortune. Then along come the New Year's Masquerade and the chance meeting with Bill Medden. His electrifying kiss promised her the love she had never dared dream of.

And because Bill became such an essential part of her life, she told him of Sherry Ann, the baby she loved as much as she loved him. Bill's answer hurt and confused her. He could never love another man's child, he told her. She must choose between one of them.

But how could he expect her to give up this child? Wouldn't it be easier to give up Bill and marry charming, handsome Marvin Edwards who asked nothing of her—except her love?



ESCAPE
FROM
DESIRE

MOVING, POIGNANT NOVEL OF A WOMAN'S CHOICE BETWEEN
THE MAN SHE LOVES AND ANOTHER MAN'S CHILD!

By VIDA HURST

Condensed from the novel
originally entitled "Mas-
querade" by the same
author.



And suddenly she
was kissing the
stranger!

LIGHTS. Glitter. Excitement. After the long, dreary years of the war it was like standing on the threshold of a new world to see the colorful costumes and listen to the mad, gay music of the Artists' Ball once more. It was New Year's Eve. A slow, persistent rain was beating against the windows, but inside was laughter and a mounting thrill of anticipation. Only those in costume had been admitted. No one was permitted to unmask until midnight and as the magic hour approached the mood of the dancers grew more riotous. Two cave men brandishing paper club fought over a slender East Indian dancer whose golden sequins sparkled with reflected radiance, but with a mocking laugh she eluded them and sought refuge in the arms of a brown-clad monk whose hood was drawn over his head.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I lost you in the crowd."

Perhaps he did not hear her. If he answered the roll of drums deadened his reply. The hands of the clock on the wall at one end of the room were almost together. In spite of the incongruity of their costumes they danced together easily. The girl's burnished auburn hair, the jeweled bangles about her white wrists and ankles contrasted brilliantly with the sober monk's robe which completely concealed the wearer.

Suddenly the music stopped. Lights flashed off and darkness flooded the room. The crowd surged closer together in swift pagan abandon and the girl in the dancing costume felt her chin tilted upward by a determined hand.

"He needn't be so high-handed about it," she thought, amused.

But as their lips met her amusement changed to consternation. Never in the three years she had known him had Roger Fenton kissed her like this. Never had Sherry Hamilton been so thrilled. For one mad moment her own identity was completely lost.

"Darling, darling," he whispered—and the voice was not Roger's.

As the lights came on and the band burst into "Auld Lang Syne," another monk came toward them, fighting his way through the jungle of dancers. That must be Roger. This man to whose kiss Sherry had responded with an emotion she had never before experienced, was not Roger.

When he removed his mask she saw a face vaguely familiar to her. She had seen him some place, but where? He said hastily, "Hello, Sherry! I knew it was you all the time."

"But I don't know you..." she faltered.

"Maddan Advertising, Bill Maddan."

Of course, she remembered having seen him in the office where she worked as a commercial artist. Roger was there now, his hand possessively on her arm.

"May I call you this afternoon?" Bill murmured.

Sherry did not answer. She was still confused. How could she have mistaken Bill Maddan for the round-faced, blond newspaper photographer who had brought her there? Roger didn't understand it either.

"What's the idea?" he complained. "Can't I leave you long enough to call my paper without having your disappear with another man?"

"He rescued me from a couple of cave men. After all, you were dressed alike."

"Oh, sure, and you didn't notice that he was at least a foot taller?"

"No," Sherry replied penitently, recalling how she had lifted her lips to Bill's.

"It would have to happen just at midnight," Roger continued. "You kissed him, I suppose?"

"If I did it was because I thought he was you."

SHERRY danced with Roger, Sherry's hazel eyes combed the laughing mob for another brown monk's robe, but Bill Maddan had disappeared. Meanwhile Roger was indefatigable. They stayed until the second orchestra refused another encore and began to fold up their stands. The crowd had thinned to a few determined or intoxicated celebrants. The floor was littered with the flotsam and jetsam of a riotously successful entertainment. Confetti, cigarette stubs, discarded masks, paper cups, pieces of ribbon. Someone had pushed the heavy draperies from the high wide windows, exposing the dirty glass streaked by the recent rain.

"Happy New Year, honey!" Roger said for what must have been the twentieth time.

"Same to you," Sherry responded automatically. "Although I doubt if I'll live long enough to see it through if I don't get to bed soon."

"It's only five o'clock. You can sleep all day. But first let's have some breakfast."

The sun was rising in a burst of color as they drove up Telegraph Hill to the flat Sherry shared with Anne Travis. Across the bay the Ber-

keley roofs were like golden minarets against a backdrop of saffron and pearly rose. Below in the harbor floated a vast armada of ships waiting to return to sea.

Roger opened the door and followed Sherry inside long enough to kiss her, but she turned her head so that his lips only grazed one cheek.

"I haven't kised you this year," he complained. "And this one doesn't count. Are you really as cold as you seem, Sherry? Or just being coy?"

"The fact that you kiss me at all is a concession on my part."

"Some day I'm going to take you at your word and walk right out of your life. Indeed, my resolution for this year is to marry you or give you up."

Sherry smiled and patted his hand. "Goodbye, Roger. It's been fun."

"I'll call you soon."

"Of course," she said.

But the door had no sooner closed behind him than she forgot Roger Fenton's existence. She was obsessed by the memory of another man. A tall, dark man with deep-set gray eyes and a generous, laughing mouth. Bill Madden was not handsome. His nose was too big, his features too rugged. But he had an attractive face. His expression was determined but tolerant. Kindly, and with a sense of humor. . . . "What's the matter with me?" Sherry wondered. The draperies were drawn in the living room and she stumbled against something. Anne's suitcase. She was home then from her week-end in Yosemite. Two empty glasses, overflowing ash trays and a withered corsage were on the walnut coffee table. Anne's new hat was perched blithely on one of the tall porcelain cats adorning either side of the mantel. The fire had burned into ashes, some of which had sifted upon the white rug. "It will have to be cleaned again," Sherry sighed. Even the refectory table in the dining room was littered with the remains of a recent meal. Anne, who was in charge of the jewelry department in one of the city's most exclusive stores, was shrewd, competent,

tireless, but she had never been known to put anything in the same place twice. Sherry adored her while deploring the disorder which surrounded her.

TWENTY-TWO girls had lived together for three years. Ever since the twenty-three-year-old Sherry had arrived in town, newly graduated from a New York art school. A remote connection between the two families had been sufficient reason to impel Sherry's Aunt Agatha in Montclair, New Jersey to write Anne's mother in Connecticut that she would appreciate any favors shown by Anne to the orphaned niece who was on her way to San Francisco. Both girls had expected to be bored with each other. To their surprise they had formed an immediate friendship which had lasted in spite of five years' difference in age.

Anne was now thirty-one. She had been married at nineteen and divorced at twenty. Blonde and beautiful, she was attractive to the masculine sex but had no respect for them. The man didn't exist who could put anything over on Anne Travis.

Glancing at her wrist watch, Sherry saw that it was eight o'clock. She pulled the cord which drew the draperies back from the large wide windows. Below lay the breath-taking panorama of the bay. Sherry prized that view. It had been their reason for choosing that particular flat rather than an apartment across the street, but this morning it did not satisfy her feeling of restlessness. She felt a longing for the wider stretch of the ocean itself. The bay was too quiet.

All desire for sleep had left her. Bill Madden had asked if he might call her that day, and before that happened she must come to some decision about him. It was silly to give such importance to a kiss given at the passing of the Old Year, but it had not been an ordinary kiss. "Darling, darling!" he had whispered. He knew it too. He must have realized as she did that something had flamed into life as the first pressure

of his lips on hers. She had melted into his arms, without resistance, losing her own identity as she had never done before. "And must not do again," she warned herself.

Walking quietly down the long hall leading to the two bedrooms separated by a sun room, Sherry decided not to go to bed. Instead she would change to a warm sweater and skirt, pull on an old beret and heavy belted coat and take a streetcar to the beach. Far out beyond the Cliff House, where she could burrow into the sand and think.

It was amazing how few people were aboard at that hour on New Year's morning. The usually crowded car was almost empty. Only the motorman and conductor accompanied her to the end of the line. Sherry walked swiftly past the cluster of hot dog stands, photograph galleries and bars. As far as she could see not another person was on the beach. She turned inside the enclosure leading to the water. Her shoes filled with sand and dragged like leaden weights. Beyond the low wall was a clump of bushes which would keep the wind from her back. She sank into a sitting position. It was like being alone in the world. Far away a ship moved into the mist like a dream. At the edge of the water-darkened sand the waves writhed and twisted into white, foaming coils.

Where was Bill now? Sleeping, probably, with no idea of the storm of emotion he had roused. He no doubt regarded her as merely another delightful prospect. Anne said such attractions were chemical reactions. Chemical or not, Sherry told herself she could not afford them. She had complicated the years between twenty-three and thirty and worked too hard to establish herself as a commercial artist to go overboard for love. When she was graduated from art school she had determined to continue her career. After that she could marry, but until then she would permit herself only unromantic friendships such as she had with Roger. Unromantic on her part, that is, it wasn't her fault if Roger was always hoping it would

lead to something else. There had been nothing platonic about the kiss she had given Bill Maddan. There never would be anything platonic between them. That was why she was so disturbed. She could hear Aunt Agatha saying, "Don't start something you can't finish." And Anne's more cynical advice to run before she was trapped. . . .

"I must make up my mind not to see him again," she thought. "If he telephones I'll have Anne tell him I don't care to talk to him."

It was then, as she came to this decision which she had suspected from the beginning would be inevitable, that she saw the wind-beaten figure of another woman struggle down the sand toward the water.

SHERRY watched indifferently as the distant figure walked toward the water. Realization of the other's intentions did not strike her until the woman began to run down the stretch of wet beach. She was deliberately wading into the treacherous undertow.

"Stop!" Sherry cried. "Do you want to be drowned?"

The other woman gave one startled glance over her shoulder and quickened her pace, then, stumbling, lost her balance and fell in the surf which broke in waves about her. She had regained her footing and fallen again before Sherry reached her. Then she struck at her rescuer with desperate hands.

"Let me go. I know what I'm doing."

"Oh no, you don't," Sherry retorted, dragging her back on the thin water-soaked beach. Sherry saw then that although the woman's body was mature her face was that of a girl. Ghastly white, with pale blue eyes and long straw-colored hair.

"You might have been killed," Sherry said severely when she could speak.

"I want to die," the girl gasped. She was drenched to the skin. In her bedraggled fur jacket, she looked like a half-drowned kitten.

"You'll feel differently about it

when you've thought it over," Sherry said. "We'll get a taxi and I'll take you home. Where do you live?"

"No, place. I just came to town last night and I couldn't find a room."

"You'll have to come home with me then. Do you feel strong enough to walk to a telephone?"

"Oh, I'm strong enough," the girl said bitterly. But when she tried to rise her knees buckled under her. She was compelled to accept Sherry's assistance as they retraced their steps across the sand to the sidewalk.

The street was still deserted. Not a car was in sight. Only the owner of the small restaurant saw them as they entered his door with water dripping from their soaked clothing in little rivulets.

He stared at them with obvious curiosity but he asked no questions. Sherry finished her telephone call and said. "We'll have plenty of time for a cup of coffee. Hot and black, please!"

The strange girl held her cup with both small shaking hands, sipping with short nervous gulps. Sherry did not attempt to make conversation. When the taxi arrived she gave the surprised driver her own address on Telegraph Hill.

"Couple of dames still celebrating," he thought. "Some people are sure goofy. Imagine going in wading at this time of year."

With a dignity which did not match her appearance, Sherry paid the fare and helped the other girl up the steps. The living room was just as she had left it. Anne wasn't up yet. That was good. The fewer explanations the better.

"You'd better get into a tub of hot water while I take a shower in the stall," Sherry said cheerfully. "Here's a wool bathrobe you may have when you've finished."

The roar of running water made further speech impossible, until presently both girls were clad in bathrobes and slippers.

"My name is Mildred Bates, Mrs. Bates," the girl volunteered as if she had been thinking things over and come to a decision.

"And I'm Sherry Hamilton. Let's go to the kitchen and I'll fix some breakfast."

When it was ready she spread a clean cloth on a small table near the kitchen window which over-looked a geranium-covered wall. Mildred Bates swallowed the hot food eagerly. When she had finished her second cup of coffee Sherry said, "Want to tell me what's wrong, Mildred?"

The pale blue eyes stared at her through veils of despair.

"My husband deserted me because I'm going to have a baby. I followed him here to beg him to come back but he won't have anything to do with me. And I haven't any money. I spent everything I had on my ticket from Kansas City."

"That's no excuse for trying to kill yourself," Sherry said stoutly.

"But I love him," Mildred said, beginning to cry. "I don't want to live without him."

"How can you love a man who treats you like that? He can be forced to take care of you."

"No," Mildred cried hysterically. "I don't want anything from him that way. I'd rather die."

Sherry wondered how any woman could be so spineless, but she said soothingly, "You're in no condition to talk about it now. I'll give you a bromide and put you to bed in the sun room. After you've had some sleep we'll think of something for you to do. No situation is hopeless."

ALTHOUGH she had not slept all night Sherry Hamilton felt no fatigue as she sat before the dead fire in the living room of her flat on Telegraph Hill. She was pondering the circumstances leading to Mildred Bates' attempted suicide, but in the back of her mind was also the figure of a man in a monk's costume who had kissed her at the Artist's Ball. She could not rid herself of the premonition that Bill Madan's life was to be entangled with hers, even though she had determined not to have anything to do with him.

It was almost noon when she heard rapid footsteps coming down the

hall. Anne Travis appeared in the doorway.

Anne said, "Do I look all right to you? Perfectly normal, I mean?"

Sherry's hazel eyes met the gray-green orbs of her friend

"Of course you do. Why?"

"Well, I know last night was New Year's Eve when strange things happen. But I'd swear there was no one on the sun room when I went to bed. There is certainly someone there now. A girl I've never seen before."

Sherry sighed. "Neither had I until this morning. She was trying to drown herself."

"Drown herself?" Anne repeated, shivering. "Where? And what do we have to do with it?"

"I'm not sure myself, yet, but if the old Chinese adage is right, having saved her life I am now responsible for it."

Anne sank into a chair, lighted a cigarette with shaking fingers and discarded it after a couple of puffs.

"You haven't answered my first question. Where did this occur?"

"Out at the beach. Below the Cliff House, I couldn't sleep and was there trying to settle a problem of my own. Her name is Mildred Bates. She came here from Kansas City. Her husband deserted her because she is going to have a baby."

Anne looked alarmed.

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"Why not? She's wearing a wedding ring."

"That doesn't mean she's married," Anne said cynically.

"I have no reason to doubt her. She says she spent all her money for a ticket to San Francisco so she could persuade him to come back to her but he refused. And she refuses to go to court about it."

"SOUNDS like a made up story to me, Sherry. The less you have to do with her the better."

"We could use a girl around here," Sherry said pleadingly. "This is too big, and neither of us has time to take care of it. If she can cook it wouldn't cost any more to feed three of us than we spend eating out. It

would give her a place to stay and something to do until her baby is born."

"And then what?" I'm not yearning for the patter of little feet in my life. What's come over you anyway?"

"I don't know," Sherry admitted. "I guess it's because I was there when she was going to drown herself. Imagine if it were you, Anne. Going to have a baby. Deserted by your husband. No money."

"Speak for yourself, Sherry. It couldn't have happened to me. I'd have been too smart for that even at eighteen."

"She's not much older than that. The poor little thing just wait until you've seen her."

Anne shook her head. She had not removed her make-up the night before and her face looked hard and shrewd in the unflattering daylight. But Sherry knew Anne was not altogether selfish. She had supported her parents in Connecticut for years and gave generously to pet charities. Her ultimate decision would depend on the first impression Mildred made, or whether or not Anne liked her. Meanwhile there was another matter to be settled.

"If a man by the name of Bill Madan calls I'm not at home," Sherry said.

Anne grinned.

"And why not? I've known Bill for years and he's a swell guy if ever there was one."

"I'm not joking, Anne. Will you said, unwilling to admit her real reason.

"One has to expect such things at an Artists' Ball," Anne reminded her. "You heard me," Sherry insisted, unmoved.

"But what shall I tell him? You can't be away from home indefinitely."

"Just tell him I have nothing to say to him."

"Was it as bad as that?"

"I'm not joking, Anne. Will you remember?"

"Have I ever let you down? He probably won't call anyway. Few men

keep a promise made on New Year's Eve."

A slight movement made both girls glance toward the door where Mildred Bates stood wearing Sherry's bathrobe, her small feet in white fur slippers.

"I heard what you said about me," she admitted. "I don't blame you for not warning me, Miss Travis, but I promise not to be any bother if you let me stay. I'm a good cook. Really I am. I'll keep this place nice and clean for you and I'll never try to kill myself again no matter what happens."

Sherry was pleased to see Anne's skepticism softening into pity.

"Well, I should hope not," Anne said. "You're nothing but a kid. Your whole life's ahead of you."

"Do you mean I can stay?" Mildred inquired anxiously.

As she spoke the telephone rang. Anne said, "That's up to Sherry. You're her responsibility, not mine." Lifting the receiver, she spoke with mock sweetness. "Miss Travis speaking." Her eyes on Sherry, she continued. "Sorry, Bill! The lady insists she has nothing to say to you. It seems you made rather a bad impression."

SHERRY swung up Sutter Street to the well ventilated modern office where she worked as an artist. Nodding to the men and girls who were already there, she removed her coat and put on a gray striped smock she had made herself. Her desk was clear. Materials for her work were neatly put away in the drawers. Although she had been there over three years Sherry had never lost the thrill of beginning her task. She approached it with gratitude and interest. She enjoyed every detail of it, and although her mind had been filled with new problems she discarded them with her coat. With the single-minded joy of a true creative artist, she drew out the heavy sheets of paper and began to block in the design she had already decided upon. She was not pretending. She really was too absorbed to realize what was going on about her until she heard

her name repeated in a voice she recognized instantly.

"Hello, Sherry!" Bill said.

Her hazel eyes met his with a "Stop this before it goes any further" expression.

"Good morning!" she replied.

The man's eyes moved over the enveloping gray smock to the gay young mouth and the dimpled and determined chin.

"Ate you still angry with me about the other night?"

"Not at all. Should I be?"

"Probably," he granted. "But if you aren't angry then will you have dinner with me this evening?"

"I never mix business with my social life. And at the moment I am very busy."

"I called you at home yesterday and Anne said you had nothing to say to me."

"That's right, and it still goes."

"Good-bye then. I'll be seeing you," he promised, apparently unimpressed. Not so Sherry. Her silly heart was pounding beneath the smart gray smock. Her hands trembled so that she could not hold her crayon. Why should she react like that to the very sight of him? He was no better looking nor more attractive than any number of other men she had dated.

"It's ridiculous," she scolded herself, but in spite of her resolution to forget it the memory of his kiss on New Year's Eve had swept over her with such force that she could actually feel the pressure of his lips on hers. Yes and she had returned it. Did he remember that, too?

Fortunately it was almost noon, so she could postpone work on her sketch until after lunch. Sherry ate her fruit salad and drank her milk at a restaurant patronized by women executives with good incomes and what Anne called "society dames" seeking to regain their lost figures. Later she telephoned Mildred and heard the thin little voice assure her that everything was all right and where did they keep the ironing board?

Sherry thought Mildred sounded more cheerful. At least she wasn't sitting around crying. But even Sherry was surprised when she

opened the door of her flat that evening.

MILDRED had unpacked her bags and put them away. Her toilet articles were arranged neatly on the table in the sun room. Her clothes which were inexpensive but smart, were hanging in the closet. The living room had been dusted and a fire was ready to light. In the dining room a table had been set for two. There were salad plates and a wooden bowl of greens. A freshly baked coffee cake was cooling on the bread board. Lamb chops sizzled in the oven.

Sherry, who had registered every item with increasing relief, said, "It smells wonderful, Mildred."

"Miss Travis telephoned this afternoon that she wouldn't be home for dinner," Mildred explained.

"Serves her right," Sherry thought, amused. "Mildred wasn't boasting when she said she could cook."

The two girls sat for a long time over their coffee. Sherry suspected that Mildred was waiting to be questioned but she had no desire to probe into the girl's past. The fact that she needed help was obvious. Sherry preferred to accept the story which had already been given her and let it go at that. Glancing at the pretty sharp little features, the pale blue eyes and weak disillusioned mouth, Sherry decided that Mildred represented a type which was rapidly becoming extinct. To try to kill oneself because of the desertion of a husband was not only cowardly; it was foolish. It showed what happened to girls who permitted their lives to be ruined by too much emotion. And remembered her own cool refusal to see Bill Maddan again, she gave herself a mental pat on the back. The best way to help Mildred regain her balance was to treat her kindly and respect her desire for secrecy.

Mildred refused Sherry's offer to help with the dishes.

"That's part of my job," she said. "You've done too much for me already. I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life."

"Well, you're going to be a lot of

help to us," Sherry reminded her. "It's such a relief to come home to a good dinner and a clean house. I hope it won't be too much work for you."

"The baby won't be here for four months," Mildred said. "I enjoy having something to do. I gave up a good job to marry, but I'd always rather do housework than work in an office."

"You would," Sherry thought a bit scornfully. "That's probably the reason you're in such a jam today."

SHE WENT into the living room and put a match to the fire but did not turn on the lights. It had been a strenuous day and it was a pleasure to relax. She heard Mildred moving about the kitchen and a little later going back to the sun room.

"I ought to go to bed myself but I'm too comfortable," Sherry mused. Then she heard the front door open and Anne's derisively gay voice saying good night to her escort. Sherry waited for him to answer, but instead there was the click of Anne's heels down the long hall leading to the bedroom.

Someone else was coming into the living room. Out of the shadows in the doorway a man's figure appeared. A man's voice said, "Hello, Sherry! How nice of you to wait up for me."

Color blazed into her cheeks. All her beautiful peace of mind had been shattered.

"What kind of a game is this?" she demanded.

"No game at all. For once in my life I'm really serious. Why won't you talk to me, Sherry? Are you afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Of the potentialities involved in any future contact with me." Bill Maddan said calmly.

The man was impossible, but he was not going to be dismissed without knowing her reasons. When he asked, "Now that I'm here how about inviting me to sit down?" she answered ungraciously, "I haven't much choice about it, have I?"

"Yes. Because otherwise I shall speak my piece standing. But I am

determined to speak it. Can't you understand this isn't just a silly flirtation, Sherry? Something happened the other night when we kissed each other, and don't try to deny that you did return my kiss."

"I shan't deny it, I thought you were Roger Fenton."

"Not after that kiss you didn't. I saw your face. The mask you wore over your eyes could not conceal your astonishment."

"Sit down, Bill! Do you mind switching on that lamp?"

"It's much cozier without it," Bill tugged, but he obeyed before taking his place across from her.

"Now will you please continue?" Sherry said, hardening her heart against the helplessness she felt in his presence.

"I've heard about love at first sight but I never expected to experience it. You see it was like that with me the first time I saw you in your office. Your boss is a friend of mine so I asked him about you. But I didn't know until yesterday that you lived here with Anne."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Nothing, except that I would have called on her long ago if I had known. We've been friends for a good many years. It was a simple matter to ask her to have dinner with me and explain what I wanted."

"I can see it was," Sherry said, but she was beginning to be amused in spite of herself. "Perhaps since she is such a good friend to both of us she also explained my attitude."

"No, we didn't go into that. She did tell me you went to the beach New Year's morning instead of going to bed. I wish I had been there with you, Sherry. I couldn't sleep either."

SHERRY HAD a sensation of unreality as she gazed into Bill Maddan's gray eyes. There was such honesty in his expression she had to believe him, but the scene in the fire-light seemed like a dream. It was herself she did not understand and could not depend on as she answered. "I am frightened, Bill. I may as well be frank and admit it."

"But why, darling?"

Sherry sat straighter in the arm chair as she replied, "I love my work just as you do yours. I'm not just marking time as some girls do until they can find a husband. It has taken me three years to get where I am and I've done it only by concentration and putting my job first."

"Are you trying to make me believe you don't go out with other men? Because I know better than that. I've seen you with Roger Fenton."

"Roger doesn't matter. He can't upset me so that I'll want to moon over him instead of work. I can't risk becoming involved with anyone who might take me seriously."

"You think I would."

"I think we both would," she answered.

"Can you really put me out of your mind by not seeing me, Sherry?"

"I can try," she said, recalling that already she had wasted a good many valuable moments on his account.

"Wouldn't it be more sensible to face the fact that we are interested in each other rather than to try to evade it? After all, I'm busy too. I don't know if Anne told you that my father died while I was in the Navy. That leaves the Maddan Advertising Agency to me. I lost my mother a good many years ago, so I live alone in the old home on Union Street."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"I'm not begging for sympathy, Sherry. I'm merely trying to explain. Won't you even be friends with me?"

Friends: with a man who had kissed her the way he had?

"I know what you're thinking," he smiled as she hesitated, "but it's possible for us to start over again. Just let me see you. Take you dancing, to the theater, talk to you. Anne told me about the girl you brought to live with you. Maybe later on you'll need my help for her, financially I mean."

"Are you trying to bribe me?" she smiled.

"Yes, I will do anything, agree to anything. Put it on any basis you please."

His eagerness was appealing. Perhaps she was being ridiculous about the whole situation. If they saw each other frequently in a purely platonic

fashion the romantic implications of their first meeting might fade. It was silly to refuse to see a desirable man just because she was attracted to him.

"I've probably taken the whole affair too seriously," she said.

Bill put out his hand.

"We're going to be friends then?"

"Friends," she repeated as his hand closed over hers.

"Thank you, Sherry. Shall we celebrate by having dinner together tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow I have another engagement."

"Saturday then?"

"Saturday," she promised.

"THE TROUBLE with Roger is that he has an inferiority complex," Anne said.

The three girls were having their breakfast. Sherry and Anne were dressed for the street. Mildred was wearing a bright colored clean smock. She looked better but still sad. Her pale blue eyes did not lift from her plate as Anne spoke. Reticent about her own affairs, she had shown no interest in theirs either, although the conversation had included her. The poor child seemed so alone.

Sherry smiled at her as she said, "I read somewhere that short men usually have an inferiority complex. I'm fond of Roger but I've never given him any reason to think he can monopolize my time. When he talks to me as he did last night I don't care if I never see him again." The night before Roger had been very angry when she had told him she was going out with Bill on Saturday.

Anne laughed when a sudden flush in Mildred's cheeks proved she had been listening after all.

"You girls are certainly sure of yourselves. If you'd ever been in love you wouldn't be so independent. The world is sure made for men and all the rules are in their favor."

"It doesn't have to be that way unless you let it," Anne said carelessly. "I was married once a good many years ago and I got out when things didn't go my way. No man

is going to put anything over on this gal!"

"Nor on me again," Mildred stated. "If I live through this I'll be the one to dictate the policy next time."

"That's the spirit," Sherry approved, glancing at her watch. "Come on, Anne, or we'll both be late."

"Mildred seems to have a little more courage," she said as they walked down the hill.

Notwithstanding her concern over Mildred, her thoughts turned eagerly to the promised evening with Bill Maddan. At her desk she found herself wondering where they would go, what she would wear. Fortunately she had bought a new hat the week before. It was black and daring. Beneath the dotted veil her hair shone like bronze. For a girl whose main interest was her career she was giving undue importance to that Saturday night engagement.

BILL MADDAN'S gray eyes smiled down upon Anne Travis who had opened the door for him.

"You weren't expecting me?" he inquired.

"Yes Sherry told me she had a date with you. What puzzles me is how you made her change her mind."

"That, dear Anne, is my secret. Or may I suggest that you have never given me sufficient credit?"

"Credit, my eye," Anne retorted. "You could have had any woman you know, including me. The truth of the matter is not one of us ever had a Chinaman's chance."

"Darling, I adore you," Bill cried, but his eyes were on the door he expected Sherry to enter. His face lit up like a Christmas tree, as Anne told Mildred later, when he saw the girl in her clinging black dress and high veiled hat.

"They forgot I was there," Anne said. "He held her hand as if they had been separated for weeks. All the time I was excusing myself and bowing out they didn't even hear me."

It was true. The touch of his hand on Sherry's was like an electric current. With an effort she broke the spell.

"Hello, Bill! How are you?"

"I'm fine. And you?"

"Never better," Sherry declared. She did not explain that the blood in her veins was sparkling like champagne. She felt dizzy, intoxicated. "Where are we going?" she asked, but she could not remember his answer. He helped her into her coat and followed her to his car. It was early in the evening. The lights on Telegraph Hill bloomed like golden flowers. Far below, the mast of a ship rose gracefully outlined above the wine dark water. There was a radiance like nether-of-pearls or opals in the atmosphere. Sherry had lived on the hill for over three years but she had never seen anything like it.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she asked as he took his place behind the wheel.

"It's like being in another world," he answered.

FOR A MOMENT Sherry was silent. This couldn't go on. They were behaving like a couple of love sick adolescents. Determined to break the enchantment, she forced herself to speak about current events, her office, his work. Snatching gaily at one topic after another, she tossed them at him like brightly colored balls, but he let each one fall without catching it. Finally he said, "It's no use, Sherry. I thought we could be friends, but it's impossible. I'm in love with you."

"That's ridiculous, Bill. You scarcely know me."

"Nevertheless it's true. I suppose you won't believe me, but I've never felt like this before."

How could she argue about it when every beat of her pulse proclaimed that the attraction was mutual?"

"I've never felt like this either," she admitted. "But that doesn't prove it's love. Let's not deceive ourselves. I've no place for love in my life at present and if you insist in being romantic about it I'll have to stop seeing you." She spoke stubbornly, trying to convince herself as well as him.

Bill shook his head; then he smiled. "To be perfectly frank about it, I've never wanted to go off the deep end myself. Okay. Let's skip it. We'll

forget what happened New Year's Eve and start all over again."

Sherry nodded, and to her surprise he now became the typical gallant escort, attentive but unemotional. They dined and danced at one of the large hotels. Bill's manner was as conventional as their setting. Why then was she disappointed? What did she expect?

"Talk to me," she said on the way home. "I want to know what you're really like."

"You don't care for the person I've been this evening?"

"You're still wearing a mask. If we're going to be friends we must understand each other. The things we enjoy and are interested in. The books we like and the kind of people we admire."

"But you told me you were just a career girl out for a good time."

"That doesn't mean I'm incapable of anything else. She suspected that he was poking fun at her. "Maybe I'm wrong," she said perversely. "Maybe you're just not interested in me as a person."

"I'm interested in you in every way," he declared. "I'll play the game any way you want to, Sherry, but in the end I shall win. In the end you're going to admit it."

FROM THE beginning Sherry had feared and distrusted her feeling about Bill Maddan. It seemed that where he was concerned she was incapable of deciding on a course of action and staying with it. New Year's morning she had determined not even to talk to him over the telephone, yet here she was seeing him several times a week. Irresolution being one of the feminine weaknesses she particularly disliked, Sherry was inwardly chagrined by her own conduct. She suspected that Anne was amused, although the older girl carefully avoided showing it. Even Mildred was puzzled by Sherry's insistence that Bill meant nothing to her when the prospect of seeing him affected her like a drink of wine.

A couple of months went by. The two girls had become accustomed to Mildred's presence. Although she

moved so quietly and appeared to be so colorless, there was no doubt that she contributed to their comfort. Mirrors and furniture shone. The white rug in the living room was spotless, and while Mildred herself ate little the meals were well cooked and daintily served. In the evenings the girls encouraged her to sit by the fire in the living room, but she seldom spoke and never mentioned the fact that soon she would have her child.

"She's like a little stray kitten," Sherry explained to Bill. "Accepting our shelter but never really making friends with us. We don't even know her husband's name, although she calls herself Mrs. Bates."

"Does she have any money at all?" Bill asked.

"Nothing except the small amount we give her each week. That's not enough to pay her hospital bill."

They were on their way home from the theater. Bill parked the car in front of the house as he spoke.

"Do you suppose she would let me help her, Sherry?"

"Why should you, Bill? Anne thinks her husband should be forced to support her."

"Anne is a man-hater. If she had her way we'd all be thrown into jail. I admire Mildred for refusing to insist upon his help if he won't live with her. I suppose she's still in love with him?"

"I'm afraid so. The poor child looks so sad it breaks my heart."

"She'll be happier after her baby is born."

"She hasn't shown any interest in it so far. All she seems to think about is that husband of hers. How can a girl be such a fool as to love a man who had deserted her?"

"MILDRED is the clinging vine type. She probably bored him to death." Bill opened, helping Sherry from the car. As they climbed the stairs they saw that the lights were on in the living room. Mildred sat in a chair before the fire with her face buried in her hands. Despair was in every line of her figure, but as they opened the door she sat up and resumed her sewing.

Bill whispered, "Let me talk to her alone."

Sherry went to her bedroom while Bill entered the living room.

"Hello, Mildred! Still working?" he asked, seating himself and lighting a cigarette.

"I'm going to bed right away," she said nervously, folding up the small garment.

"Wait a moment. I want to talk to you. Sherry and I were wondering if you've made any arrangements yet about your hospital bill."

Her pale eyes were frightened.

"No, I haven't. Why?"

Bill's voice was cheerfully matter of fact as he said, "Maybe you'll think it's none of my business, but I'd like to take care of that for you, if you don't object."

"Object?" she repeated. Tears rolled down her face. "Why are you so good to me?" she wept.

"Maybe I admire the courage of a girl who refuses to drag her husband into court."

"I'll die first."

"Well, you're not going to do that either. Remember your promise to Sherry. You'll feel differently about a lot of things when this thing is over."

Mildred shook her head, while the ghost of a smile flitted across her lips.

"Thank you, Mr. Maddan. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"Don't try. Let's not mention it again. When you find out how much you'll need you can tell Sherry and I'll give her a check for it."

When Sherry came into the living room she found Bill alone. He grinned at her.

"Now that I've done my good deed for the day how about rewarding me?"

"I'll put a gold star on your report card at the end of the month," she promised.

How little either of them realized the part Mildred's baby was to play in their lives!

ONCE SHERRY had spent several hours a week working on sketches at home, dreaming up new

ideas. Now, the moment she left her drawing she forgot it. Physically she had never felt so alive, but mentally she had begun to force herself. Monday mornings it was an effort to concentrate her attention, which had been absorbed by Bill over the week-end. In fact, the thing she dreaded was coming to pass. Her work was no longer of first importance to her. She was, albeit reluctantly, proving the statement that no man can serve two masters at the same time.

In April she was invited to spend the week-end with friends of Bill in Belvedere. Sherry had never been to the lovely wooded island before. She was delighted with the water gleaming through the dark trees, the distant hills and the house built on three levels with French doors opening upon a terraced garden on one side and a glass-enclosed patio in the rear.

"It's the most fascinating place I ever saw," she said to her hostess.

Gladys McKnight was in her late thirties. Her hair had been gray, she confided, since she was twenty. Softly waved and very short, it curled about her pretty, happy face. She had a laughing, merry mouth, a straight patrician nose and black-lashed deep blue eyes. Gladys was a beloved wife and looked it. Sherry had never met a woman so radiantly sure of herself. Her husband, a large dark man with a magnetic personality, was evidently as competent in his marriage as he had been in his business. It was a combination Sherry had not believed possible. Perhaps she had been influenced too much by Anne, who considered all successful men faithless or at least indifferent husbands. Yet here was a couple whose devotion was quietly apparent in everything they did.

Standing by the window in the tastefully decorated room where she had been left to unpack, Sherry gazed down in the patio. The stone fireplace was filled with huge logs. George McKnight was carefully building another fire of charcoals beneath the grill. Gladys had promised them barbecued steaks for dinner. The brick tiled floor was gay with umbrellas, chairs with striped awnings

and glass-topped tables. It looked like a movie set, where something dramatic was about to happen, Sherry thought.

As she watched, Gladys came out with a tray full of glasses. She put it on a table and, not realizing they were being observed, clasped both hands about her husband's neck, lifting her face to his. George's big arms closed about her and Sherry withdrew from the window. She was surprised to find tears in her eyes. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a relationship like that? Wasn't it worth more than any career could offer?

"THEY'RE delightful," Sherry said.

She was sitting beside Bill in a gaily striped swing. The outside lights had been turned off, leaving only the blazing fire. As Sherry spoke Bill reached for her hand.

"Would you like to live in a place like this, Sherry?"

"Who wouldn't?" she evaded, but Bill rushed on as if her answer had been affirmative. "I can sell the house in the city and buy one over here."

"So that's why you wanted me to spend the week-end with your friends in Belvedere?" She tried to speak lightly but the pressure of Bill's hand on hers, the comfort and beauty they were sharing, were paralyzing caution like a drug. "I must not lose my head," she thought, wanting to relax into his arms like any other woman alone with the man she loved. Why must she always be on the defensive?

"That was one reason," he admitted. "The McKnights are old friends of mine. I've wanted you to meet them for some time. Then I hoped if I could get you away from Anne's influence you might realize what a real marriage could mean."

"Anne doesn't influence me, Bill."

"Not consciously maybe. But you've surrounded yourself with the deluded ideas of modern career marriage. Just because Anne was married and disillusioned..."

"That has nothing to do with the way I feel," Sherry insisted.

"Then there's Mildred," Bill continued.

"Well, what about Milkred?"

"She's another failure," he commented. "Just another horrible example of what marriage can do to a girl."

Sherry had to smile as she remembered those had been Anne's exact words.

"I thought we had agreed to be friends, Bill. Just friends," she said, withdrawing her hand.

"I said I'd try it. But it's no go. I'm in love with you, Sherry, just as you are with me, only you're afraid to admit it."

"I don't want to be in love with anyone yet. I've no intention of marrying before I'm thirty."

"By that time no one may want you," he said frankly. "Even I won't love you after you become hard-boiled and cynical. As you will if you go on like this for four more years." Suddenly he put his arms about her and drew her close to him. "Look, you stubborn, adorable little feminist, I've played the game your way for months. I could have broken down your resistance long ago if I had kissed you as I did on New Year's Eve."

"Bill, don't. That's not true," she cried weakly, but at the touch of his lips joy tingled through every nerve. She loved him. She wanted him and at the moment nothing else mattered.

When he whispered, "I love you, my darling," she answered, "I love you, too. Oh, dear, what am I saying?"

"For once you're telling the truth," he declared triumphantly.

FOR A LITTLE while they sat enchanted in a world of magic. Neither would ever forget that night when surroundings and mood seemed blended into a perfect union. The sighing of the wind through the trees on the wooded slope beneath them, the velvety sheen of the water in the moonless darkness, the firelight and, more than any of these, the thrill of being alone with the person each loved.

"Don't argue, Sweet," Bill pleaded. "Let's just be happy."

Meekly Sherry obeyed. For one night she would permit herself this

ecstasy, even though in the clear light of the morrow she would regret it. This was the danger she had feared from the instant he had kissed her, but how lovely it was to be adored and cherished. Was it her fault that Bill mistook her silence for agreement? It was a shock to Sherry when he said, "In the morning we can decide when we'll be married."

"Married?" she repeated. Then, knowing herself incapable of refusing him, she said, "Yes, darling, we'll discuss everything in the morning."

She slept deeply, dreamlessly, waking to stretch and smile, remembering only that she had been completely happy. Then she frowned. Hadn't it been a false Paradise born of their romantic surroundings? Could she give Bill the attention a husband deserved and continue with her drawings? Marriages like the McKnights' were not built on a divided loyalty. If Bill would only be patient and wait a few more years... until she had developed a market for her own special type of advertising. If she could keep his devotion but remain free.

"In other words if you can have your cake and eat it, too," Bill said brutally.

IT WAS after breakfast and Bill and Sherry were walking around Belvedere Island with the McKnights, who had wandered ahead. The morning was blue and green and gold. The fragrant freshness of spring was in the air, but the harmony they had achieved the evening before was shattered. Sherry was on the defensive again. Determined to make herself clear, she sounded more unkind than she realized as she said, "It's up to me when I want to be married. That's a question every girl has a right to decide for herself."

"But you told me you loved me," Bill reminded her.

"And I do. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to marry you. At least not right away."

"Sherry, darling, I'm trying to be reasonable about this. Is it because you want to go on working?"

"No, Bill, when and if we're married I'm not going to work. But there is plenty of time yet. Why can't we go on just as we are?"

"Because we're in love. At least I thought we were last night. It seems now I was mistaken."

Sherry put her hand upon his arm.

"Don't be cross, darling! Can't you be a little patient with me?"

"Four years are too many. Even one year is too long. Sherry, why do you have to be thirty? Of all the insane reasons... If I didn't love you so much I'd wring your pretty neck."

"For one thing, I promised Aunt Agatha when she advanced me the money for art course..."

"Aunt Agatha is an old maid, I take it."

"She has never married," Sherry admitted. "But not because she didn't have chances, mind you. She had several, but none of them ever came up to her standards."

"They wouldn't," Bill said bitterly. "And that's the way it will be with you if you're not careful. But there's no use discussing it any longer, you're like a different person this morning."

Sherry sighed. It was a pity to mar the serenity of the sunny day by bickering. Yet in spite of Bill's words she felt sure of herself and him as they walked together. This was what she wanted. Bill beside her, loving her but willing to wait indefinitely; the pleasure of his companionship; affection without obligations. It was fun to spend the week-end with Bill and his friends, but on Monday she would be just as eager to return to her job.

BUT, ALTHOUGH they had counted on several more hours, as they returned to the house the telephone was ringing. The call was for Sherry.

"I've been trying to get you all morning," Anne said. "I've taken Mildred to the hospital. She's going to have her baby."

"So soon?" Sherry gasped. "I thought she had another month yet."

"The doctor says it's on the way and you'd better get back here. After all, this is your problem, not mine. Besides, she's asking for you."

"Yes, of course. Right away," Sherry promised.

Tossing her clothes into the suitcase, she bade a hurried good-bye to the McKnights and they were on their way. Neither of them felt like talking on the drive to the city. They were crossing Golden Gate Bridge when Bill remarked, "Relax, Sherry! Babies are born every minute."

"But Mildred isn't very strong. She's been so sad and lonely. It will be terrible for her."

"She'll probably be a lot happier when she has her child."

"I hope so," Sherry said doubtfully. "But so far she seems to feel the baby is to blame for the trouble with her husband. You'll take me to the hospital, won't you, Bill? Anne will wait there until we arrive."

Bill parked the car and followed her to the maternity floor, where Anne paced up and down the corridor.

"I'm as jittery as an expectant grandmother," she said.

"How is she?" Sherry asked anxiously.

"Everything seems to be going normally. They've taken her to the delivery room. Bill, she won't need us now that Sherry is here. How about taking me home?"

"Stay where you are," Sherry said sternly. "Bill can leave if he wants to, but you're going to wait here with me until that baby is born."

She had not expected to feel like this over the birth of Mildred's child. But the mystery of life was too great to be faced alone. Behind those silent swinging doors the greatest drama in a woman's life was taking place. And because she had dragged Mildred from the ocean, preventing her suicide, Sherry felt herself vitally connected with Mildred's baby. She could have wept with gratitude when Bill said, "We'll both stay, Sherry! Just as long as you want us." She

did not realize that her feminine fear and unusual lack of poise made her seem dearer than ever to him.

MILDRED'S baby was a girl. Seen through the glass window provided for adoring relatives, it looked like all the other little blanket-wrapped bundles. The three spectators, who had waited in the hospital for that moment, sighed with relief.

"Such a ado about nothing," Anne murmured.

"Thank God it's over," Sherry remarked. "You two may go now. I'll stay for a while in case Mildred wants to see me."

"You'd better have something to eat first," Bill advised, but she refused. Things had been happening so rapidly she wanted to be alone. She needed time to think. But as she stood beside Mildred's bed her own problems were forgotten.

Sherry's heart contracted with pity as she gazed at Mildred's exhausted face.

"Everything's fine, dear," Sherry said encouragingly. "And you've a lovely baby. The nurse says she's perfect."

Mildred sighed. "A girl. I hoped it would be a boy. At least a boy would never have to go through this."

"You'll feel much better after you've had some sleep. The doctor told us you got along beautifully."

"I wish I'd died," Mildred said distinctly.

Sherry pretended not to hear.

"Try to sleep now, honey! Shall I sit here beside you for a while?"

"I'm naming her Sherry Anne, you know."

"How nice! I've never had a namesake before. Don't you want to see her?"

"Later," Mildred said, closing her eyes.

She fell asleep, looking like a child herself with one hand tucked beneath her cheek. Sherry watched her anxiously. She had hoped the birth of her baby would rouse Mildred from the morbid apathy into which she had been plunged by the desertion of her

husband. Perhaps it was too soon to judge, but certainly Mildred's attitude could not be considered normal. Another girl whose child had been born after Mildred's was wheeled into the room, accompanied by her husband. Her first request was to see her baby. Sherry was glad Mildred was not awake to see the tears in the man's eyes as he kissed the proud, happy young mother.

"If I knew who Mildred's husband is I'd go to him and insist that he come to see her," Sherry thought indignantly.

She did ask Mildred later if she wanted them to notify anyone.

"No," Mildred replied. "There isn't anyone who would be interested."

WHAT SETTLED it so far as Sherry was concerned, as she reported to Anne that evening.

"There's nothing we can do about it, but I'm afraid she isn't going to love the baby. She scarcely looked at her when they brought her in."

"May I remind you that this is her problem, not ours?" Anne said, applying enamel to her nails.

"She's naming her after both of us."

"Very clever," Anne admitted. "But if she's going to continue to live with us she'll have to keep it out of my way. I haven't a motherly instinct in my entire body and I refuse to be disturbed by somebody else's brat."

"I'm not looking forward to that part of it myself. But we can't send Mildred away until she is well enough to go to work."

Sherry felt tired and depressed. Bill had telephoned that he wouldn't be seeing her for a few nights. "I want you to decide what you're going to do," he said, "before I talk to you again."

He was going to force her either to marry him or to give him up, which was manifestly unfair. Like many modern girls, Sherry had become adept at refusing to become serious without losing a man's attentions. It was an art to maintain the fine balance required. Always to be assured of an amusing week-end without becoming too involved. She had known Bill was going to be difficult the first time he

bad kissed her. That was the reason she had been afraid of him.

"It's turning out just as I knew it would," she prophesied gloomily. "Now that I've given up my good old stand-bys like Roger, I'll be left without anyone."

Yet even the thought of Bill gave her a thrill of tenderness. He had been so adoring the night before. She would never forget it. Was a career really so important by comparison? Sternly she reminded herself that that was weakness. She would have to tell Bill that if he really loved her he would be willing to wait.

AS IN THE case of many another problem solved in the darkest hours of the night, Sherry's solution did not seem so practical in the daytime. She worried over it while sitting at her drawing board. Bill's face, strong, generous, compelling, haunted her until she could not work. For the first time in months she had a sketch rejected. Whether she married him or not, he was already interfering with her career. Meantime there were nightly visits to be made to the hospital, where Mildred was rapidly regaining her strength but still showed no interest in her baby.

The night before she returned home Bill came to the hospital to suggest that she have a practical nurse for a few days. Sherry told him she had already decided this would be necessary.

"But there's no reason you should pay for it," she said on the way home.

"Maybe I want to," he smiled. "After all, the sooner Mildred recovers the better it will be for us. Have you decided when we are going to be married?"

Her voice was sharper than she intended it to be as she replied, "I'm not ready to marry you yet, Bill, and I won't be hurried."

They were driving up Telegraph Hill, and he parked the car in the circle below Coit Tower before he answered. They were going to have it out, and in a sudden panestricken moment Sherry knew she was not prepared to make any decision. She could

not give him up; neither could she surrender.

"If you'll only wait," she began, but he interrupted, "I want you now, Sherry, not four years from now when you've become self-sufficient. Life moves so fast these days. In four years anything might happen. You see I love you."

"And I love you."

"Then let's be married."

"It's not so simple as that, Darling. I want to achieve a name for myself."

"Is that really so important to you?"

"Of course it is. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I'm not ambitious. I've seen too many girls try to make a success of marriage and a career and fail at both."

"Now you sound like Anne."

"Well, there are women who enjoy working more than keeping house and having children."

"What's more wonderful than fulfilling your destiny as a mother?"

"Mildred tried to do that and look what happened to her."

"I hope you aren't implying that I would behave like Mildred's husband."

"Certainly not. But it proves the danger of becoming too dependent on anyone. Nothing else matters to Mildred. Nothing."

"I still say that has no bearing on our case," he said logically.

SHERRY DECIDED to descend to more feminine tactics. She loved Bill too much to lose him just because they couldn't agree about a wedding date.

"Can't you be patient a little longer?" she murmured gently. "This is so new and different for me. I've never been in love before, so please don't rush me. Let's just be happy, and if you convince me I'm wrong I'll be only too glad to admit it."

"But I can't go on indefinitely not knowing what the score is."

"I said I loved you. Isn't that enough for now?"

"I suppose it will have to be," Bill answered gloomily.

For the moment she had won, but

she suspected it would be a temporary victory. Sherry told herself it was at least a respite. With Mildred and a nurse arriving the next day, with extra food to order and the general commotion a baby would cause, she was in no condition to make a decision which would affect her entire future. As it happened, she did it anyway, but Sherry had no premonition at that time of the emotional change Mildred's baby was going to cause.

Whether it was because she bore Sherry's name or because she seemed pitifully alone without the love of either father or mother, there was an emotional bond between the baby and Sherry. The fluttering roseleaf hands, the button of a nose, the eager little mouth awakened an instinct in Sherry which she herself did not understand. Sherry Anne's routine was established by the time the nurse left. She ate and slept with remarkable regularity. She even cried in the daytime when the girls were at work. Anne reluctantly admitted she was the best behaved infant she had ever known, and Sherry begged for the privilege of giving her her six o'clock feeding. Mildred prepared the formula with painstaking precision. She bathed the baby and washed her clothes, but not one word of endearment did Mildred utter. She never held it close or murmured silly messages in its ears.

"All the affection she'll have will have to be supplied by us," Sherry said to Anne on their way to work.

"Speak for yourself," Anne mocked. "I'm not being a foster mother nor any other kind."

"Well, she does something to me," Sherry admitted. "I love to hold her and feel her snuggling down in my arms. I saw Mildred watching me with the strangest expression last night, as if she knew I loved the baby more than she does. And I think she was ashamed!"

But even Sherry did not guess the selfish plan which was taking form in Mildred's mind.

LIFE SEEMED good to Sherry that day. Her work was going more smoothly. She had been able to put Bill out of her mind for the first

time in weeks. The routine at home was well established, with Mildred caring for the baby and cooking for the girls when they ate at home. Anne had a new masculine interest, one of the executives in the department store where she had charge of the jewelry. And although she vowed she had never been able to explain the baby carriage in the hall and bottles of formula stored in the icebox, the baby had actually bothered her very little. They had hired an Italian woman to do the heavy cleaning. It was Marietta, plump and voluble, who told them later of the telephone calls she had overheard. Mrs. Bates had been talking to someone when Marietta came in. Mrs. Bates was terribly upset or maybe just excited and she hung up abruptly when she realized she was no longer alone. It seemed strange at the time, because she had never before shown any emotion about anything, not even the precious baby, but no explanation was made and naturally, concluded Marietta, rolling her fine dark eyes, she did not meddle in matters which were none of her business. If she had suspected, if she had had the remotest idea that Mrs. Bates was planning to desert her own little child she would have tried to talk to her. Because two days later this was what Mildred did.

Sherry and Bill had dined together and gone to an early movie. They returned to the flat to find all the lights on. The baby was screaming and Anne was walking the floor with her.

"If I ever get my hands on that girl I'll kill her," Anne said grimly.

"Here I came home all sweetness and enthusiasm to dress for a date with Sam and what do I find? The baby crying in her bed and a note on Mildred's table!"

Sherry took the baby from her and spoke calmly.

"The little thing is hungry. All you had to do was heat one of the bottles in a pan of hot water."

"I didn't know how to work those trick nipples," the efficient Miss Travis admitted. "Besides, after I read that note I was too mad to do anything but telephone Sam that I couldn't make it."

"Will you warm the baby's bottle, Bill?" Sherry asked picking up the sheets of notepaper Anne had indicated. "Is it as bad as that?" she inquired.

"Read it," Anne advised, lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers.

With the baby's round little head burrowing into her neck, Sherry read:

"Dear Sherry:

I am giving the baby to you since you love her more than I do. To me she will always be the cause of all my unhappiness. Without her my husband may come back to me. If he doesn't, I'm going to get a divorce and start all over again. Don't try to find me, as I shall be using his name from now on. Thanks for everything. If it hadn't been for you, Sherry Anne would never have been born."

SHERRY ANNE was tucked into bed, blissfully unaware of her mother's desertion. Sherry returned to the living room to find Bill and Anne staring at each other.

"Did you call Marietta?" Sherry asked.

Anne shook her head, so Sherry herself went to the telephone.

"She'll come until we can get somebody else," she reported triumphantly.

Anne said, "You're not going through with this, Sherry? You can't mean to take on such a responsibility."

"For the present, yes. Mildred may come to her senses when she's thought things over."

"Not that one," Anne said bitterly.

Bill said nothing. He smoked silently until Sherry asked, "You wouldn't really want to see Sherry Anne put into a home for foundlings?"

"It would be better for her than to remain with a mother who doesn't love her," he replied. "Then, of course, there is the possibility that she would be adopted by a couple who want a child."

"I've thought of that," Sherry answered quietly. She did not tell them that the idea of giving the baby to strangers was like a knife in her heart.

Bill rose. "I'm going home, so you gals will have to fight it out alone. See you tomorrow, Sherry!"

She followed him into the hall to kiss him good night.

"Don't worry if you can help it," he advised.

"Darling, I won't," she promised, pressing her cheek against his.

But although she had hoped to go to bed with no further discussion Anne was determined to have it out then and there.

"I have to know what you're going to do, Sherry. I can't ask Sam into a private nursery. It was bad enough with Mildred here, but Marietta will have baby clothes scattered all over the place. I can't stand it and I won't."

"I told you before you're free to move any time."

"But how will you manage without me? It will cost you twice as much as you're paying."

"Maybe I can find someone else who won't object to a baby."

"Honestly, I think you're as crazy as Mildred. You don't have to take over just because she suggested it."

Sherry smiled.

"I know that I love Sherry Anne. She's always seemed partly mine and I'm not going to give her to anyone else."

"**A**LL RIGHT. That settles it. This is where we part."

"Where will you go, Anne? It isn't easy to find a place to live."

"One of the other huyets at the store has bought a house in Marina. She told me yesterday she was planning to rent a room and bath to help pay for it later on, if you change your mind, I'll come back."

"I shan't change my mind," Sherry assured her. "What about the furniture? Half of it is yours."

"Keep it for the present. I would just have to store it. Damn Mildred anyway. Why did you go to the beach that morning?"

Sherry did not reply. She knew only too well that she had gone to the beach because of Bill. She had made up her mind not to see him again, yet five months later he was firmly entrenched in her heart. Perhaps that had been fate, just as it had been meant for her to rescue Mildred. Perhaps Sherry thought now, this desertion of Mildred's had been the final shove to push her into Bill's protecting arms. The more she reflected on this the more plausible it seemed. The baby had become her responsibility and Bill wanted to marry her. He had been patient but he had warned her that he had no intention of waiting four years. Why insist upon a career which seemed less important every day?

She had left the door into the sun room open. Slipping from bed, Sherry went to the bassinet which held the warm, sleeping bundle. The moon was full and the tiny delicate features were clearly visible. Poor little tick. She had had no father. Now she had no mother. But it was within Sherry's power to give her both parents and a normal home. Bill himself had suggested that some couple might want to adopt the baby.

Sherry crept back into bed, but she slept little that night. She told herself this was the perfect solution and smiled at herself because she was so ready to grasp at the excuse for a surrender she must have made in any case.

"I love Bill," she thought dreamily. "I loved him the moment he kissed me. That's why I was so upset. Because I knew he was going to change the course of my whole life. He is right. We should be married now and I'm going to tell him so tomorrow."

DURING DINNER Sherry wondered how she should broach the subject uppermost in her mind. Bill solved that question by asking one, when finally they were seated before the fire with the brass coffee service on a low table between them.

"Where's Anne?" Bill inquired, sipping from the cup she handed him.

"Gone. For good. She's moved in with a friend."

"Yes, and it's all right with me. Anne's cynicism has been getting on my nerves."

Bill carefully placed the fragile cup on the table.

"You've really decided to keep Mildred's child?"

"She's always seemed partly mine, Bill. It's just as Mildred said in her note: if I hadn't saved her life Sherry Anne would never have been born. It's very clear to me now that everything you've told me is true. My career isn't as important as I thought it was. I'm ready to marry you."

Instead of taking her in his arms and whispering his gratitude, Bill asked, "When did you change your mind?"

"Last night, but I've been weakening for some time."

"Last night," he repeated. "After Mildred had run away."

"That may have crystallized my decision but I'd have reached it soon anyway."

"I doubt that," Bill declared. "I doubt it very much. You've been quite definite about not wanting to get married until you were thirty. I'm afraid it's the baby you're thinking about."

What was he saying? How could he believe that?

"Do you honestly think I'd marry you just to have a home for Sherry Anne?"

"You may not recognize that as your motive," he admitted, "but to me it's quite obvious."

"Why, Bill . . . Oh, darling, don't be so stupid. I've told you before that I loved you. Have you forgotten that night in Belvedere?"

Bill frowned.

"I'll never forget it, Sherry. Not the way you changed the next morning. That's why I can't believe you would marry me now if it weren't for the baby."

"Sherry Anne has nothing to do with it. I always expected to marry you."

"There's only one way you can prove that."

"How?"

"By turning her over to the pro-

per authorities, permitting them to find her parents or place her with some couple who want a baby."

"I can't do that, Bill. I love Sherry Anne. Why can't we adopt her?"

HIS JAW WAS set into stubborn lines she had not seen before.

"Because eventually, I hope, we'd have children of our own, not the offspring of a man I don't even know."

"That's selfish, Bill. And I thought you were so generous when you paid Mildred's hospital bill and arranged for a nurse."

"That was purely a matter of money. I was sorry for her, but not enough to adopt her baby and bring it up as mine."

Confused and hurt, Sherry was staring at him.

"I can't understand it. You say you love me. You wanted to marry me . . ."

Seizing her hands, he cried, "And so I do, but not just because you want a home for Mildred's child. If you really loved me you wouldn't have waited until now to make up your mind. Or you'd be willing to give up the baby."

"I can't do that, Bill. If you loved me you wouldn't ask it. Sherry Anne is my responsibility. If you don't want to share it with me that is your privilege."

"I was afraid you'd feel that way," he said, dropping her hands. Rising, he put on his coat and took his hat from a chair. "Goodbye, Sherry."

"Goodbye!" she retorted.

Sherry was hurt but she was also angry. She had been betrayed into confessing her desire for marriage only to be refused. She wouldn't have Bill feel that way. But hadn't Anne always told her all men, including Bill, were selfish? Sherry pouted more coffee and swallowed it without realizing what she was doing. How could Bill doubt her like that? Walking out now just as her heart had wakened to the need for a fuller, deeper life.

"I won't give him up," Sherry cried, frightened at the bleakness of a future without him. "I won't give

up the baby either. After he's had a day or two to think it over I'll call him."

But she knew that Bill had intended that goodbye to be final.

SHERRY SAT BY the fire for a long time trying to decide what to do. The problem of taking care of Mildred's baby while continuing her work was a serious one. Bill had been unfair to accuse her of wanting to marry him for Sherry Anne's sake. Nevertheless their marriage would have solved everything. It would take every penny Sherry could scrape together to maintain the flat and hire competent help. Marietta was only temporary. The Italian woman's ideas of child care were too old-fashioned for a modern baby. Some other arrangement would have to be made soon, but what? It was too late to put an ad in the Sunday paper but she could do it Monday. Meanwhile there was always the possibility that Bill would change his mind.

Before she went to bed Sherry gave the baby her final bottle, and the absolute helplessness of the little body in her arms confronted her. Whatever else happened, Sherry Anne was hers. The more she sacrificed for her the more she loved her. As she sat in the rocker in her bedroom she caught a glimpse of the fur jacket she had bought the week before. It wasn't paid for yet but had been charged to her account.

"I'll have to return it," Sherry thought with a pang of regret. It was such a lovely jacket, but with Bill out of her life she didn't really need it. She wouldn't be going out much. She hadn't heard from Roger since their quarrel months before, and her other men friends had gradually stopped calling after discovering that she was no longer available.

"Bill has really left me in a spot," she sighed. But dates and being popular did not seem so important any longer. Maybe she was growing up, or was it because she didn't want to go places with anyone but Bill?

The baby had finished her bottle now and lay like a stuffed cherub staring glassily at the ceiling. Sud-

denly she gave a heavenly smile. Sherry knew it was indigestion, but Marietta always insisted that she was smiling at the angels.

"A bit of heaven clings to them for a while," Marietta had said.

SHERRY LIFTED the baby tenderly to press the downy head against her cheek.

"Whatever happens I'll never give you up," she promised.

She was to repeat that decision more than once in the days that followed. On Sunday Marietta did not come, so the full care of the baby and flat fell upon Sherry, and although she worked with speed and efficiency it was late afternoon before she had time to sit down. All day she had hoped Bill would call for her, but the telephone did not ring. At four she put Sherry Anne in her carriage by the window to get the sun. She had no sooner done this than the door bell rang. Thank goodness, maybe it was Bill. She had not realized until that moment how desperately she had been hoping he would call. Giving her hair a pat, Sherry ran to the door. She was wearing an old sweater and skirt, but she would be so glad to see him she didn't care.

Swinging the door wide to welcome him, Sherry saw a short, round little woman with a face like an apple withering on its stem. There was a blue bird in her hat which stared at Sherry accusingly. Gloves, shoes and bag were stamped with respectability. Her heavy coat was that of a gentlewoman who knew values and shopped until she found them.

"Well, Sherry!" she said in a gentle, ladylike voice. "I guess you didn't expect to see me here."

"Aunt Agatha! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"We don't seem to be confiding much in each other these days," her aunt remonstrated.

"I've been so busy," Sherry admitted. "Since the baby came . . . Oh, I forgot you don't even know about her."

She had deliberately not explained Mildred to her only relative, suspecting Aunt Agatha would not approve.

How much more difficult to explain Mildred's baby!

"I knew about her but not through you," Aunt Agatha said disapproving. "Anne Travis wrote her parents in Connecticut that some young woman you had taken in had become a mother. It was they who notified me."

She followed Sherry into the living room, glancing at the evidence in the buggy without enthusiasm.

"Isn't she adorable?" babbled Sherry, praying for the right words. "I know I should have told you sooner, but I was afraid you might not understand. You see the baby's mother was going to drown herself because her husband had deserted her. I rescued her, so then it sort of seemed up to me to let her stay here."

Aunt Agatha's bright eyes swung from the baby back to her niece.

"And where is she now?" she inquired.

"Well, that's another story. What I mean is, she's run away. Oh, Aunt Agatha, don't look like that! Sit down, please, and let me explain it to you."

IT'S A GOOD thing I came prepared to stay for a while," Aunt Agatha said when Sherry had told her the whole story. "If ever a girl needed her family . . . I still can't understand how you could get involved in such a thing."

"I told you, Auntie, after I'd saved Mildred's life I felt responsible for her."

"But why should you get mixed up with the kind of a girl who tries to commit suicide. She proved she wasn't any good when she ran off and left her baby."

"She blamed the baby for the trouble with her husband. She could not think about anything else."

"Well, well just have to find her. Have you reported it to the police?"

"No, and don't you try it either. We've no idea where she is or what name she's using. Besides, I want the baby. I'll never forgive you if you do anything to make me lose her."

"Those are harsh words to use to your only living relative."

"I know it and I'm sorry. Just the same I mean them."

The birdlike eyes scrutinized Sherry's face for an instant; then Aunt Agatha said mildly, "You've no objection to my visiting you for a while? You're not too proud to accept my help?"

Sherry flung her arms about the round little figure.

"Darling, of course not. If you're here I can get Marietta to help with the work. But I can't trust her with the baby's formula."

"Then I'll stay for a while, until we decide what to do. At least my presence here will prevent people from talking. A young girl has no business living alone, much less with a baby."

Sherry doubted if anyone on Telegraph Hill was interested enough to criticize, but she was too grateful to say so. Anything weirder than her prim little aunt with a baby could not be imagined. But her coming had solved the immediate problem about the care of Sherry Anne. Disapproving Aunt Agatha might be, but she would prepare the formula and follow routine with unvarying exactness. Thereby leaving Sherry free to concentrate on her other difficulty, namely Bill Maddan.

ON MONDAY morning Sherry left for the office with a large cardboard box under her arm. When Aunt Agatha asked what was in it, she replied airily, "Just a jacket I have to return." She did not explain that the jacket was made of nutria or that she had been saving for it for months. That being part of the price she must pay for the privilege of keeping Mildred's baby; she renounced it cheerfully.

She was not so resigned about giving up Bill. She still could not believe he would persist in an attitude which seemed to her completely selfish. It wasn't like him, or was it? Had she been mistaken in considering him the most generous man she had ever known?

Nervous and depressed over the abrupt change in her affairs, Sherry

was unable to concentrate on her work. Aunt Agatha telephoned several times with questions concerning the baby. Marietta would continue to do the cleaning but the maiden lady had gallantly assumed complete charge of Sherry Anne.

"She won't be satisfied to stay here very long," Sherry told herself, "But it will give me a chance to catch my breath and in the meantime something else may happen."

What she meant was that perhaps she would become reconciled with Bill, but although she glanced up hopefully everytime anyone entered the office he did not appear. Neither did he telephone her. It was as if a chasm had opened between them, separating them forever. Sherry was heartbroken and even the baby could not comfort her.

She endured it for three days. Three days of work which had become a burden. Three evenings listening to the detailed adventures of Aunt Agatha's day. Then she telephoned him; from a drug store booth, since there was no privacy at home. When she heard his voice Sherry wanted to cry, because already in that brief period it had grown unfamiliar.

"HELLO, BILL!" she said.

She could sense his surprise as if he had not expected this to happen.

"Sherry!" he cried, then more guardedly, "How are you?"

"Miserable. I miss you."

"I've missed you, too," he admitted.

"Darling, will you come to the flat this evening?"

"Why?"

"Aunt Agatha has arrived," Sherry said lightly. "I want her to meet you."

"I'm afraid she wouldn't care for me at the moment. I'm not in a very social mood."

Sherry abandoned pretense.

"Look, Bill, let's not quarrel. Just because you don't want to marry me is no excuse for not seeing me."

"I do want to marry you. Not to give a home to Mildred's child but because I love you."

"Darling, that's all I wanted to

know, because if you really love me we can come to some kind of agreement about Sherry Anne."

"Not if you're determined to keep her."

Sherry cried, "I can't give her up. You'll feel the same way when she's old enough to know you."

"Sorry, Sherry! It's no go. The sooner we face facts the better it will be for both of us."

"Oh, Bill, I can't give you up either."

"You can't have everything," he reminded her. "If it's a father for Sherry Anne you want, you probably won't have any trouble finding one. All men won't feel about it as I do."

"Thank goodness for that," Sherry flared, losing her temper. "Although as it happens, I don't want anyone else."

"You don't want me either," he said bitterly. "Why not let it go at that?"

If she had not been in a public telephone booth, Sherry would have wept with rage and disappointment. Bill was undoubtedly the most stubborn, selfish individual she had ever known.

"How can I love a man who treats me like this?" she asked, and winced as she remembered she had once said that about Mildred.

She was literally seething with indignation which carried her through the evening routine of feeding the baby, dining with Aunt Agatha, wiping the dishes and chatting before the fire.

"I called Ann today," Aunt Agatha said over her knitting. She was making a shell pink sweater for Sherry Anne. "I'm sure her mother will want me to see her while I'm here. You know we were under the impression that you were bosom friends."

"We were," Sherry admitted. "We're still friends so far as I'm concerned. Ann insisted upon moving. Naturally I didn't try to stop her."

"Well, I've invited her to have dinner with us tomorrow night," the older woman stated.

"Fine," Sherry said carelessly, but she was thinking, "What a shock

Aunt Agatha is going to have. She hasn't seen Anne since she was a little girl with pigtails."

ANNE'S VISIT with Sherry's Aunt Agatha turned out surprisingly well. Utterly unconscious that the daughter of her old friend was putting on an act, Miss Hamilton accepted Anne's decorous behavior at face value.

"She's a smart girl," the maiden lady commented when Anne had departed. "I'm sorry she couldn't have gone on living with you, Sherry, but as she said, she will be back as soon as the baby is disposed of."

Sherry said nothing to disturb the armed truce between them. If her aunt refused to accept the fact that Sherry Anne belonged to her, there was nothing that could be done about it. For the present, Agatha Hamilton was doing what she considered her duty and Sherry appreciated it. Secretly she hoped the constant care of the child would break down her aunt's resistance.

Meanwhile Aunt Agatha, who was as sensible as she was conventional, urged Sherry to go out more. It wasn't normal, she argued, for a young girl to work all day and never have any diversion.

"You'll work better if you have some fun," she said kindly. "While I'm here to stay with the baby you should be taking advantage of it."

Sherry was unwilling to admit that she hadn't been invited to do anything since her aunt's arrival. Her excuse was that she was too tired.

"That's just what I mean," Aunt Agatha said. "You wouldn't be so tired if you had something else to think about."

Anne solved that problem by telephoning an invitation to Sunday breakfast at Sam's penthouse on Green Street. Sam Grable was one of the highest paid executives in the city. Although he worked for a department store, he fancied himself to be a patron of the arts and his Sunday breakfasts honoring various art-

ors or musicians who happened to be playing at local hotels or theaters were famous.

"You'll enjoy it," Anne urged. "You're sure to meet someone interesting. Do come."

SHERRY SAID she would. She did not look forward to it with any eager anticipation, but as Aunt Agatha had said, it would give her something to think about. What to wear, for instance. For the first time she wished for the fur jacket she had returned. Not that she really needed it. She had plenty of pretty clothes. A black suit with a frilly white blouse and a fresh gardenia would be both suitable and becoming.

"You look very nice," Aunt Agatha approved as Sherry adjusted her veiled hat.

"Thank you, Auntie. Now you have the telephone number in case you need me."

"I'll get along, my dear! The baby will sleep until after one; then this afternoon I'll take her out in the carriage."

"Maybe I'll be back in time to go with you," Sherry promised with a critical glance at her reflection, which was as fresh and sweet and young as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Well don't hurry. Stay as long as you're enjoying yourself."

That might not be long, Sherry thought, ascending the elevator to the top of one of the city's highest buildings. She had not cared for Sam Grable and could not imagine being interested in any of his friends, but in this she was wrong. The guests assembled in the huge glass-walled living room were as cleverly chosen as the modernistic furniture. Anne introduced her to a famous couple starring in a local theater; there was the author of a popular radio serial looking like one of his own characters in riding clothes; several newspaper columnists and the noted band leader Marvin Edwards.

"He has the best band in town," Anne said.

Sherry smiled at the debonair young man with black-lashed blue eyes and curly dark hair.

"It is a good band. I've danced to it."

"You're flattering me," he replied. "But please don't stop. I love it. As a matter of fact, I remember seeing you."

"Sounds like the beginning of a beautiful friendship," mocked Anne, drifting on.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Marvin inquired with his boyish smile. "Let's sit down and I'll prove it to you. It was two weeks ago and you were wearing a white taffeta dress with a bunch of red carnations on one shoulder."

Sherry glanced in surprise.

"I didn't know men ever noticed details like that. Imagine your remembering them!"

"Does one forget a beautiful painting or the theme of a haunting melody? You aren't the kind of girl any man forgets."

"That's where you're wrong," she corrected him with a pang at her heart. "I'm erased very easily."

"Why do you say that, Sherry?"

Realizing that they were progressing too rapidly, Sherry smiled.

"Merely conversation. Now if you'll excuse me I must go speak to Sam."

"I shall be waiting for you," he said. Sherry was startled by the lazy intimacy of his tone but she was also intrigued. It seemed like a long time since anyone had been interested enough in her to flatter her.

BREAKFASTS at Sam's were as unconventional as they were stimulating. There were more men than women and the feminine guests, as Sam explained to Sherry, were chosen for their beauty rather than their brains.

"Nothing bores a clever man more than a homely woman," he said.

"I don't know whether to be pleased or insulted," she retorted.

"You and Anne never let your desire to show off interfere with your charm," he assured her. "The truly smart girl saves her wisecracks for her women friends."

Watching Anne's smiling role of listener to the author of the radio show, Sherry scarcely recognized the

cynical man hater. Perhaps. Sherry thought, gazing at the assembled faces, everyone wore a mask to conceal what he really was. She wondered what it would be like if everyone in the room should suddenly blurt out what he was thinking. The idea amused her, and from across the table Marvin Edwards smiled as if he understood. After breakfast he followed her to the sunny terrace filled with potted trees and all kinds of flowers.

"Are you annoyed with me?" he asked in a low voice.

"Annoyed? Why should I be?"

"For calling you Sherry. I like that name and it suits you."

"I'm not such a stickler for the conventions as that. You may call me Sherry if you care to."

"Thank you! Will you call me Marvin?"

"If you like," she agreed, thinking that he had none of the conceit she often associated with band leaders.

"**N**ICE UP here, isn't it?" Marvin continued. "Although personally I'd prefer a house on the ground with flowers growing out of the earth. I'm going to have a place like that sometime. Some spot where I can take root. I'm tired of traveling."

"You haven't traveled much lately," she reminded him. "Haven't you been here for some time?"

"Since Thanksgiving. That is long time to stay in one place, but we've just happened to get all the breaks."

"I imagine you deserved them," Sherry said warmly.

There was something appealing about him as he stood beside her, his dark hair ruffled by the wind. He must have been several years older than she was but he didn't look it.

"What were you thinking when I smiled at you across the table?" he asked.

"Oh, I just had a silly idea about how startling it would be if everyone would suddenly say what was in his mind."

"I've often been accused of being too outspoken as it is."

"Frankness is one of the qualities

I admire most," she said, thinking of Bill.

"I should like to know what was in your mind as you said that. You looked so sad and wistful. Someone has hurt you, Sherry!"

Her heart was so heavy and his understanding so intuitive that tears blurred her eyes.

"It's very foolish of me to show it. I'll get over it..."

"Of course you will. I wish you'd let me help you."

"How could you?"

"By seeing you. We could have a lot of fun together."

"Yes, I think we could."

He held out his hand. "Is it a deal then?"

"It's a deal," she said.

WHEN THE time arrived Sherry wished she had not promised to dine with Marvin Edwards. She was tired. Monday was always a difficult day at the office. Her work was still disrupted by the break with Bill. She felt sometimes as if she were drawing under an anesthetic. She couldn't think clearly. If it didn't improve she would lose her job. Work settled like a dark cloud in her distressed mind, casting an ominous shadow over everything she did. She felt too old and disillusioned to go dancing with the band leader.

"It isn't worth the effort," she explained to Aunt Agatha, tucking the baby into bed.

"That proves how much you need it," Aunt Agatha said briskly. "You're too young to sit by the fire every evening. I'll make you a nice, hot cup of tea before you take your bath."

Aunt Agatha was so kind, Sherry reflected. It was wonderful to have her there, although Sherry was afraid she would not approve of Marvin. The maiden lady's standards were extremely high, and "jazz," as she called it, was one of her pet aversions. Sherry hurried with her dressing, but Marvin was early, so Aunt Agatha was forced to entertain him. Sherry was surprised to find them chatting like

old friends when she entered the living room.

"What in the world were you talking about?" she asked as they walked to his car.

Marvin laughed boyishly.

"She was telling me about Montclair, so I told her I came from a small town myself and preferred it to any city."

"Liar! Or do you call it being tactful?"

"It's the truth," he assured her. "When I have enough money, I'm going to settle down in some quiet spot."

"With a country club and a golf course."

"Why not? I'm in this racket because it's profitable, not because I enjoy it."

Sherry decided it was a propitious moment to explain about the baby.

"Did my aunt tell you why she is here?"

"She said something about a sweater she was knitting for the baby. I wanted to ask what baby but I didn't."

"The baby is mine. At least she will be after I adopt her. You see, her mother ran away and left her with me."

HE TOOK IT well, with only a lifted eyebrow.

"Aren't you rather young to take on a family?"

"Maybe, but in a way I feel responsible. Mildred, that's the mother, was trying to commit suicide when I stopped her. Later she gave the baby to me, saying she didn't love it."

"Nice person," he commented mildly.

"I think she used to be. She was so in love with her husband she blamed the baby for coming between them."

Marvin did not reply, and, glancing at his face, Sherry wondered if she had bored him. After all, there was no reason he should be interested in Mildred's story. She was casting about in her mind for another topic when he said, "What a wonderful person you are, Sherry! To do such a

thing for a girl you didn't even know"

"But I love the baby. I feel as if she really were mine. Don't try to make a heroine out of me. Most of my friends think I'm crazy. Even Aunt Agatha is just humoring me temporarily, hoping I'll change my mind."

She spoke lightly, but the fact that he admired her action established a new bond between them.

"I'd like to see her if I may," he said.

"Of course, if you'll drop in some afternoon when she's awake."

"I'll do that," he promised.

And now, relaxed and grateful, Sherry felt her spirits lift. Fatigue dropped from her as she listened to Marvin's sparkling banter. It was fun to be circulating again. They would have a husband's holiday, he said, and spend the evening listening to someone else's band. He was recognized instantly on entering the club. The orchestra played his theme song, forcing Marvin to take a bow. When the spotlight was focused on them Sherry was glad she had worn her most becoming frock.

"You're quite a celebrity," she said, smiling.

"Not at all. I'm getting all this attention because of you. They're not accustomed to seeing me with such a beautiful lady."

It was flattery and she knew it, but it was also good medicine for her wounded vanity. Marvin was handsome, high-spirited, attentive. The girl didn't live, Sherry told herself, who wouldn't have enjoyed it.

SHE SLEPT soundly that night, at breakfast the next morning Aunt Agatha proclaimed Marvin the "nicest young man" she had met in a long time. "He is so polite and modest," the maiden lady said. "And he explained to me that his orchestra plays the classics instead of jazz. Chopin and Schubert and Mendelssohn."

Sherry smiled, wondering what Aunt Agatha would think if she could hear the modern rendition of

world-famous themes, but she did not disillusion her. In the days that followed Miss Agatha became Marvin's ally. The spinster distrusted men as much as Anne Travis did, but for some reason she felt completely at home with the debonair young band leader.

There was never a dull moment with Marvin. She even enjoyed the long hours waiting for him at a nearby table. Later they had food and coffee with other members of his band at an all-night restaurant popular with musicians and actors. Sherry liked the casual friendships and flippant conversation, although the late hours sent her to the office with a headache. Aunt Agatha, champion of Marvin as she was, warned Sherry about her loss of sleep.

"You can't burn the candle at both ends," she said.

"If I go to bed early I can't sleep," Sherry complained.

"Why not? What's worrying you?"

Sherry evaded the question.

"Nothing so long as I keep busy."

That same night Marvin asked her to marry him.

SHERRY HAD waited for Marvin at the hotel where his band was playing. When he was through he did not suggest going to their usual rendezvous.

"I'm not in the mood for other people tonight," he explained. "Let's go home."

"That's an excellent idea," she agreed. "Aunt Agatha has been scolding me about the late hours I've been keeping."

"And I thought she liked me," he said as they walked toward the garage where he kept his car.

"Oh, she does. You're the only man I've ever known her to be enthusiastic about. It's purely a matter of my health. She doesn't want me to lose my job."

"Why don't you give it up, since it interferes with my seeing you?"

"I'll take that under consideration," she said lightly.

They were in the garage by then, so the subject was dropped, but after they had reached home and were sit-

ting by the fire Marvin said quietly, "You thought I was joking, didn't you?"

"About what?" Sherry asked lazily. She was very tired and the warmth of the dimly lighted room had made her drowsy.

"About quitting your job I meant it."

"But, Marvin, I have to work. I'm not doing it just for fun."

"You wouldn't have to work if you married me. You could stay home and take care of the baby."

"Are you serious? What would you do with a wife and baby?"

"A few months ago I would have asked myself that same question, but the picture has changed since then. I've signed a contract in Hollywood which means we could stay there for at least two years. By that time I may have enough dough soaked away to settle down. Does the prospect bore you?"

"I don't think I'd ever be bored with you," she admitted honestly.

"But marriage is something I'd have to think about for a while. Then there's Sherry Anne."

"I'm crazy about the kid, Sherry."

HOW DIFFERENT from Bill, who had refused to bring up another man's child as his own.

"Would you be willing to adopt her?"

"Why not? That's what you want, isn't it?"

Sherry's eyes filled with tears.

"Marvin, you're sweet. No wonder Aunt Agatha adores you."

"I'm much more concerned about the opinion of Aunt Agatha's niece."

"Well, I'm terribly fond of you, too."

"Then prove it, my sweet! Forget this other guy you've been carrying the torch for and take a chance with me. What are you afraid of?"

As she hesitated Marvin said, "Before you answer there is something I ought to tell you. I've been married before."

That surprised her. He looked so young.

"It was a mistake. Done on impulse in a weak moment. I regretted it al-

most immediately and we've been divorced for some time. Does that make any difference to you?"

"Thank you for telling me, Marvin. The fact that you are divorced wouldn't keep me from marrying you, but it will make a difference to Aunt Agatha."

"Why tell her then? Why upset her when everything is so harmonious between us? After all, it's our life, darling!"

"I know, but I haven't said I'd marry you yet. I'll have to have time to think about it. It's a serious step to take."

"How much time? I'm leaving here in three weeks."

"I'll give you my answer before then, Marvin."

He lifted her hand to his lips with a chivalry which touched her.

"I've tried to keep emotion out of this," he said, "because I know now the right kind of marriage must be founded on mutual respect and trust. But I happen to be in love with you."

SEVERAL evenings later Sherry was waiting for Marvin as usual when Bill appeared with the same girl Anne had mentioned. They were dancing together, and as they passed the table where Sherry sat alone Bill's eyes met hers with startled recognition.

It was a night when Sherry was not looking her best. The baby had wakened early that morning, so she had had only a few hours' sleep. She had worked all day and because she was tired had not bothered to change her suit. The girl with Bill couldn't have been more than twenty. Her hair was naturally blonde and she had the clean, sweet skin which goes with it. She was wholesome and unspoiled-looking, Sherry admitted. All white and gold and fresh as a budding rose. By comparison Sherry felt old and haggard. Even when Marvin came to sit with her as he did during intermission; even when he played her favorite song, smiling in her direction, Sherry felt at a disadvantage. She wished, oh how she wished she'd been sitting at the less conspicuous table with Bill. Al-

though Bill did not glance her way again, she felt she must be as conscious of her presence as she was of his.

That night she insisted on going directly home. She told Marvin good night at the door. She had to have some sleep, she explained. Tomorrow was going to be a difficult day.

INTO THE darkness of her creative despondency came a tiny ray of light. Why not accept Marvin's proposal and stop the futile attempt to do two things at once? Unlike Bill, Marvin loved Sherry Anne and was willing to adopt her. Aunt Agatha liked Marvin and would be willing for Sherry to keep Mildred's baby if they were married. Sherry had hesitated because she considered herself in love with Bill, but Marvin was infinitely superior to Bill Maddan. Even his faults seemed likeable in comparison with Bill's. Marriage with Marvin would offer an escape from everything which was troubling her.

She had not planned to see him that night, but when he telephoned early in the evening Sherry asked him to come out.

"It will be late. You won't mind sitting up?"

"No. I can't sleep anyway."

WHEN THE door bell rang Sherry asked cautiously, "Who is it?"

"How many people are you expecting?" Marvin asked.

Opening the door, she drew him quickly inside.

"Marvin, I'm so glad to see you. I thought I heard someone outside the window in the baby's room."

"Darling, you're trembling."

"I was frightened," Sherry admitted. "When I looked out I couldn't see anyone, but I felt someone was watching me."

"Nerves, Sherry! You were upset when you talked to me on the phone."

"Maybe I did imagine it. Anyway, it's all right now that you're here."

Marvin smiled tenderly and drew her down upon the davenport beside him.

"Relax, Sweet! What's troubling you?"

She put her head on his shoulder. "Do you still want to marry me?"

"You bet I do."

"Then my answer is, yes," she said.

He put his arms about her and kissed her very gently.

"Do you mean it, Sherry? Oh darling, this makes me so happy."

"Me, too. Even Aunt Agatha is for it."

"God bless Aunt Agatha," he said fervently. "Boy, this is terrific. How about celebrating? Put on your bonnet and we'll go down to the joint and announce it."

"Not tonight, Marvin. I'm too tired. But we'll tell them tomorrow, if you like."

"Tomorrow it is then. And now I'll run along so you can get some sleep."

Now that she had made her decision Sherry felt that she could sleep for hours. The future stretched like an open road before her with nothing whatever to worry about. But the next morning Aunt Agatha awakened with chills and a temperature. Sherry turned over the baby to Marietta and left reluctantly for work. The doctor she called advised the removal of Aunt Agatha to the hospital. She was suffering from the vicious type of flu which could easily develop into pneumonia. Sherry agreed and made arrangements for an ambulance. She had been too worried to give her employer notice as she had promised, but when she telephoned Marvin that she would be unable to meet him he was so disappointed that she said, "You may announce it anyway if you like."

His voice brightened. "Fine, darling! I'll give the news to a columnist. It will be swell publicity."

FOR AN INSTANT she resented that; then she reminded herself that publicity was a necessary part of his career as it would be of hers if she married him. To be mentioned by a radio or newspaper columnist was free advertising and important. As Marvin had once explained to her, the only thing to be feared was being ignored. And since the news might be in the paper tomorrow she had better

with her employer proved rather embarrassing. When she told him she was leaving in two weeks to be married he said, "I'm sorry, Sherry. We'll miss you."

She left the office early so that she could stop at the hospital. Aunt Agatha was frightened but otherwise fairly comfortable. Sherry reassured her but did not stay long. She knew Marietta would be in a hurry to return to her children. It was not quite six when she rushed up the steps of the flat, congratulating herself that she had made it in time to feed Sherry Anne. Then as she walked into the living room she saw Mildred with the baby in her arms.

"MILDRED," Sherry gasped, overcome by the sight of the girl, who clutched the baby as if Sherry were trying to take her.

"I've come back for her," Mildred asserted. "I got to thinking about her and I couldn't stand it. She's my own flesh and blood. She's all I have in the world."

The room began to whirl so dizzily about Sherry that she sat down.

"But you said in your note that you didn't want her. You gave her to me."

"That was because I thought my husband might take me back. He didn't, so I went to Reno for a divorce. That's when I began to realize what a mistake I'd made."

"Well, why didn't you write me? I had no idea where you were."

"I'm sorry, Sherry. I know you've meant well, but just because you saved my life you can't tell me what to do."

How true it was that there was no such thing as gratitude. For an instant Sherry wished she hadn't interfered when Mildred had tried to commit suicide; then she reminded herself that there were two sides to every question, even this one. If Mildred wanted her baby she was entitled to her. The poor girl hadn't had much happiness so far, but perhaps, Sherry thought for the first time, Mildred herself was partially to blame. In any case there was nothing more Sherry could do. And how it would hurt to give up Sherry Anne.

SHERRY wanted to snatch the baby into her own protective arms, but she said calmly, "It isn't easy to work when you have a small child. I've discovered that."

"She's getting older all the time. She'll soon be talking. Oh, Sherry, I didn't intend to take her from you, but when I saw her in her little bed last night I thought my heart would break."

"When do you intend to leave?" Sherry asked, wondering if she would be allowed to hold the baby again.

"I hoped—that is, I know I don't deserve it, but could you let us stay here a few nights? Just until I can make my reservations?"

"Yes, if you like. I'll telephone Marietta she needn't come any more. My aunt was looking after Sherry Anne, but we had to send her to the hospital."

THE NEXT morning Mildred prepared breakfast as if she had not been away. The baby had been fed and was cooing from her huggy. The morning paper, folded to display the story of the band leader's engagement, was on Sherry's plate.

"It says here you're going to marry him," Mildred stated.

Sherry poured herself a cup of coffee with shaking hands. Marvin had lost no time in availing himself of her permission to announce their engagement, she thought, glancing at the printed words which seemed in her confusion to have no relationship to herself.

Sherry rose, dropped a quick kiss on the baby's head and went to the bedroom for her hat. Her head was aching furiously. A fine way to begin the day, he thought.

Sherry walked down the hill to her streetcar in a fog no thicker than her own mental state. Mildred's appearance had been a shock. She had every right to Sherry Anne, but all Sherry's plans to marry Marvin were entangled with the baby. What would Marvin say when she told him? Would he be relieved or disappointed?

Her arrival at the office was the signal for much excited comment. Only her employer had known that

she was leaving, but someone on the staff had seen the paper. So suddenly nervous, Sherry felt unable to cope with the joking congratulations. Per-versely, she wanted to cry. Vainly she tried to work, but by noon her head was splitting. If she didn't have some rest she wouldn't be able to visit Aunt Agatha, much less see Marvin for their promised celebration. At two o'clock, admitting she couldn't take it, she asked to go home.

"If I can lie down for a couple of hours I'll be all right," she told herself, but she had never felt so depressed. She turned the key in her door with a sigh of relief. All she wanted was the comfort of her own bed. But as she entered the hall she heard Marvin's voice. Without stopping to wonder why he was there in the middle of the afternoon, Sherry walked into the living room to find him kissing Mildred.

THE SHOCK of it sent her reeling against the wall, speechless. It was Mildred who cried triumphantly, "Sherry!"

At the sound of her name Marvin pushed Mildred from him, saying, "What is this? A trap?"

Then he saw the stunned comprehension in Sherry's face and stammered, "Don't look like that, Sherry. It doesn't mean a thing. Just an affectionate gesture. You see I used to know Mildred in Kansas City."

He glanced warningly at Mildred, but she cried, "Oh, no, you don't. For once, Marvin, you're going to tell the truth."

Sherry sank into her chair.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Marvin was my husband," Mildred said. "He is Sherry Anne's father."

"No, Oh, no, that can't be true. Say it isn't, Marvin."

"We're divorced," he said. "You remember I told you I'd been married?"

"But you told me that was a long time ago, not recently."

"Does that matter, Sherry?"

"Of course it matters. But why would you want to adopt the baby if

you deserted Mildred because of her?"

His glance at Mildred was one of contempt.

"Is that what she told you? The baby had nothing to do with it. Mildred was the one I didn't want. Our marriage was a mistake from the beginning. That's why I insisted we keep it secret."

"You liked me well enough at first," Mildred reminded him. "Not that it matters now. At least you'll never get my baby."

"So that's why you came back?" Sherry said, turning to the girl.

"Yes, it is. I only intended to look at her through the window; then I saw Marvin's car driving up and him getting out and coming in here. I knew he'd pay plenty to keep me quiet, but there isn't enough money in the world to keep me from telling you. If you want to marry him knowing how he treated me, you're welcome."

HEARTSICK, Sherry stared at the parents of the baby kicking in her buggy, blissfully unaware of the dissension about her.

"Sherry Anne is the one who should be considered," she reminded them. "What about her?"

"I'm willing to assume the entire responsibility," Marvin assured her, "if you will marry me, Sherry."

"She's mine," Mildred said fiercely, "and I'm not giving her to either of you."

Marvin shrugged.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it you can manage as best you can." Turning back to Sherry, he continued as if his former wife were not present. "I'm crazy about the kid, Sherry. It wasn't just an act, but I didn't want to marry you just because of the baby. You understand that?"

"Did you know about her when you met me at Sam's that Sunday?"

"No. Mildred wouldn't tell me where she had left her. I didn't know you had a baby in the house until Aunt Agatha confided that she was admitting for one. It was you who told me her mother's name was Mildred. It seemed to me then that fate had

drawn us together for the good of all of us."

"I used to believe that, too, but not any more. I'm through now with both of you. The baby, too," she said with tears in her eyes. "It will be better if I don't see her again. I thought because I saved Mildred's life that I was responsible for her, but I was wrong. No one can be responsible for anyone else."

"Don't make up your mind so quickly," Marvin pleaded. "You may feel differently in a few days."

SHERRY lifted the baby from the buggy, pressing a kiss on her cheek, but it was Mildred who got on the little coat and bonnet. Marvin picked up the suitcases and they started toward the door, but before they reached it Mildred turned to say, "I know you hate me, but we're square now. You saved my life, and I've saved you from an unhappy marriage, because Marvin couldn't be faithful to anyone I wasn't grateful to you at the time, but I am now. So thanks for everything."

Sherry did not reply. She couldn't. The sight of the baby in Mildred's arms was too much for her. She realized then that she loved the baby more than she did Marvin. It was the loss of the baby that hurt. Throwing herself on the davenport, she gave way to the storm of tears which had been threatening her ever since she had entered the living room. Her head throbbed with pain but the ache in her heart was much worse.

Hours, or was it only minutes later, the telephone rang. It was Anne.

"I understand Aunt Agatha is in the hospital with the flu," Anne said.

"Oh, the cute old thing wrote me a note asking me to come to see her. I sent her some flowers and Sam has promised to drop me at the hospital for a few minutes after dinner."

"What time is it now?"

"What's the matter with you, Sherry? Have you been crying? Is it true about your being engaged to Marvin Edwards?"

"It was, but isn't any more," Sherry admitted.

"The rat! So that's why you're crying?"

"I'm not crying about Marvin," Sherry denied. "It's the baby. Mildred came back last night and has taken her away from me."

"Thank heaven for that," Anna said fervently. "I'll be right over."

SHERRY WAS still lying on the davenport when Anne arrived. She was carrying an overnight bag and announced she would bring the rest of her things the following day.

"Are you coming back to stay?" Sherry asked.

"Naturally. Half the furniture is still mine," Anne reminded her.

It was Anne who made tea and served it to Sherry in bed. Anne who said cheerfully, "I'll telephone your office that you won't be back until Monday. Tomorrow is Saturday and you're going to spend the week-end in bed. You're exhausted."

It seemed wonderful to have Anne back and, although Sherry did not admit it, it was a tremendous load off her mind not to have to rise at six o'clock to feed the baby. She was tired emotionally and physically. Tired deep down inside, at the very center of her being. She slept for hours, rousing only long enough to swallow the nourishing food Anne loyally prepared for her. Aunt Agatha was convalescing, Anne reported. She would be able to come home soon.

On Sunday afternoon Marvin telephoned. Anne had gone to the hospital, so Sherry was alone. He sounded contrite but self-confident, as if what he had to say might influence her.

"I just wanted to tell you Mildred and the baby have gone. I put them on the train myself."

HE WAITED for her reply, and when none came he continued, "May I drop by for a few minutes, Sherry? I want to talk to you."

"You're talking to me now."

"It too difficult over the phone. Don't you feel any better yet, darling?"

"I'm feeling quite well," she assured him.

"I mean about us. Our whole future is at stake. Sherry. Why can't you forget what has happened and go ahead with out plans?"

"I can't do that, Marvin, and I don't care to discuss it."

"You hate me, don't you, Sherry?"

"No," she said roughly. "I'm just not interested in you any more, and please don't call me again."

When she replaced the telephone Sherry yawned and picked up the magazine she had been reading. It wasn't an act. She really felt indifferent to him. Nevertheless, when the doorbell rang a few moments later she was alarmed. She suspected it might be Marvin, so she called. "Who is it?"

"Roger Fenton," was the answer.

Forgetting that she was wearing a bathrobe over her nightgown, Sherry opened the door.

"Roger, how nice of you to come. But I almost didn't answer the bell. Why didn't you telephone?"

"Anne said it would be all right just to drop in."

So Anne was responsible for this, too. But to her own surprise Sherry was glad to see him.

"What else did Anne tell you?" she smiled, curling up on the davenport.

Roger sat in a chair opposite her. "She said the announcement of your engagement was a mistake, that you weren't seeing Edwards any more. In fact," he said, reddening, "she told me you weren't seeing Bill Madan either."

"Bill's been out of the picture for a long time, Roger."

"Then what say we start all over again?" he grinned. "There's never been anyone like you for me, Sherry. Most women are too possessive."

Possessive, my eye, she thought. What does he think he is? But because she had always been fond of him and because she needed his friendship now more than ever, she said sweetly, "Fair enough, Roger. We used to have a lot of fun."

"And will have again," he promised. Roger kept his promise. If it had not been for Aunt Agatha,

Sherry might have been living in the period before she had met either Bill or Marvin. Refreshed by her restful week-end, she returned to the office on Monday. A brief interview with her employer assured her that the job she had been on the verge of giving up was still hers. She also swore him to secrecy.

"I'd rather you don't tell anyone that my engagement has been broken," she said. "Let them find it out for themselves."

When Sherry went to the hospital to see Aunt Agatha she found the maiden lady unusually silent. In vain Sherry tried to interest her in various topics. Aunt Agatha did not respond.

Finally she said, "Why don't you tell me that you and Marvin have quarreled?"

"We haven't quarreled exactly."

"You're not going to marry him, are you?"

"No, but I didn't want to upset you."

Miss Hamilton said dryly, "I'm capable of hearing the truth. It's having things kept from me that disturbs me."

"I'm sorry, dear! You seemed so fond of Marvin I asked Anne not to say anything."

"Anne didn't. She didn't have to. I knew when he didn't telephone or come to see me that something was wrong. It isn't like Marvin to neglect me. He is so considerate."

"I'm afraid we were mistaken about him," Sherry said, trying to break it gently. "Marvin is the baby's father. He deserted his wife in Kansas City and later persuaded her to divorce him."

A dull flush began to burn in Aunt Agatha's dried apple cheeks.

"I can't believe it. He is one of the few men I trusted."

"Mildred came back for the baby when she discovered that Marvin wanted to marry me. But she's gone now."

"Did she take Sherry Anne?"

Sherry nodded. It would be a long time before she would be able to think of the baby without wanting to cry.

"I know how you feel, dear, but be-

lieve me it's better this way," Aunt Agatha said. "Now you can put your mind on your work again and I can go home where I belong. You may think your heart is broken but time heals everything."

"My heart isn't broken, Auntie. At least not over Marvin. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was playing a part as much as he was."

SHOCKED, Aunt Agatha said. "Sherry Hamilton, what do you mean? Would you have married a man you didn't love?"

"I cared for him very much, but my heart had been broken months ago by somebody else."

Aunt Agatha sighed. "Men are so cruel. It's terrible how they can wreck a woman's life. I wish I could have protected you from them, Sherry."

The girl smiled and patted the blue-veined hand lying on the counterpane.

"Don't worry about me! My life is far from ruined. I've my work, Anne has come back to live with me, and one of my former beaux is taking me out again."

It was two weeks later when they put Aunt Agatha on the train into a compartment filled with parting gifts. The three of them saw her off. Anne demurely ladylike to the end, and Roger, who had offered his car and a large box of candy. Aunt Agatha accepted his attentions with dignified restraint. But Sherry knew she would never like Roger Benton.

As the train pulled out Anne sighed. "Give me a cigarette. My word, it's wonderful to be able to take off my halo."

"You loved wearing it," Sherry assured her. "And Aunt Agatha would say that it is the real you—the little girl who played the organ in Sunday School"

For a moment Anne looked startled. "I wonder," she said. Her face was still thoughtful as they dropped her at the cocktail bar where she was to meet Sam. It was Saturday night and Roger and Sherry had planned an evening of dancing. Little did either of them suspect how that

evening was going to end.

LIGHTS. GLITTER. Excitement. Saturday night in the city's largest hotel always reminded Sherry of New Year's Eve. The crowds of people trying to forget their weekday problems, dressed in their best, laughing, making merry. It was so much more fun dancing with Roger than it had been sitting alone waiting for Marvin.

The band leader had left town without denying their engagement, but the story had circulated to Roger's newspaper friends, who one by one with brutal candor confessed to Sherry that they never could understand what she "saw in the guy." Refusing to comment, Sherry smiled and changed the subject, but she was happier than she had been for a long time.

Roger was so absurdly proud of her, displaying her like a medal for some outstanding achievement, strutting with the air of self-assurance Anne had said was characteristic of short men. Be that as it may, Roger was an excellent dancer and the hois passed joyously until they saw Bill Maddan.

He was with the same blonde, fresh-looking girl Sherry had seen before, and the sight of them together again flooded her heart with longing. To be Bill's sweetheart, to be assured of his devotion. How could Sherry have hesitated when he had wanted to marry her? How could she have put him off because of her career, asking him to wait four years?

Sherry knew this was the moment Roger had been waiting for. The chance to prove that he was back in Sherry's favor. Wasn't he entitled to it? Roger had never forgiven Bill for the kiss he had stolen on New Year's Eve. She was amused at the triumph in Roger's voice as, deliberately dancing close to Bill's table, he cried, "Hi, Bill! What's cookin'?"

Bill glanced up indifferently, saying, "Hello! Fancy seeing you here."

As they moved on Roger chuckled, "Guess he never expected to see us together again."

"I doubt if it matters to him."

"Sure it matters. But it was coming to him. He shouldn't have come between us in the first place."

SHERRY DID not reply. Roger's possessiveness was the price she had to pay for his companionship, and so long as she saw him exclusively he would make no other demands on her. Determined to live up to her part of the bargain, she did not look at Bill again. Nor did she suggest that they leave. The evening, which had begun so harmoniously, had to go on as they had planned. Several hours later Roger left her at the flat on Telegraph Hill with no suspicion of the emotion roused in her breast by the sight of the other man.

There was a noise at the door which sounded like Anne fumbling for her key. Without turning on the light, Sherry went into the hall and called, "Wait a minute. I'll open it for you."

She turned the knob and stared at the man who stood barchaded in the moonlight.

"Hello, Sherry," he said.

"Bill. Oh, Bill!" she cried as he stepped inside and drew her into his arms. "Oh, darling, darling!"

"You still love me, don't you, Sherry?"

"Mildred told me about Marvin when she was in the hospital. She made me promise I'd never tell anyone, but I did my best to warn you," Bill said.

"You know she has taken Sherry Anne?"

"Yes, she telephoned me. But since your engagement wasn't denied, I supposed you were going to marry Marvin anyway."

"Never! After I knew who he was. The only reason I ever intended to was on account of the baby."

"So I was right then. It was a father for Sherry Anne you wanted?"

"In Marvin's case, yes, but not in yours. Oh, darling, please believe me!"

He drew her down beside him on the davenport, whispering, "If I didn't would I be here now? Would I be asking you to marry me?"

THE END

TOO MANY



Once in an hour of anger she had run away from Sam's kisses—back to the arms of the man who would always be waiting for her—and back to the leisurely and wealthy existence she had given up to come and live with Sam in this small Maine village which was his home.

Now she must convince Sam that this second time she had not run away with a lover, but had been tricked by the people she thought she trusted most. Into an affair she did not want. But always in her mind would be the memory of Sam's words the day he told her he hated her and wished her dead!

KISSES

Condensed from the novel originally entitled "Beautiful Buttrally" by the same author.

By **CAROL HOLLISTON**

Sam kissed her as he carried her over the threshold!



THE RAIN fell with that chill steadiness which is one of the marks of spring on the coast of Maine. Along Elm Street the noble trees that justified that name tried bravely to display their new, fresh greenness, but the day and the hour mocked them. The steady rain seemed to have washed away the green and left only the shiny black look of trunks and branches. It was too early for lights in a milder world, but here even street lights were on. But they only seemed to intensify the too early darkness and emphasize the rain. Headlights on

PULSATING LOVE NOVEL OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN WHOSE ONLY REAL SIN WAS A MOMENT'S INDISCRETION!

cats turned swift drops into slanting arrows, silvery indeed but cold, and with no hint of summer in them.

But Faith Haskins certainly wasn't sitting on her front porch on a night like this, even if the station was just across the street and the train was overdue that was bringing her son home with his new wife who came from Detroit, or Chicago, or maybe it was Ohio. It did seem a pity he couldn't have married a Maine girl, best of all one from Stonehaven, and Faith Haskins certainly felt that way deep down inside, however much she might say all she asked was for him to marry the girl he loved. Loved indeed. That was the part of Faith Haskins that came from reading too many books, and not all Maine books either. Everybody in Stonehaven knew Sam Haskins had always loved Susan Goodrow even when they were kids in school together.

Something at least of all this was in the minds of all the belated shoppers as they passed the Haskins house in the rain. It was well lighted but not extravagantly so, even tonight. The kitchen sent out the warmest glow, as it naturally would to anyone who knew Mrs. Haskins and her cooking. One instinctively glanced toward the station, which was bravely lighted up indeed, but the train from Portland wasn't in yet. It always was especially late on nights like this. The Maine Central never seemed to care about anything until they started bringing the summer people. Anything was good enough for home folks.

A big boy on a bicycle swept out of the street and toward the Haskins kitchen door, splashing water on two old ladies who had been trying to stare into the Haskins living room while pretending to be having trouble with their A & P bundles. They shouted after him and he flung a laugh back over his shoulder at their discomfiture. The front door opened and a dark-haired girl peered out toward the station. One of the old ladies called out to her.

"Susan Goodrow, why don't you control that brother of yours? He splashed us. He did it on purpose."

"Brother?" She blinked at them standing in the rain. "Oh, you mean Bud."

The second old lady snorted. "The train ain't in yet. And it won't do you no good when it comes. He's bringing a wife home this time."

"I'm so anxious to meet her." The dark girl said it quite firmly.

BOTH OLD LADIES had something quite definite to say to that, but an extra cold splash of rain sent them scurrying up Elm Street. The dark girl heaved a sigh and closed the door carefully against the rain and cold outside. The living room was most inviting, with its fine old well-used furniture catching glints from the dancing flowers on the old stone hearth. The warm light touched books, so many books, and old china silver. The Haskins living room was the same cozy haven as always, but the girl went through it and on to the kitchen. Opening the door, she was welcomed by the fragrance of cooking and laughter. Mrs. Haskins was crouched before the stove basting the roast beef. The laughter came from a great, overgrown boy eating a cookie greedily.

"They were tryin' to look in your windows so I splashed them," he cried, stuffing more cookie into an already overloaded mouth.

"Bud! Put that cake down immediately!" cried the girl.

"Aw, go look out the door," he growled, and stuffed in more.

Mrs. Haskins stood up smiling and touched the girl's flushed cheek. "Let him eat. It won't hurt him. Good food never hurt anybody."

"And Faith says I can stay and have supper with them, I knew she'd say it if I asked her when you weren't around to butt in."

"Bud Goodrow! Don't you talk like that to me. Look at you. Soaking wet. Where have you been? Don't lean against the wall. Now look what you've done. Oh, I'm so ashamed of you. I always am. You're so messy."

"Faith, will you tell her to quit naggin'," growled the boy.

The girl groaned. "How often have I told you to say Mrs. Haskins."

The woman patted the girl's arm. "Let him call me Faith. It is my name." She turned. "And you are very wet, Bud. Go upstairs and put on some dry clothes. Maybe you can find something of Sam's that'll fit you."

"You mean it?"

The overgrown boy asked, but took no chances on waiting for an answer. He darted out of the room, almost bowling his sister in his haste. Mrs. Haskins laughed softly.

"You spoil him, Mrs. Haskins. You do, I can't do anything with him. I feel ashamed. He—he splashed water on Mrs. Cusk just now. Her stockings and dress were all wet. I could see that, so I know."

"Can't we blame God and the rain for that?" laughed the woman.

The bellow of a chantey came from upstairs. It was not one of those sung in concerts and the words were not skimped any. Susan started for the stairs but Mrs. Haskins caught her arm.

"Let him sing, Susan. It only means he has probably found some of Sam's sea clothes. If he comes down in boots and a sou'wester let him be. He is so excited at Sam's homecoming. And so am I for that matter."

Susan stood very straight. "He doesn't have good sense. I can't make him understand Sam is married now and—and not a playmate any more. He can't seem to realize things won't be the same—now."

"I don't think any of us can, Susan."

Susan's dark head was high. "I'm going to like Ella very much. I know I am. She must be perfect or—or Sam wouldn't love her so."

"We all shall love her, Susan. That's why you and Bud are staying for supper, to help me. I'm not sure I know how to greet a young, elegant bride—especially a rich one."

"You know how to do everything!"

The girl flung enthusiastic arms about her as she said it. There was a strain in her voice as if she were very near tears. Mrs. Haskins kissed her lightly but warmly. It was clear they felt very close to each other.

"Go see if the table's all right. I

can't leave this oven. Sam must have his meat just so. You remember how he always was."

SUSAN WENT into the dining room, winking back tears. She had resolved not to let her emotions run away with her, not to let anything slip out such as she had just said. She was going to love Sam's wife. Yes, love her. Everybody was going to be watching her like a cat, but let them watch. She didn't care. She wasn't afraid. She and Sam had just been good friends and they were going to go on being good friends in spite of Mrs. Cusk and all her gossiping cronies. This was a modern world.

She scarcely saw the dinner table but she knew everything would be all right. Everything Faith Haskins did was all right. She had said it, and meant it. She'd take this stranger to her heart just as if she were a Maine girl, a Stonehaven girl. The state of Maine had always been her world, she never had been out of it, not even to Boston as she always said, but she would welcome an unknown daughter with open arms.

The phone rang from the library which had been Mr. Haskins' study when he was living. At the same moment the doorbell rang and Bud began clumping down the stairs, shouting his loudest.

"They're here! Sam's come home! Let Sam in. Open the door."

Susan gasped and scurried toward the phone. It was a grand excuse. She couldn't face them this minute. She couldn't. She—

In her confusion she didn't see him until she ran into him. He caught her in his arms and kissed her in the same eager, boyish way that had always squeezed her heart. His hearty deep laughter sang in her blood like swift music.

"Where are you running? I'm home. Give me a big kiss."

"The telephone!" she gasped.

"Let it ring, Ella, come meet my old sweetheart!"

Susan had a glimpse of a slim, tailored figure and hair touched to gold by the lights. She pushed Sam

away and run for the phone just as Bud hurled himself upon him. Sam barely stayed on his feet under the impact.

"Sam! Sam!"

Mrs. Haskins came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She walked straight to the slim blonde girl and kissed her warmly.

"Ella, I'm sure I came as fast as I could. I'd know you anywhere. You're beautiful, lovelier than any picture, as I knew you would be."

"The girl stood very straight. 'You're very kind.'"

Sam broke Bud's strangle hold and dumped him on the couch. Catching his mother up, he swung her around in a complete circle.

"Mom! I'm home. I'll never go away again. We're home forever."

She laughed. "Put me down, Sam. What will Ella think of us?"

"She's going to love you so much she won't think at all. Come on now, Mom. Kiss her like I told her you would. Maine style."

The girl smiled. "I've already had a kiss."

"I didn't see it, again. Don't argue. I'm the boss. We're home."

Bud bulked up from the couch. "I want a kiss, too."

Sam shoved him down again gaily. Mrs. Haskins took the girl's hands.

"We aren't always so crazy. You mustn't think so. It's just because you've come home to us."

"I—I was hoping you were always like this. I like it."

Sam flung an arm about her possessively. "I call her Beautiful because she's the most beautiful girl in the world. Look at her hair, Mom. It's real gold. They don't have half as much at Fort Knox."

SUSAN came slowly from the library. "It was Dr. Hinchley. He'll be here in half an hour. Something turned up at the last minute."

Sam chortled. "Who wants old doc Mom, Susan blushed just because I gave her a hug and kiss. You tell Ella, Susan's my old sweetheart."

"I'm sure you've told her."

"Come on, girls, Kiss and be pals."

Susan came forward and kissed Ella primly. "Welcome to Stonehaven."

Bud stood upon the couch. He was not wearing a sou'wester, but he did have on a fisherman's jersey and pants and boots.

"I want a kiss, too," he shouted. "I want to kiss Ella."

Ella laughed suddenly and crossing to him, kissed him lightly.

"I was hoping there would be at least one real Maine fisherman to welcome me."

Susan flushed. "It's only Bud. He—be isn't anything."

Bud stuck his tongue out at her. "Anyway, I don't say 'Welcome to Stonehaven' like I worked for the Chamber of Commerce."

"Get off that couch this minute. I've told you a thousand times."

Sam took his mother's face between his big, strong hands and kissed her. "We're starved. When do we eat, Mom? We got to show Ella how Maine folks eat?"

"The sooner you let me get back to work the sooner we eat."

He ran with her into the kitchen. Bud half fell off the couch and followed. Susan drew a deep breath and managed a smile.

"Could—could I show you your room? I'm sure you're tired. Our train is so slow."

Ella hesitated, then took her hand. "You can do so much more, if you will. You can be my friend. Will you? Say yes without thinking."

"But of course. You are Sam's wife. We all—"

The blonde girl took her arm. "Then take me into the kitchen."

ELLA WAS never to forget her first night in Faith Haskins' house. It was her first night in Maine as well, her first touch of Maine life. She didn't consider Sam a Maine man, though he thought of himself as nothing else. She was too much in love with him for him to be anything but just Sam. She had loved him from the minute her father had introduced him and said, "I want you to meet our latest bright boy. He's from Maine." That night she

had told herself she was going to marry him. It hadn't been easy, but she had overcome even his stubbornness and she was safely married to him now. He had defied her father and brought her home to his world, his life. He had refused all gifts. He would take care of his wife.

She drew the covers up to her chin and felt strangely cozy. The room had been freshly papered and painted for their coming. It was a big room and everything in it could have been on proud display in an antique shop. It was plain and yet so fine, just as the glassware and china and silver had been at dinner. Just as the food had been, and Reith, too.

Ella was glad she was to call Sam's mother Faith. Somehow the name suited her, as she had hoped it would, just as she couldn't imagine Sam being anything but Sam. Not Samuel surely. And she hadn't wanted to call her Mother. Her own mother was Mother. She didn't like the word. She wasn't going to let Faith mother her. She had never had that and she didn't want it. She wanted something else, just what she wasn't sure. Maybe it was simple kindness and pure friendship. In her life she had never had that. She had had all the luxuries, everything that cost a lot, but nothing as simple as that.

She heard Sam's quick hearty laugh. She had come to think of it as his Maine laugh. It had somehow always seemed out of place in her house. Her mother called it his horae laugh, especially when she had just had had a few cocktails too many. Her father had thought it meant Sam was good-natured and easy to handle—until he found out better. She hugged herself at the thought. For the first time in her whole life her father had been defied, and beaten. For the first time he had found laughter to mean complete lack of respect for his money. That was why they were here now. The rich pampered girl was Sam's wife, so she must live Sam's way.

AND SHE was glad to be here now. As if in response to that thought, the door opened and Sam's mother came in carrying a loaded

tray. Ella sat up in bed quickly, her cheeks flushed. Her new dreams tumbled about her.

"You didn't bring me breakfast in bed! Please say you didn't."

"Then I didn't." Faith's clear gray eyes twinkled. "I just had to show you my new tray-table. Susan gave it to me for Christmas and I've never had a chance to use it yet. See, you press a button and you have a table."

The legs dropped down and she set it by the bed. At the same time Ella saw it was set for two. She clapped her hands like a child.

"You're going to have breakfast with me? Just we two?"

"If I may. I thought we could get acquainted better this way."

Ella jumped out of bed to kiss her impulsively. "You're going to spoil me. I know you are. And I don't want you to do it."

The woman patted her cheek. "Aren't you supposed to be spoiled already?"

"I know you'll think so. I'm absolutely useless. Helpless. There isn't a thing in the world that I can do."

"I hardly think so." Faith drew up a chair and sat down quietly. "You have worked a miracle with my son. He used to be too quiet, too dark, too much concerned with getting ahead. Money, you know."

Ella laughed. "How funny to hear you say that. Sam laughs at money. It—it's why I'm so proud of him. It's why we're here. Don't you realize?"

Faith poured the fragrant tea. "If he has learned to laugh you taught him, Ella. I was afraid no one could change his dark nature any more than his dark hair and eyes."

"No indeed. It's his Maine laugh. I called it that even before I heard it again just now. I'm only beginning to understand what home means to him."

"You mean his laugh when Susan came a minute ago?"

Ella felt something touch her heart like an icy finger. But she held her smile, knowing Faith was watching her carefully.

"Did—did Susan come? Why didn't you bring her up? She is such a real person."

"Because I'm selfish. I want you to myself for a little while. I never had a daughter. I had to wait to have one brought home to me."

"You're going to see much too much of me in no time at all."

"I don't think so. Try your tea. It is something quite special."

Sam's voice called up from outside. "Get up, lazy-bones. The day is half over."

Ella ran to the window and looked down at him. He and Susan were standing side by side looking up at her. Susan called "good morning."

Ella drew a deep breath. "You're up early, Susan."

The girl laughed easily. There was a resemblance to Sam's laugh. "I've been up for hours," she cried. "It's beautiful on the water. A real sailing breeze. I came to tell Sam he must be sure to take you out so you can really appreciate Stonehaven. Our bay is our pride. You must sail to the islands."

"I hate sailing."

"You won't up here. To sail on Penobscot Bay is heaven. Tell her, Sam."

Sam chortled. "We'll show her. I've been hungering for a sail with you, Susan. Beautiful, get dressed fast or we'll run off and leave you. It's in our blood to run away to sea."

"Go ahead. I'm talking to Faith. I have to learn things. Your mother is giving me the lowdown on every thing."

SUSAN flung back her dark hair. "The best thing you can learn down here is how to enjoy the water. This is boat country. Bud is down shining up the boat for you now. He wants to show you what a sailor he is."

Faith came to the window. "Ella and I are having breakfast, Susan."

"You had one with me already, Mom," laughed Sam. "You'll get fat."

"All right, I'm willing to do anything in a good cause."

Sam grinned. "Susan and I are going sailing. What do you think I

came back home for? And on a day like this. Look at that sky."

Faith spoke quietly, "You can wait an hour or two, Sam. Be sensible."

"But the wind may die down."

"So much the better. There is no need of scaring Ella to death right away."

"You can't scare her. She flies planes. She scared me. You don't know her."

Susan laughed. "Come on, Ella. You'll have to learn lots of things now you're married to a fisherman. You have to get salt in your blood right away."

Ella laughed. "I can't give up breakfast. You two go sailing and I'll be able to get sick enough just hearing you tell about it."

"All right," shouted Sam. "We'll be back for dinner. Save some if we're late."

He caught Susan's arm. His mother's voice was quick and sharp.

"Sam! You can't do that!"

If he heard her he paid no attention. Ella watched them dash off through the garden and out the back gate into the land leading to the water. She paused by the mirror to run a comb through her long golden hair, then sat on the edge of the bed and picked up her cup gaily. She mustn't let Faith see that her hand trembled.

"Now we can have a good talk and take our time. Your tea is swell."

Faith came and put a hand gently on her shoulder. "I feel I should apologize for Sam. He and Susan were always crazy about sailing. She—she's like a man in a boat. It is very hard to explain to anyone."

"You mean she is like Susan. Sam has told me about all that. He—he was very frank. He felt I should know."

"You mustn't feel hurt. He was always so head-strong and impulsive. I'm afraid selfish, too."

"Should I feel hurt?" Ella raised her brows ever so little.

"If you're a sensible as well as a beautiful girl, you won't."

"And suppose I'm not sensible." Ella paused to sip her tea. "You know my family have never considered I had a grain of common sense."

FAITH smiled "Uncommon sense is very much better. I'm sure of it."

"The kind you have?"

"The kind I try to have, Ella. That isn't always the same."

"But you are going to use it trying to make yourself like me, aren't you? Don't think. Just say yes. I want you to like me, and—and I have been afraid you wouldn't. Why not? This isn't my world at all."

Faith sighed softly. "I have been afraid, too. I'm not any more."

"Not even when you see I am just what you feared—a butterfly?"

"A beautiful butterfly. And I'm afraid I love butterflies. They mean summer and happiness. I want to make all this your world."

Ella leaned toward her. "Will you try to love me?"

"I'm hoping you'll let me be a second mother to you."

Ella jumped up and stood in the middle of the room. "You don't understand. I've never had any mother at all. It's just an empty word to me. All I got from my mother was my hair. She never had any time for me. Bridge is so important. And—and cocktails. When I came away my mother was too drunk to say good-bye. Do you realize what that means? My mother was too drunk. And my father said a little taste of pauper life would do me good. And my sister said I'd be damned glad to come running back as soon as I saw I didn't fit in here."

Her voice had gotten louder, shriller, ending in a kind of half-scream. Faith got up and put both hands steadily on the slim shoulders.

"You do fit in here. I need you. I've never had a daughter. I've always wanted one. I never dreamed I'd be so lucky. This is your home."

Ella looked around slowly. "It's a beautiful home. Even your tea things."

"They are Lowestoft. Grandfather had them made and brought them back when he was young. My grandmother was with him. It was their wedding trip. I'll tell you about it sometime. I have Grandfather's log

books and Grandmother's diaries. And so many letters. They wrote long letters in those days when separations were long."

Ella shivered. "I don't want to think about separations. I want love all the time. I want everything I've never had. I want to be with Sam every minute. I—I want to be with him now."

Faith patted her arm. "Why don't you dress and we'll walk down to the wharf? We're very proud of our harbor. Has Sam told you there was a time when Stonehaven ships were seen in every port of the world?"

There was not time to answer. Bud's voice roared up from below. He had come after Ella. It wasn't too windy. They were waiting for her. Susan had sent him for her. She was to make it snappy.

Ella ran about catching at her clothes excitedly. Faith picked up her table tray and spoke softly. "Aren't you afraid of the water?"

"I don't dare to be now. Tell him I'll be right down. He sent for me. Sam sent for me. Let the wind blow its worst."

FAITH HASKINS was mowing the lawn in front of her house when the afternoon train came in. It was a beautiful day after several days of rain and fog, and the grass needed cutting. It had seemed to leap up under the kiss of the sun to prove it was June—and perfect June today. She stood straight watching the people pour out of the station afoot and in taxis. Stonehaven was the end of the line. Only this morning the fat writer next door had said he liked a town at the end of the rails where the tracks ran down into the sea. She had laughed at the way he said it, and she could smile now. She could also stand very straight to watch the strangers arriving and satisfy her curiosity about life even as she eased her back. Mowing wasn't as easy as it once had been. She had promised Sam she wouldn't mow while he was away, but he had his own work. Everybody worked in Stonehaven. Even Ella worked now.

She sighed faintly. Ella had shown

an unexpected determination. She had not only gotten a job but announced at the same time that she had found an apartment for herself and Sam. It was just a little place over a store. Sam had come back from his trip and had approved of the apartment if not of the job. Faith felt she didn't know or understand him any more. Ella had kissed her and said, "Sam and I have to live alone. We're leaving your house so we can have you all the more. We're separating so we can be closer. I'm a Maine girl now. I have work to do."

It didn't make sense, of course. And yet she had to respect Ella for going out and getting a job so she wouldn't just be waiting for Sam all the time. She hadn't expected anything like that. She—

"Could you direct me to Mrs. Haskins' house?" Faith stared at the tall, smiling stranger who had crossed the road to her. She was sure at a glance that she had never seen such a handsome man. He seemed a very picture of success, a man who had everything, who always had had everything. She thrust away such a crazy thought for a sensible old Maine woman like herself. Besides, the man was waiting while she stared at him.

"Which Mrs. Haskins did you want? I am Faith Haskins."

His smile widened and his white teeth flashed.

"Then my hunch was right. I was hoping you would be Faith Haskins as I saw you standing there. Ella must have told you about me. I am Mel Winslow."

THE WOMAN felt a faint shiver touch her spine, though the day didn't warrant it. She didn't offer her hand. She didn't smile as she spoke.

"Do you mean my daughter-in-law, Ella?"

"That's right. Ella Wheeler. She surely told you about Mel."

"You mean Ella Haskins, of course."

He chuckled. "I'll have to get used to that. You see we were practically raised together. I can't seem to realize Ella is married. She wrote me all

about you, of course."

"All?" Faith paused, then spoke quietly. "No, Mr. Winslow, My daughter-in-law never mentioned your name. I suppose there was no reason for her to do so."

He laughed easily. "I'll scold her for that. Is she in the house? You watch how surprised she'll look when she sees me."

Faith had no answering smile. "I'm afraid I won't be able to watch, Mr. Winslow, because Ella isn't here any more."

Mel Winslow stopped laughing. "You mean—?"

"Just what I say. My daughter-in-law doesn't live here anymore. My son is away on a fishing trip. If you'll excuse me I'll try to get this strip finished before summer time."

She grasped the handles firmly and mowed away from him. He was still standing in the same spot as she mowed back to him. He still held his hat in his hand and the afternoon sun slipped through the elm tree to touch his sleek fair hair and puzzled blue eyes.

"Can you direct me to where Ella lives now?" he asked in a new quiet voice no longer full of laughing confidence. "You see I am a very old friend of the family and—"

"You don't look very old to me."

"I mean—"

"I'm sure you do. But my daughter-in-law never mentioned you—or anyone else back where she came from. Since she is in Maine now and married to my son, there wouldn't be any point in talking about Ohio, would there? When a woman marries she begins a new life—her real life. Would you mind moving so I could mow that spot you're standing on?"

He stood very stiff. "Would you mind telling me where I can find Ella Wheeler?"

"I don't know any such person." She mowed right at him and he was forced to move aside. His blue eyes flashed.

"Would you know Ella Haskins?"

"You mean Mrs. Sam Haskins? You can't see her. She's working."

"Working?" His jaw actually dropped as he spoke.

HE HAD TO wait until Faith mowed away from him and came back. He felt like shouting at her but knew it would be useless.

"Of course she's working. Everybody works, at least every decent person does. We don't like drones. This is Maine."

"I'm beginning to realize it, Mrs. Haskins. Now if you'd be so kind as to tell me where Ella works, per haps—"

"Dine store."

The two words seemed to slap at him as she mowed away. Two women came up the street with bundles and stared at him. He stood irresolute. Faith came back to him and paused.

"Do you expect me to stop my work and go chasin' around with you trying to interrupt Ella in her work? Jobs aren't so easy to get in this town. Let me tell you."

Mel was angry at last. "Ella doesn't need any job. She could buy up your whole town if she wanted to."

"Could she? If you're such an old friend as you claim to be, perhaps you know her father cut her off for nurrrying my Sam."

"He certainly did not. Your Sam was a lunkhead and wouldn't take what he was given. Anyway, Ella has her own money."

"That's why you're runnin' after her. I thought so. It won't do you any good. I advise you to turn right around."

He did so and marched firmly to the station where he had left his bag on a seat. He checked it and asked where the dine store was. The man looked at him slyly.

"Wouldn't Faith Haskins tell you what you wanted to know?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid I don't know much either if she don't."

Mel steadied himself. "I can see I'll like Stonehsven."

"Best town in Maine, mister."

"I see. Then I'm sure I'll like Maine."

Mel was sure he had never been so irritated in all his life. But it went deeper than that. Something had happened, he was sure of that. The idea of Ella Wheeler working

in a ten-cent store was so utterly preposterous that it couldn't be taken seriously. From what he heard about Sam Haskins he hadn't expected a vey cordial reception but this was too much. Clearly things were even worse than he had feared. He was going to do something about it, and do it at once.

THE THOUGHT satisfied him.

He felt no need to be fair to the state, the town, or anyone in it. He had come to see Ella to find out how she was doing, and was quite ready to find all evidence pointing to the fact that she had made a grave mistake and felt trapped. He had never met Sam but he felt he knew about him. He had been away in South America on a business trip and so had missed the whole courtship and marriage of the one girl in the world for him, the girl he had expected to marry on his return. Married or not, Ella knew she could always turn to him and call on him. He was sure her letter had an appeal, even though a superficial reading might make one think she was very happy. Before he had been here five minutes he had complete assurance that he was right.

He strode firmly along the Main street which was easy enough to find, because it was only a block away from the station and curved to follow the harbor.

He like that, and the glimpses of the bay and boats. He knew nothing of boats, all his traveling to and around South America had been by plane, but there was a prettiness about the sailboats. Like toys, of course, or memories of the past. Ella had written that Stonehaven had once been an important port and ship-building center and had sent ships all over the world, but there certainly

He must certainly get Ella out of any such place as this. Two drunks bumped into him and he thrust them aside with a firmness that made them blink—but they didn't say anything. One look at this blond giant made even their alcohol-dulled brains decide against even a mutter,

And they weren't the only ones

who stared after Mel as he strode along, indifferent to all stares and intent only on finding the girl he had come to find. Bud saw him and wondered who he was without realizing that he was to find out very soon. Bud even followed him in the vague way of an over-grown boy wandering along Main Street on a bright afternoon, not knowing just what to do and having no money to spend. Bud grinned as he recognized what the tall handsome man was doing. He was going from one ten-cent store to the next. Bud realized at the third one. At the fourth one he bumped into the man, who came out frowning. Bud grinned and Mel stopped.

"How many dime stores are there in this town, Sonny?"

"You've been to all of them, mister. We only got four."

Mel's eyes narrowed a little. "How do you know?"

"I see things, sometimes. I notice strangers sometimes."

Mel found himself disarmed by that grin. "I bet you know everybody in town, don't you?"

"I know some," answered Bud with true Maine caution.

"Know Ella Wheeler, I mean Mrs. Sam Haskins, who works in one of the ten-cent stores?"

"She don't."

MEL HAD ASKED the question without expecting any such direct answer as he got. The overgrown youngster was staring straight at him and not grinning now. Mel drew a half-dollar out of his pocket.

"I'll give you this if you tell me where Mrs. Haskins lives."

"What do you want to know for?"

Mel smiled his famous smile which he knew always had value.

"I'm an old friend of hers."

"From Ohio?" Bud's voice was very earnest.

"That's right. Ella and I were children together and—"

"Then I don't know where she lives."

The boy said it coolly and turned away. For a second Mel stared blankly; then he walked after him and caught him up in a dozen strides. His

hand was strong as he caught the boy's shoulder and swung him around.

"Just a minute. I want to talk to you, Sonny. I—"

"My name is Bud. Bud Goodrow."

There was an arresting dignity in the words. Mel dropped his hand and smiled again.

"All right, Bud. My name is Mel Winslow. I have come to see Mrs. Haskins. The Mrs. Haskins down by the station told me Ella worked in the dime store."

"If she said so it must be so, Mr. Winslow."

"So you don't think you'd like to earn a half-dollar, eh, Bud?"

"We don't take money for answering questions—or offer it."

Mel put the coin back in his pocket. "I thought down-easters never missed a chance to earn money."

"That wouldn't be earning it. If you talked to Mrs. Haskins down by the station, why didn't she tell you where Ella lived?"

"Are all you people as suspicious as this? Are you all trying to hide something?"

Bud's eyes twinkled. "Is it worth a dollar to see her?"

Mel held out two half dollars. Bud took them and slipped them into a pocket. He was grinning again.

"If you wanna see Ella all you got to do is turn around."

MEL TURNED swiftly, and there was Ella staring at him incredulously from the window of the jewelry store in front of which he was standing. He fairly leaped into the store and caught both her hands in his. He cried, "Ella!" and then couldn't say any more. She spoke slowly.

"What were you and Bud Goodrow talking about?"

The question broke the spell. Mel's laugh was quick.

"He was getting a dollar out of me to tell me where to find you."

"A dollar?"

"Your mother-in-law refused to tell me anything. I don't think Maine likes me, darling. Esith told me you worked in a dime store."

"Mel! You're teasing. You're making it up."

He still held her hands. He looked straight into her eyes.

"I'm taking you out of all this, Ella. Or else you're going to explain a lot of things."

An old man came forward, frowning. "You're wanted on the phone, Mrs. Haskins."

Ella thanked him and hurried into the back. The old man came forward and spoke coldly.

"Did you want anything, young man?"

"Yes, I want to talk to Ella."

"Mrs Haskins has no time to waste until we close at six o' clock."

It was the surly tone of voice more than the actual words which made Mel furious. Thrusting the man aside, he marched into the room at the back of the store. Ella was telephoning at a small table. He stood watching her as if afraid she would slip away from him. She hung up and came toward him smiling.

"It was Faith inviting us to dinner tonight."

"Us?"

She laughed a little tightly and nodded. "She thought you were very interesting. You'll get a fine dinner even at short notice."

The old man growled from the doorway. "Are you working for me or are you not, Mrs. Haskins?"

"She is not," said Mel firmly. "Get your hat, Ella."

She laughed and patted the old man's arm. "I'll have to get off the rest of the afternoon, Mr. Galton. This is Mel Winslow, my very best friend, and I must entertain him."

"You don't leave this place till six o'clock Mrs. Haskins."

Mel's eyes flashed but Ella spoke. "I am leaving right now, Mr. Galton. And I don't think I care to come back."

"I'll tell Sam what you're doin,'" cried the old man.

"Please do, Mr. Galton."

"WELL, SAM, you certainly gave us a lucky trip."

Sam Haskins' dark eyes lighted up and the smoke from his pipe curled

about his head in true sailor fashion.

"The luck is all mine in having Ike Blayne for a captain. I knew it, so I had to make a trip in order to appreciate what it means to have a Blayne on a boat."

Ike's red face got a shade redder, but he only muttered thanks, and added, "Too bad you had to cut in to your honeymoon."

Sam laughed. "My honeymoon was over before I came home. Now we just live, and work here. And you have to work to live right here in Stonhaven. Even Ella saw that. Did you know she's working for old Galton? She got the job to surprise me."

"I heard."

Sam clapped him on the shoulder gaily. "I guess everyone in town had something to say about it. They all thought I'd married a useless butterfly, just because her father has money."

"You have money, too, Sam."

"I have three boats that make me lazy money anyway."

Sam said it with satisfaction and thought of it with satisfaction as he walked slowly away from the canning house pier to which his boat was tied up. He started up the little hill slowly, then turned to look back. A light rain was falling, but that didn't dampen his satisfaction at all. It was almost nine o'clock and they were already unloading his ship so she could sail back to the Banks sometime tomorrow morning.

He hadn't expected to get in until tomorrow morning, so it meant that not only had he gotten a full catch but had also picked up a day on schedule. Since all the men worked on shares, even from the cook there had been no complaint on the score. In his business there were no sit-down strikes. Men who sat down simply shut off their income, and, being Maine men and seamen to the core, they knew it. Neither did they resent the owner on the boat. It might be his own boat, but he wouldn't have been on it unless he did his full share of work for which he would draw his share of profit exactly like every other man aboard.

AND IT HAD been a lucky trip. Fish prices were still holding up, too. Before going out again in another if his boats he would have to take paper and ink to show Ella just how profitable this fishing business could be. If she wanted to work for a while—well he wouldn't say any more about that. Really he was very proud of her, of course, or would be if he was quite sure everyone would understand he hadn't put her to work. Some people might think that, because he had always chased the dollar hard. Even as a child he had never missed a chance of making money. He had never minded being teased about it, because he had been proud of his Yankee shrewdness.

He always would be proud of it, but he didn't want people to think he carried it to the extent of having his new bride take a job. He didn't give a damn if they thought he had married her for her money, because he knew better. He had never liked his own earned money so well as when it gave him the chance to tell her father, old Bruce Wheeler, that not only didn't he expect money from him but he refused to take anything from him, even a valuable wedding present. That had hit old Wheeler straight between the eyes. And that also made Ella understand how much he loved her.

Sam drew a deep breath and went on in the rain. He had refused a lift home, or the chance to telephone Ella and tell her he had gotten in ahead of time. He wanted to surprise her. He was all eagerness to catch her in his arms, but he couldn't let the men on the ship and at the canning factory know he felt like that. Better have them think he was a cold-blooded devil who gave up his honeymoon in order to wring a few more dollars from the everlasting bounty of the sea. Let the men think he was walking home in the rain to save the fifty-cent taxi charge. They respected a man who made money. It was in their blood. They would trust him and feel they knew him, just as he felt he knew his captain, Ike Blayne, because Blayne had always captained Stanhaven ships even when they sailed the seven seas

instead of merely to the Grand Banks and back. The sea was in the blood of all the men, even as it was in his.

Only there was something more in his. There was a passion in his blood, a love and need for his wife that frightened him a little. He had never realized he could need anyone like that. This second trip had disturbed him. Perhaps it was partly the fact that Ella was waiting for him in their own home this time rather than in his mother's house. It made a difference, though he had tried to chide her for getting the little place while he was away. He had said he wanted to wait until he could get a proper house that was suitable for her. But he treasured her answer. He hugged it to his breast now, repeating the simple words aloud in the rain.

"Wherever I am waiting for you when you come home, that is our home."

HIS HAND shook a little as he relighted his pipe. He had forgotten to puff hard enough to keep it glowing in the drizzling rain. He was walking slowly now to prove he could control himself and not run every step of the way. There must be no outward evidences of what he was feeling deep inside. His face must not proclaim the singing in his blood, not even to Ike Blayne, who was engaged but not married yet. Ike had already been engaged for years in the true Blayne tradition that was also the Maine tradition. People in Stonehaven wouldn't understand that he had wanted Ella for his wife the minute he saw her, wanted her more even when he ran away from her, wanted her completely when she came after him in her plane to bring him back to her family whom she had made accept him. Then it had first struck him that she loved him even as he loved her. That made it easy to laugh away her family's gilded offers and to bring her here to his home, his environment, his life.

And she was waiting for him now.

Without knowing why for a moment, he turned up Elm Street. Then he smiled. It was so logical, and his

fect knew where to go. On a night like this before he was expected home, Ella would go to his mother, of course. He had been a little afraid that his mother might resent his marrying as he had, so suddenly away from home. She had always taken it for granted that he would marry Susan. She had never suspected he ever so much as thought about any girl but Susan. And he hadn't until he had seen Ella. His mind had been all on making money. He had taken Susan for granted as part of the tradition and pattern of his life. Susan would be true to that tradition and to him.

And then he had seen Ella and at a glance knew he had found the magic thing which he didn't even know he had desired. He had had no vision, no ideal, no dream girl until the dream was a reality. At least he had been conscious of none. Ella didn't take his breath away, she simply was there. Her golden hair suddenly filled his mind and soul. It had frightened him enough to make him try to run away from it.

The fat man was sitting on the porch of the house next to his mother's. He waved a hand.

"I see you're home from your trip. Were you lucky?"

"Very." Sam was surprised and asked a question in turn.

"Don't you feel cold sitting out when it's raining like this?"

"It's chilly but I like it. I told your mother so when she brought me some Maine books to read this evening. A lot about wrecks, I'm afraid."

Sam smiled. "That was all in the old days."

"The old days don't seem so very far away here in Stonehaven."

"My wife said that, too."

SAM SAID it and cut across the lawn to his mother's kitchen door. He could see the warm light and there was a lighted living room, too. It meant his hunch was right. He would be able to surprise them both. He slipped quietly into the kitchen through the door that had never been locked so far as he knew. How warm and cozy it was, as always. The

rain, the chill, the darkness all were outside. A wave of pity swept over him for the writer next door who had no home, no kitchen, no smell of baking and hominess in his life.

He put his pipe down and rubbed his hands softly together. The soft heat of the stove was good. There was a batch of freshly made doughnuts on the table, and he took one. It seemed to melt in his mouth, warm, fragrant, just as when he was a kid. He could hear a murmur of voices from the living room, but since the dining room door was shut it was just a murmur of voices. He smiled and slipped out of his wet coat, hanging it near the stove to dry. It was lucky he had let his feet find the way, because they had not failed him.

His eyes twinkled as he looked into the kitchen mirror and, picking up old comb, ran it through his rough dark hair. He wasn't much to look at, but Ella loved him. He was certainly nothing like Ella's former sweet heart who looked like a movie star. Ella's mother had shown him the picture of Mel Winslow, who was in South America on some special trip for the Wheeler company. He had remembered him then. Mel Winslow, the football star of a couple of years back. The Adonis of the gridiron, sports writers had called him. He had laughed in Mrs. Wheeler's face and said:

"He looks like the real Golden Boy."

Mrs. Wheeler had been drinking. She had flared out, "You have no right to marry Ella while he's away. She was going to marry him."

"But she is marrying me now, Mrs. Wheeler," he had answered.

It was funny he should think of that now. He dropped the comb and let it lie on the floor. He opened the door into the dining room softly. It was almost dark there, because the kitchen light was so placed as not to come in much. The living room door was open and all the lamps were carefully shaded. He could see the faint glow of them and even the light of the fire. His mother would have a log fire on a night like this, though it was June. His mother

loved fires that thrust back dampness. His mother's voice was quite clear now—and serious.

"I understand what you mean, Susan, but I don't see exactly what we can do about it."

SAM STOOD very still. So Susan was there. Why not? Susan had always half lived there. He would wait until Ella said something before surprising them.

Susan's voice came a little unsteadily. "I tried to talk to her, Faith, but she resented it. She told me bluntly that what she did or didn't do was none of my business or anyone else's in town."

"I'm afraid she would only tell me the same, Susan. I was afraid of something the minute I saw him. It came over me all at once, and as a result I yielded to impulse and acted very stupidly."

Sam grinned and stood very still. He couldn't imagine his mother being afraid of anything or anybody, and as for acting very stupidly, that was a joke. She couldn't be stupid even if she tried. Ella wasn't saying anything because—

"It's Ella who is being very stupid. And I told her so. Sam is coming home tomorrow, and what does she suppose he is going to say?"

Sam's jaw dropped. They were talking of Ella. They—

"You mustn't talk like that, Susan. Sam is perfectly sensible and understands Ella as well as loves her. We only know our own narrow little lives here and—"

Susan cut in sharply. "But our way has to be her way now. She is dashing around with this Mel as if she were engaged to him at least."

"She was engaged to him, Susan."

"Well, she's married to Sam now. And he won't like her walking out on Mr. Galton the way she did. A job is a job no matter how much money you have or used to have. Her father may own half of Ohio, but this is Maine and she don't count here."

"Susan, I don't like you to talk like that. There is no reason for our

saying any more about it. When Sam comes home—"

Sam didn't hear any more. He was tiptoeing out of the room and the swing of the kitchen door cut off the rest of the sentence. He had heard far more than enough. He drew a deep breath and then let himself out into the rain, ignoring his hat and coat. The rain was a little heavier, but he was unconscious of anything outside of the crazy words he had just heard. Mel Winslow was there. The Golden Boy was there. Ella was running around with him. Ella had given up her job. People were talking. Susan had quarreled with Ella. His mother had done something and was afraid.

The thoughts ran round and round in his head as he strode swiftly along. He avoided Main Street. He didn't want to meet anyone. He wanted to get home. He tried to steady himself but finally broke into a run. The rain seemed to slap at his face and head, trying to hold him back. When he reached the store over which his little apartment was situated the store was dark but music was coming from his rooms upstairs. Dance music. He stumbled on the stairs. He realized he should stop and get control of himself, but he couldn't do it. Something in his very blood was driving him on. He twisted open the door and strode into the living room of his home.

He saw Ella unsteadily. She was dancing with a tall, handsome man, laughing in his arms. Her voice came clear.

"I haven't had such fun since I left home. I—"

She broke off as she saw Sam. For an instant she stared; then she ran toward him, arms extended.

BRUCE WHEELER was an impressive figure of a man, tall, square-shouldered, square-jawed, his full face topped by a mass of iron gray hair that completed his distinction. If he was not trim-waisted in spite of his golf, his weight made him stately rather than portly. No one catching so much as a glimpse of him ever doubted he was a man of import-

ance. No one ever heard his loud voice without being impressed. He was used to giving orders and to having them carried out without question. He had the complete arrogance of self-made success.

His face glowed as he rose to welcome Mel into his library.

"I congratulate you on bringing my crazy daughter to her senses. She called me at the plant but only to say she was home. How did you manage it?"

Mel looked almost startlingly in his dinner clothes, which he wore with the perfect grace of long practice and a superb athlete's body. He smiled as he took Scotch instead of a cocktail, because his liking for the Wheelers did not extend to their cocktails, which were never carefully made.

"Ella wanted to come home for a while, Mr. Wheeler, so I hired a plane and we flew back. It was a very nice trip."

Mr. Wheeler chuckled and took a healthy gulp of his drink. If he had any weakness at all it was liquor, but he had a strong head and carried liquor well. He sank into a chair, chuckling.

"More enjoyable than South America, eh?"

"Much more so, Ella was very sweet and kind."

"And Sam?"

Mel sat carefully on a straight chair. "I think, sir, you had better talk to Ella about what actually happened."

"Afraid to tell me you beat him up? You needn't be. I'd gladly pay anybody a thousand dollars for every black eye he gives that swob. You must have handled him plenty rough or you wouldn't have gotten Ella away from him. He acted tough enough when he was here."

MEL SMILED faintly. "I didn't have a chance to talk to him at all. I'm rather sorry I didn't. I suppose I might as well tell you in a few words. He came home unexpectedly while Ella and I were dancing on the radio. Without listening to any explanation he attacked me. I had to defend myself. Ella asked me to go,

and I went to my hotel. I didn't know what passed between her and Sam, but early this morning she appeared at the hotel and asked me to bring her home. It was that simple, sir."

Mr. Wheeler rubbed his hands in the special way he had when very pleased. "I'm glad you were there, Mel. And you're staying for dinner. I'd better dress for the big occasion or Ella will feel slighted. How did you like Maine?"

"I didn't see much of it, sir, except Stonhaven." He smiled. "I don't think I like that very much. It is a poor little place, historical, of course."

Mr. Wheeler drained his drink and got up. "I won't forget your help, Mel, nor will Ella's mother, who always took it for granted that we were taking you into the family. If you still feel that way—"

Mel rose quietly. "I have always loved Ella. I'm sure I always shall."

"That's all we need to know. I'll jump into some fresh clothes. You do the honors. You know, easy on Mrs. Wheeler if possible."

He almost bumped into Ella who was just coming in. She was wearing an elegant dinner gown of billowy white lace that accentuated her slim, golden look. Her father gave her a hug.

"Welcome home, stranger."

She kissed him without any particular enthusiasm. "I hope you don't mind my dropping in like this, Father."

"It's your home, isn't it?"

"Thanks."

She came forward slowly once he was gone. Mel took her hand and patted it gaily.

"You look simply ravishing, darling."

"I don't feel that way." She withdrew her hand gently. "Mel, I'm not sure I've done the right thing in coming home like this."

"Why? What has happened now? Aren't you glad to be home again?"

"No."

He smiled. "I think you need a drink to cheer you up. What shall it be?"

She shook her head and made a quick gesture with both her hands. "That won't do any good."

"Is there anything I can do, Ella—or not do?"

SHE SMILED and touched his cheek with a light caressing gesture. "You're so sweet, Mel, and patient. I never realized how much you've always meant to me until the other day when I looked out onto that dreary Main Street and saw you there talking to Bud. It was such fun dancing with you. But—but you can't really blame Sam for misunderstanding, can you?"

Mel spoke softly. "He should have listened to you, Ella."

She sat down heavily. "Did you ever love anyone very much?"

"Darling, I love you, I always have. Surely you know that."

"No, I didn't want you to say that I—"

He laughed softly. "Then I won't say it, darling. You've had a difficult time and I won't annoy you with my stupidities. How does it feel to be home again?"

"I'm not sure." She stared toward the window that opened out on the rose garden. The rich warm evening smell of roses flowed into the formal room. "While I was dressing I wasn't quite sure I had ever been away at all. Everything here was just the same."

"And you liked that, I'm sure." He beamed as he said it.

She leaned forward. "How little you really know me, Mel. I hated it. I felt trapped as I was trapped before. I was back in the old gilded prison again. There was nothing to do, nothing to think I was dressing for dinner so I could watch Mother drink and hear Father talk money, money. We are to eat off silver, and the food won't be worthy of the cheapest dishes in that dime store where you looked for me."

"Ella, you mustn't talk like that. This is your home. You know you felt it at once."

She laughed tightly. "The next minute I felt I was a complete stranger. That all this was no part of me

at all." She jumped up and pointed at the book-lined walls. "Look at them. All the books I've never read. All the books so we can sit and swill liquor, so Father can talk stocks and bonds."

He took both her hands in his gently. "You're upset, that's all, Ella. You've been working too hard up there. You know you have. You had a job, and an apartment to take care of."

"Just like millions of other women, Mel."

"But you aren't like other women, darling. You are like no one but yourself. You—"

A young girl of about seventeen danced into the room. "I knew I'd catch you two holding hands, Mel, can you untangle yourself long enough to pour me a cocktail? I hate them, but I know it's going to be one of those evenings when I'll need strength. Mother is in her triumphant mood. The prodigal has returned. We are having champagne to celebrate, the kind with the most kick to it."

ELLA FACED her younger sister. "You didn't want me to come back home, did you?"

Nona accepted the glass Mel handed her. "Frankly, I didn't. I am very young and therefore very old-fashioned. I think a woman's place is with her husband—if she's lucky enough to be able to catch one."

Ella's lip curled. "You were very fond of Sam, weren't you?"

"So were you, Beautiful. I still am. Why didn't you bring him home with you?"

"Perhaps there wasn't room in the plane."

"Then you could have left Mel up there as a kind of hostage. Stonchaven. I know I'd like it. It sounds rocky and mysterious. I looked it up, and over a hundred years ago Stonehaven ships were in every port of the world."

Ella stamped her foot. "If I hear that once more I will go mad."

"Swell. A hundred years ago Stonehaven ships were—"

Mel put his hand over her mouth. Nona kissed it smackingly and twinkled her eyes at him.

"Good faithful Mel. Don't you see? I have to get Ella out of the way again if I'm ever going to succeed in working you up to the point of asking me to marry you."

Ella frowned. "Nona, please try to be sensible tonight for once."

"I'm always sensible. I see what I want and I go after it. I fairly flung myself at Sam Haskins, but he wouldn't so much as look at me. I bet he never knew there were such things as girls in the world till he fell for you."

"If you must know, he had a girl waiting to marry him. It was all set. She's probably consoling him right now."

"Like Mel is consoling you?"

Ella's eyes flashed but she didn't speak. Mrs. Wheeler came slowly into the room. She had evidently once been slim and beautiful, but nothing remained now except hair of the same sheer golden quality as Ella's. Otherwise she was a fat, overdressed woman wearing too much jewelry for a family dinner at home. Her heavy eyes lighted as she saw the tray on the table. Her voice gushed out.

"I was wondering where the cocktails were. No wonder everyone is in this ugly room. Look at all those ugly books. They give me the creeps. Mel, pour me a cocktail. I need it, with all this excitement. How does it feel to be home again, Ella?"

"All right."

Mrs. Wheeler laughed and her fat arms shook. "You certainly don't sound very enthusiastic, I must say. No one would ever believe Mel had rescued you from a monster who might have killed you, or who knows what."

"Sam isn't a monster, Mother, and I wasn't rescued from him." Ella spoke firmly. "I came home for a visit, that is all. I wouldn't have come if I had thought it was going to cause wild talk here."

"There must be more talk in Stonehaven," said Nona coolly.

"Who cares about that?" Mrs. Wheeler accepted a scantily filled glass from Mel and tossed it off. "So long as you see what a fool you've been and have come to your senses,

it is all right. You can go to Reno, and divorce that Maine fortune hunter in six weeks."

Nona exploded. "Sam isn't a fortune hunter. He wouldn't be one and that's why you're all down on him. If he and Ella have had a strap, what of it? They probably wouldn't have had it if Mel had stayed here and let her alone."

"Nona!"

"I said it and I mean it," cried the girl.

MRS. WHEELER took her glass away. "No more drinks for you, young lady. Such a way to talk to your sister, and to Mel."

Mel smiled. "I don't mind, Mrs. Wheeler. I know what Nona means."

"You bet you do. You went there to make trouble between Sam and Ella. If you couldn't do it one way you'd do it another. If they hadn't all been fools back there they'd seen you were up to something right away and run you straight out of town."

"Nona!"

The girl swung around on her sister. "You can't deny it. I bet Sam caught you two holding hands like you were just now when I came in."

Ella stepped forward quickly and slapped her sharply. Nona gasped and fell back a step. Mel quickly caught Ella's hands.

"Please. Nona is only a child. She doesn't know what she's saying."

"Don't I though! If you didn't go to Stonehaven to split Sam and Ella up, what did you go there for?"

Mrs. Wheeler pointed toward the door. "Nona, go to your room at once."

"I won't. Let him answer that question. Let him try."

Mel smiled. "You understand, don't you, Ella?"

She drew a long deep breath and spoke very slowly. "I'm not so sure I do, Mel. Just why did you come to Stonehaven?"

"Ella! What a question! Mel, give me another cocktail. I feel faint."

Mel ignored her, his smiling eyes fixed on the girl he loved.

"I told you back there. I came to see how you were getting along."

"Exactly," cried the irrepressible Nona. "You went to split them up and you succeeded."

Mrs. Wheeler slapped at her, missed, and decided she could get more attention by sinking into a chair as if about to swoon. But she got none, as Mr. Wheeler came in looking the ideal successful man in deftly tailored dinner clothes. His silvery hair and broad expanse of shirt bosom gleamed. His voice rolled out with assurance.

"I can enjoy my dinner now. I have telegraphed that Sam Haskins that Ella is here and I wish him to come here at once and explain his conduct. I put it bluntly."

Ella drew herself up. "Did you say I wanted him to come?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I shall do so myself." She ran out of the room.

ELLA DROVE INTO the pool to drown the disturbing thoughts and questions that ran rampant in her mind. She swam from one end to the other as fast as she could. The water was too warm, there was no stimulus in it, but she kept going. She wanted to exhaust herself so she couldn't think. She wanted to get so tired she could fall on a beach mattress and fall asleep. When you slept you didn't think, or ask yourself questions. There were no problems. You didn't miss anyone, or want anyone, or—or anything.

She heaved herself out of the water and sat on the tiled edge of the pool, dripping. It wasn't till then that she saw the slight figure standing under one of the beach umbrellas and watching her. It was a brown tailored figure titterly out of its setting here. Her eyes opened very wide.

"Faith."

The slight brown figure stepped out into the hot, glaring sunshine. "You swim beautifully, Ella. I never dreamed you might. I never saw anyone swim like that, except in the movies of course."

Ella stood up slowly. "I didn't think you ever went to movies."

Faith laughed softly. "I usually

prefer a hook at home."

"You're a long way from home now, Faith."

"Isn't it true? I've never been out of Minc before. I was always sure I never would leave the state. But I've become a traveller at last."

It was a strange conversation. Ella drew a deep breath.

"I'm dripping wet, but will you mind terribly if I kiss you?"

The thin woman's eyes twinkled. "I was hoping you would."

Ella laughed. "I'll get you all wet."

"Didn't you learn that down-easters don't mind that?"

Ella flung both arms about her and kissed her warmly. "I wish I could tell how glad I am to see you, Faith. I—I think I've wanted to talk to you ever since I got back here. I don't know whether it's ten days or ten years. But I mustn't get you any wetter. And you must be sweltering in that sun. This is one of our hottest days."

"It is warm."

Ella laughed again. "You know you're stifled. But how did you get here? Did you drop from the sky?"

"I wasn't brave enough for that. The train was enough for me. I took a taxi from the hotel, but when we came to your gates I got out to walk. I really felt I should, you know."

"But why? It is such a long way."

"I know. I never called on anybody whose house was a mile away from the front gate before. I wanted a chance to adjust myself to a new viewpoint regarding the daughter who came so unexpectedly into my life. You see you never told me very much about yourself, and Sam never talks when you want him to."

Ella spoke dully. "Is Sam with you?"

"Goodness, no. He's out to sea. He doesn't know I got wanderlust."

Faith smiled as she said it. Ella drew a deep breath.

"I see. He didn't think I was worth coming after."

"I wouldn't put it that way, Ella."

"What other way is there to put it? He got my father's telegram."

FAITH LOWERED her eyes and her voice was very low. "I'm afraid he didn't. I—I got it—and—and forgot to give it to him before he left."

Ella stared at her. "You—you mean you intercepted it?"

The woman raised her eyes slowly. "I'm afraid I did. I felt I had to or—or he might have come and spoiled everything."

"And you thought you could come and fix everything?"

"I thought I could try, Ella."

It was said so simply that something seemed to snap inside the girl's very soul. Her resentment vanished and she was left limp. She yielded to impulse and kissed Faith again quickly.

"Forgive me. I'm so glad you did come. It is so much better this way. Sam and I would have quarrelled because we are both stupid. You can help me make up my mind what to do. I suppose you've come to insist on my going back with you."

"No. I haven't."

Ella gasped. "You mean you don't want me to go back?"

Faith patted her bare arm. "That is quite different. I'm hoping for many things. I always have been a great hoper. I'd even like to meet your family."

"Meet them? Why, you're going to stay with us, of course."

"Am I? In all this luxury? I'm going to love that."

FAITH'S VISIT lasted three days and was an unqualified success. No one could resist her quiet charm and quick smile and laugh. Nona, of course, fairly adopted her at once, as Ella had expected, but she hadn't expected her father and mother to take to her as they did.

Dinner was pleasanter than any meal had been since her return, and Ella could only put it down to Faith's disarming presence. Even the meal itself was better cooked, because Faith had discovered at once that the maid who unpacked her simple travelling bag was a Maine girl, from Portland, and after that she had insisted on meeting all the other ser-

vants to see how a big house was run. She and the cook talked lobsters and, to prove he really was a chef, lobster was sent to the table such as had never appeared there before. Faith's compliment simply was, "I couldn't do better myself." And it was Mel who explained gaily that no greater praise could be bestowed.

Mel rose to the occasion grandly. He might have taken Ella away from Maine but, as he said, "he had taken himself away from Faith Haskins table and hospitality with the greatest reluctance." There was a general laugh, and as the evening wore on Ella knew there had never been so many general laughs in that house. Nona had a date to go out but broke it. Ella had been going dancing with Mel as she had every night since her return, but it was Mel himself who suggested that talk could be more fun than any dancing. Instead of retiring to the library to work as usual, Mr. Wheeler took everyone with him, and when Faith, with a deprecating smile, asked for lemonade because the night was so warm, everyone drank lemonade. Even Mrs. Wheeler.

Her mother was Ella's greatest surprise. She had introduced Faith to her mother at lunch with trepidations which had been entirely uncalled for. Faith had walked straight up to the glowing fat woman, who had most clearly had several cocktails in spite of all orders, and kissed her pleasantly.

"I'm so glad to meet Ella's mother. It is something I've been looking forward to ever since I met your daughter, Mrs. Wheeler."

ELLA NEVER forgot her mother's look of sheer amazement. The girl suddenly realized that her mother knew everyone avoided her not only in her own house but everywhere she went. She seemingly knew why, too, because she didn't so much as suggest cocktails, even with a guest as an excuse. Iced tea was served with mint in it, and by the time the meal was over Mrs. Wheeler had risen quite above alcoholic fumes. At tea time tea was served and drunk with Mrs. Wheeler pouring in the

grand manner. After tea Mrs. Wheeler took Faith unto herself and displayed her dresses and jewels. Faith appeared at dinner wearing the simple old black lace dress which she wore when entertaining in her own house, but it was fastened with a diamond pin which Mrs. Wheeler had forced upon her bodily.

And Ella had blinzed because she had never known her mother to give away anything valuable, especially any of her cherished jewels. But the magic of Faith's impulsive kiss and charm went further. By Mrs. Wheeler's orders no drinks were offered before dinner and no wine was served with it. Mrs. Haskins came from a dry state. Mrs. Wheeler explained gaily. It was enough even to take the wind out of the sails of Bruce Wheeler, who had spent part of the afternoon consulting three specialists as to what could possibly be done about his wife's drinking.

Perhaps that was why the next day he personally took Faith through the great Wheeler plant which was his pride and joy. He intended to impress her and to make sure he took her alone, but as the little woman told Ella later she would have been overwhelmed even if she had been in the midst of a touring crowd. What she didn't tell Ella or anyone was the one little scene in the luxurious private office at the end where Mr. Wheeler had finally been blunt.

"Mrs. Haskins, if your son had been sensible all this might one day have belonged to him."

Faith smiled, sitting very small with her neat hands folded in her lap.

"I can't imagine Sam in the midst of all this."

"But he was. And I had great hopes for him, especially when I thought he loved Ella enough to want to make her really happy. He showed great promise. What is he doing now?"

"Fishing."

Faith said it with true Maine simplicity and lack of adornment. Mr. Wheeler smiled.

"Would you rather fish than own and run a great plant like this?"

"I'm afraid I would, Mr. Wheeler, especially if the fish were running well on the Banks."

For a moment he had stared at her incredulously; then he had burst out laughing and patted her hand.

"If Sam had half of your charm he could get anything he wanted out of anybody, even me."

"I thought the trouble was that he didn't know what to do with all you did give him and so refused to accept it."

Mr. Wheeler stopped laughing. "You know about that, don't you?"

"I heard something," she minimized.

"You might as well see for yourself."

SO HE HAD driven her out of town again and shown her the estate he had built for Ella and whomever she married. He told her frankly that at the time he had been sure Ella was going to marry Mel Winslow, but in any case he had been sure any young man would appreciate a place like that being handed to him as a wedding present.

"What do you say, Mrs. Haskins?"

"I say Sam was always like that. I was never sure of him as a boy. It was a dark, independent streak he got from his father's side of the family. Very independent. You know he put himself through the university and wouldn't even take carfare from me."

"That's different. I'm rich."

"I'm rich, too, Mr. Wheeler. I don't owe a penny in the world and there is no mortgage on my little house."

Again the business man blinked. But he was also charmed. Taking Faith back to the house, he tried once more.

"What do you think of Mel Winslow?"

Faith could laugh this time. "I think he is the only complete charmer I have ever met. It is what made me afraid of him at first."

"And you aren't afraid now?"

"I didn't say that. I'm more afraid of him now than ever."

Mr. Wheeler took her arm. "I don't believe you were ever afraid of any-

thing or anybody in your life. Mel is very fond of you."

"That makes things ever worse. I know he is the kind who always gets what he wants. He knows it, too. Mr. Wheeler."

"Aren't you in the same class?"
"Me?"

"Suppose I tell you that you are the only complete charmer I have ever met."

Her eyes twinkled. "And you're afraid of me?"

"A little. I wanted your son to come out here so I could bawl hell out of him properly. I think I can handle Sam Haskins now I am mad enough at him. But I don't know how to handle you."

"Me? Is it necessary?"

"Very. I'm not fooled by your visit, much as I'm enjoying it. I know why you are here."

"Do you? Then please tell me, because I'm not sure myself."

"Ah, Mrs. Haskins. Can't we go on being frank? You came to try to talk Ella into going back to Stonehaven with you."

Faith folded her hands. "Have I said anything?"

"How do I know?"

"Will you believe me if I say I promise I will not try to talk Ella into coming back with me—or anything else?"

"Can't I have curiosity? I was never out of Maine before. I never had a rich friend before. This is really all very exciting."

"Do you consider us your friends?"

"I hope so."

He put an arm about her shoulders. "Then that is settled. How about writing Sam that you are here staying with us and we are going to keep you a long, long time and he had better come out to talk things over?"

"He's out on his boat now."

"He'll get the letter when he comes in, won't he?"

"Of course. But are you sure you want him to come here?"

"Very sure. You'll be here to protect him."

Faith smiled faintly. "He never needed protection even as a little hoy. But I'll write the letter if you

want me to. I'll show you what I write so you'll know."

He gave her a hug. "All I need to know is you. We're going to straighten this thing out properly."

So the second dinner was even jollier than the first. At the table Mr. Wheeler told Ella that Mrs. Haskins was going to write Sam to come out to Ohio to talk things over. Faith corrected him gently.

"I already have written and put the letter into the mail bag."

Ella faced her. "What good do you think that will do?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure."

"Sam has already refused everything Father has to offer."

Faith's eyes twinkled. "How different his mother is. She just accepts everything."

Mrs. Wheeler, again without benefit of cocktails, led the laughter. "Faith has promised to stay with us all summer. I told her I won't let her go until—until she grows wings to fly away."

"That's the best news I've heard in years," cried Nona.

"You're all spoiling me so I'll never be able to live in Maine again. We aren't so kind to strangers back there, are we, Mr. Winslow?"

"The name is Mel, Mrs. Haskins."

"The name is Faith, Mel."

YES, IT WAS a gay meal. Only Ella was a little quieter than usual and kept watching her mother-in-law. She was the same little lady of the Elm Street house and yet not the same either. Could it be that she was being swept off her feet by this rich household that seemed anxious to shower presents on her? Tonight she was wearing a dress Nona had brought home and insisted on her wearing at once, selfish Nona who never gave anything. Mel had actually brought her an orchid and a jewelled pin for it. Miracles was her mother, who was neither drinking nor wanting it. The whole house had been transformed. And now her father had persuaded Faith to write Sam to come. She could only think of one way her father ever used to

persuade people. And it left her worried.

Ella knew she would have to talk to Faith, but all during the evening there was no chance to get her alone. Mrs. Wheeler clung to her new friend as if afraid she might disappear as unexpectedly as she had come. It wasn't until everyone had gone to bed that Ella got a chance, and then only by literally forcing her way into Faith's room. The little woman was in bed and asleep—or pretending to be. Her blinking was a little bit overdone. Ella sat on the edge of the bed firmly.

"Did you really write Sam to come out here, Faith?"

"Oh, yes. Your father suggested it and I thought it was a very good idea. He showed me the wonderful place he had built for you and whom-ever you married. Sam must have been crazy to refuse a home like that. It is a real palace."

"Would you want to live there—and work for Father?"

Faith chuckled "He didn't offer me a job"

Ella drew a deep breath. "What did he offer you to write Sam?"

It was a blunt question. Faith blinked her eyes again as if the ceiling lights were too strong.

"Don't you want Sam out here? Isn't that why you came, so he would follow you?"

"No."

Faith sat up. "Then you really were running away from him? You—you were serious?"

Ella waved it away with a quick motion of her hand. "I have to know, Faith. Didn't you come here to persuade me to go back with you?"

"Your father thought that, too. How funny. I gave him my word that I would not try to talk you over in any way."

"Suppose I want to be talked into going back?"

Faith patted her hand. "I know you don't mean that. Now I have seen how you live here I can understand everything so much better. Just imagine that pokey little apartment over that store. And you working for grouchy old Mr. Galton. It is fun-

ny. It was just a joke."

Ella got up slowly, her face serious. "I wasn't joking when I married Sam. I married him because—because I loved him."

"But you didn't expect him to drag you off to a place like Stonehaven."

"Suppose I needed a place like Stonehaven to bring me to my senses."

Faith settled herself in the luxurious bed. "I certainly know I had to get out of Stonehaven and come see you to come to my senses. It's probably foggy back there right now. Think of that horn blasting away out on the breakwater. The thought makes me shiver."

"I wish I could shiver."

"You mustn't say it, Ella. Sam can't get the letter for a few days, but when he gets back he'll come out here. You let me talk to him first and I'm sure I can make him see sense. Only a fool would run away from luxury like this."

"But suppose I want that kind of a fool?"

"Ella, be good. Think how sweet everyone here has been to me. The very least I can do is talk to Sam. He loves money, you know."

"He loves to make it. That isn't the same at all."

"I'll explain things to him, don't worry."

Ella banged out of the room. She was furious. But during the night she laid her plans. It wasn't easy, but the next afternoon she persuaded Faith to go up in her plane with her. And once in the air away from the waving family, she yielded to temptation and headed east under full speed.

SUSAN GOODROW had a dark, rich beauty as she stood under a tree waiting. It had been a warm day for the Maine coast and she was wearing a white dress which accentuated her ripe beauty. Sam came up the slope from the fish pier a little more quickly, and he was smiling.

"What a surprise, Susan. You're at the wrong end of town."

Her dark eyes glowed as she smiled at him. "This is the right end of

town when I was waiting for you. I saw your boat as soon as it turned the Head."

He laughed and gave her a quick, light kiss. "You know all the boats on Penobscot Bay. I'd bet on that."

"I know yours anyway. Did you have a good trip?"

"A true Maine girl." He took her arm. "A very good trip for this time of year. My fishing luck holds anyway. I have the best crews ever."

"You deserve the best of everything."

"Thanks. I have the best of friends to back me up anyway."

They fell into step, walking along slowly. He asked if she had seen the "Island boat" coming in, the one Bud was working on for the summer, and she said she had. She didn't add that Bud had also seen her and she had been forced to chase him so she could meet Sam alone and say what she had to say. Sam looked at her quizzically.

"Anything the matter, Susan? You are quiet."

She nodded slowly. "Something is the matter. I—I have a problem. I want to ask your advice—if you can spare the time."

He looked at her steadily. "You know I'll do anything I can for you, Susan. You have been good to me always and especially since—since—lately. "If I hadn't talked to you that day Ella walked out on me I wouldn't have known what to do."

"And have you decided what to do about it, Sam?"

His dark brows contracted and he frowned straight ahead. "I guess Mom will have a letter telling me she's in Reno."

"Is that what you want, Sam?"

There was a tightness in her voice that made him look at her. "Why should I want that, Susan?"

"You couldn't take her back after—after she went off with a man like that. You know you couldn't, Sam. You'd never feel clean or—or decent again. You'd know what everyone in town would be thinking."

His jaw squared. "I've never let the town do my thinking for me. I do

things whatever way I want to do them."

"But you couldn't forgive. If he beat you up. Everyone must know it, just as they know she ran to his hotel and they went away together. Nothing like that has ever happened in Stoughton before. It wouldn't have happened this time if you had listened to me."

HE SPOKE slowly. "I remember. You tried to keep me from accepting that offer from the Wheeler organization. You said this was my home, that I belonged here, and that I would find all happiness and success here. I know what you meant, Susan. It was a kind of dirty trick to go away and get married, wasn't it? And to come back here?"

She lowered her eyes. "I didn't say that."

"You're trying to say something now, Susan."

She looked at him quietly. "Yes, I'm trying to say something. It is something you must know. That is why I wanted to meet you. I had a feeling you would be back home sometime today."

"A hunch?"

"If a girl loves a man enough she has such feelings."

It was said in a soft, low voice but it was clear enough. He dropped her arm and faced her squarely. His voice was deep in his throat.

"You always have loved me, haven't you, Susan?"

"You have always known it. I never needed to say it. Not until now."

"And why now?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Because I have no friends. I never realized it before, but I do now. Even your mother has turned against me."

"Mom? I can't believe that. She loves you."

"She doesn't! She hates me."

Sam took both her hands in his, oblivious to several women with big stopping bundles on the other side of the street.

"You must be wrong, Susan. Mom wouldn't do anything in the world to

hurt you. I'll take you home with me right now and—"

"No. I want you to come home with me. I want you to have supper with me. That will show her how you feel about me."

"Susan, everyone knows how I feel about you, Mother most of all."

"But I want you to do it. I'll give you a good snapper. Say you will."

"You're awfully kind but I got to go home and—"

"Why can't my house be your home just as much as your mother's?"

"It is Susan, but—"

"Always buts. I have never asked many favors, have I?"

"Certainly not. You've always done all the favors. But we practically have to pass Mother's house on the way to yours. What difference—"

"None."

She choked on the word, pulled her hands away, and stalked off. He started after her, then stopped and stood watching until the turn in Main Street took her out of sight. What was wrong with Susan? He had never seen her like this before. Why should she insist on taking him home and given him supper when naturally he would go to his own home where his mother would give them both a good meal? Susan had always been more than welcome in his mother's house. Why was Susan using every means to keep him from his mother's house, even to telling him she loved him? And then running away, thinking he would run after her. He had never run after anyone or anything in his whole life. In his right senses she knew that better than anyone else.

He walked slowly until he turned of Main at Elm Street. It was cool in the shade of the lovely old trees that seemed to draw a gentle breeze up from the bay. The sky was so clear, so blue, it was hard to believe rain or fog ever came that way. The fat man was sitting on his porch rocking with that peculiar happy complacency only possible to a fat man. He waved.

"Home is the sailor, home from the sea," the fat man quoted.

Sam smiled faintly. "A lovely day today."

"Yes, indeed. As your wife said a little while ago, it's hard to believe there was ever any fog here."

Sam stopped short. "My wife said that?"

THE FAT MAN chuckled. "Now I bet you didn't know she was home at all. She and your mother came by plane, and that was exciting. I was wandering about around the airport when they came in. Your mother was so excited. I teased her because she told me before that she had never been out of Maine and never intended to go. They've been back three days, but your mother is still bubbling. They're waiting to tell you all about it."

Sam said something and cut slowly across the grass toward his kitchen door. The lawn had been freshly mowed and raked, and the fragrance hung in the air, mingling with the perfumes from the garden at the back of the house. He stood for a moment hesitating. He could hear his mother singing in the kitchen. She did that when she was busy and very happy. He knew now why Susan had tried to get him away.

He drew a quick breath. For a moment he wished he had followed Susan; then he squared his broad shoulders and went into the kitchen. Faith was lifting cookies carefully from a baking pan. He kissed her as usual.

"Home again, Mom."

"You have a surprise in the dining room Sam."

"I know. Susan told me."

"Susan?"

He didn't know why he had said that, but since it seemed to surprise his mother he was glad he had. He took off his coat and hung it on the door on the accustomed hook.

"Everything smells good. And I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

Faith smiled. "Hadn't you better tell Ella you're home?"

Sam threw back his head and roared, "Ella, I'm home."

She came from the dining room at once. She was very brown, brown and gold above slacks and a gay blouse. She came up to him and kissed him

lightly, undramatically.

"Hello, Sam. We were sure you'd get in today. Have a good trip?"

"Yes, and you?"

Ella laughed easily. "Mine was swell, especially after Faith came. I brought her home by plane. We just made it."

Faith grinned. "I didn't want to come home at all. She kidnapped me, and without bag or baggage. Supposedly it was just a little ride. But after the first few minutes I gave up prying."

"Remember how I came after you, Sam, and dragged you back to Ohio to marry me?"

He looked at her steadily. "Aren't you sorry about that now?"

"No. Are you?"

THERE WAS a laughing challenge in her blue eyes. There was a dead silence in the room. Faith broke it. She felt she couldn't stand the brittle small talk any more. She felt as if she were watching a fire-cracker, waiting for it to explode. She pushed a pot noisily on the gas stove.

"We're much too crowded and hot in here. And I just remembered, Sam, Ella wants that front window open in your room and it is stuck with paint. Ella, take him upstairs. He'll have time to do that."

The girl left the room and Sam trailed after her. Faith waited until they had gone, then sat down heavily, brushing her hand over her face. It was really hot for Stonehaven. She couldn't hear a sound from upstairs, certainly none of the banging that would be necessary before that paint-stuck window could be opened. She could have stood a roaring quarrel better than this. And Sam said Susan had told him Ella was home. It would have been more like Susan's actions of late for her not to have told him. In any case, it meant Susan had been waiting to meet him, to twist something to her own advantage.

Faith couldn't sit. She had to know if her thinking had been right when she was sure Sam in his stubbornness would never go after his wife but

would welcome her with open arms if she came back. She had been sure enough of that to have gone after Ella and to have engineered the girl's return as she had. She had been so sure the two stubborn prides would melt once they were in each other's arms. And now—

The doorbell rang, surely louder and more demanding than she had ever known it to ring before. She pulled herself together and started to answer it. From the living room she flung a glance toward the stairs and the silence above. The doorbell rang sharply again before she could reach it. She knew who it was as she opened the door. Mr. Wheeler stood there, glaring. He fairly thrust by her and into the house.

"You didn't expect me, did you?" he shouted at her.

She smiled and closed the door. "We have been expecting you for three days. Didn't you bring Mrs. Wheeler with you?"

"Did you think I would?" he demanded truculently.

"As a matter of fact I did. She said she would like to come here and visit for a while."

"Visit? After the dirty trick you played on us? Where is Ella?"

"Did I play any trick? What was it?"

"You made Ella come back here with you."

Faith laughed softly. "You mean she made me come back. I was literally kidnapped. You all saw it. Did you bring my things with you?"

He glared at her. "You're trying some game on me now. Where is Ella?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. She's upstairs with Sam. He just got in. Try this chair, Mr. Wheeler. They'll be down in a moment. He is fixing a window."

He glared at her. "I'm here to take Ella home with me."

"You know you don't mean that. You're here to visit us. And just in time for dinner. We usually call it supper. Are your bags at the station?"

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "Do you think you can pull

the wool over my eyes a second time?"

She laughed lightly. "I would never try to do that the first time."

"I don't believe my daughter is here at all. You're hiding her."

"I'm right here, Father."

Her voice came quietly from the library. She had come quietly down the stairs and stood there smiling. Faith merely saw the smile and asked no more. It made everything clear. But the girl's father strode over to her.

"So you were up there?"

"Of course. Didn't Faith tell you I was?"

"Do you think I'll believe anything she tells me, now?"

The blue eyes flashed. "I would advise you, Father, to believe everything she tells you. In fact—"

"I have no time to waste talking. I must be back in the office tomorrow morning. I'm taking you back home right now."

"I'm at home right now, Father."

HE SHOUTED. "Are you going to listen to me?"

"Yes. If you talk sense. Faith was kind enough to ask you to say to dinner. You had better see if she is still willing to have you."

He caught her hand firmly. "I'm getting you out of this right now."

She jerked away. "Don't do that again, Father. I don't like it. I'm asking you for the last time to be sensible. This is my home. Ask Nona; she'll tell you a woman's home is where her husband is. I'm a woman now. I've grown up a little. I love Sam and Sam loves me."

"When did you find that out?"

"Just a minute before you rang the bell."

"A minute be—I'm sick of this nonsense. Are you coming home with me or not?"

"I told you I am home. Home with my husband."

"Where is Sam? Let me talk to him."

"Sam is upstairs, Father. I asked him to let me talk to you first. I'm hoping you'll be sensible."

He roared, "Are you telling me how to act?"

"Certainly it is time someone did."

He swung around on Faith. "I suppose you feel proud at having turned my daughter against me like this. After I trusted you to help me."

Ella came between them. "I'm here because I love Sam. There is no other reason."

He drew himself up. "In that case neither of you will ever see a penny of my money. Not one red cent."

Ella smiled. "You couldn't do anything better for us, Father."

FOR THE next few days Sam felt as if he were literally walking on air. He had stood in the hall upstairs and heard Ella literally order her Father out of the house and out and out of her life. It was all he could do to stand back and let her handle it alone, but he knew that was what she wanted. She was showing him how she could cut herself off completely from her family, her old way of life, and give herself completely into his keeping. This was her home. This was her life. He was her husband. She had said it to him just before her father came, said it with her lips, her eyes, her whole luscious body, but wonderful as that way she had told her father, "I love Sam." As simple as that. As elemental as that. As eternal as that.

When she finally called him downstairs her blustering father was gone and she flung herself into his arms, laughing. Her father had disowned her, cut her off from a fortune, and it was nothing. Nothing mattered but that he loved her and she loved him. And they had Faith. All through the meal Ella would erupt into little gurgles of laughter, her eyes glowing into his two impossibly blue lakes of laughter.

"One thing is funny, Sam. In one way I feel sorry for Father. Faith had him completely fooled. She simply wound him around her finger. She made fools of all of us."

"Even you?" asked Sam, drinking in her new beauty.

"Especially me. It was marvelous.

Never did anyone show sign of yielding to wealth. Mother is the most selfish person in the world, but Faith got a diamond pin the first day."

"Mom, I'm ashamed of you. I hope you sent it back."

"She did not, Sam. I won't let her. They were going to wrap golden coils around her and stifle her as they would anyone who was weak enough. Mel gave her an orchid and a jewelled pin to fasten it on. The servants fell over themselves to do things for her. Father showed her the house he tried to force us to live in."

Faith smiled "It was a wonderful house. I told him so."

Ella chortled. "You wrote Sam to get him to come out there. You can't deny it, Faith. That was too much. And the way you talked to me, Sam, I wouldn't dare give you details."

"Well, I promised your father I wouldn't try to urge you to come back here."

"Such slyness! You made me kidnap you. And in a plane. They couldn't have kept me out there with chains after I got the idea that you had gone soft, too. It—it showed me anything might happen."

Sam leaned toward her. "Were you afraid I'd go soft, too?"

"I'm ashamed now. But it was awful. You should have seen your mother being luxurious, and Father and Mel fawning over her, and Mother insisting she was to stay with us all summer at least. Mother was serious, too. I never saw such a change. She—"

Faith cut in quickly. "Sam doesn't need to know that."

ELLA SMILED. "Thank you, Faith. But Sam does know. Sam has seen Mother drunk—and been polite about it. He should know that you so captivated her that she stopped all cocktails. If you had stayed on as they wanted you to—I can't say it. I won't say I did wrong in coming back to Sam. That comes first."

Sam jumped up to catch her in his arms. Tea was spilled but it didn't matter. Nothing matter so long as she was home and they were togeth-

er again. He said it and he meant it. In his happiness words poured from him. He was never going to be selfish and surly and ugly again. He was going to devote himself to Ella and not bother with anything else. Ella flung back her head, laughing.

"But you'll have to bother about money. I am disinherited. No one would want me now. Oh, you needn't fear Mel coming around again. He lives by and for money exclusively. When you named him the Golden Boy when you saw his picture, you were absolutely right. Now he'll marry Nona because she'll get all the money. And she'll fool him and spend it all on socialistic reforms or what not."

"Nona is a sweet girl," Sam protested.

"Of course she is. She told me that a woman's place was with her husband. After that I smacked her, but she wasn't even mad. She heaped coals of fire on my head by telling me she was always ready to be smacked for a good cause. She bought Faith a dinner dress. Faith, I was the only one who didn't give you anything."

"But you did. You gave me a kiss the first thing."

Ella's eyes swelled up with tears of happiness. "How good you are."

"And you gave me my first plane ride. And my first trip. I've been all the way out to Ohio now. I'm a traveler. Sam can't tease me any more. I've seen the world. I'm satisfied. And now it's time we had some pic, even if it is a warm evening."

It was a glorious evening, and to Sam every day following was better than the one before. It was a second honeymoon and more. Now he could confess to himself that he never had been quite sure of her because of their different outlook on life. He had loved her so much the more she broke through his native reserve and caution by coming after him. He had defied her father and refused to live the life the Wheelers wanted because he had been sure his happiness with Ella could not survive that life. He was selfish and demanded his own

way in everything because he was deeply convinced it was the only way. It had given him courage to be hard.

But now everything was different. The danger had come and gone. Even standing to be married, he had been sure the real threat to his happiness lay in Mel Winslow who wasn't there. He had recognized the danger even from the picture. Mel Winslow was something more than the man Ella's family had picked out to marry her. He was the man Ella had picked out for herself. He was the flowering of a rich way of life, the same as she herself was. He was handsome, charming, born to money and success, everything that Sam himself was not. And Mel was away but would have to be faced eventually.

NOW THE danger had come and gone and he could hold Ella in his arms and laugh. He had been a colossal fool to have lost his temper and lashed out at Mel on sight. He might have stopped to realize that Mel looked like a pampered movie star but was also a highly trained athlete and had not only been a football star but an amateur boxing champion. He had deserved the beating he got. But he hadn't had sense enough to know it, and instead of accepting the tenderness with which Ella had brought him back to consciousness as proof of her feelings he had quarrelled with her.

But by a miracle everything had come out all right and they were both happier than they could possibly have been if it hadn't happened. The danger had come and gone and need never be faced again. He had tried to promise he would never lose his horrible temper again, but she had kissed away the words and wouldn't listen. She had tried to beg him to forgive her for leaving him, and he had told her he was so glad she had. He hugged her but he had no words to explain the wonder of it. She had gone away and come back. She had ordered her father out. She was his utterly now.

And it was his job to make her

happy. He wanted to do something, say something, but no words came. And none was needed. He looked at her, she looked at him, and they were in heaven. They did nothing in particular and they were breathlessly busy. They flew to Portland and bought ridiculous things such as only people in love ever buy. He was excited over her skill as a pilot. She offered to leave the plane in Portland and sell or give it away so she would never be tempted to leave Maine again. He laughed, his dark, happy eyes glowing.

"But I want you to be tempted—and laugh at temptation. I want you to keep the plane ready so you can leave at a moment's notice—and not leave. I want it to remind me that if I ever go crazy and lose my temper again you'll be gone with the wind, and never come back."

"But there's no place to go now. I am officially disowned."

They clung to each other, roaring with laughter at that. But it was true. A formal letter had come from the Wheeler family lawyer telling Ella that she had been cut out of her father's will. Somehow it had made everything perfect. Shopping in Portland, Ella said Faith was quite right. There was no need of going out of the state of Maine for anything. Next day she said something still more wonderful. It was a glorious day and she asked Sam to take her sailing. It was startling enough, but she went one step further and suggested asking Susan. He looked at her in amazement.

"Susan? You can't want her," he exclaimed.

"Of course I can. And most certainly you do."

"Most certainly I don't."

He said it more bluntly than he intended. He saw her look of astonishment and put his arms about her.

"If you want to sail with me I don't want anyone else."

"But you haven't seen Susan in days, and you have always sailed with her. I'm very stupid about everything connected with boats, but I know you can't handle that sailboat alone."

"You'll help me."

"But I don't know anything."

"You know everything, especially how to give me energy enough to sail a square-rigger all alone. You'll see."

"I'm sure Susan would like to go."

He kissed her warmly, his lips clinging to hers. "Would you be too angry if I told you I want you all for myself, today, tomorrow, forever?"

IT WAS MORE than enough. It was a wave of happiness that swept them both along. And never had the boat behaved so perfectly. This time Ella showed no qualms, perhaps because she had things to do now instead of merely sitting helpless and watching the efficiency of the others. Sam put her to steering at once. He was delighted at the way she took hold this time. True, the weather was perfect, but she had enthusiasm, not fear, this time. They headed bravely out past the breakwater and around the Head where a famous light stood. Ella was excited, not frightened, now. They passed the boat running to the islands with passengers and she stood fearlessly to wave at Bud who shouted back at her. She couldn't hear the words but she was sure they contained boyish approval.

Once out of the harbor, she was in a brave new world. They saw several sailing vessels that took passengers out for week-cruises. They looked brave, gallant in the sunshine. With their own sails drawing perfectly, Sam set beside her as she handled the tiller with a kind of gay abandon. She leaned against him as he pointed.

"Would you dare to take one of those sailing cruises now?"

She tossed her head. "That's for landlubbers. The next time you go to the Grand Banks I'm going with you. I'm not going to let you have all the fun any more."

He chuckled. "It isn't like this all the time even at this time of year."

"Who would want it to be?" she scoffed. "When I go I want a real trip with everything thrown in. Has Susan been to the Banks?"

"Of course not. Women don't do that."

"Great. I'll be the first one. Women are doing everything these days."

He roared with laughter, but it was because he was so happy and so proud of her. They had their picnic lunch on a little island that had a few scrubby trees on it but looked as if it must be almost submerged during storms. She had never felt so gay, so deliriously happy. They lay in the sun away from the world, free of all care of the world. She pillowed her head on his arm.

"I wish we could make this day last forever."

He chortled. "We aren't home yet. Suppose a storm comes up."

"I don't care. So long as we're together we don't need anything else."

"It would be a long swim home from here, Beautiful."

"This is home. And you don't know how well I swim. I'll show you."

THE FIRST plunge into the crystal clear water was a shock, but after that she swam on and on. He hadn't known how well she swam and he was first delighted and then afraid as she swept away from him. He called and she came swiftly back, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Want me to rescue you?"

"You'll have to if we go any farther."

She gaily showed him how it was done. After that they lay on a vast rock soaking up the sun. He touched her golden hair gently.

"I'm always afraid something will hurt your hair."

"Since it's real, nothing will."

"It's more like gold than ever today. You never were so beautiful."

"I never was so happy, Sam."

His dark eyes glowed. "I want you to be like this always, Ella."

He showered her face and throat with rapturous kisses. "I want to see you laughing. I want to be sure I can make you happy."

"That's easy."

He took her hand and held it warmly in his own. "I was wrong to leave

you as I did and to let you work too hard. I was very stupid. You must promise me when I'm stupid again you'll tell me."

She nodded mockingly. "I'll begin right now then. You didn't leave me. I left you. And I promise wild horses could never drag me away again."

"I don't mean that. I mean on the fishing trips. There is no real need for me to go because I have captains that are not only most capable but to whom I could trust anything in the world."

"You don't need to tell me. I'll get to know them when I go with you."

"You can't, Ella. Everything is worked on shares. I own the boats, but when I go out I work share and share alike with the men. It is our way and always has been."

She smiled. "So that is the way, I won't insist on that. Instead you'll have to promise we'll go around the world as soon as the world gets settled."

"When you smile at me like that, Beautiful, I'd promise you anything"

SPLENDID. THEN you must promise you won't give up your trips or anything necessary to hang around watching me. You won't need to, you know. I'll never run away again."

"It isn't that, Ella. I only want to be near you all the time. I want to look at you all the time, just sit and look at you."

She patted his powerful arm. "Have you forgotten? I'm a poor girl now. You have to work hard to support me. And I'm going to be so lazy. You have no idea. Instead of working for old Mr. Oalton, I'm going to buy jewelry from him. And Faith is going to teach me to hook rugs while you are at sea. I'm going to do all the real Maine things—even learn to cook."

"I don't want you to do anything but love me."

"That goes without saying, lover."

He caught her up in his arms and carried her to the sailboat. They got home red, and tousled and radiantly

happy, to find Faith had been called away to Bangor for a few days. They didn't really miss her. In their complete happiness they were selfish. Susan came to the door, but they hid like children in their room and didn't answer the bell. After she had gone away down Elm Street they stared at each other, ashamed.

"Now why did we do that to Susan, Sam?"

He grinned. "She has dark hair. I love only gold."

THE UNEXPECTED call from Bangor kept Faith in that city for more than a week. It was only a distant relative, but she had been brought up to respect any call from the ailing. Also, she had no need to hurry back, since Sam and Ella's second honeymoon was likely to go on indefinitely. Anything she could do to bring that about she would.

So it was ten days later when she got off the bus at the railroad station, and she was loaded down with bundles in addition to the small bag which was all she had taken with her. There had been a chance to shop in Bangor, and she had taken advantage of it. One could buy so much more there than in Stonchaven, and she had wanted to buy presents for Sam, for Ella, for Bud whom she saw so little now, even for Susan, who had seemingly dropped out of her life. She didn't want that to happen. She felt sorry for Susan and, in a way, responsible for Susan. There could be no harm any more. Whatever Susan had said or done, Sam couldn't hold it against her now. And Ella certainly wouldn't.

She was smiling happily as she crossed Elm Street, her arms loaded with the bundles. She was glad to be home. There was a little fog and it would undoubtedly get thicker with evening, but that was Stonchaven, and the air was invigorating. It had been hot in Bangor; somehow it was always hotter in summer and colder in winter. She had gone up there quite often; when Sam had been in the university at Orono. But no place was like home, especially now. It

would be so good to have Ella come running to take her bundles, her blue eyes shining, her laughter like the music of silver bells. It would—

She stood on the front step, dumb-founded. The screen door opened and Mel Winslow came out gaily. He was as elegant as ever, a flower in his lapel, his eyes twinkling.

"Hello, Faith. Let me take your bundles. You must have bought out Bangor on this shopping spree."

Her arms went limp before he could reach her and everything fell. Things fairly piled up at her feet. She spoke with equal lumpiness.

"Where did you come from?"

He actually gave her a quick hug and almost a kiss. "I knew you'd be surprised." He began to gather packages with that same deftness which characterized every move he made. "But I'm sure you won't be too surprised. We're all next door neighbors these days—by plane."

Faith swallowed a lump in her throat. "What do you want?"

HE STOOD UP, fairly towering over her, his laughter raining down on her.

"Why, I came to see you, of course. Didn't you invite me?"

"No, Mr. Winslow, I didn't."

"The name is Mel, Faith. Mel for Melville which I don't like. Don't tell you've also forgotten we were very friendly in Ohio."

His chuckles seemed to push her into the house, and he followed. Her glance was quick, but no one was in the living room. The house had that empty feeling that every woman knows. She drew a quick breath and faced him as he stood holding bundles. He was too tall for the house. He was utterly out of place in a little house. He belonged in a mansion such as the Wheelers lived in. She made a gesture.

"You can dump those things on the couch."

He didn't "dump." He put them down carefully and precisely, then stood up, debonair, immaculate, glowing with self-satisfaction.

"You have a lovely little house here, Faith. A real treasure chest

You know I didn't get a chance to look at it last time. You were suspicious of me then. Or have you forgotten?"

"I have not forgotten. Mr. Winslow, nor changed my mind. I was suspicious of you then and I am equally so now. Had I been home I would not have invited you in this time any more than I did last."

He grinned. "That's known as Maine conduct, isn't it?"

She flushed. She could feel her face getting redder and redder. But she looked up at him steadily.

"Don't you think you caused trouble enough the last time you came here?"

"That was unfortunate, Faith. But I didn't know you then."

"You most certainly don't know me now or you wouldn't be here."

"What are you afraid of? Even if Sam were here we would not fight again. He went fishing and won't be home for days."

"I see. You found that out and decided the time had come for a little more dirty work. I'm sorry, but I don't care to have it in my house. You found your way in, so you can surely find your way out."

He chortled. "Please, Faith. I really didn't find my way in. Susan was here and let me in."

"Susan?"

"Oh yes. She is a delightful girl. We had a fine long talk while waiting for Ella to come back, and then finally Susan went to look for her."

"Then you haven't seen Ella?"

"No. And now we can have a nice long talk and thrash a few things out while waiting. May I sit down?"

"No." Her voice suddenly had a nervous edge to it. "We have nothing to thrash out, nothing to talk about at all. What is more, I forbid you to see Ella. I absolutely forbid it."

He shook his sleek head. "Aren't you going a bit too far, Faith? Is Ella a guest here, or a prisoner, or what? Susan was quite sure Ella would be glad to see me—especially with Sam away."

THE LITTLE woman's eyes flashed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it quite clear?"

"It is so clear I must ask you to leave the house. At once, Mr. Winslow."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait until I talk to Ella?"

"I said at once, Mr. Winslow."

He shrugged coolly. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I have a message for you from Mrs. Wheeler. She is very anxious to—"

"I am not interested in any messages from Mrs. Wheeler."

"That is really unkind, Faith. Whatever her faults, she took to you at once and would do anything for you."

"The only thing she can do for me is to keep you in Ohio."

"As a matter of fact, I only got back there last night. I was in California."

"I am not in the least interested in your travels, Mr. Winslow."

He shrugged again and retrieved his hat from a chair. Then he held out his hand.

"I'm sorry you feel like this, Faith. I'm very fond of you. We all are, even Bruce Wheeler. You outsmarted him completely. But you are not being clever now. I must see Ella and—"

"Goodbye, Mr. Winslow. Close the door after you. The fog is coming in."

"The fog definitely is in now."

He said it in a kind of mocking tone and was gone. Faith stood rigid for a moment, steadying herself. Then she looked down Elm Street. He was walking along slowly, tall, handsome and confident. She was sure he was smiling. His words seemed to hang in the air. "You are not being clever now." A shiver shook her whole body. She also felt she hadn't been very clever. He would find Ella, of course, and talk to her. She had no way of preventing that. All she had succeeded in doing was forcing them to talk somewhere else. Far from being clever, she had been a fool.

A second shiver ran down her spine.

The fog was definitely in now. She crossed the room and set a match to the logs on the fireplace. She wanted the flames to leap against the chill in the air and the too early darkness. She stood holding out her small lean hands to the blaze. She only turned when she heard someone come into the kitchen. She hurried there and found Ella with bundles. Ella's cheeks were glowing and her blue eyes were very bright as she leaped to kiss her mother-in-law.

"Welcome home. When did you get in?"

"A few minutes ago."

Ella patted her cheek gaily. "You look tired. You sit down, because you're going to be a guest in your own home tonight. Don't say no. I have to show you all I learned in the last ten days, especially the last week since Sam left. Did you know I tried to go with him but he wouldn't take me? I know he couldn't, of course. But I love the sea now. Susan and I go sailing every day and she is teaching me so I can amaze Sam on his return. She teaches me sailing and I try out my cooking on her. She teaches me that, too. Hasn't she been telling you about it? Susan," she called, "where are you?"

FAITH DREW a deep breath. "Didn't you meet her on the street?"

"No. Is she out looking for me? I went down toward the other end of town to get some fruit. I got blueberries. I know you love them. Susan is going to show me how to make blueberry muffins and— Faith, you are looking out the window and don't hear a word I'm saying."

"I'm sorry. I—I must be tired and—"

"Of course you are. Why don't you go up and lie down till we call you? Susan will be back any minute and we three will have a jolly supper."

Faith made her decision. She took the girl's glowing face between her hands and spoke quickly.

"Will you help me? I just remembered something. Something awful."

Ella hugged her. "What can I do?"

"It's awful to ask you. But it's important. I must get back to Bangor right away. Every minute is precious. Can you fly me there?"

"Of course I can. That will be fun. We can have an early supper and—"

"No. We must start right away. This minute."

Ella glanced out the window. "The fog is coming in fast."

"That's it," cried Faith. "We must get away before it's too late."

Ella frowned. "Maybe it is too late already."

"No! No! We must go! It's a matter of life and death." She caught the girl's hand. "We have to beat the fog. You have to do it for me."

"All right." Ella caught her excitement. "Get your coat. I'll dash upstairs a minute and—"

"No! We must go now! We don't need anything!"

Faith began to drag her toward the door. Ella gasped.

"We have to leave a note for Susan. She—"

"No. Leave nothing. We must get away."

"But the stove—"

Faith half dragged her out of the house and out of the back way through the garden that opened onto the alley. The fog seemed thicker there. Definitely thicker. Ella sropped short.

"It's no use, Faith. We can't get off the ground. The fog is coming from that direction."

Faith shook her. "You have to do it for me. You—"

The woman's voice ended in a gulp. Susan was beside them. Susan's dark eyes were glowing, her voice gay.

"Where are you two dashing off to? I saw you leave the house and I ran after you."

Ella was quick. "Faith has to get back to Bangor at once. I was going to fly her but—"

"Back to Bangor?" Susan made it sound mad. "You just came from there."

Faith heaved a sigh. "It—it doesn't matter now."

Susan chuckled. "You can't go off now anyway. Ella, Mel is here. We

had a grand long talk and I think he is perfectly charming."

"Who is here?" queried Ella.

"Mel Winslow. I went out to look for you when you didn't come home for so long. He's so anxious to see you. I left him in the house waiting. Wasn't he there when you came home, Faith? He was so anxious to see you too, and told me how crazy everyone was about you out there in Ohio. He is certainly the most fascinating talker I ever met."

WITH DREW herself up with an effort. "We had better go back. We'll surely catch cold here like this."

She shivered as if to prove it. Ella looked at her slowly.

"What about Bangor?"

"We don't need to go now. I—I think I can telephone or—or write."

"But you said it was a matter of life and death."

"It isn't now."

Susan laughed. "Wasn't it lucky I saw you and could catch up with you? If you'd gone to Bangor you wouldn't have seen Mel, because he told me he is only making a short visit this time. Faith, you must have missed him."

"No. I saw him."

Ella looked incredulous. "You saw him. And you—you—"

"Yes."

Susan gasped. "You mean you were trying to take Ella away so she wouldn't get a chance to see Mel?"

"Yes. I don't like him."

"Why, how can you say it? He's the most charming man I ever met."

"I think so, too."

"I don't understand," cried Susan. "If you like him so much, then—"

"I don't like him. What is more, I told him so and ordered him out of my house. I consider him the most dangerous person in all the world, the one person who can ruin all our happiness. Now I've said it."

She turned and ran through the garden toward the back door of the house. The two girls stood without speaking until she entered the kitchen; then Susan heaved a vast sigh.

"I don't understand this at all.

What is the matter with Faith? I never saw her so utterly beside herself."

Ella put a hand on her arm. "Will you do me a great favor, Susan? Find Mel and tell him I don't wish to see him now or at any other time."

"But—but how could I tell him that?"

"With your tongue, Susan. But you needn't bother. I shall find him and tell him. You go into the house and tell Faith I shall be back in half an hour. And I shall get rid of him."

"But he has a message for you from your mother."

"All right. Will you go stay with Faith till I get back?"

"Of course, but—"

Susan broke off as Ella strode away in the direction of Main Street. Then she walked slowly through the garden and into the house. Faith was in the living room standing before the fire holding her small hands out to the blaze. She turned slowly toward the dark girl.

"Where is Ella?"

"Gone to look for Mel, of course."

"Didn't she say anything? Susan, can't you see how worried I am?"

The dark girl smiled enigmatically. "What could she say? She just ran after him. She wouldn't let me go give him a message."

"WHEN IT'S ALL a lie! A dirty, rotten lie! You aren't sick. You haven't been sick at all. It was a trick."

Ella fairly hurled the words at her mother, who was sitting up in bed with a pile of magazines beside her on one side and a box of chocolates on the other. The maid was half cowering in a corner. She was a new maid and had not been clever enough to slip out of the room when everyone came charging in. She had heard stories about Ella and her romantic marriage to a penniless fisherman who beat her up everyday, but she had never seen her.

None of the others had ever seen her quite like this either. Mrs. Wheeler took refuge in the eternal subterfuge. She put plump hands to her ears and murmured a protest.

"I may not be sick enough to suit

you, but I do have a headache and there is no need to shout."

Ella stood shaking, her face drained of all color, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides.

"There is every need to shout. I was told you were at death's door and I had to come at once if I hoped to see you alive."

Her father laughed, his rough domineering laugh. "I knew Mel could be depended on to lay it on thick. You'd listen to him where you wouldn't listen to any of us or pay any attention to any message we sent you. Mel still has the magic touch."

Ella flared out at him. "I might have known it was one of your tricks. I was a fool even to listen."

Dr. Kendricks coughed. He had a pompous manner and only prosperous patients. He had been playing chess with Bruce Wheeler when Ella burst into the house. His manner was vaguely paternal.

"Surely, Miss Wheeler, you don't regret finding your mother in good health instead of being at death's door as you put it."

The girl's eyes snapped. "My name is Mrs. Haskins, Dr. Kendricks."

"I'm afraid you'll always be Miss Wheeler to me."

Mrs. Wheeler held out a fat hand, still bejeweled even in bed. "Come give Mother a kiss. You know you don't mean any of the things you say. You're really delighted to be back home again."

"My home is in Stonehaven. In Maine. I told Father that when he came to thunder at me. Where is Nona?"

"She's out dancing, of course. You will be tomorrow night. Mel will see to that."

"Mel will see to nothing." Ella was breathing hard as if she had been running, but she felt she must control herself. "I shall never speak to Mel again, never. He is the lowest sneak in the world."

"But you love him all right," cried her father. "You know you like to bluff, but you jumped at the chance to come home I called the airport and found out you took off against orders in a fog."

She faced him. "The fog will be gone by the time I get back there."

"You bet it will," he chuckled. "They'll probably have a new airfield by that time. You're here to stay this time."

"Stay? Here? Do you think I'd ever stay here after this?"

MRS. WHEELER rattled her box of chocolates to get attention. "I really haven't been very well, Ella. But tell me. Did Mel deliver my message to Faith? He promised he would."

"Since he is the world's cheapest liar, he probably didn't, Mother. All I know is that Faith is the only one with any sense. She ordered him out of her house as any decent person would."

Dr. Kendricks smiled. "Don't be so hard on the young man. He had a difficult job to do and he did it. You should be happy, young lady, to think that he loves you so much."

"So you're in on this too. I might have known it."

Mrs. Wheeler spoke sharply, her mouth full of candy. "You should be grateful to Dr. Kendricks for being so much interested in you. For one thing, he doesn't think the climate of the Maine coast is suitable for you. Tell her about it, Doctor."

He smiled. "I think Miss Wheeler understands."

"I understand only one thing. I've been tricked."

Her father smiled. "You didn't expect me to let you go to pieces back there, did you? Whenever you are ready to apologize for the way you talked to me I shall see what I can do about remembering you are my daughter again."

"Don't bother. I'm leaving here now and this time I am never coming back. And I mean never."

"You never used to be so melodramatic."

"I never used to be a lot of things I am now."

She turned on her heel and walked out of the ornate bedroom. Her own room was down the hall. She went in to hasty quickly and change clothes.

She needed that much refreshing if she was to fly back tonight, and that was just what she intended doing. If everything went well she would be home in time for breakfast. She could telephone Faith and tell her that now. Mel hadn't given her time to phone Faith, who must be thinking terrible things.

However, she waited until after her bath before trying. She wanted to be sure she was calm. She must be steady. But when she tried the phone she got no answer. Her temper flared up; then she realized it had probably been disconnected downstairs while she was away. There were phones all over the house. Pulling on a robe, she thrust her feet into slippers and started for the nearest one.

BUT THE DOOR wouldn't open. She tried it several times before she realized it was locked. Locked on the outside. She had been locked into her room like a naughty child. For a second she couldn't realize it, and then she lost her temper completely and hurled herself against the door. The sturdy oak didn't so much as quiver under the impact. The doors in that house were made to ignore dramatics. She pounded.

"Open this door."

She shouted over and over again for a full minute before she realized she was wasting her breath and strength. Her two windows looked out on the garden and lawn, but it was a long drop. The vast proportions of the house ensured that. And shouting was less than useless. There was no one to hear within a mile at least and it was late. She was not only tricked but trapped.

It did no good to tear Mel's picture on her bureau into the smallest possible fragments and then hurl them into the night, but she did just that. The pieces fluttered like snowflakes in the darkness. It was a warm night and there was no breeze. She went to her bathroom and drank some cold water slowly. That did make her feel better. She was not too surprised when her phone rang and her Father's voice came over the wire.

"Have you decided to be sensible

and go to bed?" he demanded.

She hesitated, then answered dully. "I am tired. I think I shall feel better in the morning."

"Do you want Dr. Kendrick's to give you a pill to make you sleep?"

She held back the answer that leaped to her lips. She had been tricked and trapped and needed to be clever now. She managed a yawn.

"I'm sure I'll sleep well. But thank Dr. Kendrick's."

"Ah. Now you sound more like my daughter. Are you hungry?"

"No, Father. Mel and I ate something when we stopped to refuel."

"Then you're going to be sensible."

She managed a faint laugh she hoped sounded convincing. "I assure you I won't try to break any more doors. I am sore all over. What time is breakfast served in this jail?"

His laugh answered her. "That's better. As soon as you realize you are home with your family it won't be a jail. I'll see you at breakfast."

"Good night, Father."

"Don't try any foolish long distance phone calls. Ella."

"I won't. Not even Reno."

He only laughed, but she knew that had touched him. She took off her robe and, switching off the lights, lay on the bed. She was tired, almost exhausted, but not really sleepy yet. She whispered softly into the darkness.

"I love you, Sam. I'll always love you. You must hear me by some magic—and you must believe me. Good-night—lover."

THE SOFT sweet words seemed to hang in the air like perfume. She closed her eyes and a faint breeze came through the window and touched her cheek. It was like Sam's lips upon her lips. The fragrance of full summer flowed up from the garden. She was at peace and slipped softly into the velvety rapture of sleep.

The day dawned clear, warm, blue and promised to be a scorcher by noontime. Ella came down to breakfast with a beach robe over her bathing suit and rope-soled slippers on her feet. For once her mother was down for the meal and fanning her-

self as she drank a big glass of iced orange juice. Her father looked over his coffee cup and smiled with satisfaction.

"So you have decided to be sensible today."

"Why not, since it is going to be much too hot to use energy for anything but swimming?"

Mrs. Wheeler sighed and mopped her forehead. "It isn't this hot in Maine, is it?"

"No, Mother. It was chilly when I left."

Mr. Wheeler smiled. "Do you wish you were back on the fog-bound coast of Maine?"

Ella laughed. "I needed a swim."

Mrs. Wheeler sighed again and touched her arm. "So you have decided to be sensible after all?"

"I like taking the easiest way out." She laughed lazily. "Father, will you send a telegram to Faith? It will be easier than phoning. It's decent to let her know where I am."

He beamed. "As a matter of fact, I anticipated your wishes and phoned last night I told her you were staying here."

Ella knew his eyes were sharply watching her. She grinned.

"What did she say to that, Father?"

"She said that if you preferred staying here you might as well stay here for good and all."

"I don't believe it! It isn't true!"

It was Nona shouting from the doorway where she had been listening. Mr. Wheeler stood up, glaring at her.

"Are you daring to call me a liar, Nona?"

Ella reached up and smiled at him. "Don't mind Nona, Father. She's only a child after all."

"Am I?" cried Nona. "Well, I'm not fool enough to let them pull the wool over my eyes and ruin my happiness. Are you crazy to come back here now? Don't you know anything yet?"

"I know you'll get twice as much money if you can keep Father mad at me, darling."

Nona gasped. "You think I would do that? Do you?"

"Why not? It has been done. But

I'm being sensible now."

"You're just hateful. You are. You don't deserve to have a decent husband. I'll tell him he'll be better off if he never sees you again."

The girl fairly spit out the words, then ran from the room. Mrs. Wheeler sat down again and patted Ella's arm.

"I see my older daughter has some brains and is using them. I shall attend to Nona later"

"Let her go, Father. She is only a child and full of romantic ideas. It takes a little explosion to let off steam sometimes, especially with girls."

MRS. WHEELER heaved another sigh. "I never explode. I just wish Faith were here. I did like her. I don't care what anybody says."

Her husband chuckled. "If you mean me, why not call her up now and invite her out here? I'm quite willing."

"You mean you'll let her come?" The fat woman's eyes were round.

"Clarice, dear, this is your home. You have everyone you like. Ask Sam, too."

"I don't like Sam. I hate Sam. I only agreed to playing that trick on Ella because I hate him. Otherwise—"

She stopped short and clapped a jewelled hand to her mouth. Her husband laughed raucously.

"You haven't said anything bad. Ella is going to be sensible."

Mrs. Wheeler spilled coffee in her lumbering attempt to leave the table and got to a phone as quickly as possible. Ella sat smiling and ate a hearty breakfast while talking to her father as if nothing had happened, as if she had never left home or married at all. She felt she was going to need her strength as well as her wits today. She was finishing her second cup of coffee when her mother came back slowly, wiltedly, with tears in her eyes.

"She—she said no. She won't come. She doesn't want to see me. I—I offered to pay her anything or give her anything and she said she would nev-

er leave Maine again. I got so excited I asked could I come visit her and she said 'No.'"

The last word was a sob. Mr. Wheeler's answering laugh was a positive gloat. Ella jumped up and kissed her mother quickly.

"Don't cry. She's a cross, selfish old woman."

"But I like her. I still like her. I want her for my friend. I don't have any friends. I don't have anybody. And I don't drink any more, either. She said it wasn't good for me, so I stopped. It was easy when she was here, but it isn't easy any more. If she would be my friend it would be easy all the time. This way I might as well be drunk. I have nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to think about."

Ella kissed her again with a warmth that surprised herself, and patted her shoulder.

"Don't cry. I'm home with you. We'll do plenty of things. We'll have fun. Didn't I come right away as soon as I heard you were sick and needed me?"

"But it was a lie. It was all a lie. God punishes people who lie like that. He is punishing me now."

"Don't be silly, Mother. I wanted to see you anyway. And it's wonderful that you don't like cocktails any more."

"But I do like them. I want one right now. I—"

ELLA PUT a quick hand over her mouth. "You musn't say that because it isn't true. We're going to have fun. You're too warm and too dressed up. Put on a suit and we'll swim in the pool."

"Me? Swim? I'm as fat as a cow."

"You're not! I'll teach you to swim. Then when we feel tired of that we'll go shopping. All my clothes are so scattered I need things. We'll have lunch in town and have fun." She swung round to her father, who was standing watching. "Mother and I are having a holiday."

He squared his shoulders, then went to his wife and kissed her as he seldom had in long years.

"I think we have found our daughter."

ter. Take care of her."

She beamed through her tear-stained eyes. "She's going to take care of me. I—I never was so happy. I'll run put on my bathing suit. I've always been ashamed to wear it. I won't any more. And I'll take off all my rings. I don't need them now." She actually danced out of the room.

ELLA KISSED her father good-bye and watched his chauffeur drive him away before turning back into the house. Nona was just coming down the broad stairs. Her lip curled at sight of Ella.

"So you are crawling around like a worm after all."

Ella hesitated, then grinned. "You'd do the same in my place."

"I wouldn't crawl if they disinherited me six times over."

"So you think it's that?"

"What else is it? You were looking for an excuse to get back. They didn't have to trick you at all. And now you're teaching Mother to swim. You ought to be ashamed. You got her dancing around like—like a fool."

Ella smiled. "If I can give her any happiness I'm glad. She certainly doesn't have anybody on her side."

"Sycophant!"

Nona hissed the word and swept past to the breakfast room. Ella stood looking up the stairs. She could hear her mother singing. Actually singing. She hadn't heard that in years. She went slowly into the library and picked up the telephone. Almost to her surprise, it was working. She gave Faith's number to Long Distance and waited. It seemed an interminable length of time before the answered report came. No answer. She drew a deep breath and tried again. Susan Goodrow's number this time. It wasn't until the "no answer" report came back that she realized Of course Susan was at work at this hour. She hung up slowly. Perhaps it was just as well not to talk to Susan anyway. Yesterday Susan had seemed too anxious to cooperate with Mel.

She wandered slowly down to the pool. Chairs, cushions, umbrellas were out as always. She sat down on

the edge of the pool dangling her feet in the water. She must be careful and not make any mistakes. She had to get away from there and back home before Sam got home, but luckily there was a week or more for that. If she was clever she could do anything in a week. She—

A step made her turn. It was Mel. He was dressed perfectly as always—flannel, white shoes, a rose in his buttonhole. He carried a Panama hat. And he was smiling broadly.

"How's the water, darling?"

She stood up to face him. "I was hoping you'd come."

He took her chin in his hand and kissed her lightly. "You know I'd come to ask about your mother. How is she this morning?"

"Sober."

He stopped smiling. "I don't mean that, Ella. I couldn't come in with you last night but I was worried. Is the operation going to be necessary?"

"What operation?" Her eyes were fixed on his.

"You mean they didn't tell you anything?" he cried.

SHE LAUGHED bitterly. "I mean they told me everything. There was nothing the matter with Mother at all. And you knew it. Don't waste time looking astounded, because even Dr. Kenrielis was frank. It was all a trick to get me back here. You are going to be congratulated on having played your part so well. I must be the first to congratulate you on being the slimiest, rottenest, lowest filthiest liar and cheat I ever met."

The words were like slaps. He winced under them.

"Ella! Don't say that! It isn't true. I swear I didn't know. I—"

She pushed him. It was done swiftly and with all the force she could muster. He toppled, catching at the air, and then sank into the water. But that was not enough. She leaped to catch up cushions, stools, anything she could lift and fling at him. A wild rage completely possessed her. To do what he had done and then to swear he didn't know. She caught up an ash tray and hurled it. It just missed his head as he stood

neck deep trying to shout at her.

Then the whirlwind of madness was gone as quickly as it had come. She felt cold, critical, mocking. Sitting down in a long cane chair, she watched him climb out of the pool. She lighted a cigarette.

"How you know how the water is, I'm sure."

He looked utterly ludicrous as he stood dripping. "Ella. What is the matter with you?"

She laughed mockingly. "I'm all right. You seem to be in trouble. Run home so you won't catch cold. If you get all I'm wishing you it will start with pneumonia, and go on from there."

"But, darling, I swear—"

"Don't call me darling or I'll really do something. Don't ever speak to me again. Get out of here and don't let me ever see you again."

"But I swear—"

"All dirty liars always swear. You were too smart this time. I shall say you attacked me and I had to fight you off. Luckily, after a frantic struggle, I was able to push you into the pool and throw some of the furniture at you. I'm sorry I missed your head with that ash tray. That might have taught you a lesson."

He knelt beside her chair. "Ella, I didn't know I thought your mother was desperately sick. I believed your father. She told me herself the night before that she needed Faith. I tried to tell Faith that she wouldn't listen to me."

"I won't listen to you, either."

"You must."

He tried to hold her hands, but she pulled away and slapped him as hard as she could. She slapped a second time, crying, "I hate you! I loathe you!" before he fell back beyond her reach. Then she folded her hands in her lap, squeezing them tightly one against the other to steady herself.

Mel stood up slowly. She expected some kind of outburst but none came. He just stood looking at her, dripping, pitiful for the first time in his life. She drew a long deep breath and her voice was tight.

"What else must I do to drive you away?"

He shook his head slowly. "You can't drive me away. Not now."

"Haven't I called you enough names?"

"No. Not enough, if I was as rotten as you think I am."

"No words can express my feelings about you, Mr. Melville Winslow."

"I say again I did not know your mother was not sick. I would not have gone after you as I did unless I had thought it was a matter of life and death just as I told you."

"Must you go on lying?"

"I'm not lying. I—"

A GARDENER came along and blinked at the chaos in the pool. "What happened, Miss?"

Mel spoke quickly. "I fell in."

"But all the cushions, sir, and—"

"They fell in on top of me. I'll get them out."

The man tried to say he'd do it, but Mel went quietly back into the pool and began to hand things out, including his own Panama hat. Ella sat very still watching him. Mrs. Wheeler came along looking like an embarrassed balloon, but she gaped in complete self-forgetfulness at sight of Mel. She felt for a moment that the whole world was topsy-turvy.

"What are you doing? Mel Winslow, come out of that pool at once."

He threw the last cushion onto the sand and came out instantly. His clothes ran water and his shoes squirted it, but he walked straight up to the blinking fat woman.

"Mrs. Wheeler, I want you to tell Ella the truth. Did I know you weren't sick? Was I part of the trick to get Ella back here?"

She burst out laughing. "You look so funny. I never saw you look funny before. What happened?"

"You can laugh later. Now tell Ella—"

"Did she push you in? And throw things on top of you?"

The gardener guffawed and then tried to hide it by walking quickly away. The Wheelers paid well for very little work. But Mrs. Wheeler was laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes and she couldn't see anything. Except the dripping Mel.

She pointed a shaking fat finger.

"You are so funny. You should see yourself. You—"

She choked on a laugh and had to sit down in a chair. Mel turned to Ella helplessly. He extended a hand pitifully.

"What am I to do now?"

It was Mrs. Wheeler who answered. "You can run around in the sun til you dry. Children do that."

Mel glared at her. "I wish I'd never gone after Ella for you. It was a dirty trick on me just as well as on her. I'll never—"

A maid came running up. "I heard your voice, Mr. Winslow. Mr. Wheeler thought you might be here. He wants you to call him as soon as possible."

"I'll call him all right! I'll tell him what I think of him."

The maid fled back toward the house. Mrs. Wheeler stopped laughing and caught Mel's sleeve as he was striding past her.

"I'm sorry, Mel. I shouldn't have laughed at you. But you were funny."

"I'll be still funnier when I tell Bruce Wheeler what I think of him."

"You mustn't." She clung to his arm, and she was very earnest now. "You mustn't say anything. It would ruin your future. You know how much he means to your career."

HE DOESN'T mean enough to make me appear a rotten liar to Ella."

"Ella knows you aren't a liar. She has sense enough to see you were not part of any plot to trick her. It was all her father. Even I didn't want to do it, but I thought Faith Haskins might come, too. I still wait her for my friend. And we all need you. Yes, we do. Things are going to be better now and we're all going to be happy together. I won't drink any more and Ella is teaching me to swim. you can laugh at me for a while and then you'll feel better."

"I won't feel better until I take Ella straight back to Stonehaven."

"You can't do that. And you mustn't. Ella must stay here. She was locked in her room last night. She can't have any cars. Her plane is

grounded by her father's orders. She's going out with me today, but I promised not to let her out of my sight. She has to be good so her father will put her back into his will. He disinherited her. I couldn't say a word."

Mel stared. "Disinherited her? That's crazy."

"He did."

Ella spoke for the first time since her mother's arrival. "Since I'm not an heiress any more, you don't have to go on pretending you love me."

"But I do love you. I always have. I always shall."

Mrs. Wheeler clutched at his coat again. "Then you won't talk to Bruce and make more trouble. You must promise you won't say a word."

Ella nodded. "That is better, Mel. I do realize you weren't in on the trick. You were fooled as well as I was. Now—let well enough alone."

"But I want to help you."

"You can help me. Go up to the house and get a bathing suit. There are dozens, and you can have those clothes dried and phone for others. By the time they come we'll be tired of swimming and ready to go shopping. Call Father and tell him you're going with us to keep an eye on me. Just that and nothing else. Unless you are so mad you don't want to see me."

"I'm not mad at you," he said slowly. "I want to help you."

"That will help me. Remember, not one angry word."

"I promise."

He turned and ran toward the house with the famous long, loping stride that had carried him down so many football fields. Mrs. Wheeler stood up and looked at her daughter.

"Everything is going to be for the best, isn't it, Ella?"

"I think so."

"And you will forgive Mel, won't you?"

"Of course. He'll be very useful to us."

BECAUSE anything involving planes is always news, the story of the crash was not only used by all the news services but also given out

over the air. It was what newspapermen consider a good story. It had heart interest, involved rich important people, and also had the necessary scandal. The man involved was the famous Adonis of the gridiron, Mel Winslow; the woman, the daughter of the millionaire Bruce Wheeler. As it came over the radio to Sam Haskins via a facetious commentator, it was something like this:

"Too bad the excited lovers forgot to see how much gas they had for their midnight elopment. Planes as well as cars need gas. But then this couple must also have forgotten about the lady's husband, Sam Haskins, a worthy fisherman toiling on the Grand Banks. Of course, they might have been heading for Reno. Anything is possible.

They were not "toiling on the Grand Banks" but nearing Stonehaven and all listening to the radio when the news came in. Sam sat very still, not moving a muscle, as the half-sneering voice went on. He was so still that one of the men thought he was asleep and reached to switch off the radio. Sam's hand came out and stopped him. Sam's voice was a little thick but perfectly clear.

"We want to hear all of it."

But there wasn't any more. Several of the men shuffled away. The engineer grumbled in his old-fashioned heard.

"It must be a mistake, Sam."

"It isn't a mistake," said Sam quietly. "Can we go any faster?"

"I'll make sure we do."

The big bearded man went to his engines. Sam went into the pilot house to stand beside the helmsman. It was easier because he hadn't heard news. He wished Ike Blayne were there but he was only there himself because Ike had taken this trip off to get married. He was only there because Ella had insisted on his coming. He could remember her very words "I won't feel you have complete confidence in me unless you do go." So he had complete confidence. So now the whole world knew that

Sam Haskins' wife had crashed in a plane while running away with her lover.

He was glad it was very late, almost daylight, when he landed at the fish wharf. The cannery was closed and no one was around; at least he thought no one was until he felt a hand touch his. He was startled but smiled warily when he saw it was Bud Goodrow. He squeezed the big hand of the overgrown boy.

"Hell, Bud. What're you doing here at this hour?"

"I waited for you. The manager told me you'd be in early today. I knew you'd be in before that. You'd get full speed out of her. I got Cap'n Snow's car here. He let me borrow it."

"I always walk, Bud," he said gently.

"We got to ride tonight, Sam. They're waitin' at the house."

"They?"

"Faith and Susan. They knew you'd be hungry."

Sam patted his arm. "You're hungry anyway. So we'll eat."

HE LET Bud drive the car. Bud had no license, but no one in Stonehaven would care. The streets were dark and deserted. Always darkest before dawn, of course. He and Bud went into the kitchen. It was warm and cozy there. Faith came in and kissed him in her usual manner.

"Bud knew best. He was sure you'd be in before daylight. Susan is in the living room. We got chilly and lighted the fire."

"You shouldn't have sat up, Mom."

"It's nothing. I need to talk to you. You—you might not understand some things"

"I heard the radio, Mom."

Her eyes flashed. "That man should have been horsewhipped."

"He simply told the truth. People want the news."

"What are you going to do, Sam?"

He kissed her. "Don't worry. I'll have coffee, then change my clothes. Susan can drive me to Augusta. I'll get a plane."

Faith drew a deep breath. "I would have gone at once but I

thought I should wait for you. We can go together."

He shook his head slowly. "I have to go alone, Mom."

"I think I could help. They all like me and—"

She stopped at the flash of his eyes. "They don't like me, Mom, but Ella is still my wife, and I'm going. I don't need help."

"Sometimes we all need help. And advice."

She held his arm. "I telephoned. The hospital. They are both still in a critical condition. It was a horrible accident."

"I'm very glad it was. They got what they deserved."

He said it harshly and strode past her. She stood very still. She could hear him talking to Susan in the living room, the sound but not the sense. His last words had gone through her like a knife. She had thought he would be angry, bitter, hurt, wretched, but not like that. When people were horribly hurt you didn't say you were glad no matter who they were. She heaved a sigh and turned to the stove. Bud was still standing there. She tried to smile at him. He was too young for all this.

"Go see Susan. She was worried about you down at the fish wharf."

He came close to her. "Isn't Sam worried about Ella? She was almost killed. She may die yet."

"I'm sure she won't." Faith spoke briskly though her heart was leaden. "Papers always exaggerate. And you need a hot drink."

"I wish you could go with Sam. He—he needs you."

"We all need each other. I need you. Can you carry this coffee pot in?"

He nodded, eager to help. She was glad of something to do herself. She followed with the hot muffins she had made and a new jar of home-made preserves. Susan was standing by the fire, head thrown back. The light touched her dark eyes until they shone and put glints into her dark hair. Her voice had a lilt in it.

"Sam is upstairs dressing. I'm driving him to Augusta."

Bud glared at her. "You needn't

look so darn happy about it."

She slapped at him. "I am happy. Why shouldn't I be?"

Faith drew Bud away. "I'm sure you don't mean that, Susan."

"But I do. Sam is furious naturally, but at least he has come to his senses now and knows what to do. She can't make a fool of him any more. She got caught red-handed this time."

"Caught! Susan you can't say such things!"

"Can't I though? And why not? I know her better than any of you do. She bragged to me how she could pull the wool over Sam's eyes. Do you think her lover just happened to come here? She sent for him. Sam meant nothing to her at all, less than nothing."

FAITH CAUGHT her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Stop it! Stop saying such things. Sam will bear you."

"I want him to hear me. Why shouldn't he hear me? Why should I stand by and let her ruin his life? I won't do it. I'll tell him everything."

Faith dropped her hands to her side. "I forbid you to say any more, Susan. I'm beginning to open my eyes, too. After Sam has gone I am going to talk to you plainly."

Susan tossed her head. "Talk now."

Bud couldn't hold in any more. "Don't you talk to Faith like that," he roared. "And don't look at her like that."

She caught at his tousled hair and pulled it hard before pushing him away contemptuously. "You go home. I'll settle with you after I take Sam to Augusta."

"You won't. I won't let you have the car. Cap'n Snow lent it to me. You can't drive it."

Susan sneered. "You're an overgrown baby."

Faith put a restraining hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Susan. I can't let you take Sam to Augusta."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't trust you."

"Don't trust me?"

"No. You have done everything in your power to split Sam and Ella up since you heard they were married.

It was you who stopped me from taking Ella away. It was you who entertained Mel here. It was you who scot Ella after him. Ella was tricked somehow."

"Nonsense. Mel Winslow has been her lover for years. She told me so."

Faith didn't know what madness took possession of her. She couldn't help slapping Susan's face. And at that very moment Sam entered the room, carrying his coat, his tie still untied, his shoes still unlaced. He had not shaved and his face was dark and glowing above the fresh white shirt.

"What are you two fighting about? I could hear you upstairs."

Susan burst into tears. "She slapped me."

"I shall slap you whenever you lie like that in my house."

"I'll never enter your house again, I'd die first."

Sam stepped between them quietly. "Mom, what's the matter? Susan is out guest. We love Susan."

"She's a snake. I told her she can't take you to Augusta. She is going to fill you up with a pack of lies about Ella. She has tried to split you and Ella up from the first day. You know she has."

HIS DARK EYES narrowed. "I don't need to be told anything about Ella. I know her now."

"Do you know that Susan stopped me from taking Ella away and made her go after Mel?"

Susan's eyes filled with tears. "Sam, I pleaded with her not to do it. You forgave her once but you never would the second time. And with the same man. She told me she never could resist him."

"Susan Goodrow, God will punish you for being like that."

Faith's whole slim body was trembling. Susan burst into tears and fell sobbing into Sam's arms. He held her gently and his hand brushed her dark hair. Faith stood very straight, head high.

"Sam. You have a wife waiting for you in a hospital. It's scarcely the time to make love to Susan."

"And Susan is a liar," cried Bud.

Sam kissed Susan and took her arm. "We're going now."

His mother faced him. She can't go with you."

"She is going with me. All the way I'm going to show these people what a decent Mame girl looks like."

"Sam. You can't Ella may be dying right now."

"I hope she's dead. That will save me the trouble of divorcing her."

Faith spread out her arms to block the door. "You'll be sorry to the longest day you live, Sam."

Susan laughed shrilly. "I'll make him happy. I love him. I've always loved him. He'll never think of her again."

Faith dropped her arms and sank heavily into a chair. Bud stood hulking, openmouthed, as Sam and Susan left the house. Faith heard the car drive away before she moved. Then she got up wearily.

"Come on, Bud. You need some coffee."

The boy swallowed a lump in his throat. "I want Ella to come home."

Faith poured the coffee. "Drink this. Then you must go upstairs and get some sleep. It's getting daylight now."

BRUCE WHEELER led Sam into the library after dinner. The stately room looked its best and the tray set on the big table was most inviting. Bruce waved his guest to a chair.

"What can I offer you to drink, Sam? We don't have anything at dinner any more on account of Clarice, but this is my office."

Sam sat on the edge of the straightest chair. "I came to talk seriously, not to drink."

"I'm sure you did." The man mixed himself a stiff Scotch and soda coolly. "This is certainly all a bad business. Cigar?"

Sam waved the proffered box away. His face was dark under the carefully shaded lights. His voice was rough, harsh.

"I think it's a good business. I needed something to wake me up."

Mr. Wheeler laughed. "You never were sleepy, Sam."

"Not sleepy. Stupid."

Mr. Wheeler took a sip from his glass. "You mustn't underestimate yourself, Sam. You have a fine head for business. I can always use you."

"What if I don't want to be used?"

"What? Oh, I see. With Ella in such a bad condition you don't want to talk business. I understand. How was she when you saw her just before dinner?"

Sam's eyes narrowed. "She is well enough to understand what she has done and how I feel about it."

"Ah. And how do you feel about it?"

"The same as any decent man would who found his wife was running around with other men."

Mr. Wheeler put down his glass. "You don't seem to understand the situation, Sam. I was a little afraid you wouldn't after those damned papers and that radio announcer got through with it. It was all an excuse for an attack on me. My sin is that I have made more money than other people; therefore I must be a target for any mud slinging. In a way it was my fault. I wanted Ella back here and—"

Sam raised a hand to stop him. "I'm not interested, Mr. Wheeler. You were against the marriage from the first—and you were right. It was a mistake. But it is a mistake that can be rectified."

Mr. Wheeler expanded visibly. "I was sure you would be sensible about all this, Sam. I knew if I could get you out here and talk to you we could come to a good amicable agreement. That is why I tried to get you out here before. It would have been better. This time—well, things just happened too fast for us. But the doctors tell me Ella will make a quick recovery. As soon as she is able to travel she can go to Reno and—"

"There will be no need of her going there. No need at all."

Mr. Wheeler cleared his throat as he always did before making important decisions. "I think it had better be Reno, since we want everything done as quietly as possible."

"We don't. I want everyone that reads or listens to know just why I

am divorcing Ella. The more publicity the better."

THE GLASS slipped from Mr. Wheeler's hand and spilled on his splendid Persian rug but he never even noticed. He was positively gasping.

"You? Divorce my daughter?"

"Of course. She had her fun with Mel after getting me out of the way. Now I'm going to have my fun."

"Fun with Mel?"

"Yes, Mr. Wheeler. She boasted of it in my house. Now I can boast in your house that I shall have my fun divorcing her."

The man jumped to his feet wildly. "You're crazy."

Sam smiled wryly. "I was only crazy when I got married. I'm going to correct that mistake." He got up quietly. "And that is all I came to say. It was a waste of time staying to dinner."

"You can't do a thing like that! You can't!"

"I can and you know I can. More over, I will. Goodnight, Mr. Wheeler."

The man leaped to bar the door. "We've got to talk things over."

Sam shook his head slowly. "There is nothing to talk over. Ella has always wanted Mel Winslow at all costs. Now she can have him—if he still wants her."

"You're talking of my daughter," roared the man.

"Is she? Didn't you disown her? Or did you only disinherit her? Didn't she order you out of the house? She was very proud of that. It was a gesture to show me how much she loved me, of course."

"She did love you!"

"I know. Until she could get me off to sea and Mel on hand. She sent for him. I have a witness."

"It's a lie. I sent Mel. I pretended Mrs. Wheeler was dying. It was my trick to get her back here. Mel was fooled just as she was."

"I see," sneered Sam. "So they decided to clope."

"They didn't. That's all crazy paper talk. Mel was helping her get back to Stonehaven. I was keeping her

here. It was my fault."

"So Mel got a broken leg being noble and trying to return my wife to me after he got tired of her?"

"You can't say it that way!"

Sam walked up to him truculently and the man fell away from the door. "This time I can say things any way I want. This time—"

The door opened and Nona came in, wearing a thin print dress and looking tired. She smiled and held out her hand to Sam.

"Hello, Sam. If I'd known you were here I would have come home to dinner. Ella just told me at the hospital that you had come. She looks bad, doesn't she?"

"Not half bad enough to suit me."

Mr. Wheeler waved his hands in a helpless gesture such as his daughter had never seen him use before. "Talk to him, Nona. He has gone crazy. He's going to divorce Ella."

The girl shook her head slowly. "You can't do that, Sam."

He squared his broad shoulders. "Why not?"

"Because Ella loves you."

"Do you really think so?"

SHE WENT up to him and laid a hand earnestly on his chest. "Listen, Sam, I've always liked you. I've always been on your side from the first. I told Ella the first time that a woman's home was with her husband. I'm telling you a man's place is with his wife. I'm going back to the hospital now. Come back with me. You said terrible things to her this afternoon. I'm sure, though she won't tell. But I know. Come back now and make it right. It will mean all the world to her."

He patted the girl's hand. "You're a sweet kid. But you don't understand."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm the only one around here who does understand. You love her and she loves you. Nothing else matters."

"She has Mel to sing her to sleep."

"Don't be beastly, Mel has a broken leg."

"I'm sorry it isn't his neck."

The girl drew back. "You can't have anybody like that. He was trying

to help her."

"I'll help him, too. As soon as he can walk again I'll bust his jaw."

"Forget him, Sam. It's Ella that counts. It is—"

Mrs. Wheeler came in excitedly. "I'm so glad you're all here. I was sure you would be. Now I can tell the good news to everyone at once. I've just been talking to Faith."

"Mom?"

"Your mother, of course, Sam. She's the only Faith in our lives. I told her you were staying with us and we were so glad to have you with us again. I told her she must come out at once and be here too while Ella was getting better. And she said she would come right away."

"Mom? Here?"

"Of course, Sam. All this trouble has happened because we haven't been so close as we should be. We all have pulled in different directions and so things went wrong. I was as much to blame as everyone else. I am confessing my fault. I haven't been fair to you, Sam. I was afraid you didn't love Ella as much as you should. But you see I was wrong. The minute you heard of the accident you came flying out to be with her. You were very quiet at dinner, but I knew how you were feeling. We all are thinking deeper now that we did before. That is why we need Faith. She is named Faith because she is the personification of our needs. We all love her, Bruce, don't you dare protest."

Mr. Wheeler spoke quietly. "I'm glad she is coming."

Sam shook back his rough dark hair. "She isn't coming. She can't come. I won't let her. Where's the phone?"

Mrs. Wheeler clapped her hands excitedly. "You can't get her. She's on her way now. Nona, hold his arms. Don't let him phone. She'll be here for dinner tomorrow night. She's coming by plane. I must see about her room right now. Everything will be all right with Faith here."

SHE BUSTLED out, leaving a strained silence in her wake. Nona closed the door after her. Mr. Wheeler saw his fallen highball

glass and picked it up. Sam stood breathing heavily. It was Nona who spoke first.

"There is the phone, Sam, if you want to use it."

He shook his head. "If Mom has said she's coming I can't stop her."

"Now you're talking sense." She glanced at her wrist watch. "I have my car outside. There's just time to see Ella for a minute to say good-night."

He drew a deep breath. "I have nothing to say to Ella tonight."

Nona hesitated, then nodded. "All right. I'll tell her you'll be in tomorrow. I won't be late, Father. See you for breakfast, Sam."

She swung quickly out of the room. Mr. Wheeler mixed a fresh drink for himself, and his hand trembled a little. He took a swallow and seemed to find his voice. But not his usual blustering, arrogant voice. He was very quiet now.

"I'm glad your mother is coming, Sam. She did my wife a world of good. You can see how she is now. She—she needs a friend."

"I'm not used to asking favors, Sam, but I'm going to ask one now. Don't make up your mind about things until she gets here. Clarice is right. She will make us all see things much more clearly."

"I know. You mean she'll try to talk me into letting Ella divorce me so there won't be any scandal."

"I'm not sure I do mean that. All I'm asking is that you wait for her. And wait here as our guest, of course."

Sam frowned. "You can't win me over that way," he growled.

"I'm only asking you to think it over."

ELLA LAY QUITE still on the high, narrow hospital bed. The room was large and really quite comfortable; there was a profusion of flowers and even a balcony looking out over a garden. It was natural that Ella Wheeler should have the best room in the hospital her father had heavily endowed. She was even registered as Ella Wheeler. Her husband had not made any protest, nor her

mother-in-law, who had been there for two weeks. The girl herself never protested about anything. The nurses discussed it and reached varying conclusions. The doctors discussed it because she was certainly ready to leave the hospital. The only trouble was that tall spirit, all animation had gone out of her.

She was no trouble at all, and yet that indifference to getting well made her a problem.

Ella lay very still because it seemed easier that way. There were no more aches and pains but there was also no ambition. So long as she lay there she didn't have to make any decisions. They were all made for her. Her father couldn't rant at her, because it was a hospital. She could say, "I feel very weak," in a faint voice and the nurse would chase them all out. At other times she could be like this and Faith would read poetry to her. Faith read poetry beautifully in her clear, cultured Maine voice that gave it all a magic quality. Poetry was better than prose because it was the speech of a magic world where there were no work-a-day world problems.

The reading voice stopped and Ella turned her head with a smile toward the window where Faith sat because it was getting dark early. A typical August thunderstorm was brewing, and already the clouds were rolling up. The first faint roll of thunder had sounded the opening guns for the war of the elements. For the moment it was very hot and the only wind was up among the gathering clouds. Faith's voice came gently.

"I thought I might be reading you asleep."

Ella smiled. "You never do that. But you must be tired, so tired of reading aloud just because I'm too lazy to read to myself."

Faith brought the chair nearer. "I like to read aloud. It is the only way of staring the book. It makes it better."

Ella touched her hand "I've been afraid to say that."

"Why should you be afraid of anything?"

"I know you aren't. But I'm afraid of everything. That's why I stay here, Faith. I have to tell you. I have to stay here until I have some place to go. This is a refuge. So long as I'm here I'm safe."

"You could come home with me. Your room is always waiting."

THE GIRL patted her hand. "You would say that. But you know it can't be. I can't go back to Stonehaven until Sam takes me back. I have to wait here until he comes for me. And I don't even know where he is."

"Your home with me was nothing to do with Sam." She said it warmly.

Ella smiled wanly. "There isn't any part of my life that has nothing to do with Sam. I don't say anything, but I know it now. I know I am registered here as Miss Wheeler, but I don't care. I am Mrs. Sam Haskins. Nothing can change that."

"You are yourself, Ella. And you're better. That's what counts."

"Does Sam feel that way, Faith?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. He left before I could get here."

"Do you know where he is?"

Faith turned her head to look out the window. "He should be here with you. That's all I know."

"That isn't a direct answer, Faith. All day I've felt you were hiding something. Do you know where Sam is?"

"No."

The answer came slowly and with extreme reluctance. Faith got up and began to rearrange a huge bouquet of roses. There was a long silence and she broke it in a tone of forced gaiety.

"These roses are lovely. Mr. Winslow never forget, does he?"

Ella sighed. "He sends them every day. Lately he can wheel himself in to see me when he is sure no one is here. He thinks you hate him. He says it was all his fault. He forgot about gas. I can't make him see it was all my fault."

"Or mine."

"Yours, Faith?"

"If I hadn't driven him away twice it might have all been different. I was

a stupid, selfish old woman"

The last words were scarcely more than a murmur. Ella stirred but there was no chance for a question. Her Father and Mother came in, followed by the family lawyer. She lay very still, prepared to show no interest in anything they had to say to her.

Mrs. Wheeler dashed to the bedside. "We've come to take you home. Dr. Kendrick says you need a regular home life now. Then we can share Faith between us. And you can help me make her forget she ever used to live in Maine at all."

"No one ever forgets that," said Ella very gently.

Her father came up, rubbing his hands. "How's my girl today? All ready for a good night home?"

"I can't, Father. I—I'm tired today."

Dr. Kendrick came in briskly. "Good afternoon. Ah, Mr. Logan." He shook hands cordially with the old lawyer. "I see we're all ready to take Ella. Thank you, Mrs. Haskins, for your invaluable help to us. I won't say goodbye because I hope to see you often when the Wheelers ask me to dinner. I know you are going to do far more for Mrs. Wheeler than I can. You are a wonderful woman."

The nurse came rustling in, her skirts swishing as only nurses' skirts ever can. She came straight to the bedside.

"You'll be glad to get away from us, Miss Wheeler. I know that."

Ella sat up quietly. "My name is Mrs. Haskins. Mrs. Sam Haskins. And I am not leaving here until my husband comes to take me."

SHE SAID it firmly and lay down again. Dr. Kendrick's glided to the bedside. His voice was oil and silk.

"This is a hospital, Ella, not a hotel. We need this room. You wouldn't keep some person out just for stubbornness. I'm sure of that."

"You're not sure, Doctor. You know I have the Wheeler selfishness and I am not interested in anybody else. When I know where Sam is, if he can't come for me, then I'll do what-

ever you want me to."

Her father cleared his throat. "In that case I'll tell you. Sam is in Reno divorcing you."

Ella staggered to her feet and stood swoying. "I don't believe it."

"Show her the contract, Logan. No need for anyone else to know."

The lawyer handed her a folded paper. She tried to read it, but everything blurred before her eyes and she only could make out words, words, and Sam's signature at the bottom. Her knees buckled under her and she sat down limply.

"I can't believe it. It's a trick. Another trick."

"It is a fact, Ella." He nodded to the doctor. "I think we can start, now."

The girl caught Faith's hand, tears welling up in her eyes. "It can't be. He wouldn't do it. Not like that. Not for money."

Faith kissed her cheek. "Please go with us. It will be better."

"You knew, too. I—I can't believe it."

"I knew he was in Reno, nothing more."

"Ssh." Mr. Wheeler held up a quick hand. "We can talk at home."

Ella threw back her head. "I can talk here. That paper said my husband agreed to leave Reno and let me go there to divorce him in exchange for fifty thousand dollars. I can't believe it. He wouldn't do it that way. He might hate me but not enough to sell me. Faith, look at it. Tell me the truth. Did Sam write that? I want the truth."

The paper was passed and Faith glanced at it and nodded.

"Yes."

"Then there's nothing to wait for, is there? Miss Brown, I can go in my robe and slippers, I'm sure. No chance of a chill today. And I'll want to lie down when I get home. Stop crying, Mother. I'm all well now. I just want to say goodbye to Mel."

"He's outside in his chair," said the nurse as she held the robe.

"You would think of that. You've been so kind. Everyone has been kind. All my life everyone has always been too good to me."

Her father chuckled. "The best isn't good enough for my girl. Shall we show them how proud we are?"

"Why not?"

HE TOOK his proffered hand and the little procession went out into the hall. The elevator was waiting to take them gently down to the first floor. Nurses and a doctor or two gathered. It was an important departure. The biggest Wheeler car was drawn up to the terrace outside where convalescing patients sat in the shade watching the approaching storm. Mel Winslow wheeled toward Ella, a kind of subdued eagerness in his manner. One leg was in a cast but he managed to stand up unsteadily and take her hand.

"I'm so glad you're going, Ella. You'll soon be yourself again."

She held his hand. "Sam is letting me divorce him. For fifty thousand dollars. It says so, Mel."

He grinned. "He wouldn't do that, darling."

Mr. Wheeler put an arm around Mel paternally. "My boy, you are as good as one of the family right now. Say it, Ello."

Mel laughed. "Still want a girppy brother, darling? In Texas they shoot horses that break their legs. It's lucky I did you dirt up here."

She patted his cheek. "You're the best brother any girl ever had."

"I'll prove that, darling, if I can just have ten minutes with that husband of yours to explain a few things."

"You don't need to do anything, Mel. I—I am divorcing him."

"Ella! You couldn't do that! You love him."

He broke off in a gasp. A taxi had just whirled up to the terrace and Sam stepped out of it. Ella uttered a faint cry but couldn't move. She merely caught Faith's arm and clung to her. It was Mel who tottered forward unsteadily, his eyes shining, his hand outstretched.

"Sam! You've come back! Thank God you're in time."

Sam knocked the proffered hand aside. He looked gaunt, unshaven,

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hollow-eyed. His voice rasped out.

"What the hell does this mean?"

The lawyer darted forward. His voice was waspish. "You contracted to stay away from here altogether and—"

Sam pushed past him. His mother stepped out. "Sam! Listen to me!"

"No! I didn't come for that."

Mel caught his arm unsteadily. "Please, Sam. Listen to me for five minutes. I can explain everything."

"You don't need to. I came to see you. I came to do this."

He thrust Mel away first with his left hand and then drove his right straight to the jaw with every ounce of his weight and energy behind it. It was a shattering blow. Cries went up as Mel tottered on his cast and fell heavily on the stones. Without glancing at him, Sam got back into the taxi and was whirled away.

EXACTLY A week later Ella left for Reno. She only waited that long because she wanted to be sure of Mel's condition before going. As for herself, she could malingre no longer. Nona was driving her out in her car. It was supposedly a vacation for Nona. In fact, she knew her sister intended spending every minute of the time trying to stop her from divorcing Sam. She was willing to let her talk in order to have some company, since she couldn't fly. Everyone put his foot down firmly about that. What anyone said didn't matter. She had made up her mind definitely. Since Sam only got the full money on the day her divorce was granted, she was anxious for him to have it. Then she would be free, free to think at any rate.

Saying goodbye to Mel in the hospital wasn't easy. The fall had broken his leg again, though he insisted Sam had had nothing to do with it and he had caused it all by trying to walk too soon. He went further. Even as she was kissing him goodbye he begged her not to go to Reno, not to divorce Sam.

"It's wrong, Ella. No matter how he has acted, you married him because you loved him more than all the

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rest of the world put together."

The tears streamed down her cheeks "When I look at you I hate him!"

"You mustn't. In a few weeks I'll be all right again."

"It was beastly, rotten, cowardly!"

"You must try to see his side, Ella. If I can, surely you can."

"I can't. I only know I hate him."

He squeezed her hand. "You don't know what hate means, Ella. You were waiting for him. And he did come back. Your hunch was right. He couldn't stay away. It was just your rotten luck that I had to butt in once more. I was going to fix things. Well, I'm learning a lesson."

"You must hate him, Mel. You must. You wouldn't be human if you didn't hate him. Think of your poor leg."

He grinned "I know. I'll never dance again. I'll always limp a little. What of it—? Think of what I've done to your life without meaning to. I won't think I own the world any more."

She burst into tears. He sat up so he could put his arms about her and hold her close. His voice was very gentle.

"You can do me one favor, darling. Don't divorce Sam."

"I hate him. I—I want to hurt him."

"All right, darling. Throw rocks at him. Beat him up with a club. Use a whip on him. Get it out of your system. But don't ruin your whole life. You love him. And he loves you."

She broke away from him. "If you loved me you wouldn't say that!"

HE SMILED faintly. "I love you enough to put your happiness above mine."

She dashed the tears from her eyes. "I'll marry you as soon as I come back, Mel. I promise you I will."

He shook his head. "No, Ella. It won't be that way."

She gasped. "You mean that you don't love me?"

"I mean you don't love me. I want a whole wife I—"

"I won't listen. You're only saying it to stop me from divorcing Sam. You can't stop me. The whole world can't stop me."

She was angry, shrill. She didn't mind being put out because she was disturbing patients. She joined Nona in the car and cried:

"Let's go. And fast—I want speed."

Nona grinned. "What did Mel say?"

"You know perfectly well what he said. You and he had it all arranged."

"Of course we did." Nona was quite cool. "I want Mel for myself."

"You can't have him. He—he's crazy."

"I intend having him. And I intend trying to bring you to your senses all the way to Reno, and after."

"Go ahead. Waste your breath. I'll close my ears to it."

"You'll be sorry."

"All right. I'll be sorry. But that won't stop me."

And it didn't. Nona stayed with her at the dude ranch and never stopped talking, explaining, arguing, but all to no purpose. Ella felt she would have missed it if the flow of talk had stopped. It was also a vacation, and the keen, dry air was splendid. They rode horses and, as Nona wrote home, ate like horses. Ella wrote no one and tried to think as little as possible. She knew that Mr. Logan had informed Sam that she was in Reno and he would get his check as soon as the divorce went through. She got a letter from Faith but didn't even answer that. She had said goodbye at home. Faith was back in Stonehaven now and her mother was trying to get her back to Ohio for the winter. Mrs. Wheeler wrote of that and other things, but Ella didn't answer. Nona was with her and Nona was a letter writer. She would write again herself when she was free to begin a new life.

THE GRANTING of the divorce had been so simple there was an air of unreality about it. She received the lawyers' congratulations and thanks for their fees. She had been rather popular at the ranch, though she didn't know it till Nona told her so. She laughed heartily for the first time in many weeks, ages it seemed to her.

Bue she did feel strangely free. She enjoyed the trip back. It was autumn now and they took several

TOO MANY KISSES

days longer driving back than they had in going out. This time it was Nona who sat silent for hours at a time and Ella who talked endlessly. Now and then Nona would glance at her, and once she said crisply:

"You don't need to puff on such a good act. I know you're happy."

"At any rate I'm free."

"Free to do what?"

"Anything in the world."

"Even go back to Maine?"

"Even that if I want to," she cried.

"Why not? Sam means nothing to me now. By this time he is paid off and the slate is clear."

"What about memories?" queried Nona sardonically.

"I haven't any. I buried them in Nevada."

Bruce Wheeler welcomed Ella home in triumph. She was a true Wheeler and he was proud of her. Everyone else seemed to feel the same way about it. Mrs. Wheeler wasn't as happy as the rest, because her dear Faith had written that she wasn't feeling very well and would have to stick close to home for the present. Mr. Wheeler laughed and winked.

"The old sickness gag, but we don't have much faith in that, do we, Ella?"

She laughed with him. She didn't add that she had no faith in anything or anybody—and that included herself.

Mel Winslow came to dinner, and Dr. Kendrick, who was very proud of what he had done for him. Mel was able to get around with a cane now, but he had to be careful. There would probably be a little permanent limp, but after the second break it might have been much worse. Ella took him into the music room after dinner.

"I'm ready to listen to anything you have to say to me, Mel."

He laughed as he sat with his leg out stiffly before him. "Are you sure you can stand it?"

"I owe you more than I can ever repay, Mel."

His eyes blinked teasingly. "I can't take you dancing any more."

"I've lost interest in dancing."

"Suppose old gimpy-leg asked you to marry him?"

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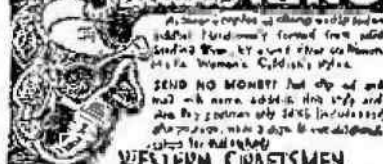
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She drew a deep breath. "I owe you that, Mcl."

He laughed and shook his head. "I do really believe that you would carry your stubbornness that far. But I won't give you a chance. If I can't make you love me, at least I won't make you hate me."

"There would be no fear of that." She stood up very straight. "Shall we tell Father now?"

"Tell him what?" Mcl still sprawled, smiling up at her.

"That we are going to marry."

HE CAUGHT her hand. "We aren't going to marry, Ella, not now or ever. I told you I was your brother. If I can manage to walk down a church aisle without a cane I'm going to be your brother. I'll marry Nona. We understand each other—and you. We won't let you jump off a cliff to prove you're happy."

She held her head high, looking away from him. "I see. You're telling me you refuse to marry me."

"Exactly, darling. I refuse to make a dishonest woman out of you."

"Do you think I still care for Sam?"

"I know you love him, darling."

She pulled away angrily and walked out of the room. She was more upset than she wanted him or anyone else to see. She started for her own room, but her father overtook her at the foot of the stairs and linked his arm in hers gaily.

"Have you been talking with Mcl? Did he tell you the news?"

"Yes." She stood with her head high. "He refuses to marry me."

Mr. Wheeler chuckled. "He would put it that way. He and Nona are going to get married. I thought you might have guessed."

"Yes. He told me that."

"And are you mad?"

"Certainly not." She managed a shrug. "I'm sure they'll be very nappy."

"I want you to be very happy, Ella."

"I shall be. I promise you that, Father. And now I must powder my nose."

"Come into the library first. I have

something to show you."

"A homecoming present?"

"I think so."

The library was a cozier room now, with the windows shut against the crisp autumn night outside and a fire on the hearth. Dr. Kendricks was there smoking a cigar. Mr. Wheeler asked him not to move. "I just want to give Ella her present."

The doctor beamed. "Read certainlv agreed with you, Ella."

"It was nice on the ranch I may go back to some ranch. I like the mountains and the vastness of everything. It makes us feel how unimportant we are."

Her father chuckled. "You're mighty important to us, so don't get any other ideas. And here's your present."

His eyes were twinkling as he handed her a check for fifty thousand dollars, made out to Ella Wheeler, of course. She looked up at him.

"What is this for?"

"For being a good girl and doing what your father wants."

"I don't understand."

HE LED HER to the table. A check lay there which had been torn to bits but then pieced together again and glued into position. She saw it was for fifty thousand dollars and made out to Sam Haskins. She touched her fingers to the table to steady herself.

"I still don't understand, Father."

"Come look at this, Kendricks. I got it from Sam Haskins today. My check for fifty thousand torn into bits and mailed back to me. I'm saving it as a souvenir of Maine pig-headedness. And after demanding it, too. But if he means to crush me I refuse to crush. Ella, you have a nice new bank account, that's all."

"But—but why should he tear up the check, Father?"

"Idiots do that to show they scorn money."

"But I thought he wanted the money."

"So did I, Ella. But there you are. Now you can really thank your lucky stars that you were able to get rid of a nit-wit like that."

She passed an unsteady hand over

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her face as if to brush away cobwebs.

"There must be a mistake. That was the price. My price He can't afford to throw away fifty thousand dollars. It—it's madness."

"Of course he's mad. He always was, if you think back. Didn't he refuse the big job here and the house I built for you, and all the rest?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "But that was because he loved me so much. He wanted to show his love was so big that nothing else mattered."

Her father and Dr. Kendricks guffawed in unison. The doctor added words in his precise, mocking way.

"My dear Ella, he certainly came here and showed conclusively how he loved you. None of us can ever forget that."

"But this is fifty thousand dollars. And he isn't crazy like that. He values money. He believes in it as he believes in hard work, and loyalty, and—"

"He has scarcely been very loyal to you, Ella."

"I mean loyalty to your beliefs, your ideals, your—"

"He knocked down a man with a broken leg, Ella." The doctor's face was stern, hard. "He announced before all of us that he had returned just to do that. He told you he wished you had killed yourself."

"He didn't know what he was saying!"

"I think it more likely he didn't know what he was doing when he tore up the check. I am a doctor, Ella, I seriously think that Sam Haskins is mad. And I mean insane. You will do well to wipe him out of your mind even as you have put him out of your life."

Her father laughed again. "That's easy to do now. We shall consign him to the flames." He took the pasted check and tossed it lightly on the fire. "There you are, Ella. Gone and forgotten."

She drew a deep breath and tossed her check into the flames, too.

"Yes, Father. Gone—and forgotten."

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(Continued From Page 88)

And as they stared blankly she swept out of the room.

SAM STOOD outside the kitchen door with an armful of wood. He seemed loath to go into the house and looked up to the stars that fairly blazed in the deep black October night. It seemed like a culmination of the grandest fall weather Stouehaven had ever known. Lowering his eyes he glanced at the back windows of the living room. The curtains were not drawn and he could see some of the fine old furniture and the warm firelight on the ceiling, but not his mother or Dr. Hinckley.

Someone touched his arm and he turned slowly. He would have known Bud Goodrow's touch even in a crowded city, the peculiarly gentle touch of an overgrown, clumsy boy. He spoke gently.

"You're back ahead of time. Was it a good trip?"

Bud nodded. "It would've been better with you on board."

"You'll learn more without me. Come on in. Mom will want to see you right away. Doc Hinckley is with her."

"Susan said she was better. Sam."

"She's better all right."

They went into the house and to the living room, where Sam put his wood beside the fireplace. Faith pushed away her hooking frame, on which she was putting the finishing touches to a rug, and held out her hand to Bud.

"Come here, young man. I want to see how you look now you've become a sailor on the deep blue seas."

He came to her shyly and she put her arm about him and kissed him on his flushed cheek. Her laugh was quick at his confusion.

"There now. I won't do that any more because you're a man now and don't want any more silly women's kisses."

Bud gulped. "I want yours. I always will."

Sam laughed and the doctor joined in. Bud looked prickly, but Faith held his hand and made him sit beside her.

"Thank you very much, Bud. You make me very proud. Now I shall kiss you every time you come home even when you're a captain. Doctor, you know this young man flung his books away in true Maine style and has gone fishing in one of Sam's boats."

"I never did learn anything in school," cried Bud, "and I had to get away from Susan 'cause she was naggin' my head off."

The doctor shook hands with him gravely. "Normally I can't approve of boys throwing their books away, but sons of Maine must still go to sea, it seems. And Sam will keep an eye on you, I'm sure."

"Not me. I've quit the sea."

Sam threw a log on the fire as if he wanted to make the sparks fly up. His mother sighed faintly.

"Dr. Hinckley means, you still own the boats, of course."

HE FACED her quietly. "I don't tell Mom. I might as well tell you now, I sold them. I don't own anything connected with the sea at all."

Bud jumped up. "You mean you don't own my boat?"

"No. Ike Blayne is captain and owner now. Didn't he tell the boys?"

"He didn't say nothin'."

Sam smiled. "Then maybe you'd better say nothin' too."

Dr. Hinckley sighed. "This is a surprise. What are you going to do now?"

"What I've done since I came home, Doc. Nothing."

"I can't believe that, Sam. You were always most ambitious. Even as a boy you could somehow always turn everything into a profit."

"I've grown up, Doc. It's more fun to take things easy. And Mother doesn't mind me just lazing around the house, do you, Mother?"

She looked at him steadily. "You haven't been lazing. You've been doing all my work. I've been the lazy one. But that's over now, I'm well."

"Oh, no" Dr. Hinckley shook his head. "You are going to stay lazy. You're not well. And I think I'm glad Sam has no ties here. I have plans for you. And you are going to obey me."

TOO MANY KISSES

"I have plans for myself. I am going to visit Mrs. Wheeler as soon as I can get ready. At least I won't do any hard work there, and they'll probably keep me wrapped up in cotton-wool and have the elegant Dr. Kendrick examine me twice a day."

Bud blinked. "You mean you're gonna leave Sam alone?"

Sam clapped him on the shoulder. "We can have bachelor hall and lots of fun. No women around to bother us."

"But I want women around."

Even Faith had to join in that laugh, but she also held his big fat hand. "We know what you mean. And you'll have Susan."

"I don't want her. She's mean and snappy. She ain't a real woman. I want you. And—and Ella."

This time there was no hurst of laughter. Bud seemed to realize he had said what shouldn't have been said, for he squared his young jaw and waited. Sam broke the silence quietly.

"Mom is anxious to go back to Ohio because Ella is there. Bud. She likes her better than she does us, and we can't blame her for that, can we? You like Ella a lot yourself, don't you?"

"I love her. I'll always love her. Some day I'll tell her, too."

IT WAS SHEER defiance now. It was the sort of defiance he had hurled at his sister and been slapped for, and which had helped in his decision to go fishing and be a complete man. Sam picked up his pipe from the mantelpiece and began loading it with precise fingers.

"Mom will tell her, and—and she'll be glad to hear it, I'm sure."

Faith nodded. "I'll tell her you sent your love. And now I think you might find something in the cookie jar if you looked."

Bud stood up. "I want to know why Ella don't come home."

Dr. Hunkley cleared his throat. Sam spoke very quietly.

"Ella is home, Bud. Home with her family where she lives in a regular palace like the ones in the movies. The swimming pool is real Holly-

(Continued On Page 98)

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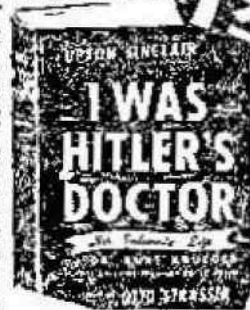
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(Continued From Page 95)

wood. Her living room is as big as this whole house. She keeps her dresses in a closet as big as this room. From the road to the front door is as far as from the fish wharf here—farther, I guess. Her father owns a factory that employs more people than live in all Stonehaven. The house is full of servants and her mother has more jewels than Mr. Galton's store, and much bigger ones of course. Her sister, Nona—well, she is lots of fun. You'd like her and she'd like you."

Bud stood very straight "I know all about that. But this is her home more than that. She's your wife and that's why Susan acts the way she does."

"Ella isn't my wife any more, Bud. She divorced me. She'll marry someone else now and forget about me."

"And you can marry Susan, now?"

Dr. Hinckley tried to speak, but Sam raised a quick hand. Faith sat very still, her hands in her lap, her eyes on the fire as if seeing a vision there. Sam went on in his new, strangely quiet voice.

"Yes. It would be legal for me to marry Susan now."

Bud clenched his fists at his side.

"It's legal but you won't do it, will you? Say you won't do it. Ella would never come back if you did that."

Faith spoke gently. "Bud, you are almost a man. Sam has told you Ella is not coming back. He knows, doesn't he?"

"No. He don't know. If they had a fight he only knows what he feels. He don't know what she feels at all."

"A divorce is not a fight, Bud. It is just a—a change. People sell one house and go to another. Bud, will you be a good boy and get my hat and coat? I'm getting to be the laziest man in Stonehaven."

BUD CAUGHT AT the chance to oblige. Holding the coat, he was actually taller than the doctor, who spoke of it before taking Faith's hand.

"Now, remember. You are to take it easy or I'll have to send you to Florida for the winter. I mean it. Good night, Sam."

"I'll see you to the car, Doc."

The two men went out by the front door. A faint wave of cold air rushed in from the foyer but the flames leaped to meet the challenge. Faith got up and put a hand on Bud's arm.

"I've been mean to you. You must be starved, coming off that boat."

"We have good food, Faith."

"You don't have my cake, I bet. No man ever makes good cake. We'll go into the kitchen now and see what we can find."

His eyes lighted up but he held back. "I ain't a kid any more. You don't have to feed me every time I poke my head inside your door."

She took his arm and they squeezed through the swinging door together gaily. Then they stopped. They had found something. Ella stood near the stove facing them. Her face was white above her mink coat and her eyes were wide, frightened. Her lips fluttered.

"I—I just walked in." She held out her hand in a wistful gesture.

FAITH TOOK THE girl's white face between her hands and kissed her.

"Ella. My sweet girl. I'm so glad to see you. Oh, so glad."

"I couldn't stay away, Faith. I had to come."

"Of course you did. We were waiting for you. I was sick or I would have been out to see you. Dr. Hinckley was here."

"I heard him I was listening. I'm so ashamed. I sneaked in."

"Silly girl. This is your home."

"I divorced him! Faith. I was crazy. I did it."

"Since you're here now, everything is all right. Let me have your coat. Mink or no mink, it hangs on a peg in the kitchen now with the family coats. Isn't that decorative? And now we go in."

"I can't face him, Faith. I can't."

Faith put both hands on her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. "Ella, it is a question of whether he dare face you. I'm not going to try to defend Sam. No one could do that, not even his mother. He has been a beast, a mad beast, and how you can

TOO MANY KISSES

forgive him if you ever do only God, who poured love into your heart, can understand. You should hate him."

"I love him. Faith. I loved him even—even when I divorced him."

"Even he understands, Ella. You tried to give him fifty thousand dollars."

"And he tote it up. I saw. I was so proud."

"Sam loves you, Ella. I am not offering that as any excuse, because there is no excuse for him. There is just forgiveness—if you can. Come."

They went into the living room. It was empty. Faith glanced out the front window but Dr. Hinckley's car was gone. She went to look out the front door but the street was empty. Only the gaunt naked trees stood in a row reaching thin branches toward the glittering stars. Faith called "Sam!" once but there was no answer. He and Bud had both vanished. Slowly she went back to the living room and found that Ella was gone. Catching her breath, she darted toward the kitchen.

Bud was sitting at the table munching cookies. He ginned at her, his mouth so full he couldn't talk.

"Where's Ella?" she cried.

His grin widened and he pointed upstairs. She fairly flew out of the room and up the stairs. Her feet were swift in the upper hall and then stopped at the door of Sam's room. They stood in the center, wrapped in each other's arms, tears flowing down their cheeks but their lips clinging to each other. She knew at once He had gone there to hide his shame and she had gone to him with her endless love (which was so much stronger than both of them).

Faith's face was radiant as she went quietly downstairs. She would make some tea, her fine China tea that Ella had. Probably the girl hadn't had any proper dinner. Bud's mouth was still stuffed. He managed to gulp and say, "She's home for good now. isn't she?"

"For good. Indeed for good. We needed her. All of us."



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