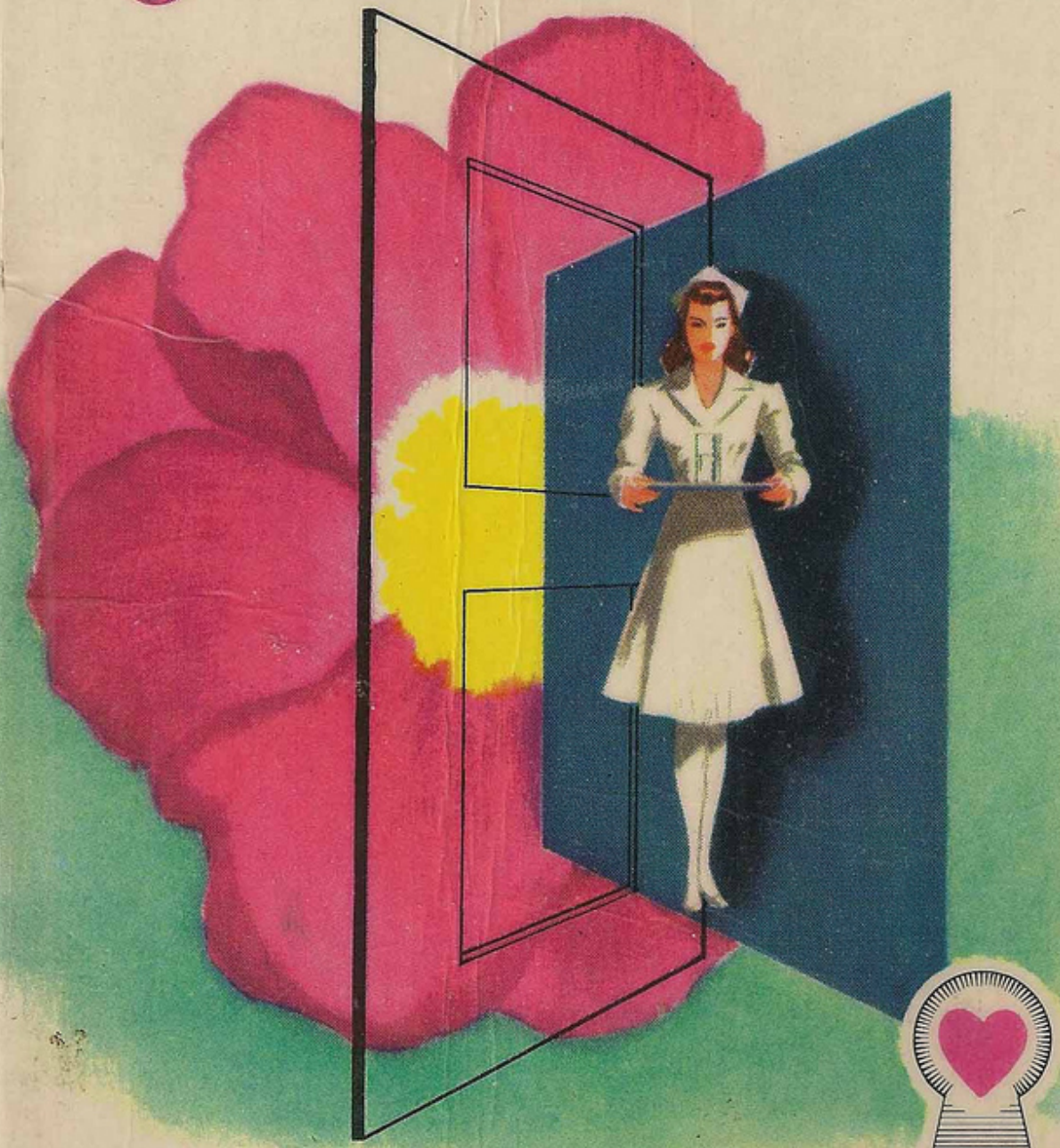
A DELL BOOK
DELL
178

TEMPLE BAILEY

THE Pink Camellia



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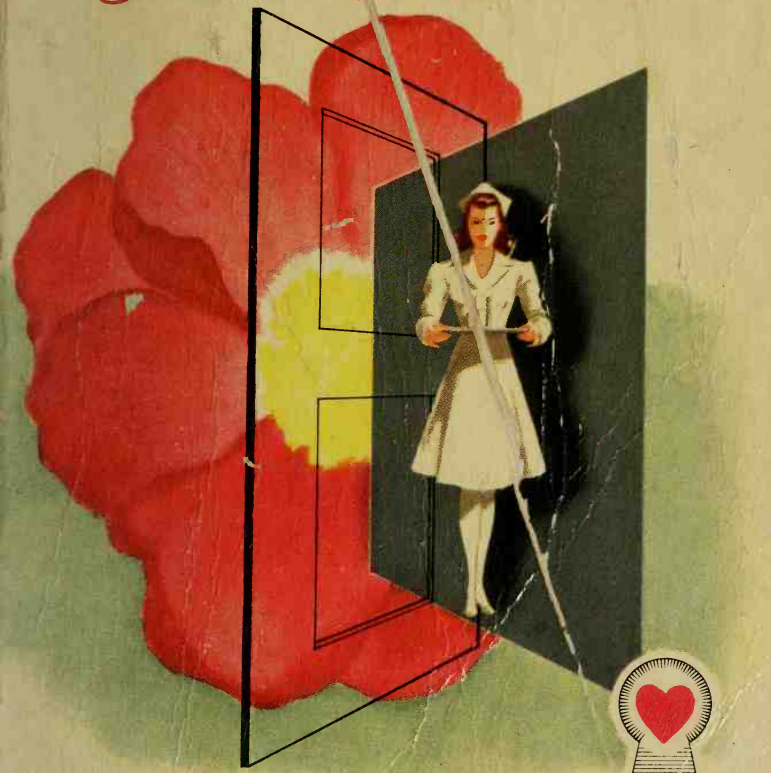

A DELL ROMANCE

Persons this *Love Story* is about—

CECILY MERRYMAN,

who has a fine sense of humor, a steadfast spirit, and a sensitive conscience, also has a face and figure to hold the eyes of men. But her standards are high and she will play second fiddle to no man.

BLAIR MARBURG,

tall, well built, fair-haired, and ruddy-skinned, is reckless and flippant and rarely thinks things through. He has let women weaken him, but if he can shake free of his past, he can do things with his future.

PETER CHILTON,

handsome author of best-sellers and Hollywood scenarios, is an exciting man to most women. He looks like his swashbuckling heroes but, for better or for worse, he does not think like them.

GYPSY TYSON,

a beautiful, dynamic girl with a great deal of money and a very definite personality, hates opposition and has always had her own way. She is never very stable about anything—except her love for Blair.

MRS. BLAIR MARBURG,

Blair's mother and mistress of Gaywood-on-the-Chesapeake, was once a great Baltimore beauty. Since her husband's death she has become a bitter, jealous, and frightened invalid.

MARK KEATING,

Mrs. Marburg's secretary, has a facile wit and a sharp tongue. Handsome in a dark way, he is shrewd and self-seeking and wields a strange power over Mrs. Marburg.

MRS. TYSON,

Gypsy's mother, is mystical and dreamy and very devout in a superficial way. Her appearance of fragility is heightened by the atmosphere she creates about her.

MRS. DONOVAN,

housekeeper at Gaywood, is the very picture of a Victorian overseer of a formal establishment. She is short and plump and loyal and kind.

MAZIE DONOVAN,

Mrs. Donovan's daughter, is a trained nurse in attendance upon Mrs. Marburg. She has inherited her mother's virtues.

ALICE,

Mrs. Marburg's personal maid, is a lush beauty. She constantly carries tales to Mark Keating, with whom she is in love.

BREWSTER,

the Marburg butler, is very conscious of his responsibilities to the family he has served for many years.

What this *Love Story* is about—

"Two men wanting her—two men fighting for her—what more could a woman wish?" old Inez sighs in a kind of ecstasy. But, before this, a great deal happens to lovely young Cecily Merryman.

After her mother's death, Cecily leaves her adobe home on her beloved Arizona desert and comes to Gaywood-on-the-Chesapeake as companion to arrogant and aristocratic Mrs. Marburg. Her main purpose is to escape from Peter Chilton, a glamorous Hollywood writer who is taking her too much for granted.

At Gaywood, Cecily finds herself between the two fires of a mother's jealous love of her son and the son's resentment of his mother's demands upon him. The bitterness between them is heightened by Mrs. Marburg's secretary, Mark Keating, who intends to rule both Mrs. Marburg and her money. Blair Marburg falls deeply in love with Cecily, and she, even before she knows herself to be in love with him, plans to help him free himself and his mother from Mark's evil and ruinous influence.

But she finds herself fighting a losing battle. Mark proves to be a strong and clever enemy, Peter refuses to be tossed lightly aside, and Blair, after a drunkenly jealous and disastrous flight in his plane, promises to marry Gypsy Tyson, who is badly injured in the crash.

In the weeks that follow, the great old house becomes a field of conflict, with the forces of rightness arrayed against a tangle of dark shadows and suspicions. This murky struggle is in sharp contrast to the sweep and sunshine of the desert, to which Cecily finally returns in an effort to bring peace to her troubled heart.

How she finds peace and happiness makes a satisfying conclusion to this warm and appealing love story in Temple Bailey's best vein.

A NOVEL OF ROMANCE

THE PINK CAMELLIA

By TEMPLE BAILEY

Author of "Fair As the Moon," "Enchanted Ground," "Contrary Mary," "The Blue Cloak," etc.

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List of Chapters—

The Pink Camellia

Chapter One

Are You as Nice as Your Name?

Certain chapters in her book of life were closed and other chapters opened when Cecily Merryman journeyed toward the East in crisp October weather to take a position as companion to Mrs. Blair Marburg, of Gaywood-on-the-Chesapeake.

There had been an advertisement in a New York paper which had, by the grace of God, come into Cecily's hands in a moment of crisis. It read as follows:

Wanted: *Young woman as companion to invalid. Must speak and read French, and have some knowledge of social correspondence. References. Address Mark Keating, Gaywood-on-the-Chesapeake, Maryland.*

Cecily had written at once from the adobe hut on the Arizona desert where her mother had died and left her alone. Her references had met all requirements—her doctor in Phoenix, her lawyer in Los Angeles. It was at Phoenix that she had picked up the New York paper. She had galloped over in the early morning to the Arizona-Biltmore to get some magazines, and had read the advertisement while she breakfasted in a coffee shop. Afterward she had ridden out through the streets in Town, a figure to catch the eyes of men and hold them, with her bright hair blown back from her sun-tanned face. In khaki breeches, sitting her horse like a

boy, her white shirt open at the throat, she was something to look at.

Peter had looked one day when he saw Cecily at the Biltmore. By hook or crook he had accomplished an introduction, and had asked her to dance with him on Saturday night. After that, things had been fast and furious until Cecily ran away. She had run away because Peter had failed to come up to specifications. Cecily had wanted no man to make her play second fiddle in the orchestra of his life.

So she had answered the advertisement in the New York paper, and, traveling eastward and thinking of Peter, had said, "Thank God."

By train and by boat, therefore, she came to Gaywood, to be met at the door of an imposing mansion by Brewster, the butler, who instructed the man who brought in her bags to leave them in the hall until the housekeeper, Mrs. Donovan, came down.

"Mrs. Marburg's orders are that you are to see her before you go to your room, Miss Merryman."

He placed a chair for her, and Cecily, chilled somewhat by this inhospitable approach to adventure, surveyed her surroundings with an appraising eye.

She had seen beautiful houses, but none which gave her such a sense of permanency and prideful position. The ceiling of the great hall went up as high as the roof. The walls were of stone, paneled halfway with wood, and hung with family portraits. There was a fireplace in which huge logs burned, and above it the portrait of a cavalier in a wide hat with a sweeping feather. The west end of the room was filled by a bowed window, its leaded glass bearing a coat of arms

in color. Opposite the window at the farther end of the hall, a gallery ran north and south and gave entrance to the bedrooms on the second floor. It was reached by a grand stairway which went up and beyond the second floor to a third, where another gallery led to other bedrooms. On the railings of the galleries and of the stairs were hung tapestries which caught the light from the bowed window and glowed richly in gold and blue and red.

It was down the stairway that presently Mrs. Donovan came, a hurried and flurried figure.

"My dear," she said breathlessly, "I am sorry you had to wait, but I was on the telephone, and Brewster had his orders not to show you to your room until Mrs. Marburg had seen you. She wants to be sure you are to stay."

"Of course I am to stay, Mrs. Donovan. I am engaged for the winter."

"Not if she doesn't choose to keep you on. She'll talk to you, and then decide. I feel sure you will please her, but one never can tell."

"But I've come all the way from Arizona."

"She'll pay your fare back and give you a month's wages if she decides against you. And now, if you'll follow me, we will go at once to her rooms."

Mrs. Donovan was, Cecily told herself as they went up the stairs, completely one's idea of the housekeeper of a formal establishment. She was short and plump, but with a kind of Queen Victoria dignity of carriage. Her gray hair was worn in flat curls against her forehead, with the back carried up to a French twist on the top of her head. Her neat black dress, with white

bands at wrist and throat, increased the Victorian effect, so that one was led to believe the resemblance was premeditated and not accidental. As for the rest, her skin was pink and white, her eyes blue, and her smile so warm and welcoming that, in spite of her crisp words and decided manner, Cecily liked her at once.

The way they followed took them to the east wing and Mrs. Marburg's suite, where a maid in a mauve uniform opened the door and led them through a charming boudoir to the bedroom beyond.

Every step of the way was, to Cecily, a progress of enchantment. If the lower part of the house, with its glow and gorgeousness, had seemed beyond her dreams of luxury, here was luxury of a more delicate and feminine appeal. There was rose-color and blue in furnishings and draperies, flowers and fragrance, silver and ivory. There was a fire on the hearth, candles lighted against the darkness of the afternoon.

A woman in dinner dress sat in a winged chair by the fire. A nurse in white linen stood beside her and, curled on a cushion at her feet, was a Siamese cat.

When Mrs. Donovan had presented Cecily, Mrs. Marburg said to the nurse, "You may go now, Mazie, and take Alice with you." She spoke then to Cecily. "Sit down, Miss Merryman. I hope you have no objection to cats. Some people are allergic to them."

"I love them," Cecily said and, leaning forward, touched the cat's head with light finger tips.

He rose and looked up at her. He had eyes of a deep, unfathomable blue. They seemed to look through and beyond Cecily. Then, quickly and without warning, he leaped into her lap.

She laughed and bent down to him. "You see," she said, "we are friends already."

Mrs. Marburg said, "It's rather curious, his doing that. He doesn't often take to people. And now we must talk a bit, Miss Merryman, before we make our final arrangements."

Her voice, which had been soft and pleasant when she spoke of the cat, took on a sudden harshness. She waited a moment before she went on, as if to appraise the appearance of the girl, and in that moment Cecily did her own appraising.

Mrs. Marburg had beauty of a kind, hair touched with gray and perfectly dressed by the competent Alice. She had a thin, aristocratic profile as became one of old Baltimore stock, and a tall and slender figure clothed now in misty black out of which her shoulders rose white and smooth as satin. There were pearls about her throat and in her ears, and diamonds on her fingers. A little scarf of ermine laid about her shoulders added to the queenly ensemble.

She was saying, "Your references are excellent, but I am wondering why you came all the way from Arizona to get work."

"My father was born in Maryland and spent his boyhood here. He loved it and wanted me to see it some day."

"He never brought you East himself?"

"No. My mother was not strong, and we lived on the desert, except for a few years in France. My father died there. In Brittany. He was an artist and painted seascapes. And one day in a storm he was drowned."

"How tragic!" The words were sympathetic, but the

voice was cold. "Your mother is living?"

"She died—six months ago."

Again Mrs. Marburg said, "How tragic!" and again Cecily had a sense of the emptiness of the words.

"Merryman is a good name," Mrs. Marburg went on. "I hope you will live up to it. You understand, of course, that you are not to have special hours, but are to come to me when I need you. All of my business affairs are looked after by my secretary, Mr. Keating. It was Mr. Keating, you remember, with whom you had all the correspondence.

"I think you will find the house interesting. It is a lonely place, and it is larger than we need, my son and I. I wanted to move to Baltimore after my husband died, but my son adores Gaywood. He's like his father —cares for nothing but boats and planes, and hunting and fishing. Are you fond of sports, Miss Merryman?"

"Yes."

"What, for example?"

"Oh, I rode a lot on the desert, and hunted and fished with my father. In France I went sailing with him."

"Well, I'm glad you're strong and healthy. I hate to have sick people about me. My last companion was so thin and pale it seemed as if a breath would blow her away."

"It's fashionable to be ethereal," Cecily told her, smiling.

"I do not expect my companions to be fashionable." There was an edge of sharpness in Mrs. Marburg's voice.

Cecily did not answer. She sat there, with the cat in

her arms, wondering whether she should rise and go, or wait for Mrs. Marburg to dismiss her. With her hand on the cat's soft body, she was aware of his purring content.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Mickey. Blair called him that when he was a kitten. He is registered under a Siamese name, but he's Mickey to us, and always will be."

Mickey, hearing his name, mewed and jumped down, stretching to his full and sinuous length.

And it was then that Mrs. Marburg said, "I think that is all, Miss Merryman. Mrs. Donovan will show you to your room. It is in the west wing and gives a view of the bay. If there is anything you need, you can tell Donovan or Brewster. I shall not see you again today, but shall let you know when you are to come to me tomorrow."

So that was that, and Cecily was glad to get away from the woman whose arrogance had hurt and offended her.

As they went out, the nurse was waiting. "This," said Mrs. Donovan, "is my daughter, Mazie. You'll be glad to know, Mazie, that Miss Merryman is staying on."

Mazie's smile was as warm and welcoming as her mother's. "It will be nice to have you," she told Cecily, "and I shall want you to help me with Mrs. Marburg. She's not well, and she shuts herself up too much. She needs new interests, and you may be able to suggest something."

Mrs. Donovan said as Mazie left them, "Mrs. Marburg isn't always so difficult. But you'll have to ease

her along until you get to understand her. It was lucky that the cat liked you. Her last companion hated cats, and Mickey knew it and wouldn't go near her."

They met the maid, Alice, on the stairs. She was a tall girl, with auburn hair parted and rolled back at the sides. Her skin was white, and her cheeks, without rouge, flushed with warm color. She passed them with a curt nod and went on up the stairs.

"Alice and Mazie look after Mrs. Marburg," Mrs. Donovan explained. "There are two other maids. You can use Flora whenever you wish, but Tina helps in the pantry and dining-room. Then there's Cook, and Brewster, and myself, a houseman and chauffeur, and the men outside. It's a big house to run, but I've been here for years with Mrs. Marburg. I know her ways and was with her when her son, Blair, was born. He's like my own child, Miss Merryman, and he'll do things for me that he won't do for his mother."

There was no connection between the galleries of the east wing and those of the west wing, so they went down the stairs and up another flight before the room assigned to Cecily was reached.

Mrs. Donovan, opening the door, said, "Mrs. Marburg doesn't usually put her companions on this side. Most of the house staff, except Mr. Keating, live in the south wing. Mr. Keating has a room above yours, and Mr. Blair's suite is on this floor. You have a wonderful view of the Bay and can see the boats go by."

It was a large room, with windows which looked toward the west. The furnishings were almost as luxurious as in Mrs. Marburg's suite.

Cecily, entering, said, "How charming!" She might

have said more, but she could not and would not reveal to Mrs. Donovan how much she was thrilled by all these elegancies. For three years she had lived with her mother in that adobe hut on the desert. It had four rooms, furniture made by the Mexicans and Indians, and on the walls her father's paintings. There had been sunshine and the sweet air, and the free life of the desert. A different world, indeed, from this!

Mrs. Donovan was saying, "There's Blair now, up in his plane. His mother hates it. He's wild and reckless, and she's afraid."

"He isn't afraid, is he?"

"No."

"Then why should she try to stop him? Men in these days have to take chances. Their mothers have no right to make cowards of them."

"Perhaps you'd feel different if you were a mother and had a son."

"If I were a mother, I should try to make my son forget fear."

Mrs. Donovan shook her head doubtfully. "Fear walks with us through life, my dear. We may fool ourselves and face things with a bold front, but the fear is there just the same. At least it is for us old folks who have seen—" She broke off. "I must stop talking and run along. Dinner is at seven in the terrace dining-room for you and Mr. Keating and Mazie. I have mine on a tray in my room, and Mrs. Marburg has hers on a tray except when Mr. Blair is here. But he's away a lot. It's all very complicated since Mr. Marburg died, with Mrs. Marburg never knowing when she is coming down, and everything having to be changed about

at the last minute. And now, my dear, if there's anything more you want, please let me know. I'll send a maid to look after you, or you can ring the bell."

"I really shan't need anyone. I can do myself nicely."

When Mrs. Donovan had gone, Cecily went to the window. Sea and sky were swept by the pale saffron of the autumn sunset, and against that sky Blair Marburg's plane shone like a silver bird. The Bay, reflecting the saffron of the sky, melted into the gold of the horizon. Not until the plane was lost in the clouds above did Cecily leave the window. She loved beauty and found her heart lifted by the sense of it all about her.

She spent the next half hour in unpacking her bags. Her wardrobe was limited—just a few simple dresses which she had deemed appropriate for her position as companion. There was, however, one bit of gorgeousness—an evening gown in silver brocade. It was done up carefully in white tissue paper, and brought memories of Peter. She had a twinge of nostalgia, not so much for Peter as for the life she had left behind her. What would she find here? Perhaps something better. She hung the silver gown in the back of the closet and forgot it.

She chose to wear to dinner a brown crêpe frock, smartly cut but demure in effect. She gathered her flowing locks into a close knot at the back of her head, and brushed the hair away from her forehead. It pleased her to make herself conform to what Mrs. Marburg's idea would be of a properly dressed companion. Cecily's instinct and sense of the appropriate rarely played her false.

When she stood again by her window, the sky had darkened, and Blair Marburg had made a landing. There was light enough for her to see, as he came toward the house, that he did not look in the least like his mother. His hair was fair and his skin fresh and ruddy with the sun. He was tall and well built, and walked with a free swing. When two Irish setters raced down to meet him and he admonished them, "Hey, don't knock me down!" there was youth and laughter in his voice.

When he disappeared from view, Cecily, with a last look in the mirror, left her room and started down the stairs. Halfway she met Blair Marburg coming up. He said at once, "You're my mother's companion, Miss Merryman?"

"Yes."

"Are you as nice as your name?"

So that was it? Giving her a line! Cecily spoke with a calmness she did not feel. "Some people don't like it."

"Cecily? It's a lovely name." He stood on the step below her, his eyes level with her own. They were quizzical eyes, with a spark of impertinence. "What do your friends call you?" he demanded.

"Cissy."

"Not good enough. I shall call you Merrymaid. Anybody ever call you that?"

"No."

"Mind if I do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't need to tell you. You know all the answers."

He laughed. "Smart girl. But not smart enough to know the right hair-do. Yours should be loose and flowing, with a gardenia in it."

"Not a gardenia. A pink camellia."

"Right-o. But how did you guess it?"

"I read it—in a book."

"Liar! I'll bet you wore one."

She stiffened. "I think dinner is waiting," she said, and again started down the stairs.

He barred her way. "Tell me where you wore it."

"In New Orleans." She had not meant to say it, but there it was.

"Tell me more about it."

But she did not tell him, for a slight sound drew her eyes upward to where a shadow stretched across the ceiling. On the balcony above them someone was leaning down and listening.

Chapter Two

If You Were Always Like This

Blair's glance had followed Cecily's. "Is that you, Mark?"

"Yes." A young man appeared on the stairs above them. "I thought I heard Brewster. I have the place cards ready."

"Good. Let me see them."

"I may as well tell you that the verses are rotten. But after the cocktails no one will know it."

Blair said, "This is Mark Keating, Miss Merryman. My mother's secretary. I think he wrote letters to you about your coming."

Mark Keating looked at Cecily and smiled. Cecily did not like his smile. He half closed his eyes and showed his teeth, like a grinning fox. He was handsome in a dark way: black hair, an olive skin. His figure was slender, and he wore his clothes well. Yet there was an indefinable something that set him apart from Blair, or even from Peter.

"It was Miss Merryman's letters to me," he said, "that decided the case for her. They were extremely well written."

Blair said with a laugh, "Don't let him put anything over on you, Miss Merryman. It was mother who made the decision. Not Mark!"

Young Keating flushed and flung back, "That's what I meant, and I'm not putting anything over."

Blair had been shuffling the place cards and now read one of the verses aloud:

"Let's drink and be gay,
Gypsy's twenty today.
She's young and she's fair.
Let us toast her—with Blair.

That's not so bad, Mark."

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "In my opinion it couldn't be worse. You know, I'm not a poet."

"Who cares whether it is poetry or not as long as it brings a laugh?"

"Perhaps it will bring more than a laugh. Perhaps some of them may take it seriously."

"You mean, linking my name with Gypsy's?"

"Yes. Your mother, for example. She's coming down to dinner."

There was a second's pause, out of which Blair said sharply, "But why tonight? She hasn't been down for a week."

"I know. But she heard you were throwing a party, and asked me about it."

"What did you tell her?"

"That it was planned on the spur of the moment, and that even you didn't know till this afternoon that you were giving it."

"Did you tell her I'm having Gypsy Tyson?"

"No."

"Well, I'll have to tell her, and the sooner the better. You can show Miss Merryman the way to the dining-room, Mark. I'll see you later."

He went on then up the stairs, and Mark, looking after him, said, "That's the kind of thing that goes on

constantly in this house. It's a bit early, Miss Merryman, to let you in on the family skeleton, but I think you might as well know that Blair and his mother don't hit it off. You'll find yourself between the devil and the deep blue sea, trying to please the two of them. They may use you as a buffer, as they do me.

"Take tonight, for example. At the eleventh hour Blair remembers it's Gypsy Tyson's birthday. He gets up a crowd for dinner, rushes all the servants around until their nerves are on edge, and has the party here because he thinks his mother is too ill to come down. And Mrs. Marburg gets up from her sickbed, puts on her best bib and tucker and all her diamonds, and insists that she'll sit at the head of her table! That's the picture, and it isn't a pleasant one."

Cecily said, "Why do they call it the terrace dining-room?"

He flashed a keen glance at her. "Are you trying to change the subject?"

"Well, perhaps it would be better if I found out things for myself. I should hate to start with—prejudices."

"It's better for people to be prepared, isn't it, for what's ahead of them?"

"I'll learn soon enough. And now, let's not talk about it. I asked you about the terrace dining-room. Why do they call it that?"

"Because it looks out on the terrace," sulkily. "It used to be used as a breakfast room when Mr. Marburg was alive, but now Mrs. Marburg has made it into something between the servants' hall and the family table. Mazie Donovan, Mrs. Marburg's companion,

and I dine there, except on such nights as they need an extra man when someone disappoints them at a dinner party. They may work you in sometime when a woman disappoints them. I'm sure you're going to be a life-saver to me, Miss Merryman. Mazie Donovan is not a stimulating tablemate, and things here are deadly dull. Five nights in six Blair dines out, Mrs. Marburg dines upstairs, and I am left at loose ends."

When they reached the dining-room, they found Mazie Donovan already seated at the table. She rose as Mark and Cecily entered. "It's awfully nice to have you here, Miss Merryman. I know Mr. Keating will be glad. I'm always being called away, and he has to eat alone."

Mark drew out Cecily's chair. "It's going to be more than awfully nice. It's going to be superlative!"

Cecily did not answer. She hated the familiarity of his manner. She hated, too, his insinuations. He had said, in effect, that he and she were two of a kind, that her place was with him—below the family and above the servants. Cecily had never before had any sense of social inferiority, but he made her feel it.

Mazie said, "Mr. Blair is with Mrs. Marburg. He's giving a party tonight, and his mother is all dressed for it. I didn't think she'd be well enough, but she insisted, so Alice and I got her ready."

Mark said, "She won't come down. Blair will see that she doesn't. If she insists, he'll call off the party."

"Oh, but he couldn't," Mazie protested. "Not at this late hour."

"He could, and he would. You remember that time when he canceled the invitations to a big hunt break-

fast because he had to take his mother's cat to the veterinary?"

Mazie laughed. "And after all, there was nothing the matter except that a bee had stung Mickey on the nose."

"But Mickey is Mickey!" Mark said. "You must remember that, Miss Merryman. Blair is almost as bad as his mother about the cat. He got it for her when it was a kitten. The one thing on which the two of them agree is that Mickey is tops."

The maid, Alice, coming into the dining-room, said, "Mrs. Marburg gave me some letters for you, Mr. Keating. I put them on your desk."

"Thank you, Alice."

As he spoke to the maid, the high color in her cheeks deepened. But if he saw it, he made no sign.

Alice, going back upstairs, waited outside Mrs. Marburg's door until she should be called. She knew that the letters for Mark Keating had been merely an excuse to get her away, for Blair was with his mother and the things they were saying were not for other ears.

Blair, entering, had found his mother at the mirror, with Alice giving last touches to her hair and face. She had turned and smiled at him. "I'm glad you're here to look me over. Am I all right, darling?"

Blair said hastily, "Mother, surely you're not coming down to dinner?"

"I am. Why not?"

"Well, it isn't exactly your kind of crowd."

It was then that Mrs. Marburg had spoken to Alice. "Take those letters on my desk down to Mr. Keating. I'll ring for you when I want you."

When the maid had gone, Mrs. Marburg said, "What you really mean is that you don't want me."

Standing back of her so that he was reflected in the mirror, Blair put his hands on her shoulders. "What I mean is that you are too perfectly beautiful and much too good for that rowdy crowd."

"Then why have them?"

"Why try to explain? You wouldn't understand."

"Whose fault is it that I don't understand?"

"Mine, perhaps, but we won't quarrel over it. It isn't worth it."

"Who are coming?"

"Darling, don't embarrass me by asking for my dinner list." His chin was in the hollow of her shoulder, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror. "Say you don't hate me, Mums."

He was laughing, and she yielded to the charm of him. "Of course I don't."

"Then kiss and make up." He was giving her little pecking kisses on cheeks and forehead and ears.

She leaned against him. "If you were always like this—"

He drew away from her. "Love me for what I am." Then, not meeting her eyes in the mirror: "I'm having Gypsy Tyson. It's her birthday. I know you don't like her, but if you'll come down and be friends with her, I'm sure you'll find her better than you think."

"How can I be friends with a girl like that? Good family, everything to live for—and she flings it all to the winds for the sake of a good time!"

"Not at all, Mother." His voice should have warned her.

"I sometimes think I'll forbid her the house."

"And put me out at the same time? Go ahead, Mother."

"You don't mean that, Blair. Surely I should be allowed to choose my guests. This is my house, and I am still mistress of it."

"Do you need to tell me that? That I am a pauper except for what you give me? Well, I shall ask whom I please, and when you have had enough of me and my friends, you can tell me, and I'll get out!" He flung himself away from her.

"Blair!" Her voice was hysterical.

But the door had opened and shut, and he was gone.

Chapter Three

Your World Is Not My World

Dinner in the terrace dining-room was half over when Alice again appeared. "Mrs. Marburg wants you at once, Mr. Keating."

Mark left the table reluctantly. "I'll be seeing you later, Miss Merryman."

But she did not see him, for presently Mazie was called. She returned to say that Mrs. Marburg was having one of her bad spells and that they were telephoning for the doctor.

Cecily ate her dessert in lonely state, then wandered into the spacious hall, where Brewster was setting vases of huge chrysanthemums about the room.

She spoke to him. "How lovely they are, Brewster."

"Yes, Miss Merryman. We had a hard time getting them. Our own are gone, and these were rushed down from Baltimore. Mr. Blair was very particular about having yellow and white. Yellow is Miss Tyson's favorite color."

"I hope Mrs. Marburg's illness won't interfere with the party."

"I think not, Miss. She often gets these upsets, and they don't last long. It's her nerves, you know, and the doctor gives her something." He broke off as Mark came running down the stairs from the east wing.

"Where's Blair?" he asked of Brewster, hurriedly.

"Up in his plane, sir."

"Well, tell him when he comes in that his mother is ill and that he'll have to call off his party."

"Is that Mrs. Marburg's order?"

"It is my order, Brewster."

"It will be difficult to reach his guests at this late hour, Mr. Keating. And everything is ready—"

"Do you mean that Blair's party is more important than his mother's health?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Then don't make objections. And send Alice at once to Mrs. Marburg's room. We need her."

Turning to go back up the stairs, Mark saw Cecily. "There's the devil to pay," he said, "and all because of Blair's thoughtlessness. His mother is in a dreadful state."

"I'm sorry."

"Mazie is giving her a sedative, and the doctor is on the way." He smiled his ingratiating smile. "I had hoped to take a walk with you, Miss Merryman, and show you the place, but we'll have to postpone it. I won't be able to leave Mrs. Marburg."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing, except to hold yourself in readiness if Mrs. Marburg should suddenly ask for you. She likes to talk of her troubles and weep on people's shoulders. Perhaps you'll be the next to console her."

He left her then and, meeting Mickey, the Siamese cat, on the stairs, made a pass at him with his hand, which Mickey met with uplifted paw.

Brewster, seeing Cecily's eyes on the cat as it made a detour around Mark and scurried down the steps, said, with a gleam in his eye, "Those two hate each other."

"He's a lovely creature."

"Yes, Miss, he is when you treat him right. But he's a tiger when you don't. And now would you mind, Miss Merryman, finishing up these flowers for me? I'll signal Mr. Blair, and see what he says about postponing the party."

What Blair said about postponing the party was emphatic. He came back with Brewster to find Cecily with an armful of chrysanthemums which she was arranging in a high gilt basket.

He began, without preamble, "Has the doctor come?"

"No, Mr. Marburg."

"He should be here. Telephone, Brewster, and see what's keeping him."

Pending Brewster's return, Blair aired his grievance to Cecily. "One can never tell just how ill mother may be. When anything upsets her, she is apt to work herself up into a state of nerves. And now it's this darned party for Gypsy Tyson. If I were sure mother is really ill, I'd call it off. But if she is simply staging an act—" He caught himself up. "You're shocked, aren't you?"

"Well, after all, she's your mother."

"I know. But there's a lot I can't tell you. If it isn't one thing, it's another. Whatever I do is wrong." He ran his fingers through his hair so that it stood up in a rumpled crest. "I'll wait until the doctor comes and see what he says."

The doctor, coming in just then, proved himself an ally of Blair. "I doubt if it's anything to worry about. I'll go up at once, and let you know whether things are serious." He started toward the stairs and stopped.

"You needn't think, Blair, that because I'm making things easy for you tonight, I'm always going to do it."

Blair grinned. "Many is the day you've helped a bad little boy."

"You're too old for that now, son," the doctor said, with a touch of sternness, as he went up the stairs.

Blair, pulling off his leather coat and helmet, threw them on a chair. "It's only when I'm flying that I forget my troubles. Did you ever fly, Merrymaid?"

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"May I take you up sometime?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Your world is not my world, Mr. Marburg."

"If you mean that mother might object, forget it. If I want to take you, why should she know?"

"I think you can answer that for yourself."

He flushed. "I'm sorry. Of course if you have a conscience, I won't urge you. But I thought you might be more—flexible."

Cecily found herself smiling. "Flexible?" she said. "That's a new word for it."

A door above opened and shut, and Mark Keating came down.

"McDonald says the party may go on," he said to Blair, "but it won't be with my approval. If you want my opinion, he's an old fossil. What you need in your mother's case is a sympathetic doctor."

"McDonald is sympathetic enough, and he's a Johns

Hopkins expert in nerve cases. We'll take our chance on his being right, Mark."

"Well, if she's worse, it will be on your head."

"She won't be any better for my giving in to her," Blair said. "You know that as well as I."

"I know if she were my mother how I'd feel about it."

Blair said sharply, "Cut that out, Mark! I can stand just so much, and no more."

Then, as Mark went on up the stairs, Blair said to Cecily, "You think I'm cold-blooded?"

"Who am I to judge?"

"Well, try to judge me fairly. I like you, Merrymaid, and I want to be friends."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that, Mr. Marburg."

"How can you stop me?"

"By asking you not to do it."

"But it's such a lovely name!" he said regretfully, "and I'm not going to make any promises."

She did not answer, and Brewster, coming down at that moment, reminded Blair, "Dinner is at eight, sir. You'll hardly have time to dress before your guests arrive."

Blair and Cecily went up the stairs to the west wing together. When they reached her door, she said, "I hope your party will be a great success."

"It will be," he said, and his voice was light as air. "My things always are. I have plenty of money to spend. My mother's money! She pays my bills, and ties me to her apron strings. It's a great life if you don't weaken."

He turned away from her and went on to his room.

Chapter Four

You've Been Holding Out on Me

To Cecily, looking back over the hours since her arrival, it seemed incredible that so much should have happened in so short a time. Here, she told herself, was a household torn by conflict, a household in which it would take all of her tact and patience to steer a straight course. Here were two men, each ready to engage her in a relationship other than that which she had conceived as right and proper for a paid companion. Mark Keating with his flatteries, Blair Marburg with his frank assurance of future meetings. Surely the gods had not been with her in this choice of an occupation. Yet there was something exciting in it all, something which made her loath at this moment to leave it.

It was almost nine when, hidden from view behind the draperies of her window, she saw Blair's guests arrive. It was a gay and gorgeous crowd. Under the light above the great door moved young women in ermine and silver fox and sable. There were blond heads and dark ones banded with gold and silver or wreathed with flowers. And Blair, standing on the steps to welcome them, was immaculate in evening clothes, his fair hair shining under the lamp, his quick laugh and gay wisecracks coming up to her as clearly as if she stood beside him.

It was after ten when the music began and there

was dancing. Cecily loved to dance. It had been her dancing that had charmed Peter. There had been that Saturday night at the Biltmore when he had said, "There must be other nights like this, darling."

But she must not think of Peter!

She went to her door and opened it. With no one in sight, she made her way along the gallery to where, from among the shadows, she could see and not be seen.

In the great hall where the rugs had been taken up, Blair Marburg and a girl, whom Cecily decided was Gypsy Tyson, were doing the rhumba. It was a beautiful sight—the medieval background, and against it the boy and girl, advancing, retreating, their bodies fluid as quicksilver, vivid, dashing, exciting. Gypsy was a little thing, with long black hair, curled at the ends and parted on the side. Her dress of white silk jersey fitted her like a glove, flaring to fullness in the hem. There were gold buttons and a gold belt, gold slippers, and gold rings in her ears. She had, Cecily told herself, a very definite personality.

When the dance was ended, there was much applause, which Gypsy acknowledged with a wave of the hand and a bend of the knee. But Cecily had eyes only for Blair. Flushed and exultant, he stood among his guests, no longer the resentful boy of a few hours ago. She wondered if it was Gypsy Tyson who had made the change in him. How much did he love her? Or did he love her at all?

And why should she be asking such questions?

Back in her room, Cecily went soberly about the business of getting ready for bed. She took a hot bath,

wrapped herself in a rosy dressing-gown, manicured her nails, and was brushing her hair into a halo of little feathered curls when there came a tap at the door. Opening it, she found Mrs. Donovan on the threshold.

"May I sit with you a bit, Miss Merryman? I've brought you some of the party."

"I'll be so glad to have you. I was feeling low in my mind. Not homesick, exactly. But the first night in any new place—" She stammered over the explanation.

"I thought as much, and I'll rest here by your fire while you eat your cream and cake. Bring that little table over here, my dear, and I'll set the tray on it."

The ice cream was in a little basket of spun sugar, tied with yellow ribbon, and the small cakes were Baltimore's best.

"Nobody in the world can bake better cake than our Maryland cooks. The caterer who serves Mrs. Marburg is the grandson of the man who served her grandmother. There aren't many such left in these days."

Mrs. Donovan had all the gossip of the old families on the tip of her tongue.

"It isn't as it used to be," she said, "and perhaps it's just as well. People call it progress. But I like to think of the old days when everybody went to church on Sundays, and when our girls were chaperoned, and nobody ever heard of a night club. I'm sometimes glad that Mrs. Marburg didn't have a daughter! It's bad enough to have a son.

"Brewster said you heard all the talk this afternoon

between Mark Keating and Blair, so I might as well explain that Blair isn't as hard-hearted as he may have seemed. Every time he wants to have a young crowd here, his mother gets one of her upsets. They don't last long, and she'll be as chipper as anything in the morning. Mark Keating encourages her, and so does Alice.

"And while we're on the subject, Miss Merryman, I'd like to say a word of warning about Alice. She isn't quite—trustworthy. I don't mean that she steals or anything like that, but I know she carries tales to Mrs. Marburg and Mr. Keating. I wouldn't keep her on for a moment, but Mrs. Marburg won't hear of getting rid of her, and Mark Keating backs her up. I think it best to caution you so that you may be on your guard, but this is, of course, confidential."

"It is good of you to warn me," Cecily said, "and I shall certainly not say anything to anybody."

Mrs. Donovan rose. "Well, I must be going on. And you must get some sleep, my dear. I hope the noise of the music won't keep you awake."

Relaxed and refreshed by her talk with the little housekeeper, Cecily fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

She was waked toward morning by the noise made by Blair's departing guests. There was much laughter and loud talking—some of it with an alcoholic accent.

One voice rose above the others. "Blair, why can't we fly to Baltimore? You said you'd take me up the next time there was a moon."

"Darling, this is no time to fly, and you know it."

"Why isn't it the time? And 'your time is my time,' isn't it?" Gypsy's words were slurred a bit.

"Not when you want to do foolish things. If I get you to the airport, what then? A taxi to take you home, and another to bring me back to the plane. It's too complicated, Gypsy. You came with Bubbles and you'd better go back with him."

"You mean you don't want me?"

"Don't be silly!"

"I'm not. And it would be wonderful!"

"Oh, well, if you must have it, tell Bubbles I'll take you."

More loud talk, more laughter, as the last of the cars moved on. Then after a while Cecily, watching, saw Blair's plane rise like some strange nightbird against the lurid sky. There was a ghastly moon which tipped down toward the horizon, leaving a track. Up and up went the plane, its lights gleaming like baleful eyes, until distance blotted them out.

Too wide awake to sleep, Cecily got into her dressing-gown, built up the fire, and was again settling herself to her book when the stillness of the night was broken by the roar of the returning plane. There had been no time to reach Baltimore. Blair and Gypsy were coming back.

It was too dark to see their landing, nor could she hear their voices as they entered the house. After a short interval came a tap at her door. She opened it to find Blair on the threshold with Gypsy in his arms.

"She's been terribly ill," he said. "I'll have to ask you to help me."

"Of course. Bring her in." Then, as Gypsy lay still and white on the couch where he had placed her: "Hadn't I better call Mrs. Donovan?"

Blair spoke with some impatience. "No. If you do, you'll wake mother, and there'll be the devil to pay."

"But—"

Again he was impatient. "Please don't insist. Gypsy will be all right in a moment. There's some sherry in my room. I'll get it."

He rushed away and came back with bottle and glass. He lifted Gypsy up with a strong arm and forced a few drops of wine between her lips. "Take it all, darling. It will do you good."

Gypsy, rousing a little, murmured, "I'm frightfully sorry."

"You should be! You had too much birthday—too many cocktails. I warned you, but you wouldn't listen."

"But I've been up with you any number of times and kept my head."

"You had no head to keep tonight."

"Don't scold!"

"I should scold myself for taking you. We'll be in a nice mess if it gets to mother's ears." He had been kneeling by the couch, but now he rose and spoke to Cecily. "I think I'll have to ask you to let Miss Tyson stay here for the night."

Gypsy interrupted. "I've got to get back to Baltimore."

"And how?"

"You could drive me in your car."

"And have you fainting on my hands again? Not if I know it. You should thank your lucky stars, my dear, that you're alive. I might have crashed when you passed out if I hadn't had my wits about me."

Gypsy, flickering her eyelashes at him, said, "I can think of worse things than to die with you."

"What good would that do," he demanded, "after we're dead?"

"We could go sailing away on a cloud, like Paolo and Francesca."

Blair was abrupt. "Stop dreaming, Gypsy."

"It's a nice dream," she told him.

He did not answer. He was looking over her head at Cecily—this new Cecily of the shining locks and feathered curls, whose skin against the rose of her dressing-gown was white as alabaster.

If she was aware of his survey, she did not show it. "If Miss Tyson could get some sleep?" she suggested.

"Yes." He dragged his eyes away from her. "Miss Merryman will tuck you in, Gypsy. And I'll come for you at seven and drive you to town. I'll sneak you into the car so that the servants won't see you. I don't want to have them carrying tales to mother."

"It isn't the servants I worry about," Gypsy said astutely. "It's Mark Keating. I'll bet he's leaning down from aloft at this very moment, like a bad little angel."

Blair's face was dark. "Sometime I'll catch him at it."

"And then what?" Gypsy demanded. "If you should find him now on the stairs, he'd swear he had a toothache or something and was coming down to get a hot-water bottle. Mark has brains, darling; you just have feelings."

"That's what you think," Blair told her. "But you don't always think right. And now I'll be running on and let you get some sleep."

Gypsy, reaching out her hand, drew him to her. "Nightie-night, darling."

She expected him to kiss her, and he did it, with, Cecily thought, some embarrassment.

Cecily followed him into the hall and shut the door. "I still think we should call Mrs. Donovan."

"Why?"

"Because if your mother hears of this—"

"She won't hear of it." He stopped abruptly, and there were little dancing devils in his eyes as he said, "You've been holding out on me, Merrymaid." He touched one of the feathered curls with the tip of his finger. "Hair like yours does something to me. Did you ever hear of Mélisande? Well, you know what I mean."

Cecily said, "Please don't talk to me as if I were an audience."

"Don't you like it?"

"Not at this time of night."

"Tomorrow then?"

"Never."

"Never is a long time."

As she turned from him, he said softly, "Good night! Good night, Loveliness!"

As Cecily came back into the room, Gypsy opened her eyes. "May I have another glass of sherry, Miss Merryman?" Then, as Cecily brought it to the couch, "Pour one for yourself."

"No, thanks."

"Don't you drink?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I like to keep my head."

"That's what Blair says. He doesn't drink. He says he hates to make a fool of himself. Yet he is rather a fool in other ways."

Fool or not, Cecily told herself, Gypsy loved him. Sophisticated as she might seem on the surface, she had as little self-control as a child. And she was pathetic as all women are pathetic who love and are not loved. For Cecily was sure now that Blair did not love Gypsy. She knew the signs of a man in love. She had seen them.

As Gypsy handed the glass to Cecily, she said, "Blair didn't tell me you were so pretty."

"Perhaps he doesn't think so. People's tastes differ."

"He usually likes 'em dark, and I'm not the first dark woman in his young life. But I'm the last. It is better to be the last than the first, isn't it?"

"Much better," Cecily agreed. "And now do you want a nightgown or pajamas?"

"Anything. And be sure to wake me early."

"By seven, Mr. Marburg said. I'll set my alarm for six-thirty."

Gypsy curled up like a kitten among the blankets, murmured gently, "You're a nice old girl."

Old girl! Well, really!

Chapter Five

Isn't My Word Enough?

Cecily, having bathed and dressed, waked Gypsy. "It's time to get up. Mr. Marburg will be here for you in a few minutes."

Gypsy stretched and yawned. "I'm dead for sleep." She sat up and looked at herself in the mirror. "The morning after! And my face looks like it."

"A cold shower might help."

Gypsy shivered. "I'm like a cat. I hate cold water."

With a touch of irrelevance, Cecily remarked, "Speaking of cats, there's Mickey. Isn't he wonderful?"

"He's a spoiled brat," Gypsy said as she pulled Cecily's bathrobe about her. "Blair called off a cocktail party about a year ago because he had to take Mickey to a vet. I told Blair if he ever did a thing like that again, I would be done with him forever. All he said was, 'I wouldn't exchange Mickey for all the cocktails in the country. If you love me, you'll have to love my cat.' And then he laughed and said, 'Oh, don't be a little fool, Gypsy. What's a cocktail party more or less?' So I forgave him, but I can't say it has helped Mickey's case with me."

She went on then to the bathroom, to come back glowing. With comb and brush, rouge and powder, she created an effect of freshness and charm, although she still complained she felt "rotten."

"Got any more of that sherry, Miss Merryman?"

Cecily brought it, and as Gypsy was drinking it, a cautious tap came at the door. Cecily, opening it, found Blair waiting, with a fur coat over his arm.

"It's beastly cold outside," he said. "Get into this, Gypsy."

"It's a man's coat," she said. "I'll look like a sight and a fright."

"Why should you care? There'll be no one to look but the milkmen."

"But why should I wear it?" she insisted. "My own is warm enough."

"Very well," he said resignedly, "but don't blame me if you catch cold. And now, let's go. The sooner I get you back to your mother, the better for all concerned."

"Mother won't care."

"What will she think of your staying out all night?"

"I'll tell her the truth, and she'll believe me."

"If I told my mother the truth, she'd call me a liar."

They went away then, with Blair returning for a moment to speak alone to Cecily. "You've been a grand sport, and I'm no end grateful. I'll be back this afternoon in time for tea in the hall. Will you meet me there, Mélisande?"

"My time is not my own. I can make no engagements."

He laughed. "How proper you are! Well, I'll look for you at five."

Left alone, Cecily picked up the fur coat which Gypsy had spurned. She didn't know quite what to do with it. To have one of the maids find it in her

room might lead to gossip. She decided, if Blair's door was not locked, to take it there.

Hurrying along the hall, she found the door of Blair's suite open. Entering the sitting-room, she could see the bedroom beyond. With some curiosity she looked about her. The rooms lacked the effect of delicacy and femininity which characterized Mrs. Marburg's suite and Cecily's own bedroom. They were, rather, keyed to the coloring and period of the great hall. Some tapestries of hunting scenes, shelves of books in rich bindings, pieces of furniture that might have come from some old cloister, and, in violent contrast, on a table near the window, Gypsy's photograph in a modernistic frame.

It was a beautiful picture, much more beautiful than Gypsy, yet lacking something of the almost impudent charm which was her strongest asset. Her white dress was off at the shoulders, and had the look of the kind of thing a girl wears when she makes her bow to society. She carried a sheaf of roses, and across the picture was written, *To Blair, from his own Gypsy.*

Well, that was that, of course. Cecily wondered if Mrs. Marburg had seen the picture and, if so, what she had said about it. What would anybody say about it but that the affair between Blair and Gypsy had come to a definite stage?

The thought depressed her. Whatever Blair Marburg might be—whether he was the cold-blooded monster which Mark evidently thought him to be, or the victim of his mother's neurotic complexes—Cecily had found herself liking him. And because she liked him she felt sure that marriage with Gypsy Tyson would

simply add to the complications of his life.

A slight noise in the room beyond startled her. The Siamese cat had jumped down from the canopied bed, where he had evidently been sleeping, and was coming toward her.

She said, "Hello, Mickey," then, as her voice echoed in the big room, stood listening to footsteps above.

She caught the cat up in her arms and was on her way to her own quarters when she was met by Mark Keating.

"Does the cat belong over here?" she asked breathlessly. "I found him wandering about."

"He often sleeps on Blair's bed," Mark said. He looked down the hall to where the door of Blair's room still stood open. "Where is Blair, by the way?"

"I heard him go out."

Mark's laugh was hateful. "We may as well come into the open, Miss Merryman. I saw Blair go, and he did not go alone. Gypsy Tyson spent the night here."

"She spent the night with me."

"You will swear to that?"

Her look was steady. "Why should I swear? Isn't my word enough?"

His eyes fell before her own. "Of course Mrs. Marburg should know of this."

"Should she? Why?"

"Blair had no right to deceive her."

"What would you have him do? Miss Tyson was taken ill in his plane, and he had to come back to the house. I was awake, and he brought her to me."

"It sounds easy, but I don't know how Mrs. Marburg will take it."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"How can I keep it from her if I am loyal? You can see that, surely."

"No, I don't see it. But you must do as you think best."

With Mickey still in her arms, she went on to her own room and closed the door behind her. Mickey mewed and she set him down. "I don't wonder you hate him," she said.

She went to the window and stood looking out. It had begun to rain, and the world was gray. Oh, why had Fate brought her here? In less than twenty-four hours she had been confronted with a situation both dangerous and distressing. What would Mrs. Marburg say when she knew Cecily had harbored Gypsy?

Uneasy and restless, she got into a warm coat and, as there was still an hour before breakfast, went for a walk in the rain.

She said to one of the gardeners as she passed him, "It looks like a storm."

"It will be a regular one," the man told her, "and there'll be cold weather with it."

Cecily wished that the storm might come while she was out in it. It would suit her mood to wrestle with it.

Yet, though the storm did not come in all its fury, the walk did her good and she came back to the terrace dining-room ready for the hearty breakfast which was set before her. It was while she was having a second cup of coffee that Alice brought her a message from Mrs. Marburg.

"You are to come at once, Miss Merryman."

With her heart beating wildly, Cecily ascended the stairs. At the door of Mrs. Marburg's suite she gathered herself together, and went in with a smile and a greeting. "Good morning, Mrs. Marburg."

"It is not a good morning, Miss Merryman. It is a very bad morning, both within and without. I am sorry to have to send for you so early, but it is necessary that I should know at once what happened last night. I understand that Gypsy Tyson was here and in your room until morning. Is that true?"

"Yes, Mrs. Marburg."

"How did it happen?"

"Your son was taking her home in his plane, and she was ill, and they had to turn back. He saw my light and knew I was awake, so he brought her to me."

"Why didn't he call Brewster or Mrs. Donovan?"

"I suggested it, but he thought it was best not to rouse anyone. I think he didn't want you disturbed, Mrs. Marburg."

"You mean he was afraid I might know he had Gypsy up in his plane. I have told him repeatedly how dangerous it is to carry a passenger. And then, of all things, to take Gypsy at night and with a storm coming on!"

"There was no sign of storm when they took off."

"Are you defending him?"

"Surely not, Mrs. Marburg."

"Then at least you can tell me all the details."

"There are really no details."

"You are refusing to tell me?"

"What can I tell but what I have told—that Miss Tyson was ill, was brought to my room, and that I

kept her there until morning."

"You must understand, Miss Merryman, that if anything of the kind ever happens again, you are to come to me at once. I can't have Blair doing things without my knowing them."

There was a dead silence, out of which Cecily said, "You mean you want me to spy on him?"

"Spy is an ugly word. I am simply asking your cooperation."

"I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Even if your refusal should cost you your position?"

"Yes."

"Then you may consider yourself discharged."

Cecily took the blow without flinching. "Very well, Mrs. Marburg."

Mrs. Marburg went on as if Cecily had not spoken. "I should have known nothing at all if Mark Keating had not told me. He was waked by voices and saw Blair coming up the stairs with Gypsy in his arms. It's disgraceful, Miss Merryman, that such a thing should happen in my house."

"I saw nothing disgraceful in it, Mrs. Marburg. It was foolish, perhaps, but young people are foolish. They grow up to know better, as I think your son will grow."

The words, spoken steadily and quietly, brought from Mrs. Marburg the demand, "What makes you think my son will grow?"

"Because I know a lot about young people."

"You talk as if you were an old woman yourself."

"I'm twenty-two."

"And Blair is twenty-four. No longer a child."

"But you treat him as a child, Mrs. Marburg."

"Stop saying things like that," shrilly. "And now I think we had better come to an understanding. I'll pay your fare back to Arizona, Miss Merryman, and give you a month's salary. I'm sorry our association should have been so short, but I can't put up with impertinence."

"Believe me," Cecily said earnestly, "I did not mean to be impertinent. And you need not pay my fare back to Arizona. I have some money of my own."

Mrs. Marburg caught her breath in a gasp and then began to cry. "I'm always having trouble with my companions. They're either incompetent, or they make love to Blair. That's one thing I won't have. My son has his place in this household, and my companions have theirs. I intended to tell you this, but now it doesn't matter."

She sat up and wiped her eyes. "Will you hand me that bottle of toilet water, Miss Merryman, and my powder and mirror?" And when they had been given her, she began to repair the ravages the tears had made.

"Mark Keating is coming in in a few minutes and I don't want him to know I've been crying. Mark is the only friend I have in this house. I don't think he'll approve of my sending you away, but I couldn't keep you on, of course, when you refused to co-operate."

"I understand," said Cecily. "And now, if you have finished with me, I'll go to my room and get my things in order."

"If you're going by boat to Baltimore, there's no boat until tomorrow."

"Is there a train or a bus?"

"No. We're quite out of the world, except when we use our own cars. That's why my husband liked it, and why Blair likes it, but I feel sometimes as if I were on a desert island." She gave a final dab to her nose with the puff. "I shall tell Blair when he comes in exactly how I feel about last night, and I shall tell him I let you go because you were willing to keep things from me. If Blair will act like a bad little boy, he must know that I won't stand it."

Cecily came and stood by the bed, looking down with hot eyes at its occupant. "Some day," she said, "you'll drive him from you, and what then?"

"He wouldn't go," said Mrs. Marburg, bitterly. "He needs my money."

"If you ask me," said Cecily crisply, "he needs a mother!"

"How dare you?" Then, as Alice came in to announce Mark Keating, Mrs. Marburg said, "I insist on giving you a check for your fare and one day's services. I'll see that you have it before you leave. I never permit myself to be in debt to a subordinate."

Cecily, aware that this was no time for argument, turned away, and, passing Mark Keating as she went out, gave him scarcely a glance.

"I hope things weren't too bad," he said.

"Not as bad as you might think," Cecily said. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You mean that you've been foolish enough to defy her?"

"I mean that I've been honest enough to tell her that

I won't carry tales."

"And you think I'm not honest?"

"What you do is not my affair, is it?"

"Perhaps not. But I shall make what you do my affair. I shall insist that Mrs. Marburg keep you on."

"Please don't. She has made up her mind, and perhaps it is all for the best. Perhaps I shall find a place I like better."

"But where will you go from here?"

"There are some distant relatives of my father in Carroll County. They have asked me to visit them."

"Not many employees are paid as generous a salary as Mrs. Marburg is giving you."

"Money isn't everything."

"It means a lot when you've been without it. Some day I'll tell you about myself, Miss Merryman."

Ignoring his last sentence, she said, "I have been without money and I was not unhappy."

"But I want you to stay—" He stopped as the maid, Alice, appeared on the landing above them.

"Mrs. Marburg is asking for you, Mr. Keating."

"In a moment," he said.

But Alice still stood there and did not move until, with a quick, "I'll see you later," he left Cecily and went on up the stairs.

Chapter Six

They Work for a Living and You Don't

Now and then Mickey, the Siamese cat, left the great house behind him and made his way to a heavenly place in the stables where there was the sweet smell of hay and the sweeter smell of mice. Here Blair's riding-horse and the two work horses were kept, and the Irish setters, Pat and Tim, spent much of their time and were bedded there for the night. Mickey had no fear of the dogs. They were of mild disposition.

On this day of storm that same small soul of Mickey was stirred by a primeval instinct. Hunting was in his blood, and there was quarry in the loft. He had spent the night in Blair's room and had slept a dreamless sleep. He had gone downstairs with Cecily and had begged a breakfast from the cook. Going up then to the east wing, he had found his mistress's door closed against him, and Alice in an unreceptive mood. She had said, "Scat!" and Mickey had wisely taken himself out of the way.

Being therefore at loose ends, he had braved the elements and, padding through the rain, had entered at last the Elysium of heavenly scents, to be greeted by the chauffeur, Mike, who in the adjoining garage was washing cars. "So here you are, Mickey! And what will the ladies do without you?"

Mickey didn't care what the ladies did. In Mrs. Marburg's rooms he lived in an atmosphere of luxury and

adulation; with two natures warring within him, the sybarite and the warrior, he at times reveled in the warmth and ease, but there were other times, like this morning, when an atavistic urge sent him forth to kill.

He sat down in the doorway and began to smooth his coat. Through the curtain of rain which separated the stables from the garage, Mike was saying, "So you like it here? Well, I don't blame you. The things that go on in that house are enough to make even a cat want to stay away from it. Now there's that Alice. She's a snake in the grass if there ever was one. Coming down here and going for rides at night with Mr. Keating. She says he takes her to the movies, but I'll miss my guess if she's telling the truth."

Polishing off his last car, Mike crossed the intervening space and sat down on a feed box in the stable. Mickey, dry now and shining, leaped to Mike's knee and draped his silver-fawn length like a rug under the young Irishman's hand.

"You're a beauty," Mike told him, "and I like that little song you're singing. But you can't stay here, for I've got to put on my uniform and get out the station wagon and drive Mrs. Donovan to market. Liver is high, but I'll bring a bit back for you and the barn cats. They should have all of it, if you ask me, because they work for a living, and you don't."

The barn cats were, as Mickey knew, a hardy crew, never entering the big house, and living the lives of buccaneers. Perhaps, in some dim way, he knew them, not as rivals, but as freer souls in the scheme of existence. They were well fed, on coarser food than Mickey, but they had a real job. They kept away

from the stables not only the sweet mice with which Mickey indulged his fastidious appetite, but the rats as well. When Mickey encountered them, there was usually an exchange of courtesies, but no fighting.

With Mike gone, Mickey ascended the stairway to the loft where the hay was sweet and where he sniffed the air ecstatically. Here were no perfumes such as were sprayed from atomizers in Mrs. Marburg's rooms.

Mickey, finding his favorite mouse hole, sat down before it and, tucking his paws under him, began his long vigil. Now and then he slept, but the slightest sound waked him.

One of the sounds that waked him was a woman's voice. Alice was in the room below, and Mark Keating was with her. Mickey roused himself and went to sleep again. He was safe up here in his nest of hay.

Alice was saying, tempestuously, "Why did you ask her to stay?"

"Because Mrs. Marburg needs a companion, and there's no one else in sight."

"She's got me and Mazie. Why does she need anyone else?"

"Because neither of you knows enough," brutally. "One of Mrs. Marburg's requirements for a companion was that she would read French, and, besides that, have had some experience in social correspondence."

"Well, I'm getting tired of it here."

His voice was sharp. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's as dull as dishwater."

"Don't I take you to the movies?"

"Yes."

"And to dances?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you satisfied?"

"I was, before that Miss Merryman came. But now you're getting bored with me—and she knows a lot."

"Don't be a fool, Alice. If we stick it out long enough, things will come our way. But we've got to be careful. Some day Mike may decide not to keep his mouth shut. I can see he doesn't like our going out together."

"Perhaps it's because he'd like to take me himself."

"Cut that out, Alice. If you're trying to make me jealous—"

She laughed. "You are jealous. And I like the Irish."

"Stop laughing."

There was a short silence, through which presently Mickey's quick ears caught the sound of the returning station wagon. With the wagon would come liver for the barn cat and a bit for Mickey.

He went cautiously to the top of the loft stairs. Already the barn cats, who had been napping in the hay, were unrolling themselves and heading the same way. A mother cat, soft as silk and leaving behind her a nest of new-born kittens, eyed Mickey suspiciously before she followed the others. But Mickey had no designs on the kittens. He was looking down to see if the coast was clear of Alice and Mark. But he saw no sign of them. The room below was empty, the station wagon was stopping in front of the stable, and Mike was smiling down at the phalanx of felines which awaited him in the doorway. "You're a hard-working bunch, all except Mickey. You'll have to wait until last, Mickey, but I'll see that you get your share, Beautiful."

Chapter Seven

It's the Song of the Merrymaid

Cecily, after she left Mark, went on to her room. She felt stunned and shaken. She had lost her job, and the future was a blank before her. Yet it was better to be out of work than at war with your conscience. A conscience, to be sure, was not fashionable in these days, but, call it what you would—conscience, a fine sense of humor, a sensitive shrinking from sordid treachery—this thing of being asked to spy upon the actions of another distressed and shamed her.

Nothing that Mark Keating had said to her on the stairs had altered her determination. She would go at once to Baltimore, and from there get in touch with the distant relatives in Carroll County. She had already written them that she had taken a position with Mrs. Marburg and that she hoped to see them, so her letter would not come as a surprise. If no invitation was forthcoming, she could go to Washington and find a place for herself in some Government office where women were needed.

Failing all that, she could return to her adobe hut in the West. She owned it, and the expenses were small. Inez, the old Mexican woman who had worked for Mrs. Merryman long before Cecily was born, would welcome this child of her heart with open arms. And there would be the desert! The unfathomable blue skies, the dark majesty of the mountains, the

sweet air, and, more than all, the sense of freedom which she would sacrifice if she stayed with Mrs. Marburg.

Yet if she returned, there would still be Peter. Peter with his honeyed words, his pulsating promises. Peter with his good looks, his best-selling books, his youth, his ardor.

It was because of Peter that she had left the desert land that she loved. A year ago he had come from Hollywood to find peace and quiet while he wrote the screen adaptation of his latest best-selling book. He had bought an old Spanish ranch house, miles removed from any habitation except the adobe hut in which Cecily and her mother had lived since their return from France, and in which Mrs. Merryman, day after day, was losing her hold on life.

There were books in the adobe hut, and the two women spoke Peter's language, but their greatest appeal was in their willingness to listen when he read from his own manuscripts. After a morning at his desk, he would ride across the desert, kiss Mrs. Merryman's hand as she lay on her couch, drag Cecily down beside him as he sat on the floor of the patio, and would then read page after page in a voice that would pull the heart out of you.

But it had not pulled the heart out of Cecily. She liked Peter awfully, but she had not known him long before she was aware that he dramatized himself, identified himself with his own heroes. He dressed and looked like them. Tall, dark-haired, gray-eyed, with a thin, romantic face, he wore high boots, a broad hat, and gay Mexican colors.

But if Peter looked like his heroes, he did not think like them. "I know the world," he would say, "and it is not the world I write about. People want swashbuckling stuff, so I feed it to them."

Mrs. Merryman adored the swashbuckling stories, and she adored Peter. If Cecily did not share this adoration, it was because something within warned her.

"All the world," she would tell her mother, "is Peter's stage."

Yet as time went on and the part that Peter played in the lives of the two women became more and more intimate and absorbing, Cecily found herself drawn toward him. She was glad when he came, missed him when he went away on various trips to Hollywood, and felt that day lost which did not bring him riding madly across the desert, waving a manuscript and waking the echoes of the quiet house with the pleasant tumult of teasing and of laughter.

After a session of comment and discussion of the story, Inez would serve a luncheon which consisted mainly of a great dish of chili, bread of her own baking, and the makings of a salad in a wooden bowl. Peter would mix oil and vinegar and salt and red pepper in proper proportions and sit down to eat prodigiously while he talked and talked about himself.

After lunch Mrs. Merryman would rest, and Peter and Cecily would ride away across the desert, and Peter would tell Cecily how lovely she was with her head bare and her hair blowing. And there would be the line of the mountains to the right of them as they went, and to the left of them as they came back. And

often there was snow on the mountains, and the hard blue of the sky above them, or the flat gold of the sunset if they were late. And Cecily would feel that she and Peter were a part of it all and that nothing in life could be better than this.

And so, when Peter asked her one night to dine with him at the Biltmore and they rode back through the star-studded night and Peter said, "You are the sun and the moon and the stars to me, darling," Cecily felt that at last Peter was more than an actor on a stage. He was a man who loved her.

Later, when she told her mother some of the things Peter had said to her, Mrs. Merryman sighed. "I could die happy, my darling, if I knew you were going to marry him."

And Cecily murmured, out of the dark, "He hasn't asked me, Mother."

"But he will," Mrs. Merryman said, and a few weeks later died believing it.

After Mrs. Merryman's death, Peter went on making love to Cecily, but he didn't ask her to marry him. The lovemaking was of the purely romantic kind, for Cecily would have no other. Peter said she was cold, but it wasn't that. It was only that she had a kind of pride which kept her sturdily away from surrender. She wanted no halfway measures in courtship. It must be all or nothing.

Then one day Peter's screen play, which had its setting in New Orleans, was to be shown in that city and Peter was to go with the company for a great hullabaloo of publicity. He asked Cecily to go with him.

"It will be something to see, Cissy, and you've been such a grand sport in helping me with the story."

And Cecily said, "I'll go if I can stay with some old friends of my father. French people, and such darlings!"

And Peter said, "Just as you like. But if it's because you think it wouldn't be quite proper to go with me, you'll have to do some more thinking. My world isn't your world, Cissy, and nobody cares—"

But just the same Cecily stayed with her French friends, and saw Peter's picture and its great success. She went to a ball with him afterward at the old St. Charles Hotel, and wore a marvelous gown of silver brocade, and pink camellias in her hair.

Peter had given her the gown. He had insisted, "I owe you more than I can ever pay. And besides, I want to show you off to my Hollywood friends."

Cecily had looked simply ravishing in her silver gown and her crown of camellias, and some of the men had asked Peter, "Where have you been hiding her?" and the way they said it made Cecily uncomfortable.

And the woman star of the piece, who was very glamorous and who seemed to take more than a professional interest in Peter, said, "The Lady of the Camellias?" and Cecily's cheeks were hot.

And when she got home, she thought it all over, and especially the way he talked about their future. "We'll go to South America, darling, and I'll get material for a new story." And again, "Perhaps the South Sea Islands would be better." But never in all his planning was there a mention of matrimony.

And so, as she thought about it, Cecily's doubts of Peter were revived. And one day, when he had been for some weeks in Hollywood, she saw in the morning paper a picture of him and the glamorous actress, whom Cecily had met in New Orleans, night-clubbing in a famous place. After that there were daily paragraphs by screen columnists linking Peter's name with that of the glamorous beauty.

It was then that Cecily knew that she was not going to play any longer the part that Peter assigned to her. She didn't question his love for her. It was rather that she questioned its quality. He had fitted her into a romantic picture which had to do with the desert and its enchantment—the blue of the sky, the dark line of mountains, "the sun and the moon and the stars." He had dreamed and seen visions of their future, but the dreams had nothing to do with reality. Peter was not, she told herself, the villain who pursues. He was simply a sybarite who shirked responsibility.

It took Cecily some time to make up her mind what she was going to do about it. And in that time Peter wrote to her constantly. Whether she answered his letters or not, he wrote of the wonderful things that were happening to him. *They treat me as if I were a Prince.* He even spoke of the glamorous beauty. She was to be in his next picture. He wanted Cecily to meet her. *She's a darling—*

Cecily told herself that she wasn't jealous. It was only that she didn't intend to play second fiddle. Or rather, she wasn't going to let Peter play on her heartstrings until they frazzled and broke.

So, facing facts, Cecily had decided to run away.

She had answered the advertisement in the New York paper and, with all her bridges burned behind her, she had come to Gaywood, only to find her adventure flattened out and a blank future before her.

She had left with Inez a note for Peter.

I am going because I have let you take up too much of my time, darling. And perhaps I've been taking up too much of yours. Anyhow, it will be best for me to see the world on my own, and leave you free to go your way, as I go mine. I shall miss you, and I think you will miss me, but what we feel for each other is not, I am sure, deep enough to last until death parts us. And that's the only kind of love I want, Peter.

So this is good-by, my dear. Thank you for all the lovely things you've done for me, and thank you, too, for the happiness you gave to Mother. She thought you were wonderful, and so you are, Peter. Too wonderful, it may be, for a world of reality.

And now as she stood by the window, looking out on the storm that was lashing the Bay, Cissy told herself that perhaps Peter's half loaf would have been better than no bread. Perhaps if she had waited, things would have worked themselves out. Perhaps even now, if she went back—

But she didn't want to go back. She wanted to stay here in this great house, see things through, prove to herself the quality of her own courage. But go she must, tomorrow morning, and only God knew what was beyond.

Restless and with a storm within her which matched the storm without, Cecily went for a walk. It was still raining heavily, but the coat that she wore was thick

and warm and had an attached hood which she drew over her head. The coat was one which Peter had brought her from Hollywood. It was a soft red wool, with gold military buttons. A rather startling coat for a paid companion. But in it Cecily was something to dream about.

As she went toward the Bay, Blair's dogs joined her. They were streaming wet, but they were alert and eager, as if they loved it all. And Cecily loved it. She went on and on, coming back at last in the early twilight, hating to enter the house, wishing with all her heart that there was someone within to welcome her.

Yet, when the door was opened by Brewster and she was met by warmth and brightness, her spirits lifted. She was met, instead, by more than warmth and brightness, for gaily and lightly someone was singing. Blair was at the piano, his head thrown back and turned a little toward her. "It's your song, Merrymaid," he said as he saw her.

She stood beside the piano, flushed and startled. "Oh, how did you get here?"

"I told you I was coming, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I meant it. I always keep my word—at least to you."

He began again to sing—

"It's the song of a merrymaid, peerly proud,
Who loved a lord and she laughed aloud
At the moan of the merryman, moping mum,
Whose soul was sad, and whose glance was glum—
Who sipped no sup, and who craved no crumb.
As he sighed for the love of a lady."

He ended with a flourish, then stood up. "Take off that wet coat and I'll sing the rest of it." Then, as she made no move to obey him, he lifted the hood from her hair. "You should never cover your hair, Mélisande."

His fingers were busy with the top button of her coat, unfastening it. "Why did you go out in such weather?"

"I like it."

"I'll bet your feet are as wet as water."

"No. I wore my galoshes." She stuck out her feet to show him.

He made her sit down by the fire while he unbuckled the straps of the heavy overshoes. "Pretty feet," he said when they were revealed in their brown Oxfords.

"Please don't."

The shake in her voice made him say quickly, "Merrymaid, my dear, what's happened?"

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me that. I know wet eyes when I see them."

"Well, I've had a trying day."

"With Mother? You'll have plenty more of them."

"Please let's not talk about it. I'd rather you'd sing the rest of the song."

She was smiling now, holding on to herself. That break in her voice had been uncontrollable, but she wouldn't let it happen again. It was only that coming in from the dark and cold, and having Blair so kind—

He was at the piano again, going on with the second verse.

"It's the song of the merrymaid, once so gay,
Who turned her heel and tripped away
From the peacock popinjay, bravely born,
Who turned up his noble nose with scorn
At the humble heart that he did not prize;
So she begged on her knees with downcast eyes,
For the love of the merryman . . ."

He went through the chorus, then rose and came to the fire. "I've told Brewster to bring us our tea and plenty of it. I'm starved, and you should be. And we've got everything to ourselves. Mark is in Mother's room, having tea with her, and smoothing her ruffled feathers. So you can eat and drink and be a merrymaid, and I'll be a merryman, moping mum." He hummed the tune and took a step or two in time to the rhythm.

Brewster brought in then the great silver tray and set it in front of Cecily. Blair sat on the rug beside her.

"There's gingerbread," he said, "and hot buttered biscuits, and tea sandwiches, and I'm going to eat everything."

It seemed to Cecily quite heavenly to be laughing and light-hearted after her hours of uncertainty and depression. She ate with an appetite while Blair talked to her.

He came at last to his escapade with Gypsy. "I suppose I ought to apologize. I'm really sorry, Merrymaid, that you had to be disturbed. I shouldn't have taken her up in my plane. But she wanted it, and when a girl wants a thing, you've got to give it to her."

"Have you?"

"Well, girls like Gypsy. It's easier to go their way

than to go against 'em."

"Why not make her go your way?"

"You try it! If I really cared for her, of course, it would be different."

"You mean you would want to protect her."

"I think I would. I'm not sure. There's never been a woman I wanted to protect. Once upon a time I felt that way about Mother. But not any more—"

"When did you change?"

"After my father took on Mark Keating as his secretary. Mark and I went to prep school and college together. I liked him, and when we were graduated and I found that he had been educated by a fund left by an uncle and that his own family had nothing, I brought him here and asked my father to get a job for him. Mark seemed to fit into our life rather well, and it ended by my father making him his secretary. I don't quite know what happened after that, but my father seemed to turn against me. I could do nothing to please him. He said I was irresponsible and extravagant, and that I wasted my time. Mother took sides with him, and the old relation between us, which had been close and happy, was ended. When my father died, he left his entire estate to Mother, not in trust for me, but to dispose of as she liked. It was a terrible thing to do. I don't care so much about the money, but the awful thing is to feel that he believed me so unworthy that he had to cut me out of his will. I shall never get over it."

His voice died away into silence and he stared into the fire, rousing himself at last to say, "I can't put my finger on a thing that Mark has done. It's only that

he influences Mother. She is always telling me that all I care about is her money. It isn't true, but I can't convince her."

"Why not convince her by not taking any part of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"But I haven't a penny."

"Other men," said Cecily, "hadn't a penny, but they made their way in the world."

"How could I make my way? I've never been trained to do anything except play a few tunes on the piano."

"Well," Cecily said, flaming, "if I were you, I'd break stones on the road rather than fight like cats and dogs for a dead man's fortune."

A deep flush rose to Blair's forehead. "You're putting that pretty strong, aren't you?"

"Yes. Too strong. I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. It's true, of course. If I'd have been half a man, I'd have found something when I left college. But Father wanted me to come into his law office, and it didn't appeal to me. So I drifted."

"Well, don't drift any longer. Tell your mother that you'll be on your own for a while. It might bring her to her senses."

"Will you help me, Merrymaid?"

"I shan't be here."

"Not here?"

"Your mother told me this morning that she wouldn't need my services any longer."

"You mean, you're leaving?"

"Yes. On the boat tomorrow morning."

"But what happened?"

"I'd rather not tell you."

"You must. Did it have anything to do with my bringing Gypsy to your room last night?"

"Yes."

"She knew about it?"

"Yes."

"Who told her?"

"I'd rather not say."

"It was Mark, I'll bet." His face darkened. "Do you think I'm going to let her get away with it?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to. Anything you might say would only make it worse. Your mother has told me quite definitely that you have your place in this household and that her companions have theirs. She wouldn't like my having tea with you alone. But now that I am going away, it really doesn't matter."

Blair said impatiently, "Don't be silly, and don't talk as if you were a cook or a parlormaid. Mother's acting like a child, and I shall tell her so."

Her hand went out toward him. "Please don't. It would only make more trouble for all of us."

He took her hand in his own. "It's a lovely hand," he said, "and very eloquent. And perhaps you are right to go. I'm not much of a fellow, Mélisande, and you'll be better off away from me."

There was a note of bitterness in his voice which distressed her.

"You shouldn't say such things. They aren't true. I know it."

"How do you know it?" Then as he saw the flush

on her cheeks, "No, don't answer that. Tell me more about yourself and your life on the desert—everything."

Well, of course she couldn't tell him about Peter, but she did tell him about the adobe hut and Inez. And the sweetness of her home life with her father and mother. Of their books, and her father's pictures, and how the little house, set like a jewel in the great ring of the desert, was filled with sweetness and light. She didn't say it in those words, for she spoke simply, but Blair was aware of something choice and perfect and never to be forgotten.

"I've never known a home like that. Money has always stood between." He got suddenly to his feet and stood looking down at her. "Do you know," he said irrelevantly, "what I'd like to do?"

"No."

"I'd like to take you up in my plane and fly out in the storm to your desert—and never come back. But we can't do that, can we? We've only known each other twenty-four hours, and a man can't run away with a woman on such short acquaintance. But tonight I shall dream that I am flying with you above the clouds, and we'll be laughing and singing of the merrymaid and the moping mum—and there'll be no end to it—ever."

His words seemed to echo and re-echo in the great room. Then, with a sudden change of mood, he reached out his hands to her and pulled her to her feet. "Don't ever take me seriously, Merrymaid, when I say such things. My mother will tell you that I'm not to be trusted, now or ever."

Chapter Eight

People Are Talking

Blair Marburg rarely thought things through. He didn't think them through now. In his talk with Cecily Merryman that afternoon he had been swayed by an emotion deeper than any he had known. It was not the usual brand of emotion which swayed him on meeting a new girl. He knew how to deal with that—a cocksure approach, an exchange of wisecracks, a short period of pursuit, and then a tactful gesture of withdrawal without hurting the girl's pride. It was all very trivial, but it was the accepted thing.

He had begun flippantly with Cecily the afternoon before when he had met her on the stairs, but it had stopped there. He couldn't for the life of him analyze why it had stopped. But there it was: an attitude of mind which paid tribute to certain qualities which he had discovered in her—a kind of innocence, a naiveté, a steadfastness. There was beauty, too, though she had kept it half hidden until last night when he had brought Gypsy to her room.

He had laughed always at the thing men called love at first sight, but now he had it. If he had thought of marriage, it had been in terms of a big wedding, a big house, and a big income. But the picture that Cecily had drawn of the adobe hut, its warmth and brightness, its love and loyalty, had opened new vistas. Perhaps all his life that had been what he wanted—

real things, sweet things, not hardness and distrust and recrimination.

Driving through the rain toward Baltimore after his tea with Cecily, he thought of what she had said to him. "I'd break stones on the road rather than fight like cats and dogs for a dead man's fortune."

No one had ever said things like that to him. No one had made him feel that there were possibilities within him for success. No one had made him look upon life as a battlefield where he might fight and win. Women like Gypsy, for example, had weakened him, and he had let them do it. Playing the game without caring much about the stakes.

And now here he was on his way to Gypsy's because, quite incredibly, he had agreed some time ago to be best man at the wedding of Bubbles Tyson, Gypsy's brother. The wedding was tomorrow, and tonight was the night of the rehearsal. If Blair had been wise, he would not have driven that afternoon back to Gaywood for the sake of having tea with Cecily. But he had not been wise. He had wanted to see her, and a promise was a promise.

He arrived at Gypsy's in a state of mind which made him say irritably to Bubbles, "If you have rain tomorrow, it will serve you right for bringing me out on a night like this."

And Bubbles said, " 'It isn't raining rain to me; it's raining violets.' "

"You're that much in love?"

"That much, and more."

"Well, let's hope it will last."

"Viola says it won't. She says I'm marrying her be-

cause I like her eyelashes. But it's really more than that. I love my love with a V because she is a Vixen. You should see her when she loses her temper." He laughed and went on.

Blair happened to know that Bubbles was crazy about Viola. As for Viola, Heaven help Bubbles!

Gypsy, coming in, said, "How do you like me?" and whirled about in a flame of full-skirted coral crêpe.

"Lovely," said Blair mechanically.

"We're going to have cocktails before we go over to the church."

"You'd better not have one, Gypsy. You're drinking too much. Look at last night."

"Oh, well, nothing really happened, did it? I got home without mother finding out."

"My mother found out, and she discharged Miss Merryman this morning for harboring you."

"Discharged her?"

"Yes. She said we should have called Brewster or Donovan."

"That's silly, of course. But you can't blame me for your mother's moods. And as for Miss Merryman, she can find another job."

"You're a cold-blooded little cat, Gypsy."

"I'm not. Only I think she'll be happier away from Gaywood. She's a nice old thing, and I liked her."

"*Old?* What are you talking about?"

"Well, she's loads older than I am."

"Perhaps. But that wouldn't make her ancient."

"Who cares?" Gypsy gave him a smile and was off to meet the other members of the party.

They had their cocktails, then drove down to the old church on Charles Street where the Tysons had worshipped for generations. The city had grown out far beyond it, but every Tyson, man or woman, still went there to be married. It was dimly lit; the figures on the glass windows were faint; and there was about it an atmosphere of ancient holiness which made the bustle and clamor and almost hysterial gaiety of the young people seem irreverent.

"You're to stand with Bubbles," Gypsy said to Blair, "and later go down the aisle with me. You should see our bridesmaids' dresses, darling. Mine is yellow, and we're all carrying violets."

But Blair was not interested in Gypsy's clothes. He was not interested in the rehearsal. He was not interested in Viola and Bubbles. He was interested in this thought of marriage. Of what it would mean to him if he married a girl like Gypsy Tyson, and what it would mean if he married a girl like Cecily Merryman.

To tell the truth, he had thought little of marriage. He had had love affairs—evanescent things, here today and gone tomorrow. His affair with Gypsy had had no depth or breadth. Until Cecily came, he might have drifted into marriage with Gypsy because they had gay good times together. Or he might have run away with her in some flaming moment of rebellion against his mother's opposition.

But now?

Gypsy was saying, "You'd better go over there and back up Bubbles. He hasn't an idea what to do next."

So Blair steered Bubbles to his place in the chancel,

and they followed out the whole mechanized program, with everybody laughing and joking until the rector quieted them with "You're in the house of God."

Blair drew a long breath. He wondered what this good priest thought of these parishioners of his—christened and confirmed before this altar—to be married and buried, and their babies christened and confirmed. That was life's great circle—birth, marriage, death, and children and grandchildren.

Going home in Gypsy's car, she said, "Why are you so quiet?"

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Well, there have been some things at home to worry me."

"What things?"

"Mother hasn't been so well. My party upset her."

"Because I was there?"

"Yes."

She waited a moment before she said, "Bubbles had too many cocktails this afternoon, and he told the crowd I was out all night—with you!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"Except—"

"Except what?"

"Well, as I said, people are talking."

"About what?"

"You and me."

"Let 'em talk."

She shook her head. "No. Frankly I don't like it. I think we'd better see less of each other, Blair. It's be-

ginning to cramp my style. The other men think you've got the inside track and they've stopped asking me to go places."

"My fault! I'll hold off a bit."

He saw at once that was not what she wanted. What she wanted, indeed, was not less, but more. In a way she had a right to expect it. He had given her a whirl, and she had taken him seriously. There had been times when he had thought he might marry her. In certain moods it had seemed to him that nothing was so important as to show his mother that, money or no money, she could not dictate in the matter of his marriage.

Gypsy was petulant. "What's the matter with you, Blair? I don't believe you've heard a word I've said. You don't drink, or I should think that had made you stupid."

He smiled down at her. "Suppose I take my stupidity off with me. I must be going home or the gobble-uns will git me."

She laid her hand on his arm. "Darling, you're not upset by what I said?"

"What did you say?"

"That people are talking."

"Let 'em talk." He bent and kissed her on the cheek.

Gypsy pulled herself away. "Brotherly love?" she said.

He laughed and went on, feeling something less than a man, yet knowing he must, somehow, square himself with life. With love. With Cecily.

Chapter Nine

I Will Not Carry Tales

Cecily slept little that night. Blair's words kept beating in her brain. "My mother will tell you that I'm not to be trusted, now or ever."

Surely that wasn't true. Surely there were in Blair undiscovered sources of strength. To develop them he must cease to nurse his resentments, refuse to believe himself the victim of his parents' unfairness, and look forward and not back.

If only she might stay and help him! But she could not stay. In a few hours she would board the boat for Baltimore, and be out of his life forever.

By six o'clock she was up and dressed. The storm had passed, and the waters of the Bay showed the amethystine haze of the dawn. The morning star hung low and faint. A serene world outside, but within this great house, bitterness and hate.

Cecily, turning away from the window, saw that a note had been slipped under her door. It was from Blair.

Things happened to me last night, Mélisande. I must tell you about them, and I must tell you about my dream. We were not up in my plane, and there was no storm. You were alone on a strip of desert between two high mountains. There was a bird flying above you—an ominous bird like a buzzard. Do they have buzzards on the desert? Anyhow, there was

something evil in it, and I tried to warn you. But I couldn't make you hear— And then I waked up, and was glad to know it was all a dream.

And now I can't let you go, Mélisande. We must find a way to keep you. Do you think if you went to mother and told her that you wanted to stay—? Would that be too hard? Perhaps I shouldn't ask it, but I am asking it because, as I have said, I cannot let you go.

She read Blair's letter again. It was naive, emotional. Not the letter of a man of the world playing a pleasant game, but that of a boy reaching out for something he could scarcely define. Was it love, she asked herself, that he was offering? And if it were, how could she meet it? She was no Juliet, flaming to the moon. Yet if she were not, why were her pulses pounding?

Sitting down at her desk, she reached for pen and paper. She would write to Mrs. Marburg. Put her pride in her pocket. She wanted to stay. She would ask if she might do so.

She had written only *Dear Mrs. Marburg* when Alice knocked and came in with a tray.

"Mrs. Donovan said you wanted your breakfast here."

"Thank you, Alice."

Having opened a folding table, Alice set the breakfast upon it. "She says you're leaving us this morning."

"Yes. I'm taking the boat for Baltimore."

"I think you're well out of it, Miss Merryman. You wouldn't like it if you stayed. Mrs. Marburg is hard to work for. She's always so suspicious of the women about the place. She thinks they're in love with her son. But he never looks at them. He's got his heart

set on Miss Tyson. He may play around with other girls, but he never means anything. Miss Gypsy has money, and that's all men think about. Money!"

Mickey, the Siamese cat, who had come in with Alice, jumped onto a chair beside Cecily, giving her a welcome excuse for a change of subject. "Is he allowed to have cream, Alice?"

"He's allowed to have everything. He's a spoiled brat, and I hate him. I wouldn't give him any cream if I were you, Miss. It will only encourage him to come around and bother you."

"But I shan't be here," Cecily said, "so it won't hurt just this once to indulge him."

There was a knock at the door. When Alice opened it, Brewster was on the threshold.

"Mr. Keating wishes you to come to his study, Miss Merryman, as soon as you've had your breakfast."

"Very well, Brewster. I'll be down in a few minutes."

When Brewster had gone, the maid still lingered. "Mr. Keating may be asking you to stay on. I heard him talking to Mrs. Marburg. But don't you do it. It's a dull old place for anybody."

"Then why are you staying, Alice?"

"Me? Well, I may be going, if things don't work out as I want them. I wouldn't want to go before Christmas anyway. There's always the tips and the presents."

Mark's office was beyond the great hall and to the right of the terrace dining-room. It's windows looked out on the formal gardens, where at this season only the yews and boxwood hedges were green, with the

white of marble statues showing among them. On the walls of the office were hung a few rare etchings and on the shelves were many books with rich bindings. The furniture was done up in dull red leather and gave warmth and color. It was, in fact, a rather opulent room for a man of Mark's position, and Cecily judged correctly that it might have once been used by Blair's father.

Mark rose as she entered. "Good morning," he said. "It's a lovely day after the storm."

Cecily said, "Yes," and stopped there.

"Sit down," he said, "and I'll tell you why I sent for you. I've had to fight a hard battle for you, Miss Merryman."

Cecily, still standing, said, "What battle?"

"To keep you here."

"I'm not sure that I want to stay."

"What can you do that is better?"

"Own my soul, perhaps."

A faint smile lighted his face. "Don't be melodramatic, Miss Merryman. And you haven't given me your answer. What can you do that is better?"

She evaded that. "If I stay, it will have to be on my own terms. I will not carry tales."

"Mrs. Marburg is willing to waive that. She has asked me to tell you that she may have been too hasty yesterday morning, and she hopes you will consider it advisable to stay on. I am sure nothing will be required of you which will interfere with your somewhat Puritanic conscience. There are many advantages in your position here which you might not find in other places. And I might tell you this: Don't be

too highminded. It doesn't pay in a world like this."

"I hate compromises."

Again the faint smile. "Sometimes half a loaf is better than no bread. I like having you here because, as I have told you, you break the monotony of this devilish routine. There's no one else with whom I can associate on equal terms. Our status in the house is the same. We are a little lower than Blair and his mother, and a little higher than Mrs. Donovan and Brewster. Yet there are things that are favorable to us in this very fact of our supposed inferiority. We can work together for our common good. I promise you that if you will co-operate with me, Miss Merryman, in my effort to free Mrs. Marburg from the insolence and indifference of her son, you'll bring peace to her days and the assurance of stability for your future."

Cecily felt that a net was being drawn about her. If she refused to be cast in the role of fellow conspirator, she would earn Mark's ill will and the withdrawal of his influence with Mrs. Marburg. For it was undoubtedly through Mark's intercession that she had been asked to stay on. She wanted to stay. And Blair Marburg wanted her. Yet if she acquiesced in Mark's program, she would have to play a double game—seem to be on his side, while she worked with all her mind and heart to bring Blair and his mother together. She hated the thought of compromise, but if she could achieve her purpose, it would be worth it.

"I shall do my best to be helpful to Mrs. Marburg," she said quietly. "Will you tell her that I will stay and that I am sorry if I seemed impertinent."

He was beaming. "You will never, I am sure, regret

being—sensible. I think we understand each other, Miss Merryman. I hope I shall have no reason in the future to modify my belief in your loyalty to the best interests of this household."

Had the whole thing not been so serious in its implications, Cecily would have found a high element of comedy in Mark's pomposity. As it was, she saw only treachery and meanness.

Mark, unaware of her mental indictment of him, said jauntily, "Shall we go now and tell Mrs. Marburg what I know will be good news to her? Perhaps it will be best to make no mention of the recent unpleasantness. There's a lot of work waiting for you, and the sooner you get at it, the better."

Cecily, entering Mrs. Marburg's room with Mark, was greeted by a casual "Good morning," which Mark followed up by a few observations about the weather.

"It's clear and beautiful after the storm. The Bay looks—"

Mrs. Marburg interrupted him. "I can see for myself what the Bay looks like. And now you'd better show Miss Merryman where she is to work. You'll have my little sitting-room to yourself, Miss Merryman. You can shut the door when you use the typewriter. I hate the sound of it."

Cecily, following Mark, found a charming circular room with the same view of the formal garden that was had from Mark's office. There was a desk outfitted in old English silver—a quaint inkstand with its candle-holders, an hourglass with a figure of Time on the top, and the family crest on everything.

Returning to Mrs. Marburg for instructions, Cecily

spoke of the silver. "It's so lovely," she said.

"It belonged to my great-grandfather in England. We have loads of it not in use and packed away. I prize such things and want to pass them on to future generations, but Blair says he doesn't want the silver nor any sons and daughters." She broke off to say impatiently, "Run along, Mark, and get at your own work. And when Blair comes in, tell him I want to see him."

"He's here now, Mrs. Marburg. When we came up, Brewster was giving him a late breakfast. He was having bacon and eggs and hot cakes. I don't see how he keeps his figure."

"His figure is his," Mrs. Marburg said acidly, "by the grace of God and his family background. None of the Marburgs is fat. Blair could eat hot cakes forever and still look as slim as that statue of Apollo out there in the garden.

"And now, Miss Merryman, if you'll sit down here beside me, we'll make a list of things I want you to do."

Chapter Ten

A Beggar at Her Gates

Blair, coming into his mother's room, well-fed and hearty, said, "Hello, darling! I got in late last night, and—" He stopped suddenly, for there, on the opposite side of the fire from his mother, sat Cecily—Cecily in her demure brown dress with crisp cuffs and collar, and her hair in a tight little bun at the back.

He stammered, "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't know you had anyone with you."

"It's only Miss Merryman. I wanted her to be here when I told you that I was much displeased when I found that you had brought Gypsy Tyson to her room. You should have notified Mrs. Donovan or Brewster. I have told Miss Merryman that if it happens again, I cannot overlook it. You would not, I am sure, want to be responsible for her being sent away."

Cecily saw the flame of temper in his eyes. Saw him control himself.

"I should not like," he said, "to have Miss Merryman punished for my sins."

"It's your responsibility," his mother said, "if you know what responsibility means."

"Perhaps I can learn." He shifted the subject. "Is there anything I can do for you in Baltimore? I'm flying up in a few minutes to be best man at Bubbles Tyson's wedding."

"Yes," his mother said. "I saw it in the paper. You

might, at least, have told me. But if you're going up, you may get some papers from Joshua Stabler. Mark wants them at once."

Joshua Stabler was the junior partner in the firm of which Blair's father had been the senior member. The firm had handled all the affairs of the Marburg estate until lately when Mrs. Marburg had given into Mark's hands the control of certain investments.

"Of course I'll get them," Blair said, "but why don't you have Joshua come down and talk things over with you?"

"There are no things to talk over," coldly. "Mark would have to be present at the interview and he doesn't like Joshua Stabler. He says Joshua treats him as an inferior."

"That's one of Mark's complexes," Blair told her, "to think that people look down on him."

"Perhaps they do," Mrs. Marburg said, "but he doesn't deserve it. I don't know what I should do without him."

Blair did not answer. He knew what Mark Keating deserved. But this was not the moment in which to say it.

It was, indeed, not the moment in which to say anything except that life was lovely because Cecily was staying on. He did not know how it had been accomplished, but he knew this—that nothing else mattered but that she was there.

With his heart filled to overflowing, he bent down and kissed his mother. "I'm sorry, darling, about the other night."

"Sorry is as sorry does," said Mrs. Marburg, and

Cecily winced at her tone.

But Blair laughed and kissed her again. "I'll be back in time for dinner and to go to bed early. It was nearly morning when I got in last night. Bubbles wanted me to stay in town after his supper for the groomsmen, but I told him I wanted some of Cook's corncakes for breakfast. I ate ten of them this morning, Mother."

"You're like your father," she said, "always thinking about food."

He put his arms about her shoulders. "Darling, if you'd eat ten pancakes every morning, you'd be dancing the rhumba with me before you knew it."

"If I ate ten pancakes, I'd be dead," his mother told him. Yet she smiled as she said it, and Cecily, watching the two of them, thought she had never seen a picture more charming. The handsome son smiling down and the handsome mother smiling up at him.

Arriving at the Tyson mansion, Blair changed his clothes and came downstairs in an exuberant frame of mind.

Gypsy, observing him closely, said, "You act as if you were the bridegroom."

"How does a bridegroom act?"

"Well, as if he owned the world. Bubbles, why don't you brace up and show how happy you are?"

"I am happy," Bubbles protested, "even if I don't look it."

At the church, Blair stood beside Bubbles in the chancel, with the bridesmaids coming up the aisle, two by two. Pale violet. Pale primrose. The fragrance of flowers filling the church. The bride misty in clouds of tulle. The groom joining her, and the solemn words

spoken. *"I, Alexander, take thee, Viola—"*

Blair had almost forgotten that Bubbles's name was Alexander.

"I, Blair, take thee, Cecily . . . for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer—till death do us part." How wonderful that would be! How wonderful!

There was a wedding breakfast following the ceremony, a bride's table with its great cake and the bride cutting it, and Bubbles, in a haze of champagne and happiness, smiling at last, with his arm about Viola.

Gypsy, all fragrant with violets, was saying to Blair, "Doesn't it make you want to go and do likewise?"

"Yes." It was out before he realized how she might take it.

"Then let's do it," she said. "We could announce it now and surprise the crowd."

He tried to pass it off lightly. "I refuse to be beggar-maid to your King Cophetua."

"You mean my money? But you have as much as I."

"I have nothing except by the grace of God and my mother's willingness to dole out an allowance."

"Then why did you say you wanted to get married?"

"Did I?"

"You know you did. If it wasn't that you don't drink, I'd think you had had too much champagne."

"Bubbles has had too much. You'd better stop him."

Suddenly furious, she said, "I wonder why I let you treat me as you do? Perhaps I bring it on myself. And if you think I meant what I said, you're mistaken. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth."

He said, "Oh, have a heart, Gypsy. Stop scolding. We'll have a dance together before I go. I've got some

business at Joshua Stabler's and I must get there before his office closes."

They danced together beautifully. They had always danced beautifully. It was a pity, Gypsy thought, that Blair couldn't see how well they did everything—together.

Joshua Stabler, when he had given the papers to Blair, said, "I wish you, instead of Mark Keating, were looking after your mother's affairs. Keating is gradually taking over a lot of the things we have always managed. There's nothing that can be done about it, for your mother has, as you know, entire control of the estate, to appoint whomever she sees fit. She has appointed Mark Keating. These papers which I am giving you now are the last we have in our hands. After that we shall be completely out of the picture. Keating hires other attorneys, makes investments as he chooses. He knows little of such things. I'm telling you all this because, as Mrs. Marburg's son, you should know it."

"I'm glad you told me. Mother treats me as a child. Perhaps I deserve it. But Father's will was unfair and unjust, and I've been weak enough to let it throw me off my balance."

"I wish you had come into this office when you left college. Your father wanted it, and it was a great disappointment to him."

"I know." Blair hesitated, then went on, "I wish I could come into it now. Do you think you could make a place for me?"

"You mean that?"

"I certainly do. I want to shake myself free from this feeling of dependence on Mother. I'll do anything, if you'll let me come."

"You won't find it easy. You've been something of a playboy."

"I know, but I'm not going to play any longer."

Joshua Stabler was not so sure. Blair's reputation for gay and reckless living was well known to his father's partner. But he had always liked the boy and had resented, indeed, the elder Marburg's attitude of sternness and distrust.

"It's a bargain," he said, and held out his hand. "How about coming in next week? I'll have a desk for you. Then we can talk about your duties."

As he flew back over the Bay to Gaywood, life seemed to Blair wonderful. Never had he felt like this —that he had in him the power to bring toward him the things he wanted. He had told Cecily, "I am not much of a fellow," and had believed it. Yet, if he could shake free from his past, what might he not do with his future?

On arriving at Gaywood, he went at once to his mother's room. She was alone by the fire. "You're back sooner than I expected."

"It's good flying weather."

"Did you see Joshua?"

"Yes." He handed her the papers. "I think he's a bit worried about your investments."

"Why should he be?"

"He says Mark is managing a lot of them."

"Well, Joshua is an old fogy. Mark has increased my income by at least a third."

"But has he done it with safety?"

"Why should you doubt him? And I don't thank Joshua for telling you."

"I think you should trust him, Mother. He's a grand old fellow."

"Old? He's your father's age."

"He talked to me as if I were his son. And he's going to give me a job."

"A job?" sharply. "What kind of job?"

"In his office. The pay will be small to start, but if I make good, I'm to have a raise."

She sat rigid in her chair, her hands clenched on the arms of it. "I forbid you to work for Joshua Stabler."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that. I've told him I'd come on Monday."

"And you'll go even if I forbid you?"

"Why should you forbid me? I've played around long enough, Mother. I want to be on my own a bit."

"On your own? You salary won't be more than enough for cigarettes. And you can't live at Gaywood! Not if you work for Joshua. When you're tired of scrimping and saving, you may come back, but not before."

"Do you mean you're turning me out?"

"You're turning yourself out. If you had consulted me—"

"If I had consulted you," hotly, "it would have been the same. I'm sorry, but I feel that if I pass this up, I shall be something less than a man."

She looked up at him, standing straight and slim in his aviator's outfit. "Aren't you going to miss your plane?"

"Miss it?"

"Surely you don't think that a clerk's salary will make it possible for you to fly your own machine?"

He had not thought of that. But he braved it out. "I shan't have time for such things."

"I'll give you a month to be back again. Remember, when you stop working for Joshua Stabler, Gaywood will welcome you. But not before."

"That's your last word, Mother?"

"My last word."

"I hope you won't regret it."

"Why should I?"

"If you don't know, I can't tell you."

He left her then and went in search of Cecily. But he could not find her.

Brewster, being asked, stated, "She has gone for a walk with Mr. Keating."

Cecily and Mark! Blair hated the thought of it. Mark's influence was sinister. He seemed to poison everything he touched.

Moody and restless, he sat down at the piano and played a modern composition of crashing chords and thunderous repetitions. He wondered if, upstairs, his mother could hear it. He hoped she could. Such music offended her ears.

Mark, coming in with Cecily, said, "Blair is at the piano. I'll bet something has happened to upset him. His playing always reflects his moods."

Cecily did not answer. She went on into the great hall. Blair, unaware of her presence, played until he reached the end of his tumultuous theme, then, whirling around on the piano bench, saw her standing with

Mark by the fire. He did not by the flicker of an eyelash acknowledge her presence.

"You'd better run along, Mark"—his tone was harsh, insulting—"and look after mother. She has just repudiated me as her son. Perhaps she'll take you on as a substitute."

"Don't be a fool," Mark said. "You're master of this house, not I."

"A master with his mother's foot on his neck," violently. "And now go on, Mark, and get busy."

Alone with Cecily, Blair demanded, "Why did you go for a walk with him?"

"How could I refuse? I must seem to be friendly, although I don't like him. It was he who made it possible for me to stay. He asked your mother to give me another chance. I had to accept that favor from him or leave here."

"You wanted to stay?"

"Yes."

"Because I asked it?"

"Because of everything—"

"Even if your position here is undefined and my mother treats you like the devil?"

"Yes."

He came toward her. "What a brute I am! But I hate to see you with Mark. He'll try to get you on his side."

"As if he could! But it's what you just said about your mother that I want to hear."

"She's asked me to leave Gaywood."

"But why?"

"Because Joshua Stabler gave me a job and Mother

won't hear of my working for him. She wants me to be willing to live on what she doles out to me, like a beggar at her gates."

Cecily said, "Please—don't talk like that."

"How shall I talk? But you've got to stick by me, Merrymaid. And we've got to thrash things out before I leave. We can't do it here. Let's go into the library where there won't be any interruptions."

The library had books to the ceiling and a painting of Blair's father above the fireplace.

"You're like him," Cecily said, looking up at it.

"Mother wouldn't say that. She thinks he was perfect. I'm only fit to be thrown out of the house."

Cecily laid her hand on his arm. "Oh, little boy, little boy, when are you going to act like a man?"

His face darkened. "So that's the way you think of me?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. What matters is—you! Nothing your mother does can ever hurt you. It's what you do to yourself."

"Don't preach, Merrymaid. I can't stand it."

"I'm not preaching." Then, as he turned away from her, "Oh, let's sit down and talk about it sensibly."

"I don't want you to be sensible. I want you—" Suddenly his arms went around her. "I want you here—Mélisande." Then, as she made a little movement of withdrawal: "Let me say it while I have you close. I've never believed in a thing like this, Merrymaid. But it's got me."

She said, very low, "But you hardly know me."

"I've known you for a thousand years. Don't you feel that way about it?"

"How can I be sure?"

"I'll make you sure. Perhaps even now I could make you say it—but you're too sweet for caveman methods. When you come, I want you to come freely, Merrymaid."

He let her go then, touching her burning cheeks with his finger. "Did I frighten you, darling?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry."

There was a fire on the hearth and he drew their chairs up to it. Then he began at the beginning—his interview with Joshua Stabler, his high hopes, his mother's repudiation of him.

"I saw red, Merrymaid. It wasn't only what she said about me, but the way she feels about Mark." He told her what Joshua had revealed about his mother's finances. "The whole thing is rotten."

"Saying things are rotten won't help. You must go to your job. Do it well. And don't look ahead."

"But when shall I see you?"

"I'll be coming up to Baltimore some day, and I'll let you know. It will be better, I think, for us not to be together." She looked up at him smiling. "Jacob, you know, served seven years for Rachel. It always seemed wonderful to me that he could wait so long."

"Do you think I'll wait seven years, or seven months, or seven weeks?"

"We must have time enough to think—"

"Why should we think when we can feel?"

"Love is more than the emotion of the moment."

"What do you know of love, Merrymaid?"

"Nothing—really."

"Was there ever any other man?"

She nodded. "I thought it was the real thing, but it wasn't."

"What was his name?"

"Peter."

"Was it for him you wore the pink camellia in New Orleans?"

"How did you know?"

"The way you said it—on that first day! But there are to be no more Peters—ever. There are to be no more Gypsy Tysons. They are just shadow shapes that have crossed our paths. Just ghosts of yesterday—"

She stood up. "I must go now and dress for dinner."

"Then this is good-by, darling! I shall leave for Baltimore tonight. If I stay over until Monday I shall have to face Mother and Mark, and I'd rather get away without that."

She held out her hand to him. "Good-by, my dear, and God bless you!"

His hand tightened on hers. "Is that all you're going to give me?"

"Yes. You said when I came you wanted me to come freely. Let us wait for that—darling."

Chapter Eleven

The Dark Canopy of the Night

In the meantime there was Peter, arriving at Palm Springs and being met by his Mexican man, Miguel. Miguel had many duties. He drove the car, acted informally as butler, valeted Peter when he needed it, and managed the other Mexicans who cooked and waited and washed and planted and did all the other things which kept the Chilton Ranch going. Being head man was Miguel's vocation. His avocation was doing personal things for a somewhat exacting master, yet one who was his delight. Peter had to have a listener, and, failing anyone else, he poured out his triumphs, his disappointments, his praises, his complaints to Miguel, and Miguel adored it.

Today Peter's volubility was excessive.

"I've brought loads of things from Los Angeles," he said. "I shall be taking some of them to Miss Merryman. I'll go home, have a bath, and ride over later to see her. Tomorrow you can put the bigger boxes in the station wagon and deliver them. I shall be writing like mad until twelve. I've had such weeks as never were, Miguel. And I've brought back a contract in my pocket for an old story and a new one to be screened every year."

Miguel, who knew little about screen contracts, but a great deal about movies, said eagerly, "How soon shall I see them?"

"The first one in a few months. And I've got such a girl for them!"

Miguel, who knew Cecily and liked her, said jealously, "Got a girl?"

"Oh, not for myself. For my picture!" And Peter went on and on. He was glad to get back to Miguel, glad to get back to the desert, glad to get back to Cissy. He had had a grand time, but he was glad to get back. He had a new plot in his mind. He'd tell it to Cecily tonight, they'd ride out under the stars, and there would be the desert stretched out before him, the desert which was to be the background of his new book and picture. She had not written of late and he had wondered at her silence. Perhaps she was sulking because he had stayed so long away from her. But it would be easy enough to explain, and bring her back to him.

Peter talked to Miguel as he rode home. He talked in his bath which Miguel had drawn for him, and he talked while Miguel got out the gay Mexican riding-clothes, the broad hat, the high boots. He talked while he ate his dinner, which Miguel served, having changed into his white linen jacket and by that act having transformed himself from a valet into a butler.

And when dinner was over, Miguel brought Peter's horse and fastened securely to the saddle three boxes which Peter said must go with him tonight. "I can leave all the other things, Miguel, but these I must take at once."

In one of the boxes was a pink camellia for Cissy's hair, in another the *marrons glacés* that she loved, in another the delicate perfume with which he kept her

supplied.

And then, when all was ready, as Miguel thought, Peter stopped for more conversation. "By the way, have you seen Miss Merryman lately?"

Miguel had not. Her house was so far away.

"Not so far for me as for you, Miguel," and Peter rode on, laughing.

The stars were out, and the great world was still and serene under the dark canopy of the night. "The dark canopy of the night" was Peter's poetic way of putting it. He set beauty always to words. Cecily might thrill to the loveliness of Nature, but it was Peter who found phrases to fit it. He found phrases now. His next book should have in it some of this! A man riding alone on the desert, laden with largesse for the woman who loved him. It would be like something out of Keats.

It will be noted that Peter thought *for the woman who loved him*. He was so sure of Cissy. He was, on the other hand, not so sure of himself. But why be sure? Why, indeed, be definite about anything?

It was enough that Cissy would be there to welcome him, to listen while he sat at her feet and poured out the thoughts that were teeming in his brain. Of the new contract with Hollywood, with his publishers—everything. Of the new glamour girl they were giving him for his latest screen production. He might not tell her all about the new glamour girl, but such reservations as he made would be only to save her feelings. That was the lovely thing about Cissy—she accepted what he cared to tell her, never asked questions, never complained.

And tomorrow Miguel would ride over and bring with him the things Peter had purchased in a heavenly pilgrimage through the markets—the new cheeses with the smoky flavor, the preserved fruits, "translucent"—that was another word of Keats's.

And so Peter came to the adobe hut to find it still and silent under the moon. There was no light in the windows and the door was shut. Perhaps Cissy had gone to bed. Perhaps he should have telephoned. Perhaps—

But he had wanted to surprise her!

With much jingling of harness, he jumped from his horse and knocked at the door. There was no answer, and he went around to the back, to discover that the kitchen door was open and the little room was warm with the glow of a fire over which an iron pot was hung. And, sitting by the fire, weaving a basket, was Inez—making a wonderful spot of color in her red dress which repeated the note of the red peppers which hung from the rafters and the red tiles on the floor.

Peter said, "Hello, Inez. Where's Miss Cissy?"

Inez rose and came forward. "She's gone away."

"Gone away? Where?"

"She tells you in her letter. I have it here." And Inez, producing it from a capacious pocket, said, "You can sit down here and read it."

Peter took the note from her. The light was poor, for the hut had no gas or electricity, and Inez in the kitchen burned fat candles of her own making.

And by that poor light Peter read what Cissy had to say to him. He couldn't, of course, believe his eyes.

It was incredible that she should be putting herself out of his life. Just when he needed her most! Just when the new book was in the offing and he must have her to listen while he read.

He crushed the letter in his hand. "How long has she been gone, Inez?"

"Ten days."

"You have her address?"

Inez shook her head. "No. She said, if there was anything, I could write to her lawyer in Los Angeles."

"Did she say when she was coming back?"

"She said, 'Not soon.' I am to stay here and keep the house. She'll pay me wages, but I need little. There's the garden, and I sell baskets."

Peter, in a daze, said, "Well, I must be going."

He gave the box of *marrons* to Inez, but took back with him the perfume and the camellia. Heaven only knew what he would do with them! Heaven only knew what he would do with anything!

Riding back now under the stars, he had a feeling of panic. He had been so sure. So sure that no matter how long he stayed away, Cecily would be waiting. No matter how long he delayed in deciding their future, she would always acquiesce. And now she had taken things into her own hands and left him! Left him—Peter! Of course she didn't mean it. The whole thing was simply a woman's way of waking a man up to what she meant to him. He hadn't thought Cecily was like that. He must tell her when he saw her how disappointing it was to find her like other women.

For, of course, he would see her. He'd get her ad-

dress from that lawyer and write to her, or, better, go after her. And bring her back. He'd even ask her to marry him! Though this was no time to be thinking of matrimony, with that glamorous screen star making something of a personal matter of it and likely to withdraw from the cast if he brought a wife on the scene.

Returning to his ranch, he said to the astonished Miguel, "Miss Merryman is away. You needn't take the things over tomorrow." He vouchsafed no further explanation.

He went into the house carrying his box with its camellia and the flagon of perfume. Bored and disgruntled, he threw himself down on a chair to think things over. On the table beside him was a large photograph of Cecily, taken in New Orleans. The publicity department had included her in the group from Hollywood of whom they had taken pictures on the night of the ball. Cecily wore the silver dress which Peter had given her and her crown of camellias. She had written across the picture when Peter had asked for it, *Always yours, Cissy.*

Well, *always* meant *always.* He'd tell her that.

The next day he went to Los Angeles. The camellia faded in the box where he had left it, and Ramona, Miguel's wife, who helped with the housework, poured the perfume out of the flagon into another bottle and refilled the flagon with water. She felt sure that Mr. Peter would never notice that the bottle had been opened. He might not even notice if she carried off the flagon to her own room, which she finally did.

Cissy's lawyer had no address to give Peter. "I as-

sure you I would let you have it, Mr. Chilton, but her instructions were that no one—no one—"

Peter said, "There are ways, of course, to get her address, and it is very important that I reach her. I don't like the position in which I am placed, and I'm sure Miss Merryman would not have it so."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, well," said Peter, and flung himself away in a fury.

He went back to his ranch and thought about it, and the more he thought, the more certain he was that through Inez he could get the address. He knew Inez's devotion and integrity. No bribe would induce her to play traitor to her beloved mistress. But there were ways!

Peter lay awake all night plotting it as he would plot one of his stories, and the next morning he rode over to the adobe hut to see Inez. The sky was blue as he rode and hope was in the air. Inez sat outdoors weaving her basket. To the right and left of her the ground was red with drying peppers. Her head was bare, her hair blue-black under the sun.

Peter, dismounting, said, "Look here, Inez! Aren't you lonely?"

"Oh, not so much."

"But you're happier when Miss Cissy is here?"

Inez's eyes were lighted up. "Oh, much happier."

"Then help me bring her back."

Peter was a striking figure as he stood leaning against his horse, and he knew that in Inez's eyes he was glamorous. "Help me bring her back," he repeated.

Inez shook her head. "She won't come."

"Yes, she will if she knows what I want. She went away because I stayed too long and it made her unhappy. But now, if she will come, I'll never leave her. We'll be married, Inez, and you shall bake a cake for our wedding."

Inez looked up from her weaving. "A bride's cake?"

"Yes. One with white frosting. No one makes such brides' cakes as you, and you know it."

Inez did know it. Baking cakes, especially brides' cakes, was a ritual. People from all about begged her to bake a cake for them. Young Mexican girls felt that with one of Inez's cakes their marriage would begin auspiciously. And Inez loved not only to make cake, but to eat it.

She said uncertainly, "But she told me not to tell you."

"How could she know what was in my heart, Inez? But you know it."

Inez, impressed by his melodrama, and sympathetic, dug down in her bag and produced the address:

c/o Mrs. Blair Marburg
Gaywood-on-the-Chesapeake
Maryland

Peter's excitement was intense. "You shall dance at the wedding, Inez."

All the way home the hoofbeats of his horse seemed to make the rhythm: *Wedding! Wedding!*

There was another word—matrimony! Hollywood said that matrimony for a rising young author was a mistake.

But if there was no other way to get Cecily back—?

Chapter Twelve

I'm Bored to Death

In the weeks that followed, the old house at Gaywood became a field of battle. It was not a fight in the open. It was, rather, one of hidden forces, with no sign of disturbance on the surface.

From the moment Blair went forth from beneath his mother's roof, Cecily had registered a vow that some day she would have him back in his rightful place. She did not know how she was to do it. She knew only that it was with Mark Keating she would have to reckon. If she could break through the wall he had built around Mrs. Marburg, she could, she felt sure, bring about a more healthy state of affairs. It would, moreover, be a slow process. She must find by what hypnotic methods Mark had gained ascendancy. She must discover if, beneath the crust of arrogance, there might not be something of softness and kindliness in Mrs. Marburg's nature. She must learn who in that great household were on Blair's side and who on his mother's, and whether anyone was in league with Mark. Of Mrs. Donovan's loyalty to Blair and of Mazie's, she was convinced. Brewster, also, and Cook, and Mike, the chauffeur, worshipped Blair. They gave faithful service to Mrs. Marburg, but they feared and dreaded Mark.

It was not long before it became apparent that Mark had an ally in the maid, Alice; that she carried

tales to him of all that went on in Mrs. Marburg's rooms—tales about Mazie and Mrs. Donovan, but, more than all, tales about Cecily. Had Cecily known that Alice saw in her a possible rival for Mark's affections, it might have given her a key to the maid's antagonism. But she did not know. She was aware only that Mark knew things which could have come to him by no other than a grapevine route.

Of one thing she was sure. Mrs. Marburg was suffering acutely from boredom. Mark did his best to relieve the monotony of her existence. He spent hours with her, reading aloud, playing backgammon, motoring on pleasant afternoons, inducing her at times to exchange the grandeurs of the limousine for the intimacy and companionship of his own small car. These things were well enough in their way, but they failed to satisfy the needs of the brilliant and beautiful woman, once a belle and still able to charm. For months Mrs. Marburg had shut herself away from social activities. She entertained only at long intervals, saw her friends rarely, kept away from shops and theaters, yielding always to Mark's dictum, "You are not equal to it, dear lady."

Only by providing counter-attractions could Cecily hope to break Mark's strangle hold. The invalid must be led into new paths. She must be shown vistas beyond the narrow limits of the sickroom. She must be made aware of the gayer and lighter aspects of the modern scene. She must, in other words, be waked to all that life might mean to her if she would drift with the tide instead of against it.

So, analyzing, experimenting, advancing, retreating,

there came a morning when Cecily played her first trump card in the game with Mark. One of her duties was the reading of the daily papers. These readings had, hitherto, been highly selective. Mrs. Marburg had wanted to hear only the editorials, the commentators, the political news. All else, she held, was wasted print, fit only for people of low intelligence.

But on that particular morning, Cecily, casually turning to a page of advertising, showed Mrs. Marburg a hat. It was a small hat of the latest mode. It had a floating veil and an air of belonging to someone like Queen Alexandra.

Mrs. Marburg, condescending to look at it, said, "Veils are always becoming," and told when she had worn them.

The next day Cecily brought in a fashion magazine, one of the streamlined kind with illustrations whose color and form are as appealing to the eye as caviar to the palate.

Here was another hat that Cecily wanted Mrs. Marburg to see. And there were those quaint gowns which went back to *Godey's Lady's Book* for inspiration. There were, too, the amazing advertisements.

Mrs. Marburg found herself looking with Cecily, not only at hats and dresses, but at shoes and perfumes, at lipsticks and rouge. There was an arresting picture of the Duchess of Windsor which Mrs. Marburg studied with interest. She had, she told Cecily, worn her hair like that when she was a young beauty in Baltimore.

"There's a miniature my husband had made of me. You'll find it in my desk."

When Cecily brought the velvet case, Mrs. Marburg opened it. "I was twenty," she said, "when that was painted. I had been married a year, and my husband gave me those pearls as an anniversary present."

The beauty of the woman in the picture was breathtaking. Her hair was red-gold, her eyes a deep violet. Her neck and shoulders, above the pale blue of her low-cut gown, showed white and flawless.

Cecily said, "How lovely you are!"

Mrs. Marburg sighed. "There's little loveliness left."

Cecily, studying the portrait, said, "You should always wear blue."

"Nonsense. I'm an old woman."

"It's not nonsense," Cecily said with earnestness, "and you're not an old woman."

"I've worn only black since my husband died."

"But now? Why don't you let me order an evening gown like this one sent down from Baltimore and see how you look in it?"

"Where would I wear it?"

"You might give a party."

"Surely you must know, Miss Merryman, that I am not strong enough for social affairs."

"But Brewster and Mrs. Donovan and I could arrange everything. All you would have to do would be to greet your guests and look beautiful."

Mrs. Marburg's voice was suddenly austere. "Please, Miss Merryman!" And that seemed, at the moment, the end of it.

But it was not the end.

Cecily had planted a seed in Mrs. Marburg's mind which came later to flowering. For the invalid, lying

back on her pillows with her eyes closed, began to see herself in imagination as young and lovely in blue, with her hair worn in the style of the Duchess of Windsor. There was a beauty shop in Baltimore where she had gone in those early days and from which she had come forth radiant as a star. She wondered if, she should go now to that shop, they would reveal remnants of that loveliness, achieve rejuvenation?

She decided to talk it over with Cecily Merryman. She liked talking with Cecily. It was amazing the effect of vividness and vitality which the child imparted to everything she did or said. Mrs. Marburg had found herself of late looking forward eagerly to the things which Cecily had to tell her—the winter gulls had come into the Bay and would Mrs. Marburg come to the window and see them? One of the barn cats had five kittens, and old Crofts, the stableman, had named them after the Dionne quintuplets. There was a new colt, a darling, and she was going to call it Astra because of the star on its forehead. She had given Cook the recipe used by her own Mexican cook for chili, and would Mrs. Marburg like a bit for her lunch?

And now this morning the talk was about clothes.

"My dear, I've been wondering if a trip to Baltimore would tire me too much? There's a beauty shop on Charles Street. I'd like to see what could be done with my hair. Alice and Mazie do their best, but their best is far from what it should be."

"It would be wonderful, Mrs. Marburg."

"When the doctor comes, I'll ask him what he thinks."

Cecily protested. "Why ask him? Why not run

away for a day? Make an adventure of it?"

"An adventure?"

"Yes. Mother and I were always having adventures. Doing unexpected things."

"Mark Keating would think I was crazy."

"Why should he know?"

Mrs. Marburg froze suddenly. "I see no reason why we should keep it from him."

Yet, when Mark came in that afternoon, she made her statement an affirmative. "I'm going up to town tomorrow."

"To town? But why?"

"To a beauty shop."

"Dear lady, what do you need of beauty aids?"

"What every woman needs—to look her best."

He shook his head. "You're always lovely to me, and if you go to Baltimore, it will be absolutely with my disapproval. I dare not think what might happen—in this cold weather and with influenza so epidemic—"

And so Mrs. Marburg stayed at home. But Cecily did not give up hope.

"Why not let me bring some dresses down to you—and give a party on Christmas Eve?"

"What would a Christmas party be without Blair?"

"Ask him to come."

"And put pride in my pocket? No, my dear. I'm not ready for that."

"But you might call it a truce, like the armies who lay down their guns on Christmas Day. You wouldn't want your son to miss his Christmas tree and turkey, would you, just because he is trying to earn a living?"

It was a daring thing to say, but Mrs. Marburg was not offended.

"You have a quaint way of putting things," she said and laughed.

Cecily laughed with her and, striking while the iron was hot, suggested, "Why not write now?"

"I'll ask him," Mrs. Marburg said, "but he'll probably be obstinate and not come."

Cecily knew that Blair would come at the drop of a hat if he were invited. But there was still Mark Keating to reckon with. Mrs. Marburg insisted that she must tell him.

"I'm sure he won't approve of my having Blair. He says that Blair upsets and excites me. And so he does."

"Why," Cecily said slowly, "should anybody tell you what you should do? The matter is between yourself and your son."

"A son like mine," said Mrs. Marburg bitterly, "lets everything come between us."

She spoke, however, to Mark about it. "I'm thinking of asking Blair here for a Christmas party."

He said sharply, "What made you think of that? It will only stir things up."

Mrs. Marburg said unexpectedly, "I want to stir things up. I'm bored to death, Mark, with lying in bed and doing nothing."

He said slowly, "I seem to see Miss Merryman's finger in this. Did she suggest it?"

"I think she did."

"Does it occur to you—?" He hesitated.

She demanded, "What are you trying to say?"

"That she may want to get Blair here. He's attrac-

tive, and to a girl in her position—"

"Nonsense. She isn't that kind. And even if she were, Blair's got his mind on Gypsy Tyson."

But Blair, in Baltimore, was not thinking of Gypsy. To be sure, he saw her now and then. But he refused most of her invitations. "I'm a working man," he would tell her. "I've neither the time nor the money for play."

Gypsy did not, of course, believe him. His mother had money. Blair would inherit it, and he'd grow tired some day of fooling around with a job. And anyhow, she loved him. And there was no other girl. But of this last she was not so sure after that day when Cecily came up to Baltimore.

Blair had not known Cecily was coming. When his office telephone rang and he answered it, he was unprepared for the wave of warmth and happiness which swept over him as he heard Cecily's voice.

"I'm in town, Blair, and I wondered if we might have lunch together."

"You—angel!"

"There are things I want to tell you—about your mother."

"There are things I want to tell you, sweet child, but not about my mother."

He told her he would be waiting at the old and honorable and delectable Women's Exchange on Charles Street. She had motored up, she had explained, in the Gaywood limousine to do some shopping. Mike would take the car to a garage and she would meet it there later.

And so it happened that when she came down the

narrow street she seemed to light the snowy world for her lover.

Under his ardent eyes, she managed to say, "Do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"My hat. I just bought it."

"It's perfect." He had her hand in his. "Oh, Mélisande! Mélisande! If you could know how I have wanted you!"

"Your letters told me."

"Did they? Yours were—stingy."

They entered the Exchange and sat at a small table by the window. While Blair ordered, the people at the other tables looked at Cecily—at the gold of her hair under the little black hat with its wisp of veil, at the clear blue of her eyes, the white of her skin. Baltimore had many beauties, had always had them, but here was an outsider who was more than a match for those Baltimore belles. Many of the gazers knew Blair, but they wondered about the girl. Some of them wondered enough to tell Gypsy about it. They did not know, they told her, who the girl might be.

But Gypsy knew!

Blair and Cecily ate with hearty appetites. They ate chicken salad and Virginia ham and hot rolls and Lady Baltimore cake, and drank cups and cups of delicious coffee.

And as they ate and drank, Cecily told Blair about his mother. "If she asks you to come down for a Christmas party, will you do it?"

"I'll be there with bells on!"

She told him of her idea of a truce, and then went

on to explain: "Your mother's getting interested in things—other things besides Mark and her health. I'm up here today trying to buy clothes for her, and hats. I'm taking back a dozen boxes."

He listened for a time, then broke in: "Darling, the thing I want to talk about is not my mother but you, and whether you have missed me."

"Suppose I should say I haven't?"

"I wouldn't believe you. Your eyes keep telling me how glad you are, even if your lips won't say it."

When at last they left the tearoom, light flakes of snow were falling. Blair had brought an umbrella and held it over himself and Cecily.

"I have something," he said, "that I want to show you."

The old church which had been the scene of the Tyson wedding was not far away, and it was there that he took her. Candles were lighted on the altar, and the window with the girl in white was illumined.

Together they stood and looked at her, then Blair drew Cecily into one of the pews and knelt beside her. "You're a part of all this to me, darling. I've never felt this way about any other woman. It's the way I want to feel about my wife."

He had her hand in his and he felt it tremble. Then for a long time there was silence.

Out in the world again, they talked of their future. "Why not marry me tomorrow, Mélisande?"

"Your mother would never forgive me."

"Do you think I care?"

"But I do. Things aren't all her fault, and if we could only get rid of Mark Keating—!"

He said gloomily. "When you get rid of Mark, the world will get rid of the devil."

"Waiting won't hurt us," she said. "Somehow I feel it's more wonderful this way—to grow into each other's hearts."

"How sweet you are!"

"Am I?"

"Yes. Promise me that nothing will ever come between us?"

"I promise."

"Sometimes—I'm afraid!"

"Why should you be?"

"Because things never seem to turn out right for me. Perhaps its my fault. I don't know. I only know I love you, Mélisande."

The snow fell in a veil around them, the umbrella shut them in. He said, "Look at me, darling."

She lifted her face to his and his lips were warm on her lips.

He said, in a moved voice, "That's the sign and seal of it all, my sweet!"

And Cecily said, "Yes."

Chapter Thirteen

He Was Lunching With a Woman

Cecily, going to the garage where Mike waited with the car, found Mark Keating lounging against the cushions. He hopped out at once when he saw her.

"You won't mind my riding back with you?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"Mrs. Marburg said you had motored to Baltimore on a shopping expedition, so as Crofts was coming up in the station wagon for supplies I rode with him."

"Did Mrs. Marburg know you were coming?"

"No. Why should she? She's having her masseuse this afternoon, and I'll be back before she misses me."

"It sounds somewhat clandestine," Cecily said. "And I'm still wondering how you found me."

"Mike usually parks in this garage, so I waited around."

"I see."

She entered the car, Mike spread the rug over her knees, and they were off through the white world which grew darker and darker as they left the city behind them.

It was not until they reached the open road that Mark said, "So you lunched with Blair!"

Startled, she managed to say casually, "It was a good lunch—Lady Baltimore cake, and everything."

His laugh was not pleasant. "I wonder what Mrs. Marburg would think if she knew."

"Do you mean to tell her?"

"Not yet. But I confess I'm much disappointed to find you on such terms of intimacy with Blair. I had suspected it from the letters which came. Of late I have had Brewster hand the mail to me for distribution. I had thought I could count on your loyalty to Mrs. Marburg, and now I find you having what seems to be an under-the-rose relationship with her son. Or is it only one of those casual affairs of Blair's? For I must tell you, Miss Merryman, what perhaps you do not know—that he is here today and gone tomorrow with women. If he marries anybody, it will be Gypsy Tyson."

"If he marries anybody, it will be the woman he wants—whether it is Gypsy Tyson or someone else."

"Whoever marries him will be bitterly disappointed. Blair is unstable, adolescent. And if it is his money you're thinking about, I think I can safely promise that Mrs. Marburg will see to it that he has no power to squander the estate."

Cecily was frozen into silence. She dared not strike back. Too much was at stake.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, "that you think so meanly of me as to believe I would marry any man for his money."

"Money will buy anything," Mark said moodily. "You're no exception, though you may think you are. All the women fall for Blair. It has always been like that. There was a girl at college. I liked her a lot. Then she met Blair, and I lost her. Not that he cared for her! She was just another girl to him. Blair has always played around like a young prince, while I've

been no more to him than a beggar on the streets."

He launched forth then into the story of his life. He had been a poor boy living with a rich uncle who had educated him, and had then died without leaving him a penny. "He taught me to like luxury, and then set me adrift. So after I left college, I came here with Blair, and I've had to dance to his tune ever since."

"It seems to me that it's your tune to which Blair dances."

His laugh was not good to hear. "Well, in this world we have to fight for what we get. There's no reason why I should eat in the terrace dining-room while Blair dines in state and elegance. Some day I want a high seat in the synagogue, and I'll miss my guess if I don't get it." His voice went on in a blatant, bragging chronicle.

In a way, Cecily felt sorry for him. Yet she knew intuitively that his failure to sway level with normal living had not been because of his environment, nor was it the fault of others. It was, rather, something fundamental. Rich or poor, under any circumstances, with any background, Mark Keating would be cheap and shrewd and self-seeking. Against his well-planned machinations, a boy like Blair had had little chance.

Swinging him away at last from the recital of his woes, she asked questions about this and that—politics, the books he read, the plays he liked. She found him well-informed, with a knowledge of the classics and a rather exact knowledge of the modern arts. He had a facile wit, a sharp tongue, and a little bag of gossip about Washington affairs, both political and private.

She was glad when finally they saw the lights of

Gaywood. She wanted to be rid of Mark, to go back in imagination to those moments with Blair when they had walked together in the snow.

But Mark was not done with her, for, as the great car slid up to the door, he said, "You're a clever woman. You got me to talking about myself, and not about you and Blair. I like your cleverness, but let me tell you this, Miss Merryman—that those who are not with me are against me. You understand that, don't you?"

"I think you have made it very plain."

"No hard feelings?"

"A paid companion has no right to feel, has she, Mr. Keating? She must simply obey orders."

Going at once to her room and dressing hastily for dinner, Cecily reviewed her conversation with Mark. Here, indeed, was conflict, and the need, more than ever, for diplomacy. Mark must not be made aware of open opposition. She must seem to acquiesce, even while she plotted against him.

Later, at the table, Mark was in an affable mood. He had put Miss Merryman in her place. Had she not said, "A companion must obey orders"? He had tamed her, he told himself, and she was worth taming.

He remarked as the dessert came on, "I saw Mrs. Marburg for a few moments before dinner. She has asked me to come to her room tonight to see what you brought in the boxes from Baltimore."

"I really think," Cecily said, "it would be better if we waited until morning."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Marburg might find it tiring."

"She says not. So I'm afraid the fashion show will have to go on." Mark was leaning back in his chair and enjoying the situation. It was evident that Miss Merryman didn't want him to be present at the showing. Well, whether she liked it or not, he intended to be there.

His complacency was somewhat disturbed when, after dinner, Alice asked if she might see him for a moment.

He took her into his office. "What do you want?"

"I thought we were going out tonight."

"That's off, Alice. Mrs. Marburg wants me."

"So I heard you tell Miss Merryman. And what, may I ask you, am I going to do with my evening? Sit around and twiddle my thumbs?"

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped, Alice."

"It can be helped, or I'll be getting out of here. I'm fed up on this place. As soon as Christmas is over and I've got the tips and presents, I'm going back to town."

"But you can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"What would I do without you?"

"You've done without me lately. Going up to Baltimore and everything. Like today, with Miss Merryman."

"I went to Baltimore today because I wanted to check up on certain things. Miss Merryman has been getting letters lately from Blair Marburg, and today she met him."

Alice stared. "Met him? In Baltimore?"

"Where else?"

"So you were spying?"

"Do you like me less for that, Alice?"

Her face showed a reluctant admiration. "I like you better, if you want to know it. And if you're clever enough to get her out of here—"

"I'm clever enough for anything. Just put your faith in me, Alice, and you'll find yourself some day on easy street."

In the meantime Cecily, in Mrs. Donovan's rooms, was airing her grievances. "Mark followed me to Baltimore and came back in the car with me. He told me frankly that he wanted me to co-operate with him in keeping Blair away from his mother. If I don't co-operate, he'll get Mrs. Marburg to send me away. I don't know what to do. But I'm not going to desert the ship, Mrs. Donovan, and he needn't think he can make me. I may have to seem to play his game until I get Mrs. Marburg's confidence. And get it I will!"

"You've done a lot, my dear, since you came, to change her. All the servants are talking about the interest she's taking in things."

"She's naturally gracious and kind," Cecily said, "but Mark plays on her jealousies and suspicions and arouses the evil that's in her."

"The evil is not in her, but in Mark," said wise Mrs. Donovan. "He has the stronger will, and she'll never get rid of him until Blair kicks him out of the house."

"But the house doesn't belong to Blair."

"His mother would make him master here if he would play the part. The thing she adored in her husband was his dominant spirit. He was a tyrant, but she liked it."

"And you think that Blair—could?"

"I'm sure of it. He has let things drift too long."

"I'll tell him that," Cecily said. "I saw him today in Baltimore. He has promised, if his mother will ask him, to come down for the Christmas party."

Mrs. Donovan's voice showed her astonishment. "A Christmas party? Do you mean she's going to have one?"

"Yes—unless Mark gets in some of his fine work and changes our plans."

Mrs. Donovan smiled at her. "You're a wonder, my dear. Well, good luck, and God be with you."

Cecily, going along the hall, met Brewster. "Were the things I brought from Baltimore taken to Mrs. Marburg's rooms?"

"Yes, Miss Merryman. Mazie and Alice are opening the boxes and putting the dresses on hangers, as you told them."

"Thank you, Brewster."

And Cecily went on to come presently to Mrs. Marburg's sitting-room, where Mark lounged in a big chair by the fireplace. He rose as Cecily entered.

"We're all set for the fashion show."

Cecily, ignoring him, spoke to Mrs. Marburg. "You're sure you're not too tired?"

"Not in the least. Mark suggests that I try on some of the dresses."

"Tonight?"

"Why not? Mark can be audience."

Mrs. Marburg was lighted up as Cecily had never seen her. Her eyes swept the racks on which were hung the dresses and wraps and hats that Mazie and Alice had taken from the boxes.

"You've chosen lovely things, Miss Merryman."

"You can make your selection," Cecily assured her, "and the others will go back to the shops."

Mark broke in with "But, dear lady, where will you wear them?"

"I told you, didn't I, yesterday, that I'm tired of staying in bed? I want to be up and about, and getting into things again. And if I get into things, I must have clothes to wear."

"It might be well to go slowly."

"Don't discourage me," she said wistfully. "You see," she went on, "I want to give a Christmas party and wear the blue dress that Miss Merryman brought for me."

"A party?" incredulously. "A big one?"

"Very big," eagerly, "with lots of guests, and Blair coming down from Baltimore."

For a moment the room was very still. Alice and Mazie in the background stopped the folding of tissue paper lest they should lose a word of what Mark might say. Cecily, balancing a lovely hat on her forefinger, and apparently composed, felt her heart pounding.

Mark's words fell into silence, like shots from a rifle. "You mean you've asked Blair?"

"I wrote him yesterday."

"I'm afraid you'll be sorry."

"Why should I be?"

"Well, there are things I could tell you—" His eyes were on Cecily. Yet even as she braced herself for what might come, he laughed. "Why tell things that might upset you? You know your son, and the worry you've had with him. And Christmas comes but once

a year! So why protest against your party?"

"But you don't approve?"

"Frankly, no!'

The light was gone from Mrs. Marburg's eyes. "Perhaps I should have consulted you," she faltered.

"It might have saved you some difficulties. But let's not talk any more about unpleasant things. I want to see you in that blue dress."

The blue dress was a heavenly thing—all chiffon and feathery ostrich.

Cecily, holding it up, said, "It's perfect, isn't it?"

Mrs. Marburg was dubious. "It's too youthful for me."

Mark interposed, "You'll add youth to it." He was expansive, smiling. He had brought Mrs. Marburg to her knees and had checkmated Cecily. What more, he asked himself, could he want?

Cecily, in the bedroom with Mazie and Alice, got Mrs. Marburg into the blue dress, did her hair in the Duchess of Windsor fashion, unlocked the jewel box and took therefrom a great sapphire and diamond clip and bracelet, and, at the last, put around her shoulders a wrap of blue and silver.

"You're to take off the wrap," Cecily instructed her, "after you have shown yourself in it. It's all so perfect, Mrs. Marburg. You look like a queen."

She tried to speak with lightness, but she felt desperate, defeated. Mark had shown his power, and this evening, which Cecily had hoped might be spent in a purely feminine atmosphere, was spoiled by his intrusion.

Rising from his chair as Mrs. Marburg entered the

sitting-room, Mark said, "She walks in beauty like the night." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Cecily shivered. So that was that. Mark paying homage to Mrs. Marburg, feeding her vanity, drawing her to him with hooks of steel. Yet, was she drawn to him?

For Mrs. Marburg turned suddenly away. "I feel foolish," she said, "in all this finery. Run along, Mark, and I'll have Mazie put me to bed. Then Miss Merryman can sit by me and tell me what she did in town."

Mark's smile was not pleasant. "I hope she tells you everything she did in town. Was all your time spent in the shops, Miss Merryman?"

There were sparks in Cecily's eyes. "I took a walk up Charles Street and lunched with a friend."

Mrs. Marburg said, "I didn't know you had any friends in Baltimore."

"Yes. It was a delicious lunch at the Women's Exchange. We had Lady Baltimore cake, and I ordered one put up for you, with some cookies and beaten biscuit. I thought you might like them with your lunch tomorrow."

"I want them right now," said Mrs. Marburg unexpectedly. "Alice can go down and get them, and Mark can pour us a glass of sherry. Lady Baltimore cake and sherry is a grand combination."

Mazie said, with some trepidation, "But do you think you should, Mrs. Marburg?"

"Should what?" tartly. "Eat Lady Baltimore cake or drink sherry? It's my business, not yours, Mazie. And now run along and get the cake."

While Mazie was away, Mrs. Marburg resurrected

memories of the Women's Exchange. "I used to take Blair there for lunch when he was at Gilman. We'd have chicken salad and Virginia ham and ice cream, and everything. We had great fun, and Blair loved it."

Mark, getting out the bottle of sherry from Mrs. Marburg's tiny buffet, said over his shoulder, "The last time I saw Blair at the Women's Exchange, he was lunching with a woman."

"What woman?"

"Well—" Mark said, and held the rest of his sentence suspended for a moment. "It might have been Gypsy Tyson. It's hard to tell who these women are in the new hats. And I was looking at her through a window."

Chapter Fourteen

Keep Your Mouth Shut, My Girl

In reply to his mother's invitation, Blair wrote that he would come to the Christmas party. The guest list expanded as Mrs. Marburg summed up her social obligations. There would be a dinner first with a special group, and after dinner, more guests, the tree, dancing, and a midnight supper.

Everybody in the house was busy. Cecily found herself being constantly teamed with Mark in the working-out of plans—place cards, favors, presents for everybody: plutocrats and poor relations, dowagers and débutantes, tradesfolk and servants. Cecily had never dreamed of such orgies of spending.

"Charge it. Charge it," Mrs. Marburg would say when Cecily protested. "There's money enough, isn't there, Mark?"

"Money enough for what, Mrs. Marburg?"

"For everything."

"Of course, dear lady."

But there wasn't money enough, as Cecily was to learn in a roundabout way. It all came about through Mickey, the cat. Cecily had followed him one day through the snow from the house to the stables, and they had climbed the stairs to the loft together. Cecily came there often to visit the mother cat and have a look at the kittens.

"Aren't they darlings?" she said now to Mickey, but

Mickey was not so sure. The mother cat's temper in these days was unpredictable. He removed himself therefore to his pet mouse hole and became absorbed in other things.

Outside the snow was falling and the world was hushed. In the loft was dimness and fragrance. Cecily, glad to be away from the busyness of the house, leaned against a great mound of sweet hay and, with the kittens in her lap and the mother cat stretched beside her, rested and relaxed. She was half asleep when she heard voices. Mark Keating was in the room below, with Alice.

Alice was saying, "You said you'd give me a ring for Christmas."

"You'll get it, but not at Christmas. I haven't the money at the moment. The old lady is spending so much."

"Why should her spending have anything to do with it? You have your salary, and it's a big one."

"Not so big. She's rather stingy about salaries. But I'm doing some investing for her. I'll get my share of the profits, but right now I don't dare hold her back from spending. She might ask questions."

"Questions about what?"

"Oh, business matters. But don't bother your head about it. I'll make a lot of money for her, and plenty for myself. So keep your mouth shut, my girl, and you'll get your ring."

Alice was not satisfied. "A ring in the hand is worth two in the bush," she told him.

"Don't you trust me?" sharply.

"Why should I?"

"Because I can do more for you than anyone you are ever likely to meet. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, but you don't act as if you cared a lot."

"Don't I? Well, I'll show you—"

He stopped suddenly, for with much stamping of snow from his feet, old Crofts came in, and Cecily heard him say, "This is no place for you, Alice."

"I brought Mr. Keating to see the kittens."

"You'd best keep out of the loft," Crofts said gruffly.

Mark said, "Run along, Alice," and when she was gone, he spoke to Crofts. "You know better than to go around talking of things you see. It's as much as your job is worth."

"I've had my job," said old Crofts, "for twenty years, and I shall say what I please."

"Very well! It's your funeral," said Mark, and went away.

Cecily, coming down the loft stairs, said, "Don't worry, Crofts. I heard what he said."

"I carry no tales, Miss Merryman. And as for that Alice, the only use she has for kittens is to drown 'em."

"Well," Cecily said, "I came to have a look at them, and then Alice came, and Mr. Keating. I didn't dare show myself."

"He asked me to keep my mouth shut," old Crofts said, "but you don't have to keep yours shut, Miss, and perhaps they'll listen to you up at the house."

Cecily knew they would not listen. She wrote to B'air that night: *I couldn't help hearing what was said, and I'm glad I did. I'm sure you and Joshua Stabler ought to know about it.*

Blair wrote back: *Joshua says we can't do a thing until we get Mother's consent. And she won't believe a word against Mark. Even if you should go to her and tell her what you know, Mark would probably convince her that you were lying.*

It was not easy in the days that followed for Cecily to work in such close association with Mark. But he had to be consulted about all arrangements, and his ideas were often valuable. His sketches on the place cards were wittily conceived and beautifully done, and his ideas for the arrangement of the dinner table surpassed anything the florist could have possibly suggested. There was to be in the center a great tree of red roses, with gold streamers coming down from the ceiling to match the gilt candelabra, and the gold place plates which had been one of Mrs. Marburg's wedding presents. The Christmas tree, too, was in gold and red.

Cecily, admitting the beauty, thought it too flamboyant. She protested, "I'd rather have silver and stars."

"Why?" Mark asked. "'Aren't we a bit pagan, all of us? Why use outworn symbols?"

But they were not outworn symbols to Cecily and little Mrs. Donovan and Brewster. Not even to Mike and old Crofts. They packed and delivered baskets to the poor on Christmas Eve, and paid for them out of their own pockets.

And so time went rapidly, and Christmas was only a week away.

Mrs. Marburg talked constantly of Blair's coming. "I hope he won't think because I asked him here that I approve of his working for Joshua."

"Why should you disapprove?"

"Because I know he is doing it to spite me."

"Oh, surely you can't believe that!"

"Why can't I? And Mark agrees with me."

Cecily let it go at that. Mrs. Marburg was in these days irritable and exacting. Mark's influence was again in the ascendant. Fearing as he must, if Blair came upon the scene, a possible reconciliation between mother and son, he redoubled his efforts to bring Mrs. Marburg once more to acquiescence and to put Cecily as much as possible in the background.

He succeeded in this to such an extent that two days before the dinner party Cecily learned she was not to sit at the table with the guests. It had been, she knew, Mrs. Marburg's intention to have her there, but now it seemed that Mark was the only one of the household to be so honored.

"I find, Miss Merryman," Mrs. Marburg said, "that you'll be needed to look after things while the dinner is in progress. Donovan is apt to lose her head, and Brewster will have enough to do in getting the house staff and the caterer's men to work smoothly together."

So that was that. And Cecily, with a sigh, gave up her dream of having Blair see her in her silver gown. It wasn't that the dress mattered so much, but that she must stand helpless while Mark gave orders to Mrs. Marburg.

Well, she'd talk to Blair about it when he came. Surely something could be done to relieve the situation. Something *must* be done or Mrs. Marburg would be caught in the net of Mark's machinations, there to struggle, a helpless victim.

Chapter Fifteen

God Is Never Out of Fashion

Hollywood, in the autocratic Hollywood manner, had refused to give Peter time to go East on what he had insisted was an imperative errand. To Hollywood nothing is imperative but it's own needs, and here was the picture that Chilton was doing, unfinished, and with no one else competent to work on it.

It was not until the week before Christmas that, having been given a month of freedom, Peter shook off the shackles of Hollywood and traveled East. He went by train because he was not air-minded and liked to play safe. He stopped in New York for two days to see his publishers, and arrived in Baltimore on the 23rd of December in time, as he told himself, to celebrate Christmas with Cecily.

He could hardly wait to see her. He had missed her dreadfully. More than he had ever thought he could miss anyone. And he had brought her a present—a bracelet and long earrings of aquamarines and diamonds. They were very gorgeous and very expensive, but Peter felt the expense would be justified when he saw the delight in Cecily's eyes. She had a charming way of accepting a gift. Peter had to admit that, until he lost her, he had not given her credit for her many charms. He intended now to make the most of them.

More than anything else, he wanted to surprise her. He did not know what her position at Gaywood might

be. She might have found work, or she might be visiting friends or relatives. He remembered that her father had once lived in Baltimore. Well, whatever her status at Gaywood, he would go down on Christmas Eve, bearing his gifts, and shining on her with all the effulgence of which he was capable.

On the morning of the 24th, as he sat at breakfast and turned the pages of the paper, his eye was caught by a familiar name. Mrs. Blair Marburg was giving a Christmas Eve party on her great estate of Gaywood. All the gay world of Washington and Baltimore would be present. A partal list of the guests was given. Big names, but Peter knew none of them.

He left the dining-room, called up Gaywood, and got Brewster on the telephone.

"This is a reporter on the evening paper," Peter said. "Is there a Miss Merryman visiting Mrs. Marburg?"

"Miss Merryman is Mrs. Marburg's companion. Shall I put her on the wire?"

"No, thank you. I simply wanted to verify my list of guests," and Peter hung up.

So that was it! Cissy was a paid companion, and she had preferred that to a life with him!

With his flair for drama, he planned the way he would do it. He would put on white tie and tails, mingle with the guests at the party, and appear before Cecily like Lohengrin on his swan. Or was it Tannhauser? Peter was a bit vague about Wagnerian opera.

From a Charles Street florist he ordered pink camellias. He put no card in the box. He would have her guessing. Perhaps into her mind might drift a memory of that night in New Orleans when she had worn

the gown that he had given her.

Cecily, when she opened the box, had no thought of those almost forgotten days. Peter was a thousand miles away, a shadow-shape, as Blair had said. To her the pink camellias meant Blair and his memory, perhaps, of that first day when he had met her on the stairs and she had told him of New Orleans.

Yet the flowers were too grand for her to wear tonight. She must tell Blair that when she saw him. She put the lovely flowers back in their box and set them in the window, then went on with her dressing. She gazed at herself with some dissatisfaction in the mirror. Oh, well, what difference did it make what she wore? Blair loved her. Nothing else mattered.

She was putting the final touches to her toilet when there was a knock at her door and Alice entered. "Mrs. Marburg wants you at once, Miss Merryman. She's not well, and she won't be able to go down to dinner."

"Not come to dinner? Oh, but she must, Alice."

"I'm afraid not, Miss. Mr. Keating has sent for the doctor. It's her heart."

Hurrying through the hall, Cecily told herself that Mark Keating had won. He had prophesied that Mrs. Marburg would not be able to go through with things, and he had seen to it that his prophecy should come true.

Mazie had put Mrs. Marburg to bed, and Mark Keating sat in the dark shadows by the fireplace.

Cecily asked breathlessly, "What happened?"

It was Mrs. Marburg who answered. "I was suddenly faint—"

"You were feeling all right before that?"

"No. I had been talking to Mark, and I was nervous and restless, so he gave me a bromide."

Cecily looked at Mark. "Why didn't Mazie give it?"

"She was not in the room, and I felt myself competent to perform that simple service."

The words had a sarcastic ring, but Cecily was not interested in Mark's reactions.

"I'm sure when the doctor comes he will give you something that will brace you up, Mrs. Marburg. It would be such a pity for you to miss going down to dinner."

Mark said, "Why not call the whole thing off?"

Mrs. Marburg was fretful. "We can't do that, of course. You'll have to take my place, Miss Merryman, and receive my guests. There's no one else to do it."

"But—"

"Please don't argue. I'm not equal to it." Her weary eyes surveyed Cecily. "You should have a better dress than that if you are to stand in my place. Perhaps one of mine might fit you."

"I have one I brought with me—a silver brocade."

"Then wear it." Mrs. Marburg's voice fell away into silence. In another moment she would be asleep.

Cecily said desperately, "When Mr. Blair comes, shall I send him up to you?"

"No. I can't see him. I'm not well enough."

"But surely you'll want to wish him a Merry Christmas."

There was no answer. The effect of the bromide was complete.

And Mark from the shadows was saying, "I told you that she would not be able to go through with it."

Cecily wanted to fling in his face the words that came to her lips, but Mazie was in the room, and anyhow the game was up. Mark had won. All Cecily's work had gone for nothing. On this Christmas Eve and the day to follow, Mark would see to it that Blair did not meet his mother.

Going back to her room, Cecily put on the silver gown, then fastened the pink camellias in her hair. As she surveyed herself in the mirror, her beauty shone like a star. The stress and strain of the last half hour vanished. In a few moments she would be with Blair. Nothing else mattered.

He was very late in coming. Cecily, standing in the great hall to welcome the guests, asked Brewster, "Has Mr. Blair arrived?"

"Yes, Miss Merryman, and he has gone to his room to dress."

She saw him then coming down the stairs and the room seemed to swim in a golden light.

As he came up to her, he said, "What's this about mother?"

"She had a sudden heart attack and insisted that I take her place."

"Brewster told me something of it and I asked if I might see her. But she sent down word that she was too ill."

"I'm sure it's only temporary and that she'll let you go to her later."

"Whether she sees me or not isn't so important as that I am seeing you." His eyes swept over her. "You're lovely, dearest."

"Your flowers helped."

"What flowers?"

"The camellias you sent."

"But I didn't send them."

"Then who did?"

"Tell me, and I'll knock him down."

"But there isn't anyone. Blair, it couldn't be Mark, could it?"

"If it is, I'll wring his neck."

People were coming up, and Cecily and Blair were kept busy receiving them until dinner was announced and they all went in together.

After dinner other guests arrived, and there was dancing. Men were asking to be presented to Cecily. Blair danced with her a half dozen times, and Mark Keating stood on the sidelines and watched them.

"Love me?" Blair whispered.

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Forever."

Into this Eden entered, presently, Peter. Peter could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be compared to that Satan of the Scriptures who came so inopportunely to the Garden, but the effect of his coming at this particular moment was equally devastating.

He saw Cecily dancing with Blair. He saw the silver gown and the pink camellias. He saw her against the background of the great house, and at ease with its distinguished company. And the realization came to him that the girl whose friendship he had taken so lightly was something more than he had thought her. Here was not the Cecily of the adobe hut and the rides across the desert. Here was a beautiful woman,

able to take her place among those Massachusetts Chiltons of whom Peter had said little, but of whom he was very proud.

He waited his opportunity. He wandered through the rooms until he found one suitable for the setting of the scene which would be the first act of his drama. He wanted, when he met Cecily, to be alone with her.

He wrote something on his card and asked one of the servants to give it to her. Watching from a crowded corner, he saw her startled look. He had written, *I must see you in the library.* And she came there at once.

"Peter!" she said. "Peter, how did you get here?"

He laughed and caught her hands up in his. "Did you think you could run away from me?"

"But how did you find me?"

"Ask Inez."

"Then it was you who sent the camellias?"

"Yes. Say that you're glad to see me, Cissy."

"You shouldn't have come."

"That isn't an answer. Say that you're glad." He still had her hands in his and was drawing her close. "You're my life and my heart. You know that, don't you?"

"You mustn't say such things, Peter." She was trying to release herself.

"Why mustn't I say them?"

"Because I don't want to hear them."

"But you'll want to hear them when I tell you why I've come. I want to marry you at once, Cissy, and take you off with me to South America."

She backed away from him and said breathlessly,

"But I don't want to marry you!"

He laughed exultingly. "Still holding out on me? You weren't always so stingy with your favors, darling. And if you think I'm going to take no for an answer—"

He stopped suddenly, his eyes on the door. And Cecily, turning, saw what he had seen. Blair was standing on the threshold, his blue eyes in a blaze of fury.

She took a step toward him. "Blair," she faltered, "this is Peter Chilton. I'm afraid he's an uninvited guest. He learned that I was here and came down—"

Peter broke in easily: "Cissy thought she could run away from me. But I've found her at last, as lovely as ever, wearing my pink camellias and the dress I gave her!"

If Cecily had expected that Blair would wring Peter's neck or knock him down, her expectations were not realized. For Blair just stood there, looking from her in her silver gown to Peter, with his thin, romantic face. Then he gave a sudden harsh laugh and said, with the flippancy with which he had spoken to Cecily when he saw her that first day on the stairs, "So he's one of the friends who call you Cissy. Well, for all I care, he can call you that for the rest of your life."

And he turned away and left her.

Chapter Sixteen

There's a Grand Moon, Gypsy

Gypsy Tyson, having come in at midnight from a somewhat hectic Christmas Eve celebration, was reading in bed and wondering in a bored way why she hadn't gone on with the others to a night club, when her telephone rang.

Blair was on the wire. "There's a grand moon, Gypsy. Want to fly over the Bay?"

"Where are you?"

"At the airport. I'll come out for you in a taxi if you'll say the word."

Her pulses were pounding, but she managed a protest. "It's so late, darling."

He was impatient. "Oh, cut that out. Do you want to go or not?"

"Of course I want to go."

"Then get into something warm and be ready."

Gypsy, putting on a knitted suit under her leather-lined fur coat, reflected that Blair's presence in Baltimore was, to say the least, peculiar. All the evening she had thought disconsolately of him as making merry at the Gaywood party, from which she and her crowd had been most pointedly omitted by Mrs. Marburg. It was her dark mood which had kept her from going on to the night club with the man who had asked her. She had wanted Blair and no other.

As she went downstairs, only a dim light burned in

the hall. All the servants were in bed or out on Christmas merrymaking, except Marie, Mrs. Tyson's maid, who was waiting up for her mistress.

Gypsy stopped to speak to her. "What time will Mother be in, Marie?"

"Not for an hour or more, Miss Gypsy. She went to midnight service at the church."

"When she comes, will you tell her I am celebrating with Mr. Marburg."

"Yes, Miss Gypsy."

When Blair came in, he kissed her. "Glad to have the Prodigal back?"

"If he's really sorry."

"Sorry enough. I've had my medicine." He ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. "Got a cocktail for me?"

"Two, if you'd like them."

"The more the merrier. It's a bitter night, Gypsy, and it's Christmas. Two good reasons for breaking the rules."

There was a touch of wildness in the way he said it and in his laughter. A vague fear assailed Gypsy. Blair had always held that no man who flew a plane had a right to drink. Yet here he was, breaking, as he said, the rules, yet ready to take her up with him.

She voiced her thought. "Isn't it a bit too cold for flying?"

"You mean you don't want to go?"

"Of course I want to go."

"Then don't talk foolishness. Just get out those cocktails, and we'll be off."

"You'll have to mix your own. None of the servants

is up except Marie."

She led the way to the butler's pantry and watched him as he mixed the drinks.

"You'll have one, Gypsy?"

"Yes."

He filled the glasses. "A Merry Christmas, darling!"

"A Merry Christmas, Blair!"

"Have another?"

"No."

"What's come over you? You never stop at one."

When she persisted in her refusal, he said, "I'll drink yours for you."

He filled his glass again and again until she said, "Blair, you're drinking too much."

"Who are you that you should tell me?" he demanded truculently. "I'll do as I please."

When at last in the taxi and on their way to the airport, Gypsy was filled with forebodings.

Blair was talkative. "I'm done with Gaywood for the rest of my life."

"Why?"

"Oh, Mark's in the saddle and mother rides with him." He rambled on about Mark, but not a word did he say of Cecily. He was not too befuddled to know that her name on his lips would sting him with a pain too sharp to endure.

It was Gypsy who ventured, "Is Miss Merryman still there?"

"Yes."

"Are you done with her, too?"

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Well, several people saw you lunching with her at

the Women's Exchange. They told me about it."

"They would!" His mind went back to it—the walk in the snow, her kiss warm on his lips.

They reached the airport and presently were sailing up into the silver night of stars. If their minds had not been muddled, they might have thought of that Holy Night when Shepherds, looking up, saw a great Light and heard angels singing.

Blair and Gypsy had no thought of angels. Like millions of others, Christmas meant for them only a time for uproarious celebration and self-indulgence. Gypsy's fears had vanished. Up among the stars, Blair was hers. Wherever he took her, she would go. If their way led through Hell, she would follow.

Higher they went and higher, sailing through a world whose effulgence was incredible. The Bay was now a shining stretch beneath them, touched here and there by the dark shadow of a ship. Turning back, there was the twinkling kaleidoscope of city lights and the signal lights of the airport. In spite of the moment of ecstasy in flight, Gypsy was glad they were descending. Blair had only to make a landing and they were safe. She had not known until now how tense she had been when, up in the air, she had felt that Blair was taking chances, risking their lives in his reckless indifference to hazards. But now there was no need for fears. Blair always made a perfect landing. Before they went home, they'd drink a hot chocolate somewhere. That would be better for them than cocktails.

They were close to the ground now, with the red, blue and green of the Neon signs flashing up at them.

One of them, Gypsy knew, was for hamburgers. Blair liked hamburgers with onions, and coffee. Perhaps he'd rather have them than hot chocolate. Gypsy hated onions, but if Blair— Well, a woman who would follow a man to Hell couldn't afford to be too particular about what he ate!

When Gypsy came back to consciousness, she was saying something unintelligible to the people about her. There was a crowd, and someone said, "She's asking for hot chocolate," and another, "She's had her last drink of chocolate, poor thing!"

Sometime afterward Gypsy, rising to the top out of Stygian darkness, murmured, "What happened?"

A doctor, who was doing things for her, answered, "You made a bad landing. And now we're going to get you into the ambulance. It may hurt a little."

It did hurt, and there was more darkness, out of which Gypsy asked, "Where's Blair?"

"His injury was slight. They're giving him first aid."

Gypsy started to ask another question, but a pain struck her and she screamed. They gave her something to help the pain, and after that she slept.

A little later, Blair, arriving breathless at the hospital, said to the nurse at the desk in the hall, "I must see her."

"As soon as the doctors have finished their examination."

"Is she badly hurt?"

"The doctors will tell you."

Blair, pacing the floor while he waited, stopped suddenly and asked the nurse, "Has Miss Tyson's

mother been notified?"

"I think not. There hasn't been time."

"May I use the telephone?"

"Certainly."

Blair, dialing the number, wondered what he should say to Mrs. Tyson. He didn't know the extent of Gypsy's injuries. Perhaps he should have waited. But what if Gypsy should be dying?

A sleepy servant answered the call. "Is it anything important? Mrs. Tyson is asleep."

"It's very important. Will you tell her Mr. Blair Marburg wishes to speak to her at once."

Mrs. Tyson's voice over the wire held a high note of irritation. "What in the world do you want with me, Blair, at this hour of the night?"

"I'm sorry"—he fumbled for words—"but there's been an accident, and Gypsy—"

"Gypsy? What do you mean? Is she hurt?"

"Yes, and she's in the hospital. It may not be serious, but I think you should come at once."

"Of course." Then harshly, "What kind of accident?"

"I took her up in my plane."

"At this hour of the night?"

"Yes."

"Were you crazy?"

"Perhaps."

"I'll never forgive you."

"I'll never forgive myself."

He hung up the receiver and again waited. The doctors came out, three of them, and gave their verdict. "It's her leg and hip. It may be a long time before she

walks. Then, too, there was the shock. She had a very narrow escape from death."

"I know."

"She asked to see you," the surgeon went on. "We can allow you only a few minutes. We're planning to operate as soon as possible."

So Blair went in to where Gypsy, looking very small and childish, with her dark hair ruffled, smiled up at him and reached out her hand.

Blair knelt by the bed. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"You mustn't blame yourself, darling."

"I do blame myself. I took all kinds of chances after those cocktails."

She was still smiling. "Do you know what I was thinking about when we crashed?"

"No."

"I thought we'd go to a hamburger stand and you could have yours with onions. You know how I hate them, but I wanted you to have them." Her voice trailed weakly into silence, and the nurse said, "You've talked enough, Miss Tyson."

Blair said, "One moment, please," and bent down and spoke with earnestness. "If my life is worth anything to you, little girl, you may have it."

"Oh, Blair, if I only thought you meant it!"

"I do mean it. If you'll marry me, I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make up to you for this."

He had not said that he loved her. But she was content. This was not Hell, but Heaven.

Chapter Seventeen

Crumbs From the King's Table

Blair, coming out of Gypsy's room, found Mrs. Tyson waiting. He went toward her eagerly. "She's going to live."

"Don't speak to me," she said tensely. "How dared you take her up in your plane?"

He had no words for her, and she turned from him. "Take me to her," she told the doctors.

Gypsy was lying very still, with her hand under her cheek. "I'm going to marry him, Mother," she said dreamily.

"You mean Blair?"

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful? It's what I've always wanted. And now it has come—"

Mrs. Tyson, controlling herself with an effort, said, "We won't talk about it now, darling."

The surgeon said as they went out of the room together, "We've given her an opiate. The operation may take some time."

"I'll stay here until it is over."

"It will be better if you don't. You can't see her when she comes from the operating room, and we can keep in touch with you by telephone."

Blair, still waiting, said, "I'll stay."

The surgeon shook his head. "There's nothing to be gained by it. And you're a bit shaken yourself."

Mrs. Tyson directed her question to the surgeon.

"Do you mean he was injured?"

"Some bruises and contusions. Nothing serious."

"Yet Gypsy had to suffer," Mrs. Tyson said hysterically.

She did not speak to Blair again, and when she had gone, the surgeon said to him, "You'd better come in later and let me have a look at your arm."

"There's really not much the matter with it."

"You can leave me to judge of that."

The surgeon's manner was not sympathetic. Blair knew he was being judged as a playboy who had taken a woman's life in his hands for a midnight frolic.

Mrs. Tyson's maid, Marie, had come back and spoke now to Blair from the threshold. "Mrs. Tyson asks if she can take you home in her car, Mr. Marburg."

He apologized to Mrs. Tyson as he got into the car. "I'm pretty well covered with mud. I really should have gone home in a cab."

"Oh, what difference does it make how you look? I asked you to ride with me because I want to talk about Gypsy. She told me when I saw her that you had asked her to marry you. Is that true?"

"Yes. I—she's such a little thing, Mrs. Tyson, and I've hurt her, and it seemed the only way I could make up to her for what I've done."

"In other words, you don't love her! You're simply sorry, and want to punish yourself for your sins?"

"That's one way to put it."

"Isn't it true?"

"Yes," soberly, "it's true that there'll never be anything that Gypsy can ask of me that I won't do. I shall never forgive myself."

"And I shall never forgive you. But as for marrying Gypsy, I'm not at all sure that when Gypsy comes to her senses, she'll want it. Certainly I'd hate to see her married to you. You've always treated her so casually—given her crumbs from the king's table. She told me that not long ago—that you didn't care for her. And she cried in my arms."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Tyson!"

She was inexorable. "You might as well hear it. I can't deny her anything, but I shall do my best to disillusion her."

He could only say, "I'm sorry."

He had known Mrs. Tyson since young boyhood, yet had never felt drawn to her. She was a beautiful woman, not dark like her daughter, but very blond and fragile. The effect of fragility was heightened by the atmosphere she created. She was devout, mystical, dreamy. The exact opposite of her daughter who, like her Tyson father, faced life realistically and with the determination to get out of it what she could.

But now Mrs. Tyson was shaken by something that brought her down from her ivory tower. She didn't want Gypsy to marry Blair Marburg. If the things one heard were true, his mother had cut him out of his inheritance. He could barely earn a living in Joshua Stabler's office.

Yet there was nothing to be gained in going over it all again. So she set him down at his apartment house, said good night, and left him to find his way to his own dark room where, without turning on the lights, he flung himself on the bed and lay with blackness all about him that seemed to smirch his soul.

Chapter Eighteen

There's All the Desert Waiting

Peter left Gaywood on Christmas Eve with his ego somewhat deflated, but with hope in his heart. Not that the hope was justified, but Peter had a way of seeing lights ahead which did not always burn as brightly when he reached them. The light in this case was a half promise from Cissy that some day she might come back to the desert. To be sure, she had said it was to the desert she would come, and not to Peter, but he felt that if once he had her there, she could not escape him.

When B'air flung himself away in that dreadful moment when he saw Peter and Cecily in the library together, Cecily had turned on Peter. "How dared you tell Mr. Marburg that I belonged to you?"

"Well, you do, don't you?"

Her steady eyes and her steady voice shamed him. "Have I ever given you reason to say a thing like that, Peter?"

"There was no engagement, if that's what you mean."

"There was no—anything."

"Yet surely you loved me?"

"Perhaps I thought I did. But love is something—different. I told you that in my letter."

"I didn't believe your letter. I don't believe it now."

"You'll have to believe it."

"Why?"

"Because nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

"You're in love with someone else?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"It has a lot to do with it. Is it that young Marburg? Well, you heard him give you back to me!"

"I was never yours, and you know it." She was firm in her refusal to discuss it. "I must go to my guests. I'm sorry, but I think we'll have to say good-by."

"You can't always run away from me, Cissy."

"I shall try."

"When am I to see you again?"

"How can I tell?"

He caught at her hand. "Some day you'll come back to me, darling. There's all the desert waiting."

She looked up at him. "If I come back, it will be to the desert. Not to you."

He laughed. "Don't be too sure. You're the girl I want, and I'm going to have you."

As they moved from the library into the great hall, someone in the crowd recognized Peter and came up to him. "It's Peter Chilton! Where did you come from, Peter?"

The word went about, and Peter was quite the lion of the evening. No one knew he was uninvited. No one but Mark Keating who, familiar with the guest list, was aware that no Chilton had been asked.

"How did he get in?" he asked Cecily.

"I knew him in Arizona. He heard I was here and came down."

"Good-looking chap. He ought to be in one of his

own pictures."

"They want him, but he sticks to his books and his playwriting."

"Is he in love with you?"

"He was our neighbor on the desert and used to come over to read his manuscripts to mother."

"Sounds romantic. Was it?"

"Not in the way you think."

Brewster, coming up at the moment, said, "Beg pardon, Miss Merryman, but have you seen Mr. Blair?"

"He was here half an hour ago. Why?"

"Some of the guests are asking for him."

Mark laughed. "They can keep on asking. Blair's gone off in his plane."

Brewster said, "Thank you, Mr. Keating," and was moving on when Cecily said, "Perhaps you had better not tell the guests that he is flying. You might make other excuses."

"Yes, Miss Merryman."

Cecily asked Mark, "How did you know he was flying?"

"One of the servants told me. It's a bitter night, but he has no sense when it comes to things like that. That's what I'm always telling his mother—that Blair hasn't grown up. He's a creature of moods. Adolescent."

Without a word Cecily left him. She felt she could not stand further strain on her emotions. She went among the guests, avoiding Peter, who was in high feather and holding the center of the stage. Supper was served at midnight, and after they had eaten, many of the older guests went home, gossiping eagerly

about Blair's disappearance, his mother's illness, and the rumor that all was not well between them. The young people, caring little whether they had a host or not, stayed on to dance. Some of them were there, indeed, for the four-o'clock breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausages which Brewster had served for them.

Peter remained, hoping for a word with Cecily. At last he got it. "Come with me, darling," he pleaded. "I'll build such a world—just for the two of us. Think what life would mean if you went back! The rides under the moon, and Inez baking a bride's cake for you!"

If for a moment she wavered, she showed no sign of it. "Run along, Peter," she said. "I'm dead for sleep, and I have a thousand things to do before I go to bed."

"So it's really good-by?"

"Yes."

There was a mocking light in his eyes. "It's not good-by for me. You can't escape me, Cissy, now or ever."

Peter, motoring through Baltimore at dawn in the car he had hired, felt as if time had been set back several centuries. The formal old town, with its rows upon rows of identical houses with identical white steps, seemed to his desert-accustomed eyes as unreal as a jigsaw puzzle. Close-set together, so exact in size and shape, they were like something cut out of cardboard. Coming presently to the dwellings of the more prosperous members of the community, there was still the formality, but in a large way, with fewer white steps, and with masses of brown stone and gray marble.

There were, Peter realized, forces within those for-

mal houses which matched the outmoded exteriors. At Gaywood he had sensed the atmosphere of social exclusiveness. To be the master of Gaywood would be, he told himself, something more than to be a writer of plays. No wonder Cissy had fallen for that fellow, Blair Marburg. He had something to give her that Peter couldn't give—not merely grandeur of background, for that might be achieved in Hollywood, but tradition and the glamour of distinguished inheritance.

He had told Cissy that she couldn't escape him. Yet if young Marburg learned that he, Peter, had claimed too much, might he not blind her eyes to all that Peter might mean to her?

For Peter refused to believe that, given a fair field, he could not win Cecily from Blair. Weren't there thousands of women who would jump at the chance of a marriage with Peter Chilton? But he didn't want any of the thousands. He wanted Cissy, and he wanted her now. How lovely she had looked in the silver dress that he had given her, with his pink camellias in her hair!

Chapter Nineteen

It's a Dreadful Business

The news of Blair's accident came to Gaywood over the radio. It was Mark Keating who told Cecily. Neither of them had gone to bed, for at six o'clock the last stragglers among the guests were still piling into their cars.

Cecily, her world whirling about her, said, with stiff lips, "Is Mr. Marburg badly hurt?"

"No. But Gypsy Tyson is. They're both in the hospital in Baltimore. I telephoned, but could get very little satisfaction. The crash occurred after midnight. Blair must have gone straight from here to Gypsy Tyson's."

Cecily's mind flashed back to that scene in the library. Blair had left Gaywood in a reckless mood. And so this dreadful thing had happened.

She controlled herself with an effort. "Have you told his mother?"

"Not yet. I thought it best to wait for definite information. I've put in a call for Blair and should be hearing from him shortly."

"Let me know when you have further news. I'm going to my room to get some rest. I'll have my coffee sent up."

"Why not have it here with me?"

Cecily looked about the great hall, strewn with all the flotsam and jetsam of the sea of gaiety which had

for some hours engulfed it. Flowers, dropped to the floor, had been trodden by tapping feet. Wisps of net and tulle had been torn from whirling flounces. Cigarette stubs were everywhere. Wineglasses had been set down on polished surfaces. Sleepy servants were moving about under the watchful eyes of Brewster and Mrs. Donovan, who, faultlessly neat and miraculously wide awake, gave their orders calmly like seasoned generals after the heat of battle.

"I don't see how they do it," Cecily said to Mark.

"Do what?"

"Brewster and Mrs. Donovan. They're going on as if nothing had happened."

"Well, it's their job, isn't it?"

"Yes. But there's something fine about it."

He looked at her with brooding eyes. "How do you do it?"

"What?"

"See the best in people. To me, Brewster is just an old stuffed shirt and Donovan a plump little bore. I'd get rid of both of them if I had my way."

Cecily, controlling herself with difficulty, said, "You'd better find a quieter place than this to drink your coffee. And I must get some rest. Don't fail to let me know if you hear anything from Baltimore."

When she reached her room, she closed the door and locked it, then flung herself on the bed. She dared not cry lest the signs of her distress be seen by the maid who came with her tray.

"Oh, God help him! God help him!" she whispered, and after a little while lay quiet with her eyes closed.

It was not for herself she prayed, but for Blair. She

had learned in a hard school to endure stress and sorrow, but Blair was still undisciplined. He stood now amid the ruins not only of that frail machine which had carried him to the skies, but amid the ruins of the life which he had so eagerly and earnestly planned for himself.

Her coffee came and she drank it, and, curling up then among the pillows on her couch, fell unexpectedly asleep. She waked to find Mrs. Donovan bending over her.

"Mrs. Marburg is asking for you, Miss Merryman."

"Does she know about the accident?"

"No. Mr. Keating wants to speak to you about that before you go to her."

"Has he heard from Mr. Marburg?"

"Not directly. He had left the hospital, but Miss Tyson is still there. It's a dreadful business."

Cecily, brushing her hair in front of her mirror, said, "Do you think that prayer helps?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Then pray that Gypsy Tyson doesn't die. Blair would feel himself a murderer as surely as if he had stuck a knife into her. Even if it wasn't his fault that the plane crashed, he'd feel that way—and he'd never get over it."

Mark, waiting on the stairs, said, "I've decided it will be best to have the doctor here when I tell Mrs. Marburg. I've had him on the telephone, and he'll come down as soon as he can. Since Mrs. Marburg is asking for you, Miss Merryman, it may be best for you to fill in the time until the doctor gets here by reading and talking to her."

"You're sure she's heard nothing?"

"Absolutely. I've cautioned all the servants. You have simply to act as if nothing had happened."

Cecily said hopefully, "At least when you tell her, you can say that Blair isn't badly hurt."

"The worst thing she can hear is that Blair took Gypsy up with him. She has so often warned him against it. But he wouldn't listen, and now he's getting his punishment."

He seemed to roll the words on his tongue as if to taste the savor of his joy that Blair had been overtaken by his sins.

He added, "You'll have at least an hour with Mrs. Marburg. I haven't seen her this morning, but Alice says she's in a fretful mood. No wonder, after last night's experience."

Mrs. Marburg, sitting up in bed with her breakfast before her, hardly raised her eyes as Cecily came in. "You're early, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Marburg. I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"How can one be merry with things as they are?" Then pushing her plate away, she said wearily, "I can't eat. Sit down, Miss Merryman, and tell me about the party. Mazie said some of the guests stayed until morning."

"Some of the young people did. Most of the older ones left after supper."

"Is Blair still in bed?"

"He—went back to town last night, Mrs. Marburg."

"To town? But why should he? He knows I'm ill."

"Perhaps he thought because you wouldn't see him

last night that you wouldn't want him here this morning."

"But I do want him here." She lay lack on her pillows. "I don't know why I refused to see him last night. I think I was confused by the bromide Mark gave me. I shouldn't have taken it without the doctor's orders."

Cecily did not answer. There was nothing she could say. Giving bromides without the doctor's orders was one of Mark's pleasant little tricks in these days. By keeping Mrs. Marburg drugged, he could often win an acquiescence which would have been denied him had her brain been clearer.

Mrs. Marburg was asking further questions. "What time did Blair leave?"

"Just after supper, Mrs. Marburg."

"He should have stayed until his guests were gone. Oh, I might have known that if I didn't go down, something would happen. What must people think, Miss Merryman, to have me ill in bed and Blair acting like a spoiled child?"

Cecily, grasping at anything to stem the tide of excitement which might result in hysteria, said, "One thing that interested everybody was meeting Peter Chilton!"

"Peter Chilton?"

"Yes. The writer."

"How in the world did he get here?"

"I've known him for a long time, Mrs. Marburg. He was in Baltimore and came down last night to see me. He found we were having a party, and stayed, and everyone was thrilled to meet him. He gave sev-

eral people his autograph and was quite the lion of the evening."

"I've read all of his books and like them." She stopped suddenly as Blair entered the room, with Mark following.

Coming up to the bed, Mark said, "I tried to keep him out, Mrs. Marburg."

"Why should he stay out?" Mrs. Marburg demanded. "And what does all this mean? Miss Merryman told me, Blair, you had gone to Baltimore."

"I went last night. Bubbles Tyson brought me back just now in his plane. There are things I've got to tell you, Mother, and I don't want you to hear them from anyone else."

Cecily said hurriedly, "We've been trying to keep it from her."

Mrs. Marburg looked wildly from one to the other. "Why should anything be kept from me?"

"It shouldn't," Blair said, "and if you'll ask everybody except Miss Merryman to leave us alone, I'll say what I've come to say."

The look on his face frightened Cecily. What had he to tell them? That Gypsy was dead and that he had murdered her? Or of some other dreadful thing that gave him that look of strain and torment?

When Mark had withdrawn with Alice and Mazie, Blair sat down beside the bed. "You warned me, Mother," he said, "and now I've done it."

"Done what?"

"I took Gypsy up in my plane, and we crashed. I got off with a few scratches, but Gypsy is badly hurt."

Mrs. Marburg was leaning forward, her face pale

and stricken. "You took Gypsy up?"

"Yes."

"I knew it would come some day."

"You were right, and I'm only getting what I deserve. I've almost killed Gypsy, and now I've got to make it up to her. You can see that, can't you, Mother? I've got to make it up to her."

He was talking incoherently. Yet he had not been drinking. He was rather in that state of nerves which comes from shock and excitement.

"I've got to make it up to her," he said again.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to give my life to her if she will have it. I've asked her to marry me, Mother."

Cecily's world crashed! So this was the dreadful thing!

Then Mrs. Marburg said hysterically, "You don't mean what you're saying!"

"I do mean it. I've ruined Gypsy's future. I was drunk when I took her up. If she dies, I shall feel that I killed her. Can't you understand that, Mother? Can't you?" His voice broke. He laid his hand over Mrs. Marburg's. "Can't you understand that, Mumsie?"

For a moment she wavered, then drew her hand away. "I understand nothing," she said, "but that you're getting the punishment you deserve. You can marry Gypsy Tyson, but you needn't bring her here, now or ever."

Blair's face went white, and Cecily, alarmed by his looks, said, "Sit down. You shouldn't have come. You're not strong enough."

He was groping for a seat and sank into a chair as she pulled it toward him. "I had better have stayed away," he said bitterly.

And then Cecily did a thing for which she could never afterward account. She stood very still by the bed and said, "O God, Whose Son came on this day into the world, look down on this mother and her son!"

For a moment the room was very still, then Blair said, in a low voice, "Thank you," and Mrs. Marburg began to sob, with her face turned on her pillow.

Again the door opened and Mark came in with the doctor. "You might have killed her," he said to Blair, "breaking the news so suddenly."

Blair did not answer. "I'm going now," he said to Cecily. "Perhaps when I am gone, you may tell Mother that I am sorry."

The doctor said, "Will you call the nurse, Mr. Keating? And will everyone else leave the room?"

As Cecily and Blair went down the stairs together, Blair said, "So this is the end of all things, Mélisande!"

"Perhaps it is just the beginning."

"No. I've been all kinds of a fool." He stopped on the stair below her, looking up. "How much do you love him?"

"Peter?"

"Yes."

She did not answer. She just stood there looking down at him, until at last he said, "Good God! Have I hurt you as much as that, my darling?" and then stared after her as she passed him in a flash and ran across the great hall and up the stairs to her room.

Chapter Twenty

You're Not to Come Here Again

Blair, lingering in the great hall, looked about him. Soon he would fly to Baltimore with Bubbles Tyson, who was now waiting for him in the library, where Brewster had built a bright fire and given him the morning papers.

Bubbles had said, as his sister's picture and Blair's faced him on the front page, "That was a pretty bad smash-up, Brewster. But I don't blame Blair. Those things happen. But it's hard on old Gyp, and Mother is fit to be tied."

"Mr. Blair will be flying back with you to Baltimore?"

"Yes. And we'd better get going. Will you tell him that, Brewster?"

When Brewster delivered the message, Blair said, "In a moment, Brewster." He hated to leave. Here, after all, was home. Here under this same roof was Cecily—

Mickey, the cat, mewed at his feet, and Blair leaned down and lifted him to his shoulder. "Miss me, old chap?"

He felt he wanted someone to miss him. Someone to say, "Stay here where you belong. Be one of us." But there was no one to say it.

As he turned to leave the room, Mark crossed the hall from the stairway. "I have a message for you from

your mother."

"Yes?"

"You're not to come here again or you'll find the doors closed against you."

"You made her say that!"

"How can I make her say anything? Can't you see what you've done to her? Disappointed her—thwarted her in the things she has tried to do for you. The trouble is, Blair, that you're a boy who has never grown up."

"Perhaps we might argue that question. But whatever the answer, it's none of your business."

Mark laughed. He had thrown himself negligently into a big chair, one leg over the arm of it, his cigarette in its long holder dangling from one hand. "Everything that relates to your mother is my business."

Blair, looking down on him, said, "You must be very sure of your position in this house to say such things to me."

"Why shouldn't I be sure? Your mother trusts me because I have given her strength where you have given weakness. At times you are thoughtless and cruel. Like today, when you burst in on her with your news. With her bad heart, the shock might have killed her."

Blair's head was up. "I'll admit it was thoughtless. But there's nothing the matter with Mother's heart. Any doctor but the one you brought in a few months ago will tell you that all she needs to get well is to live a normal life with normal interests. Hers is a nervous, not a physical, disorder."

Mark said sneeringly, "So your doctor knows more than mine? Well, she'll have this doctor and no other!"

"You're being very high-handed, Mark, and I may as well tell you that you can't go on."

"Who is going to stop me? Not you. You haven't got what it takes to beat a man like me."

The blood surged up into Blair's face. "I've half a mind to throw you out of the window."

Mark's laugh was not pleasant. "You can never throw me out. Try it and see what happens."

"I shan't try, but perhaps at some future time the gods may be good to me."

He went on then into the library and collected Bubbles. "If you only knew how grateful I am," he told that inconsequential person, "for bringing me here! I should think you'd hate me for what I did to Gypsy."

"It doesn't pay to hate," Bubbles said. "And besides, I've taken people up in my plane when I was full of cocktails. It's just been my good luck that I haven't killed anybody."

"Things are pretty bad between me and my mother," Blair confided. "I had a little talk with Donovan. She says Mark may try to get rid of her and of Mazie and Brewster. He knows they don't trust him. And they don't trust that maid, Alice."

"She's a good-looker," Bubbles said. "She came in to offer me the morning paper. I had one, and I think she knew it, but she has an eye out for the men."

"She has an eye out for Mark," Blair said. "Brewster says she carries tales to him."

"What about that Miss Merryman? Is she staying

on?"

Blair was suddenly reticent. "I don't know. And now, if you're ready, Bubbles—"

A few moments later, as the two of them roared toward Baltimore, Blair let his mind dwell on Cecily. What a moment that had been when in the shadowed room she had spoken to God! He dared not think of that later moment when, on the stairs, the anguish in her eyes and the whiteness of her face had told him the truth. She was not in love with Peter. She loved him, Blair Marburg.

Cecily, from her window, saw the plane rise high in the air. It was a glorious morning—Christmas morning—with the Bay and the sky a deep blue and the wind blowing. She thought of the day of her arrival when she had seen Blair in his plane. Of their meeting on the stairs. Of all those other meetings. And now he was going to marry Gypsy. Well, the thing for her to do was to get away. She'd go back to Inez. If Peter made love to her, why not? Blair was going to marry Gypsy.

Tomorrow she would tell Mrs. Marburg that she couldn't stay and she would be off and away. It would be wonderful to be back on the desert, wonderful to leave this dark house behind her and the sick old woman and her sinister secretary. And why should she be afraid of Peter? He was gay and laughing. Perhaps friendship would be enough. There had been such friendships between a man and a woman. And why face anything until it happened?

But she was not to be off and away, for quite unexpectedly she was called to Mrs. Marburg's bedside.

The poor lady lay in a darkened room. She caught Cecily's hand and held it. "My life is over," she said. "I've lost my son."

"Oh, surely not, Mrs. Marburg?"

"Yes. I've sent him away. I've told him not to come back."

"Do you want him to come back?"

"Yes. But Mark says that I mustn't. That it will be the same thing over again—quarrels and recriminations."

"Perhaps if Mark should go away—"

"Go away!" Mrs. Marburg's grasp on Cecily's hand tightened. "But he wouldn't go. Not even if I told him—"

"Do you want him to go?"

"I don't know." She was breathing quickly. "I don't know. I only know that I am so—frightened." She was sobbing.

Cecily bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't, my dear," she said. "Try to rest and sleep."

"Stay with me," Mrs. Marburg whispered. "Stay with me. Don't go away. Don't go away—ever!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Heaven Help You

Blair, arriving in Baltimore, had gone straight to the hospital, where he was told he could not see Gypsy. He took a taxi to the florist's and ordered yellow roses to be sent to her.

The florist gave him a flower for his coat. "Sorry to hear of your accident, sir."

Rather than meet more people, more condolences, more thinly veiled curiosity, Blair went back to his apartment and threw himself on the bed.

It seemed such a little time since he had been carefree. A boy, as Mark had said, who had never grown up. He had refused to take responsibility, had quarreled with those who took advantage of his weakness. In a way, Mark had been right. He had accepted defeat when he should have fought to the finish. He had not seen that within himself might be forces which would command his mother's regard.

Yet now, he told himself, he had arrived at man's estate. Hereafter he would blame no one for his failures. If he had chosen the hard way, it was because he must sway level with his self-respect. In marrying Gypsy he would violate that which was the most sacred within himself. Yet only marriage with Gypsy could release him from the horror of that which he had done to her.

At last he fell asleep, to be waked two hours later

by a ring of the telephone. Mrs. Tyson, Gypsy's mother, was on the wire. "I must see you, Blair. Will you come over now and talk to me?"

He did not want to go, but he felt that he must. The interview promised to be unpleasant. He wondered what more Mrs. Tyson would have to say to him that she had not already said that morning.

He found her alone, with the tea tray on a low table in front of her.

"Sit down," she said, as Blair stood before her like a prisoner at the bar. "I'll give you your tea and then we can talk." Her manner had an affability which was in direct contrast to her furious arraignment of him as they had ridden home in her car.

Remembering that fury, he felt he would rather not break bread with her. "If you don't mind, I won't have any tea," he said, with some stiffness.

"Don't be silly. It will do you good. I'll make it strong and put in four lumps. Most men like it that way, and with lots of cream. It makes them fat, of course, but fat is something you don't have to worry about."

Blair took the cup and drank the tea. A maid came in with little hot biscuits, and there were sandwiches and cakes on the tray. Blair had had nothing to eat all day but a hastily snatched cup of coffee and a roll. In his excitement he had not felt the need for food, but now he was glad to have it.

He and Mrs. Tyson talked of trivial things while he ate, and then she said, "I didn't bring you here, of course, to discuss the weather. You know and I know what is in both of our minds. I said things to you this

morning about my daughter. Well, I want to take some of those things back. My daughter's happiness is what I have to think of. I shall make no objection to your engagement. That does not mean, however, that Gypsy will marry you. She's not a very stable person, and she may be off with the old and on with the new before we know it. She hates opposition, and I'm going to be perfectly frank when I say that, whether I like it or not, she'll have her own way. We've spoiled her, and we're undoubtedly getting what we deserve. Under the circumstances you and I might as well be friends."

It was beautifully said, but Blair felt that back of it was a certain insincerity. She was making the best of things, not because she blamed him less, but because she knew that opposition would throw Gypsy into his arms.

"You are very good," he said, "and I'll do my best to make Gypsy happy. You know that, I'm sure."

He stood up then and said good-by and presently went away, feeling that the interview had done little for either of them, but trying to accept Mrs. Tyson's remarks at their face value.

As he left the house, he met Bubbles Tyson coming in.

"It's been a heck of a Christmas day," Bubbles said. "First Gypsy, and now Viola."

"What's the matter wth Viola?"

"She didn't like my Christmas present! I bought her a mink coat. I thought every woman liked mink, but she says no smart woman wears it these days. What she wanted was something in sable. She says a

short cape in sable is smarter than a dozen mink coats. She's going down to the store tomorrow and see what she can do. It's a tempest in a teapot, if you ask me. Here's Gypsy half dying, and Viola ragging me because I bought her the wrong present."

Blair said, "Cheer up! You love her, don't you?"

Bubbles at the moment was doubtful. "I don't love her to the point of not seeing her faults. And I'm staying away until she gets back to normal. We're supposed to be having Christmas dinner with her mother, but I'm eating mine where I please. What have you got on for tonight? If you don't want turkey, I'll take you somewhere for seafood."

Blair said, "You'll do nothing of the kind. If you're sensible, you'll go back to your wife, tell her she's a little fool to let a mink coat come between you, and eat your turkey with her family."

"And have Viola on my neck for the rest of my life? If I give in now, it will be fatal."

"Don't give in, but don't be childish."

And Bubbles flung back at him, "Who are you to give advice? You're not married."

"No," Blair said, "I'm not, but some day I shall be. When Gypsy is well enough, I want her to be my wife."

Bubbles stared at him. "Heaven help you!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, Viola is bad enough, but Gypsy is something more. She's always had her own way, and she always will have it."

Blair said roughly, "Stop saying things like that. You don't mean them."

"If you think I don't mean what I said about Gypsy," was Bubbles' parting shot, "you've got another think coming. But just to show you there are no hard feelings, I'm going back and put Viola under my arm and take her to her family's to eat turkey." He laughed, ran down the steps, and was off.

It had begun to snow, and Blair, walking back to his apartment, was aware of the lights in the windows. It was Christmas night, and such a Christmas! With Gypsy in the hospital, Viola weeping over her mink coat, and down at Gaywood, Cecily breaking her heart over the thing he had done to her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I Shall Try to Remember

The shadow of tragedy hung over Gaywood. Mrs. Marburg spent most of her days in bed. Cecily tried to rouse her, but found it difficult.

Mazie, co-operating with Cecily, had to confess she could do little. "It's Mr. Keating and that doctor. They're taking away her will power. It's a kind of hypnotism."

Cecily and Mazie were having tea with Mrs. Donovan. There was no division now, socially, of sheep and goats. With Mrs. Marburg attended more or less constantly by the masseuse, the doctor, and Mark Keating, Cecily found refuge from the loneliness of the great house in the housekeeper's cozy quarters. There a bright fire always burned on the hearth and the china tea service was gay with garden flowers.

"I can't do anything with her," Mazie said again. Then, after a pause, "I don't like the way Alice is acting."

"Alice?"

"She's always getting Mr. Keating off in corners and telling him things."

"What things, Mazie?"

"Tales about you and me, Miss Merryman."

"You shouldn't be drawing on your imagination, Mazie," her mother warned her.

"It isn't imagination," Cecily said. "I've noticed it.

We must be careful what we say before her."

Mazie nodded. "That's why I told you. She's always going in and out when you and Mrs. Marburg are together, and I've caught her standing with just a crack in the door, listening."

Alice was, Cecily knew, getting an influence over Mrs. Marburg second only to Mark's. By subtle flattery and by meeting the invalid's neurotic need of a listener to whom to relate her ills, she was gradually pushing Cecily out from the close intimacy that had once existed. Of late, indeed, she had set herself squarely against Cecily and against Mazie, so that she had become practically dictator in the management of Mrs. Marburg.

"She really shouldn't go out, Miss Merryman," she had said one day when Cecily had urged Mrs. Marburg to ride with her in the February sunshine. "There's a cold wind blowing."

"The car is closed and heated, Alice. She couldn't possibly feel the wind."

"I'm sure Mr. Keating wouldn't like it," Alice had insisted.

And Mrs. Marburg, glad to be released from any exertion, agreed with Alice. "Mark wouldn't want me to go."

In certain ways, however, Cecily still held her place in Mrs. Marburg's favor. Neither Mark nor Alice had her mental resources, her sense of humor, her capacity to amuse, distract, and charm. Weighed down as she was by the heavy burden of her own unhappiness, she still managed to bring to the sick woman a sense of stimulation that was like wine to her troubled

spirit.

Supplementing her own resources for amusement, she induced Mrs. Marburg to order a sumptuous new radio with a phonograph.

"Listen," she would say to the weary woman in the bed. "Don't you love this?" And there would be Mrs. Marburg's favorite blond baritone singing love songs that swept one above the earth and into the clouds. There were, too, the old Gilbert and Sullivan operas, *Pinafore* and *The Mikado* and *Patience* and the rest of them. Once Mrs. Marburg had asked for *The Yeomen of the Guard.*

"There was a song about a merrymaid and a moping mum. Have we that, Miss Merryman?"

For a moment Cecily did not answer. Her mind went back to that day when she had come in from the storm and Blair had been at the piano. "It's your song, Merrymaid—"

"Have you found it?" came the voice from the bed.

Cecily said, "Yes," and presently the music drifted into the room. Cecily, listening, thought her heart would break.

It's the song of a merrymaid, peerly proud,
Who loved a lord and she laughed aloud
At the moan of the merryman, moping mum—

When it was over, Mrs. Marburg said, "That was one of Blair's favorites. He has a good voice, but he's never made anything of it. He never made anything of himself in any way."

Cecily knew it was useless to argue. Mark Keating had done his work. Mrs. Marburg was in his power, dreadfully in his power, Cecily feared.

So gloom settled down heavily over Gaywood. Blair's name was never mentioned. Only through Brewster and Mrs. Donovan did Cecily learn that the marriage had been postponed.

As time went on, Mark took upon himself more and more the management of the estate. He gave orders to Brewster and Mrs. Donovan, ignored Mazie in favor of Alice, and was increasingly dictatorial in his dealings with Cecily.

At last she could stand it no longer. "I prefer," she told him one morning, "to take my orders from Mrs. Marburg."

"I'm not giving orders. I'm simply saying that I don't approve of your spoiling Mazie and Mrs. Donovan. People of their class are easily spoiled by familiarity."

"They're not spoiled. They couldn't be."

He passed over that. "There's another thing, Miss Merryman, that I have against them. They're keeping in touch with Blair Marburg. A letter came from him the other day to Mrs. Donovan."

"He wrote her about some books he wanted sent on."

"He probably wrote of other things as well. And I won't have it! There are other housekeepers and other nurses. Mazie and her mother are not indispensable."

She looked at him, aghast. "Surely you wouldn't let them go?"

"I would. I'd make a clean sweep of all the servants if I thought it necessary. And I shall, if things continue to go on this way. I might even remind you, Miss Merryman, that a companion may outlive her usefulness."

Cecily restrained herself with difficulty. Why should she submit to his insolence? Yet—Gaywood must be saved for Blair!

With a flush staining her cheeks, she said, "I shall try to remember," and went away, feeling, as she told Mrs. Donovan and Mazie later, "like a worm in the dust."

After that the three of them met only when Alice and Mark were safely out of the way. Alice's absences were frequent and often coincident with Mark's. The assumption was that the two of them were together.

The climax came when Mark arranged to have Alice eat with Cecily, Mazie, and himself in the terrace dining-room. Cecily had evidently ceased to be the superlative attraction. The house was gloomy enough in all conscience, Mark argued, and Alice, with her florid beauty, her gay wisecracks, her infectious laughter, relieved the tenseness of the situation. One must, of course, wait patiently for what one wanted. When the right time came, he would fill Gaywood with people like Alice—carefree and laughter-loving and gorgeous good company. Alice meant all that to him, and more.

Chapter Twenty-Three

You Can't Escape Me

Peter was back in Hollywood in time for Easter. The South American trip had left him drained of everything but a sense of futility. He had been wined and dined, run after for autographs, fallen in love with by feminine fans. He was Peter Chilton, whose books had been translated into Spanish, and whose screen plays had needed no translating.

He sent Cecily at Easter a mantilla that he had bought in Rio. Women were wearing them in Hollywood, and Cecily's fair face framed by the black lace would be a poet's dream. He wrote her a letter telling her that.

I can see the lace shading your lovely eyes, darling. Put it on and look at yourself in the mirror. That's the way I shall see you in my heart.

I saw Inez yesterday. I see her every day. She is homesick for you. And so am I! When I think of you in that gloomy house, when you might be riding with me on the desert—! It is wonderful now, with everything blooming. "And the desert shall blossom like a rose." That's out of the Bible, isn't it? You're my rose of the desert, Cissy, and I want you here—with the wind blowing your hair, and our horses pounding.

Cissy laid the letter down. The wind in her hair, and the horses pounding! How she wished for it, longed for it! Longed for Inez and the safe snugness

of the adobe hut. Here nothing was safe. Nothing!

She longed for her mother, for the old carefree days. But not for Peter! Nothing that he said of himself moved her. It was only when he spoke of the free life she loved.

She resumed her reading of the letter.

I've a lot of Hollywood people here on the ranch for the Easter week-end. I took them over yesterday to see your father's pictures. Inez gave us coffee and one of her cakes. There was a big movie producer in the crowd and he wants to buy three of the paintings. I put up the price, and it ought to make a nice nest egg for you if you want to sell. Let me know, and I'll get the check on to you.

And here's my last word, darling. You can't escape me. Or the desert. We are here, waiting for you. Don't make us wait too long.

Cecily wrote at once. She would sell the pictures. She needed the money, and there were other paintings that meant more to her.

You may send the check to me here. I may be leaving Gaywood, but mail will be forwarded.

I shall keep the mantilla because it would seem ungracious to send it back. But you mustn't do it again. I put it on in front of the mirror, and if that is the picture you carry in your heart, I'm sure it is disappointing. Mantillas don't belong to me. They belong to dark and stately ladies who wear big combs in their hair and roll their eyes! And that's the kind of woman you should marry. You'd make a stunning pair. So think about it, Peter. There are so many women in Hollywood who should wear the mantilla.

She kept her letter on that light note until it was ended, but as she addressed the envelope she found herself sobbing. She cried not so much from loneliness and longing as because of the fears which beset her.

And her fears were soon justified, for Mazie, white-faced and trembling, came to her the next morning. "He's told Mother and me to go!"

"To go?"

"Yes. I had an argument with Alice about Mrs. Marburg's bromides. They're giving her too many of them, and when I told that to Alice, she said it was Mr. Keating's orders. So I went to him, and he told me to mind my own business. When I said the doctor hadn't ordered so many given to her, he said I'd better find another place. And when I said, 'But I can't leave Mother,' he said, 'Then take her with you!' "

The girl was in tears. "I don't mind so much about myself, but it will break Mother's heart."

"He can't do a thing like that," Cecily said, flaming. "I'll speak to Mrs. Marburg. Surely she is mistress in her own house."

Mrs. Marburg, hearing the story, showed concern. "Of course they're not going. Mark must understand he can't discharge my servants. Donovan has been with me since I came here as a bride. She was with me when Blair was born. I'll speak to Mark. Will you ask him to come to my room at once?"

Cecily, going into Mark's office, gave the message. "Mrs. Marburg wants to see you."

He rose and gathered up his papers. "I'll get her to sign these. Is Alice with Mrs. Marburg?"

"No."

"Will you send her up, please? I shall need her as a witness to Mrs. Marburg's signature."

But Cecily did not tell Alice. What Mrs. Marburg had to say to Mark had better be said when they were alone.

She wandered into the great hall and stood looking out of the window. The Bay was golden with sunshine and the gulls were flashing silver wings above it. The forsythia on the lawn flaunted its yellow branches, and daffodils, like stars, dotted the green. All the world was ablaze with beauty, but Cecily saw the beauty through a mist of tears.

Mark Keating, coming down, crossed the room and stood beside her. "So you thought you could interfere?" he said harshly. "Well, let me tell you that the Donovans are leaving as soon as they can pack their belongings."

Cecily could not believe her ears. "Mrs. Marburg is willing?"

"Yes. Why not? I'm not going to have them snooping around, and I told her so."

By what spell put upon the poor lady Mark had managed it, no one ever knew. How she could forget the long and faithful service of Mrs. Donovan and her daughter and send them ignominiously out of the house seemed to Cecily incredible. But there it was, and Mark was saying, "If I should tell Mrs. Marburg that I saw you and Blair in Baltimore together, your own goose would be cooked. And I saw him kiss you! The snow and the umbrella made it difficult, to be sure, but something can be left to the imagination. Mrs. Marburg would be shocked beyond words if she knew of such

an—intrigue. She has trusted you. If she ever ceases to trust you, you will find that your usefulness as a companion is ended."

Cecily had all she could to control herself. She wanted to fling his words back in his face. To tell him that she was going at once away from Gaywood, and that he could tell Mrs. Marburg what he pleased.

But she was held back by two considerations—her pride, which made her unwilling to admit that she was beaten at the game which she and Mark had played so long, and her solicitude for Blair's mother, helpless in the hands of this unscrupulous beast. She felt that Blair should know. Yet if he knew, what then? There was nothing to be done as long as Mark held Mrs. Marburg's mind in bondage. He had made himself, at last, master of the house.

His manner to Brewster made the old man wince. But Brewster stayed on. Until he was ordered out, he would not leave his beloved mistress. Mike, the chauffeur, and old Crofts, the stableman, were also subjected to insults. At last Mike could stand it no longer.

"I won't submit to it," he told Cecily. "He can drive the cars himself. I tell you, Miss, you've got to look out for him. I'd stay on if it would do any good, but it won't. So I'm signing up with the Navy. It will be a nice change to get on the water. And you'd better be going yourself, Miss, if you know what's good for you."

Old Crofts, like Brewster, stayed on, awaiting the day when things would take a turn. "Our time will come," he told Brewster.

But things took a turn for old Crofts sooner than expected. And it all came about because of Mickey.

For Mickey was not happy. He missed Mrs. Donovan and he missed Mazie. The maid, Alice, and Mark Keating were constantly in his mistress's room, and when they were there, the door was shut against Mickey.

A day came when Mrs. Marburg asked Alice, "Where's Mickey? I haven't seen him this morning."

"Well, if you must know, Mrs. Marburg, the doctor thinks you're allergic to cat hairs."

"Oh, surely not!"

But when she asked Mark, she got the same response. "You're hurting your health by having him here."

Cecily, hearing the tale and not daring to protest, took Mickey to her own room and kept him with her as much as possible. But now and then he grew restless and went out to the stable loft.

The kittens were growing up and ventured at times down the loft steps to the room below. It was on one of these adventures that Mark kicked Cecily's favorite kitten, who got in his way, and broke her paw.

Old Crofts mended the paw and told Mark what he thought of him. "What would Mrs. Marburg say?" he demanded.

"There wouldn't be a cat around the place," Mark said, "if I had my way."

"And mice would be running over everything," Crofts told him. "How would Miss Alice like that, I wonder?"

Alice, who had come in and joined the two of them, gave a little scream. "I hate mice!"

"Well, you've got to have one or the other—cats or mice. That's the way of the world, isn't it? If the lion

lies down on his job, the jackal gets his chance. So you'd better let the cats alone, Mr. Keating. Especially the little ones. They can't defend themselves. Now if it was Mickey, he has claws, and he don't mind using them."

"Let him try to use them on me," Mark said darkly, "and he won't live to use them again."

The threat didn't mean much to anybody at the moment, but the day came when Mark met Mickey on the stairs outside of Mrs. Marburg's room, picked him up by the scruff of the neck, and threw him over the rail.

Mickey landed on his feet. He was unhurt, but raging. With ears flattened and tail waving, he crouched on the polished floor like a miniature lion.

"The animal's mad," Mark said to Brewster, and Brewster, not deigning to answer, gathered Mickey up under his arm and took him to Cecily.

"Mark Keating has got it in for him," he said, "and you'd better watch out."

Every night Cecily locked Mickey in her room, and one day she asked Mrs. Marburg, "Did the doctor say you were allergic to cat hairs?"

"No. But Mark told me, and Alice."

Alice, with her ear at the crack of the door, heard what was said and went to Mark. "I'll bet she's going to ask the doctor about Mickey."

"She won't have a chance. Come into my office. I've something to show you."

In the drawer of his desk was a shining, deadly little gun.

"When I use that," Mark said, "he'll never know what hit him."

And so it happened that at sunset on the same night, old Crofts, sitting somewhat back in the darkness of the stable, saw Mark stalking Mickey. What he was doing was unmistakable. Following the unconscious Mickey as he strayed through the garden, Mark's hand went now and then to his hip pocket, only to be withdrawn as Mickey was hidden behind a bush or leaped across a flower bed.

At last Mickey was still, on top of the low sea wall, where he was silhouetted against a silver sky.

It was then that Mark drew his gun and took aim, but before he could fire he was enveloped suddenly in darkness, and someone was saying, "You fool! A cat like that has nine lives. And you'd better give me that gun! I wouldn't trust you with it for one life, which is all a man like me has."

Mark, coming out from under the bushel basket with which old Crofts had crowned him, said, "So you sneaked up on me, did you? Well, let me tell you, I'll get Mickey yet. And you're not staying on as stableman. There are plenty who want your place."

"They may want it," said old Crofts calmly, "but they won't get it. I've served Mrs. Marburg since her husband first brought her here, and I'll serve her until she tells me with her own lips to get out." The eyes of the old man were clear and accusing.

Mark turned away, muttering.

And that night, old Crofts, with Cecily and Brewster conniving, took Mickey in the station wagon to join the Donovans in the new home they had made for themselves not far from Baltimore.

Chapter Twenty-Four

What Sins Have I?

The papers which Mark got Mrs. Marburg to sign gave him further powers in the handling of her securities.

Joshua Stabler, receiving them in his mail one morning, laid them before Blair. "Look here," he said. "There's your mother's signature. She must be mad to give everything she has into Keating's hands. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"Nothing but throw him out of the house," Blair said hotly. "Sometime I may do it."

"And have him sue you for assault?"

"But can't we prove something? Undue influence? You lawyers generally find a way, don't you?"

"Not in a case like this, where the person is in her right mind and under no apparent duress."

But Blair was not convinced. He began to study similar cases in which nurses and doctors had had last minute wills made in their favor, only to be broken by the courts; cases in which sinister influences had been traced and the victim released from bondage by wise and just decisions; cases which taught him respect for legal processes and made him for the first time aware of the intellect the good Lord had given him and the uses to which he might put it.

Unexpectedly he found interest and enjoyment in his work. He came to his desk gladly and left it reluctantly. He learned that heartache can be relieved

by persistent application. He learned that a man's job fulfills some of his needs, if not all of them. In work he forgot Cecily for a time. In work he gained the detachment which made it possible for him to go to Gypsy and patiently adjust himself to her demands. In work he found his resentments against his mother and father lost in his sense of the importance of his new activities. With work, in other words, he built a structure of mental strength which was comparable only to the strength of body which one gains by hard labor.

It was with something of a shock, therefore, that he had been brought back, one morning, to Gaywood and its affairs by a visit of Mrs. Donovan to his office. She was neatly dressed in black and wore a little black hat like a bonnet. But her face, which had been as round and rosy as an apple, was now gray with worry.

Blair said, "Donovan, you darling! Where did you come from?"

"From Gaywood, and I'm not going back."

"Not going back?"

"No, sir. Not me, nor Mazie. We've been discharged by Mark Keating."

"But surely Mother didn't consent?"

"She did, Mr. Blair. And that's what hurts—that she has let that snake influence her against us. Mazie would be here this morning, but she stayed to pack our things. I've such a lot of belongings after all these years. There's my big clock and my Windsor chairs and my nice English tea set."

"But where will you go, Donovan?"

"Well, that's what I came here to see you about. You remember that little stone house up near Ellicott

City that your grandfather left you?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"No one has lived in it since your great-aunt Margaret died, and I'm wondering if Mazie and I could rent it? Mazie's going to get a nursing job in Baltimore, and it would seem more like home to me than anything in the city." The tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I thought if we could have the house that Brewster could drive me up this afternoon in his car. This is his regular afternoon off, you know, and he always comes up to town on Fridays."

"Friday. Fish day for Brewster! Do you remember what a joke we always made about it, Donovan?"

"Yes. He never misses getting his crabs in summer and his oysters in winter at that old place on Fayette Street. I'm to have lunch with him there today."

"I'll join you," Blair said, but Mrs. Donovan shook her head.

"I'm afraid not, sir. Brewster wouldn't think it proper. He has such a perfect sense, if I may say it, of keeping to his place."

Blair laughed. "Perhaps you're right, but times are changing, Donovan. Some day the butlers will sit at table and their masters will serve them."

"It will be a poor sort of service to my way of thinking."

"Well, anyhow, I'm going to drive up with you to Ellicott City. I haven't seen the old place since I was a boy. I'd almost forgotten that I owned it."

"I hadn't forgotten, Mr. Blair. I remember going there once with your mother, when you were a baby. Your grandfather bought it for your Aunt Margaret,

who never married. Her furniture is still in it. I thought you might not mind if Mazie and I used it."

The ride to Ellicott City was short, and from the town they followed the line of the river to the small stone house, where the garden was a riot of early bloom. Blair had got the key from Joshua, who had charge of certain of Blair's small properties which yielded no income and were, financially, of little account.

Brewster, opening the doors and windows, said, "I shall envy Mrs. Donovan, sir. Gaywood is not what it used to be."

Blair asked, with a hint of hesitation, "Is Miss Merryman still there?"

"Yes, Mr. Blair."

"Does she, too, find it changed?"

"She often speaks of it. Of the day she came and how wonderful it was to her. She had always lived in little houses."

Mrs. Donovan was saying, "I wish you'd look at the way things have been kept, Mr Blair. Everything is as neat as a pin. The man out there in the vegetable garden looks after things in exchange for the use of a part of the ground for his own planting. There are several acres, and I must say it will be a lovely place to live."

It was a lovely place. Its chintzes were somewhat faded and its draperies needed renewing, but there was some of Aunt Margaret's old mahogany, old brasses for the fireplace, and plum-colored willow plates.

"You'll be as comfortable as a pussycat, Donovan," Blair said.

"I'd be happy enough, too, if it wasn't for thinking of your mother. There's no one to look after her now but Miss Merryman and Brewster, and the good Lord only knows how long it will be before they are pushed out. Brewster says he'd go anyhow if it wasn't for leaving your mother alone with Mr. Keating. He's trying to get control of everything, and he argues with your mother for hours. He's too shrewd to quarrel with her, but he is wearing her down."

Brewster drove Blair and Mrs. Donovan back to town, and Mrs. Donovan went to a quiet hotel to stay until Mazie came and they could go together to their new quarters.

Blair, going up that night to see Gypsy, told her, "Mark is playing his game with a high hand."

"Why don't you do something about it?"

"Joshua says there's nothing to be done as long as Mother is in her right mind."

"Is Miss Merryman still there?"

"Yes."

"I should think she'd hate it. But perhaps she likes Mark, and now that he's getting control of the money, he'll be a good catch."

Blair laughed. It was a waste of emotion to flare up at the things Gypsy said in these days. Her nerves, poor girl, were on the ragged edge.

"Mark wouldn't be a catch for anybody," he said.

"A man with money is always a catch."

"No matter what he is?"

"Well, Mark's good-looking."

"Looks and money. What else, darling?"

"He must have brains or he couldn't have fooled

your mother."

Blair said, "Let's talk about something less unpleasant than Mark."

"I like to talk about unpleasant things. People always think they must feed a sick person with 'sugar and spice and everything nice,' like the little girls in the nursery rhyme. And I'm not a Pollyanna. I'm not glad because I have a broken leg. I'm not thanking the Lord that He put me to bed for a while so that I might dwell on my sins. What sins have I, Blair, that I should be punished like this?"

"Don't, Gypsy!"

"Answer my question. What sins have I?"

She was working herself into a fit of hysteria. She had done it before and had ended up by wild crying, with Blair soothing her like a child in his arms.

He laid his hand now upon her own. "You have no sins for punishment," he said, "and God is not to blame. Whatever blame there was, I have taken upon myself. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know it. And I know you asked me to marry you because you're making restitution. You don't love me. You're just doing penance!"

"Hush!" he said. "If you don't control yourself, I'll leave you."

He spoke with some sternness. He had found in his dealings with her that when she was on the verge of a scene, she would be at once quieted by his threat to go away. She wanted him with her, demanded, indeed, that he spend every evening at her bedside.

She tried to smile at him and there was something pitiful in the effort. "Don't be cross."

"My dear, I'm not cross. It's only that you hurt yourself and me when you talk about punishment. And now let's forget it all, and I'll beat you at a game of backgammon."

Night after night he played backgammon with her. They had learned the game together, and Blair enjoyed it. When they did not play, Gypsy grew restless. Sometimes Blair sang for her. When there was neither backgammon nor songs, Gypsy would say, "Hold me in your arms," and he would lift her carefully from her pillows so that she might lean against him. And she would say, "Let's pretend that you love me."

She said it tonight, but something—perhaps some hint of reluctance in his manner—made her suddenly withdraw from him. "Go away! Go away!" she said. "You don't love me!" And she broke into wild crying.

He tried to soothe her, and, failing, called the nurse. He blamed himself for Gypsy's outburst, blamed himself because he could not play more perfectly his part as lover.

He went away that night wondering what would happen tomorrow. What usually happened was that he sent her flowers and was received when he went again with a forgiving kiss. He could not afford the flowers he sent, but he denied himself in many ways, and the discipline was good for him.

He went back to his room and read the evening paper. There was a long article about aviation. He longed for the freedom of the upper air, to sail straight toward the moon at its rising or toward the

sun at its setting. It might end in death, but death was not the worst thing that could happen to a man. He might lose that in living which made life stretch ahead like a trackless desert.

He remembered what Cecily had said of the desert, of its incredible beauty, its charm. She had told him of the days on horseback, of the nights under the stars. They had spoken of a honeymoon in the little adobe hut, with Inez baking her crisp loaves and, perhaps, a bride's cake for their feasting. They had dreamed together, but now there was no dreaming. His life was dedicated to a crippled child. He must not look back, but forward.

The next morning at the office he found Joshua Stabler in a perturbed mood. "Mark Keating has asked for a conference. Tonight. He's coming to my club."

"Why couldn't he come to your office?"

"He says it's impossible for him to get away during the day. He's planning to spend the night in Baltimore and can see me at eight. I won't have him in my home, so I asked him to the club. He wants to consult me about the transfer of some securities."

"I'd like to wring his neck."

"There should be some better way," Joshua said thoughtfully. "If you could see your mother—"

"Not a chance. Mark's always there."

"He won't be there tonight."

Blair's voice was quick. "You mean I might go down?"

"Yes. Whom has she with her?"

"Brewster and Miss Merryman."

"Who is Miss Merryman?"

"Mother's companion."

"Is she to be trusted?"

"Yes."

"Then surely she and Brewster can make it possible for you to see your mother alone. You must tell her what you and I both know—she must get rid of Mark Keating or he will ruin her and rob her."

"I've told her that, Joshua, but she won't believe me."

"Tell her again."

Blair, flushed and excited, said, "I'll do it. By the time Mark reaches Baltimore, I'll be at Gaywood. I'll take the Marlborough Road. I wouldn't want to run the chance of meeting him on the highway."

Blair's start was delayed by Gypsy's demands on him. A few minutes before he left the office, she called him up.

"Darling, your roses are here, and it was sweet of you to send them after the way I acted. I want you to dine with me tonight and I'll say I'm sorry."

"Gypsy dear, I can't come."

"Can't come?" sharply. "But why?"

"It's a business matter."

"I didn't know you did business at night."

"Sometimes."

"But for dinner—surely, darling! I'll let you go as soon as you have your coffee. And I *must* see you."

"May I come early?"

"At six."

And so it was settled.

The table was set in Gypsy's sitting-room and her invalid's chair had been brought up to it. She sat at the foot, with Blair at the head, with his roses between

them. Gypsy, in soft and flowing yellow, had one of the roses tucked in her hair.

"How pretty you are," Blair told her.

She flushed with pleasure, then laughed. "I've been a hateful pig. I don't see how you can say nice things to me."

"Skip it!" Blair said, and laughed with her.

The dinner was delicious, a man's good dinner, with filet mignon, and mushrooms, and Camembert at the end. Gypsy ate little.

They had their coffee on a little balcony which overlooked the walled garden of the old Tyson place.

"I used to climb that wall when I was a child," Gypsy said wistfully. "I shall never climb it again."

"Don't!"

"Oh, I didn't mean it, darling. It just slipped out." She lifted his hand and laid her cheek against it. He caught the scent of the rose in her hair. And after a little she whispered, "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

She was a charming child. Charming. His heart was, for the moment, filled with tenderness. Then she did a thing that in a flash wiped out the softness of his mood and hardened him into resistance.

She brought out from a bag which hung on the arm of her chair a little box. "It's a present for both of us, darling!"

In the box were two identical rings—wide bands of dull gold, intricately carved.

Blair said doubtfully, "You mean we are to wear them?"

"Yes. Engaged people do, don't they?"

"Do they? I gave you an engagement ring, Gypsy. Do you need another?"

"This has nothing to do with the other. Don't you see, these two link us in a mystical way together?"

She lifted his hand again and put the ring on his finger. "Will you wear it always, darling?"

"I shall not wear it at all," he said, slipping the ring from his finger.

"Why not?" Her voice should have warned him.

"Because I can't have you giving me things, Gypsy. Can't you see? Perhaps I'm wrong, but I want to do the giving. It's a man's place, isn't it?"

She put the rings back in the box. "Of course, if that's the way you feel about it." Her face was wet with tears.

"Oh, I'm a brute." He drew her toward him. "I'm a brute. Of course I'll wear the ring. It was only that I've never had to take things, Gypsy, and it isn't easy now."

It was late before Blair got away. He had left Gypsy soothed and satisfied, but in his own soul raged a storm which matched the storm he met on the Marlborough Road.

All that evening as he had sat on the balcony with Gypsy there had been flashes of lightning and the low roll of thunder. And now the wind had come and trees were bending before it. Branches were twisted and fell with a crash on the highway. Presently came the deluge and the rain in sheets turned the road into a river. Blair reflected that if the storm continued it would be midnight before he reached Gaywood.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Don't Leave Me Alone

On the afternoon of that same day Mrs. Marburg had said to Cecily, "Put on another record, Miss Merryman."

"What would you like?"

"The one about the moping mum."

Cecily adjusted the needle and the music began. *"It's the song of the merrymaid, peerly proud—"*

"Blair used to sing that."

"Yes. You told me."

"Sometimes I wish—" The voice died away.

"Wish what?"

"That things had been different."

"You mean you wish your son were here?"

"Yes. Perhaps I haven't been fair to him. Perhaps if he were here, I wouldn't be afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes." Mrs. Marburg raised herself on her pillow. "Where's Alice?"

"She went down for your tea. Shall I call her?"

"No. I don't want her to hear what I'm saying. I don't trust her, Miss Merryman."

"Why did you let Mazie go?"

"Because Mark didn't like her or her mother."

"They had been with you so long. Why should you let Mr. Keating's likes or dislikes influence you?"

"I don't know. I don't know!" pitifully. "But some-

how when he is with me he makes me see things his way."

Cecily sat down beside the bed. "Dear Mrs. Marburg, Mark Keating is not to be trusted any more than Alice. Won't you believe that?"

"Why should I believe it?"

"Because it's true. I think in your heart you know it's true. That's why you're afraid."

Mrs. Marburg was rocking back and forth in her bed. "I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do! I miss Donovan and I miss Mazie. I shouldn't have let them go. I shouldn't! There's no one here now but you and Brewster. You'll stay with me, Miss Merryman? Don't leave me alone with Alice."

Cecily said, "Hush! I won't leave you. And now I'll fix up your pillow and we'll play another verse of the moping mum."

Again the music—the memories of Blair, the tightening of Cecily's heart as she thought of the shadows that were gathering over Gaywood. She herself was afraid. Mark and Alice! Mark and Alice!

Alice came in now with the tea. "Put it here," Cecily told her and indicated the low table in front of her. "I'll pour for Mrs. Marburg and you can come back for the tray."

"Mr. Keating said I was to pour. He wants to speak to you, Miss Merryman."

"Very well." Cecily rose and leaned over the invalid. "I'll be back in time to read your evening paper."

Mark was having his own tea in front of the fireplace in the great hall. "Pour a cup for yourself, Miss

Merryman. There are some things I want to talk about."

"So Alice said."

Brewster came in with hot toast and marmalade, and Mark, helping himself lavishly, began: "I'm going up to Baltimore tonight and I've let Alice off for the evening. You'll sleep in Mrs. Marburg's room, of course."

"Then Alice won't be back until morning?"

"She asked for the night off. There's illness in her family. She doesn't often ask for extra time, so I'm letting her have it."

He spoke then to Brewster, who was bringing in small frosted cakes. He repeated that he was going up to Baltimore for the night and that Alice had been called away by illness. "Miss Merryman will sleep in Mrs. Marburg's room. I shall depend upon you to look after things, Brewster. I'll give you my telephone number in case Mrs. Marburg needs me."

Brewster said, "Very good, sir," then passed the cakes and withdrew.

Mark Keating said, "I'm going to see Joshua Stabler. Mrs. Marburg has signed papers which instruct him to hand over certain securities. I understand Mrs. Marburg and she trusts me. I should not like to have that trust undermined by anyone. Not even by you, Miss Merryman. I got rid of Mazie and her mother because they were not loyal. Of late I have feared I might have to let you go. I shouldn't like to do it, but it may be necessary."

"I hope you won't think it necessary. Mrs. Marburg's nervous state is critical. She likes to have me

with her, and Alice is not sufficiently experienced to act as nurse. I would suggest that you get someone who will obey the doctor's orders and not use her own judgment in the giving of medicines."

"You need not tell me what I must do, Miss Merryman. I shall look after Mrs. Marburg's interests in every way. There is no reason why you should be concerned about the matter."

He had eaten two of the tea cakes, spreading one of them with jam. The change in him since Cecily's coming was startling. He had been then like a lean young wolf, scenting afar off the savor of future feasts. He was now that wolf grown fat with good feeding and licking his chops with the satisfaction of it.

"If in the days to come I find no reason to doubt your loyalty, I'll add a bonus to your pay."

"I do not want a bonus," Cecily said hotly. "Why should I ask pay for loyalty to a mistress that I love?"

"Beggars, my dear young lady, can't be choosers," Mark said brutally, and laughed aloud as Cecily left him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It's a Long Time, Merrymaid

Mark left the house at five, and in fifteen minutes Alice followed.

"He's probably waiting for her down the road," Brewster told Cecily. "She was dressed up, if I may say it, Miss Merryman, like a Christmas tree, and she was off her head with excitement. It's my guess that they're going to be married."

"You think it has gone as far as that, Brewster?"

"I think it has gone so far, Miss, that marriage is the only answer."

The two of them were together in the great hall.

"I'll have dinner with Mrs. Marburg when she wakes, Brewster. She's sleeping too long and too heavily. It may be that Alice gave her a bromide in her tea. They were alone for a few minutes."

"But what reason would they have for giving it at this hour?"

"To keep her confused and dazed so that she won't talk too much to me while they're away. Mr. Keating has warned me that I may go next. He accused me of disloyalty. He doesn't know the meaning of loyalty, and neither does Alice."

Brewster said, "You'd better have your dinner now. Mrs. Marburg may not wake for a long time."

"I'm not hungry."

But when Brewster pressed his point, she finally con-

sented, and felt refreshed by the good food. Cook was still in the kitchen, but two new maids, Ruth and Flora, had been hired when Alice was promoted to nurse Mrs. Marburg. There was no housekeeper to succeed Mrs. Donovan, and Brewster's authority was curtailed.

It was after dinner that lightning flashed over the Bay. There was the sighing of wind in the trees, and the distant sound of thunder. The maid who came for Cecily's tray said, "I don't like storms, Miss Merryman. I've always lived in the city. I'm going to sleep in Ruth's room, and Cook says she'll leave her door open so we can come in if we're afraid. She says the storms down here are dreadful—with the noise and everything."

"There's nothing really to be afraid of, Flora. A little wind and rain won't hurt anybody."

But Flora was not convinced. "I don't like this house anyway, and I'm not staying. Neither is Ruth. We'll wait till our week is up and then leave. We don't like Mr. Keating bossing us—and that maid, Alice! She acts as if she owned the place."

When Flora was gone, Cecily reflected that the time might come when Alice would be mistress instead of Mrs. Marburg. Nothing could save Mrs. Marburg now but Blair.

Blair!

In a flash she saw what might be done if it were done quickly. Mark was in Baltimore. If Blair could be reached, he could come to Gaywood and, with Mark away, might take possession. Mark couldn't turn him out. Not if Mrs. Marburg was willing to let

him stay. And might she not be willing since she feared Mark and Alice?

She went downstairs and found Brewster counting the silver and locking it up for the night. "Come into the library," she told him. "I've got to talk to you."

With the door shut and secure from the ears of the listening maids, she told Brewster what she wanted. "It's our chance to get Mr. Marburg here. I want you to call him at his apartment, and if he isn't there, at his club. If he isn't there, try Miss Tyson's. Tell him he is needed at once. That Mark Keating is away and that it's important."

Brewster's fine thin face was lighted. "God grant we may find him."

But Blair was not to be found. At the Tysons' it was said he had come and gone. He had not been to the club, and there was no answer when Brewster tried to reach him at his apartment.

Reporting all this to Cecily as they stood outside Mrs. Marburg's door, Brewster said, "Even if we could reach him, Miss Merryman, I doubt if he could get here. The storm's terrible."

"I know. Yet in spite of the noise Mrs. Marburg is still sleeping. I tried to rouse her so that she might have her dinner, but she just murmured something and went to sleep again. Oh, Brewster, what are we going to do about it? It's all so dreadful." Her voice shook.

And Brewster said, "I think, Miss Merryman, if we leave it to the Lord—"

And Cecily said, "You're a good man, Brewster."

And Brewster said, in his stiff way, "It's God's good-

ness that I lean upon."

The storm was shaking the house as Cecily went back into Mrs. Marburg's room. Only a low light was burning, and with the invalid quiet in the bed, the rain washing against the windows, and the sound of the waves bounding, Cecily was aware of a shivering sense of terror. She didn't want to be shut in with the storm and that sleeping woman.

She opened the door and went to the head of the stairs. One lamp shed a pale glow over the piano; the rest of the great hall was dark with shadows. Brewster was, she knew, taking what rest he could in Mrs. Donovan's little sitting-room. The bell in Mrs. Marburg's room would call him at once. But she did not call him.

She had put on the pink dressing-gown in which he had seen her on that first night when he called her Mélisande. She had brushed her hair into little feathered curls on the top of her head. The gown and the curls were a part of her nightly routine.

Presently she would go back and lie on the couch in Mrs. Marburg's room and try to compose herself. But not yet—

She sat down on the stairs and listened to the storm.

And so it happened that when Blair came she was asleep on the stairs; Brewster was asleep in the housekeeper's room; and there was no one—not even a cat—to welcome him.

Blair had let himself in with his own key. He was drenched by the storm, and cold and hungry. But he did not think of these things. He thought only of Cecily. He had come to save his mother, and he had

no right to think of Cecily since he was to marry Gypsy. But think of her he did and of no other as he stood there in the great hall, with the pale light on his piano and the rest of the room in shadow.

But there was another light at the top of the stairs. A light which fell on a bright head with feathered curls, on a pink robe that he remembered, on a relaxed figure leaning back against the rail.

He spoke softly, "Mélisande!"

She opened her eyes and said, "Darling," sleepily. And then in a moment, wide-awake, she came swiftly down to him.

She was trembling. "How did you get here?"

"By car. The storm delayed me. Mark told Joshua that he was coming up to Baltimore, and it seemed my chance to come down."

"Brewster said, 'Leave it to God!' "

"Leave what?"

"We tried everywhere to get you, to tell you to come because Mark was away. And your mother needs you. She's beginning to be afraid of Mark—of being left alone with him when everyone else has been sent away."

"But you're still here."

"Mark wants to get rid of me."

She had drawn her hands away, but he put his arm around her as they went down the stairs together. And she let him do it. She was weak from surprise and excitement. She needed his strength to lean on. As for Gypsy, Blair would be hers for the rest of his life. He might give to Cecily this little moment.

When they reached the piano, he bent and kissed

her. "It's a long time, Merrymaid."

She knew what he meant—a long time since they had stood there together.

"I was a fool!"

"You mean, about Peter?"

"Yes."

"We mustn't think about it. We must never think about it."

"Because of Gypsy?"

"Yes."

She rang the bell then for Brewster, and when the old man came, she said, "You see, God brought him, Brewster."

While Blair explained why he had come, Brewster built up the fire, took Blair's wet coat, and went away to get sandwiches and coffee. "You'll need something to warm you up, sir."

"What I need," Blair said when Brewster had gone, "is what I have here." He touched Cecily's feathered curls with a light finger. "Do you remember? I fell in love with you at first sight. Or perhaps it was second sight, when I brought Gypsy to your room that night. It was a new heaven and a new earth—and I've thrown it all away!" He was looking down at her with his heart in his eyes. "I'm trying to see life straight, Merrymaid, but it's not an easy thing to do."

"No," she said, "it's not easy. But if we start by seeing it crooked, it will be crooked to the end."

She moved away from him and sat down by the fire. "As soon as you've had your coffee, we'll go up to your mother."

"Tell me about her."

So Cecily told him all that had happened since Mrs. Donovan and Mazie had been sent away. She told him of Mark's increasing demands and of Mrs. Marburg's fear of Alice.

"Mark took Alice with him tonight to Baltimore. Before she went, she gave your mother an overdose of bromide. She is still sleeping from the effects of it."

Blair said, "I'll stay until tomorrow morning and kick Mark out."

"You can't kick him out if your mother wants him to stay."

"But why should she want him?"

"He has made her think no one else can manage her affairs. But her feeling for him has changed since he got rid of Mrs. Donovan and Mazie. She hates Alice, and clings to me more than ever."

Blair said, "If we could get her away from here."

"Where could she go?"

"To Donovan, at Ellicott City."

Cecily was not sanguine. "She'll never consent to leave Gaywood."

"We might convince her that if she can leave Mark behind, her fears will vanish."

Brewster came in then with the coffee and sandwiches. He served them, then went upstairs to sit near the door of Mrs. Marburg's room to be at hand if she waked.

But she did not wake, and when Blair went up with Cecily, she was sleeping quietly with her hand under her cheek.

Blair bent down to her. "Mother, darling."

There was a flicker of a smile, but she did not open

her eyes.

He said again, "Mother."

"Darling," she said sleepily, "darling, I'm so glad you've come!" and drifted off again.

Blair said desperately, "We must keep her awake long enough to tell her what we want to do."

"If we could get her to drink some coffee—" Cecily called Brewster and sent him for it.

When it came, Blair lifted his mother on her pillows. "Wake up, Sleepyhead."

"Is it morning?"

"No. But Brewster has brought your coffee."

She opened her eyes. "Blair! Where did you come from?"

"I motored down."

"In all this storm?"

"It's all over now. And I wanted to see you. I've brought you a message from Donovan. She hopes I can persuade you to visit her."

"Visit her? Where?"

"She's living in Aunt Margaret's house near Ellicott City. You remember? The one with the garden? Where you spent week-ends with me when I was a baby."

"I remember. It was a happy time."

"It's wonderful in this spring weather. And you can have Aunt Margaret's room on the first floor and look out on the river."

"Don't be silly, Blair. I can't leave Gaywood."

"Why not?"

"Mark wouldn't hear of it."

"Do you have to do the things Mark tells you?"

"No. But he would argue with me till I was tired and then Alice would give me a bromide."

Blair flashed a glance at Cecily and met her look of understanding.

"That's why I want to get you away. So that Mazie can take care of you."

"Mark wouldn't like it," fretfully. "And it's a crazy plan."

"It's not crazy," he said earnestly, "to want you to get away long enough to realize what Mark is doing to you and to the estate. Joshua and I hear that he is speculating wildly. With your money! It's all wrong, Mother, and you must believe me. I have the evidence that will show what Mark has done to you. I've been working on it for weeks. I want you to go with me now, before Mark gets back and makes it hard for you."

"You mean I'm to go tonight?"

"Yes. Why not? I motored down, and Brewster will drive you and Cecily to Mrs. Donovan's. I'll stay here and meet Mark. He can't turn me out of your house. It's still your house, isn't it, Mother?"

"Yes," she said, and her eyes were lighted with sudden resolution. "It's mine. And you can tell him so!" She lifted herself on her pillows. "I want to go," she said feverishly, "before Alice comes. She's a dreadful girl, Blair, and Mark's in love with her."

Cecily, startled, said, "You knew?"

"I'm not a fool!" She waved her hand toward the door. "Run along, Blair, and let Cecily get me into my clothes. I'd like to see Alice's face when she comes back and finds me gone."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Game Is Up—

In the kitchen at Gaywood curiosity ran high.

"Mr. Marburg's here for breakfast," Flora had told Ruth when she waked her at seven.

Cook had found a note from Brewster. "He's gone up to town with Mrs. Marburg and Miss Merryman. Went in the middle of the night, if you please. He'll be back at nine, but Mr. Marburg wants his breakfast at eight."

"He's giving orders instead of Mr. Keating?"

"Why shouldn't he give orders? It's his mother's house, isn't it?"

"You'd think it was Mr. Keating's by the way he acts. But there's something queer about it."

"About what?"

"Mrs. Marburg's going off like that when she's been so ill she couldn't lift her head from the pillow."

"I wonder what Mr. Keating will say about it?"

Still busy with their surmises, the maids demanded of Cook when they came to the kitchen, "What's it all about?"

"Nothing that's your affair. Your business is to do your work and not ask questions. Mr. Blair wants his breakfast served on the terrace. I've been out and picked some strawberries and I'm giving him bacon and eggs."

A little later, Flora, having served Blair in a flutter

of excitement, returned to the kitchen and delivered an opinion. "I must say he's better-looking than Mr. Keating and has better manners."

"Why shouldn't he have better manners?" Cook demanded. "He was born to them."

Blair, on the terrace with his good breakfast before him and with a fresh breeze blowing over the blue waters of the Bay, felt a sense of exhilaration that dispelled somewhat the shadows of the night. He had slept little after his mother's departure. He had, indeed, lingered for a time in the great hall, seeing Cecily —standing by the piano in a circle of light; on the stairs in that first moment of meeting; by the fire, her face upturned to his as they walked together. He would always see her thus in his heart, though distance might divide them.

He finished his breakfast, went into the house, and sat down at the piano. As he had so often done, he found an outlet for the storminess of his mood in the crashing chords of a musical masterpiece. The thunder of his playing went out through the open windows and reached the ears of Mark Keating as he drove up with Alice in a bright roadster.

When he had parked the car, Mark stood with his foot on the running-board and listened. "It's Blair Marburg," he said at last. "What in Hades is he doing here?"

Alice had no words with which to reply. She was, indeed, nervous and ill at ease. Last night in Baltimore she had been married. She couldn't even now believe it. Mark had told her she was to be mistress of Gaywood, and when she had said, "Quit your fooling!" he

had explained.

"The old lady will do what I tell her and we'll get rid of Miss Merryman. Then who will there be except me to give orders?"

"I'll like taking orders from you," she had said with quick breath. "I never liked it before, but I shall now."

He had kissed her then and had called himself a lucky man. He was aware, of course, that she wasn't the type that in his sober senses he would have chosen. He was ambitious and had wanted a woman of somewhat higher station. But he was madly in love with Alice and nothing else had counted. He would teach her the things she didn't know, dress her in the fashion that suited her spectacular beauty, and show her proudly to the world.

The music still thundered.

"You'd better go up to your room," Mark said, "while I find out what's happened."

"You said you'd tell everybody at once that we were married."

"This isn't the moment," Mark said. "Run along and get into your uniform."

"My uniform?" flushing. "I thought I wasn't ever going to wear one again."

"I don't want to be making explanations. Not until I dispose of Blair. So do as I tell you."

Brewster, having arrived half an hour in advance of Mark, had reported to Blair the safe arrival at the Donovan cottage. "Your mother went to bed at once and fell asleep with her hand in Mrs. Donovan's. She said she was at peace at last."

"We'll all be at peace when we get Mark out of Gay-

wood," Blair said. "I wonder what he'll think when he finds me here?"

"He'll be up to some of his tricks," Brewster said. "You'd better watch out, sir."

He went then upstairs to change his clothes and from the windows saw Mark's car when it arrived. Going down to meet it, he was at once aware of Mark's dark mood.

"How did Blair Marburg get here?"

"He came last night by motor."

"Did he see his mother?"

"Yes."

"He's got his nerve," Mark said, and hurried to the house and into the great hall where the music still thundered.

The thunder ceased as Blair lifted his eyes from the keys. "Hello!" he said, and stood up.

Mark said, "Where did you come from?"

"Baltimore," succinctly.

Mark's laugh was not pleasant to hear. "You thought with the cat away, the mouse could play?"

"I thought it a good chance to see my mother."

"I hope she was not upset by your visit."

"On the contrary! And you may be interested, Mark, to know that I sent her up last night to stay indefinitely with the Donovans."

Mark said, stammering, "You—sent her away?"

"Yes."

"And she was willing to go?"

"Of course. I'm not a kidnaper. She was glad to go because she was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of you and Alice."

"Nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense. You've overreached yourself, Mark—grown too certain. Joshua Stabler and I have been looking into things. If my mother should demand an explanation of her affairs, the result wouldn't be exactly creditable to you!"

"She won't demand an investigation."

"Why not?"

"I think I can convince her that all you want is her money. That's what you're after, isn't it?"

"What I'm after is to get you out of Gaywood. The game is up, Mark. I've been digging into this thing, and before I get through, you're going to give back to Mother that power of attorney you got from her. You've been speculating with her funds and lining your own pockets with the profits."

"Look out!" said Mark darkly. "You can't say things to me like that."

"I shall say what I please. You're a crook and a liar and you don't dare deny it."

"I do deny it," Mark said, and his face was white as paper, "and if you think you can get me out of Gaywood, you have another think coming."

"I could put you out now," Blair told him. "You're not a match for me with your fists, but I might do things to you that would get me into court. I have other weapons and I shall use them. For years you've been carrying tales to my mother. This house has never had a ghost, but I'm sure if I ever come again to Gaywood, yours will haunt it—standing on the stairs and leaning down and listening"

"Oh, come off!" Mark said, and shifted his glance to the shadowy flight that went to the galleries. "I'm not afraid of you or your ghosts."

"You lie!" said Blair easily. "You're shaking in your shoes this minute. And let me tell you this—that I shall follow you like a hound till you hand over that power of attorney to me. When I get it, I'll let the investigation drop and not prosecute. I'll give you ten minutes to think about it. Yes or no. And it had better be yes, if you know what's good for you."

Then, not waiting for an answer, he again sat down at the piano and ran his fingers over the keys. With his head thrown back, he began to play—not stormily this time, but lightly—the song of the merrymaid, peerly proud. He hummed it under his breath, while Mark stared at him and wondered.

His wonder lasted until Blair stood up. "Well?"

Mark said sullenly, "You win. I'll get the papers."

Upstairs Alice was waiting. "They told me in the kitchen that Mrs. Marburg had gone. What's happened, Mark? What's happened?"

"This has happened," he told her. "Blair Marburg is down there and is ordering me off the place. I've half a mind to kill him—"

"But you can't," Alice said wildly. "Not with me your wife." Her arms were about his neck. "What do I care about Gaywood? It's you I want, darling."

His tenseness relaxed. "You're a good girl, Alice," he said, and kissed her. "Now pack up our things and go down and wait for me in the car. We must be getting out of here or Blair will kick us out. I can't say that I'll be sorry to leave."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

You're in Love With Her, Aren't You?

Gypsy Tyson, having smoked one cigarette after another, opened a fresh pack and demanded of her mother, "Why should I put up with it?"

"With what?"

"Blair hasn't been here for three nights. What does he think I'm doing? Tied to this chair, and waiting and waiting—?"

"Why do you limit your life to waiting, Gypsy? You could easily have other young people in. Bubbles and Viola would be glad to come for an evening of contract, with some man to make the fourth."

"What man?"

"You know dozens who would jump at the chance."

"I don't want dozens. I want Blair."

"But he's busy, darling, trying to straighten out his mother's estate."

"He isn't too busy to see Cecily Merryman."

"Cecily Merryman? His mother's companion?"

"Yes. She's with Mrs. Marburg at Ellicott City and Blair goes out every day. I'll bet he's there tonight. He used to go around with her. People I know saw them together. I sometimes think he cares more for her than he does for me."

"Don't be silly, darling."

"I'm not. But why does he stay away when I want him so much?" She began to sob hysterically, pulling

at her handkerchief with nervous fingers. "Oh, Mother, sometimes I wish I were dead. Sometimes I wish the accident had killed me." She stopped suddenly as Blair appeared in the doorway.

"Hi there, Gypsy! What's the matter with you?"

She sat up, wiping her eyes. "I was low in my mind," she said shakily.

"You must cheer her up," Mrs. Tyson told him. "And I'll run along."

Alone with Gypsy, Blair bent down and kissed her. She put her arms about his neck. "Love me?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wonder."

"Stop wondering." He dropped a small box, tied with yellow ribbon, into her lap. "Sweets to the sweet, Gypsy."

Within the box were the crisp nut candies that she loved. With her tears dried, she sampled them. "You were a darling to bring them."

She was, he reflected, like a pretty child as she bent over the box, her dark hair banded with a yellow ribbon, the yellow roses he had sent the day before on the table beside her.

As if she read his thought, she said suddenly, "You're always giving me things, all except the thing I want most!"

He knew what she meant, but tried to evade the issue. "Tell me what it is," he said lightly, "and I'll try to get it for you."

"I want more of your time, darling. It's been three days—"

"You knew I would come if I could. We've been

having Mark on the mat, and the whole thing is a mess. We can't do much because Mother was in her right mind when she agreed to let him make her investments. We may have to lose Gaywood."

"But what will your mother do?"

"Stay with Donovan for a time, then take an apartment in town. There's nothing settled, of course. There can't be until we see what's left of the estate. It may be poor pickings for all of us. It's one of the things I have to talk with you about—that you may have to marry a poor man."

"I have plenty of money."

"It's not easy for a man to live on his wife's money."

She flared, "Are you trying to get out of it?"

"Out of what?"

"Marrying me? If you are, say so."

He stared at her. "Darling, have you lost your mind?"

"No, but I will lose it if I lie here day after day wondering and wondering."

"About what?"

"Whether you're with Cecily Merryman."

Again he stared at her. "Cecily?"

"Yes. You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Out of the silence that followed, he said, "My dear, let's settle this once and for all. I'm going to marry you and Cecily Merryman knows it. She's not the kind of girl to take away what belongs to another woman."

Gypsy reached out a thin little hand to him and he took it. "I can't give you up," she said, with quick-drawn breath. "You're all I have. And when we're married, I'll make you love me."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Men Like a Change

It was three days after her talk with Blair that Gypsy wrote a note to Cecily: *I must see you at once. Will you have a cup of tea with me on Monday?* And, as a postscript, *Please don't speak of this to Blair.*

Cecily answered that she would come at four. As the time approached, she found herself agitated and uncertain. She didn't want to see Gypsy. She didn't want, indeed, to talk about Blair, and that was, of course, what Gypsy wanted.

She made the excuse for going to town that she had shopping to do and Mazie drove her in. They were to meet at five and go home together. Cecily took a taxi from one of the shops and, arriving at the great Tyson mansion, was shown at once upstairs to where Gypsy, in her invalid's chair, with a yellow ribbon about her hair, looked young and pretty.

She spoke in a formal voice. "It was good of you to come."

"It was good of you to ask me."

"Perhaps you won't think so when you hear what I have to say." Gypsy lighted a cigarette with nervous fingers. "Tea or a cocktail?"

"Tea, please."

"Oh, yes, I remember. You don't drink. You wouldn't drink with me that night when Blair brought me to your room. I didn't know then that he was going

to fall in love with you."

Cecily started to speak, but stopped as a maid came in with a tray and glasses.

"Tea for Miss Merryman," Gypsy said, "and the same for me. Doctor's orders. He's taken all the joy out of living."

Cecily tried to speak with casualness: "It was my first night at Gaywood. I thought it a wonderful place. You see, I had always lived in little houses."

"Well," Gypsy said, "I've never lived in a little house and I'm not sure I should like it. Or a small apartment, such as Blair talks about. It's the love in a cottage idea, isn't it? And it doesn't seem to me particularly tempting."

Cecily found herself faintly smiling. "Anything might seem tempting if one was in love."

"Would it? Would you like it—a small apartment?"

Cecily evaded. "I'd rather be outdoors. I was born on the desert."

"That's what make you so different. You are different, aren't you?"

"In what way?"

"Oh, in our crowd, we're all alike. The girls are cut from one pattern, the boys from another. We've always done the some things, thought the same things, been married in the same church, buried in the great tombs at Greenmount. And men like a change—new brands of cigarettes, new cars, new girls—Camels and Chesterfields, Lincolns and Cadillacs, blondes and brunettes." She was talking excitedly, her cheeks flushed and her eyes blazing.

A maid came in with the tea, and having served it,

withdrew.

Gypsy said, "I'm off of cocktails, and so is Blair since the night we crashed. I had never seen him drunk before and I thought it didn't matter. But it did. It matters so much that here I am having to ask you to keep your hands off the man I am to marry."

Cecily said in a low voice, "Please—"

There was a quiet dignity in her manner which stopped Gypsy's wild tirade. She had meant to hold Cecily up to scorn as a girl who was robbing another girl of her lover. Yet here was something with which she had not reckoned—a loveliness to fill a man's heart, a perfection of body which made Gypsy's own crippled state seem a sorry thing, and, more than all, the effect Cecily gave of having herself well in hand. Whatever emotions might be stirring within, there was no sign on the surface.

"You shan't take him away from me!" Gypsy said suddenly and violently. "He owes his life to me for what he has done. I had everything—men always around me, wanting dances, wanting to take me places, asking me to marry them. And I wouldn't look at them because it was Blair I loved. And I still love him. That's what makes it so—difficult." There was despair in her voice.

Here, Cecily told herself, was a depth of passion for which she had not given Gypsy credit. Fighting for the possession of the man she loved, she knew no pride, no reticences. And in that moment there was wakened in Cecily sincere compassion for this child who was cruelly aware that her future husband was held, not by his need of her, but by a sense of overwhelming

obligation.

She said gently, "What do you want me to do?"

"Go away and let me have him."

"You have him now."

"I shall never have him as long as the two of you are together. You see each other every day. How do I know he doesn't make love to you?"

Cecily stood up. She had not touched her tea or the little cakes. "My dear," she said, "may I tell you how much I regret that I should seem in any way to be what you think me?"

"If you're not what I think you are, you'll go. Promise me that you will."

Cecily hesitated. "It will not be an easy thing to do. Mrs. Marburg needs me."

"And Blair needs you! Why not tell the truth?"

"I am telling you the truth. There's nothing between Blair and me and you needn't be afraid there will be."

"But you'll go?"

"Yes. I can hardly do anything else, can I?"

Gypsy, having gained her point, melted suddenly into softness. "I hope you don't think me too dreadful."

"I think you're making yourself unnecessarily unhappy."

"You won't tell Blair you've been here?"

"I shan't tell him anything," Cecily said. "And you must forget what you have said to me. You will be happier, I'm sure, not to remember."

Chapter Thirty

The Desert Has Never Let Me Down

Cecily made her plans quickly and quietly. She would not, she decided, say good-by to Blair. He would ask questions and she couldn't answer them. She would announce some morning to Mrs. Marburg that a sudden call from the West would take her there. She would leave a note for Blair, and that would be the end of it.

She had not, however, reckoned with Mrs. Marburg's distress and protestations. "But, Cecily, I can't let you go!"

It was significant that Mrs. Marburg had dropped the formal "Miss Merryman" in these days in which she and Cecily had been drawn together.

"I wouldn't leave if it wasn't absolutely necessary. You know, dear Mrs. Marburg, how I shall miss you."

"Then stay—for my sake. When Blair is married to Gypsy, I'll be utterly alone."

"You'll have Mrs. Donovan and Mazie."

"But you have been like a daughter. Oh, I wish you were my daughter! I've been watching you and Blair and I've seen his eyes when he looks at you. If ever a man loved a woman—"

"Please don't say it, Mrs. Marburg!"

"Why shouldn't I say it?"

"Even if he did, what could come of it? Blair is going to marry Gypsy. That's the path before him and

he feels he must follow it. Neither of us should try to break down his resistance, even though we may feel he is wrong. It is a thing he must work out for himself."

"But she'll make him miserable."

"How do we know? How do we know anything? We can only hope and pray that life will bring him what is best for him."

"It is you who have taught me to pray, Cecily. You have made it seem so simple just to ask God—"

For a moment Cecily did not answer, then she said, "He doesn't always give us what we ask for, but He gives us strength to go through with what we have to do."

"Is it hard, then, for you to go, Cecily?"

"Very hard."

"Is it because of Blair that you're going?"

"Yes."

"You love him?"

"Yes." She was kneeling now beside Mrs. Marburg's chair and the arms of the old woman went around her. "But Blair must never know. Promise me you won't tell him!"

"I promise." Then, after a moment: "Do you remember what I said when you came to Gaywood—that Blair had his place in my household and you had yours?"

"Yes."

"What a fool I was! Not to know what you might mean to us! And let me tell you this, my dear, that when Blair comes tomorrow and hears about all your plans, he won't let you go. You belong with us and

he knows it."

"I shan't see him tomorrow. I'm leaving tonight on the late train. I'll write him a note. That's the best I can do!"

For a while no words were said. Cecily had risen from her knees and stood with her hand on Mrs. Marburg's shoulder. It was peaceful here in the old garden. Mickey, having been brought at last to this safe haven, was chasing the butterflies that sailed over the flower beds.

"He'll ruin everything," Mrs. Marburg complained. "Make him stop it, Cecily."

Gathering up the reluctant Mickey in her arms, she took him back to the house and shut the screen door on him.

When she came back to Mrs. Marburg, she said, "I must run away now and finish packing my bags. I'm not going to say good-by to you tonight. It shall be *au revoir*. Some day, when Blair is married, you must come and see me, and you shall learn to love the desert and its sunshine and wide skies. Promise me you'll come?"

The older woman's arms went around her. "Whither thou goest, my heart will go," she said pathetically. "You'll write to me often, my dear?"

"As often as you wish," Cecily said, and tears were running down her cheeks.

Mrs. Marburg wept with her, holding her close and still protesting, "Don't leave me. Don't—"

Blair, coming the next day, found Cecily gone.

"She's coming back, of course," he said when his

mother told him.

"No. She wouldn't promise anything."

"But why?"

"She had her reasons," Mrs. Marburg said. "She left a note for you. It's upstairs on your desk."

The note was brief.

I'm going away because I must. You know how I love the desert, and it has never let me down. Good-by and good luck.

It was not like Cecily to say a thing like that. Long ago on that Christmas night he had let her down, but there had been so much since then— And now she was gone, and on the desert would be Peter!

Yet why should he doubt her? Why, indeed, should he want to keep her here? To have her near and not make love to her was agony. To have her away was like enduring the slash of a surgeon's knife and praying for healing.

Chapter Thirty-One

But I Don't Want You, Peter

"The little lady's back again," Miguel said to Peter.

"Miss Merryman?"

Miguel nodded. "Inez is baking a cake for her."

Peter refused to believe his ears. He was, indeed, like a child who, having been told there isn't a Santa Claus, sees one ringing a bell on the street. He had hungered and thirsted for Cecily. He had written and she had not answered. He had sent a registered letter and it had been returned. He had at last, in desperation, made up his mind to go East again, for the East meant Cecily.

And now she was here!

"How do you know, Miguel?"

"I saw her in Phoenix this morning, riding her horse, and she waved to me."

"You didn't talk to her?"

"How could I when she rode away?"

"You're to take a note to her, Miguel. I'll write it at once."

Cecily read the note as she stood in the hot sun in front of the adobe hut. She wore riding breeches and a white shirt open at the neck. The wind blew her hair back from her lovely face.

Miguel, observing her, missed the rich tan which had brought out the blue of her eyes. He missed, too, the quick smile with which she had always greeted

him.

"You haven't been well?" he asked her.

"Well enough, Miguel, and glad to be back."

Peter's note said, *Darling, when may I see you? How about a ride tonight under the stars?*

Cecily's reply was definite: *I thought you were in South America, and I wish you were. Please don't come. I don't want you.*

She watched Miguel as he rode away, then went to the kitchen to talk to Inez. "It's heavenly to be here, Inez."

"You didn't like it in the East?"

"I liked some things, but I missed my little house, and I missed you, Inez."

"Mr. Peter thought he was going to marry you. He asked me to make a bride's cake."

"That was when you gave him the address?"

Inez said, "I'm sorry if it made trouble."

"It wasn't your fault, Inez. It was Fate! And now, what are you going to give me for lunch? No one in the East has a cook like mine. And I'm so hungry I could eat a house."

Inez, beating up batter for French pancakes, did not worry her head over what had happened. She had her beloved Miss Cissy back again, and that was all that mattered.

Leaving the kitchen, Cecily went through the house to the front door and, standing there, faced limitless space. She drew in great breaths of dry sweet air. This was what she had wanted. She had left behind that dark house at Gaywood and the little cottage with its garden. She would try to forget them. She

wanted no memories.

It was on the next afternoon that Peter, gay and laughing, came riding up, ready for anything. "If Mahomet wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain came—"

"But I don't want you, Peter."

"You don't want me because you're afraid of me. I dare you to say you're not afraid!"

"Afraid of what?"

"That I'll make love to you."

"Well, won't you?"

"No. I promise—"

"I have no faith in your promises."

"Cross my heart!"

She shook her head. "I don't believe you."

He dismounted. "Any cake left?"

"Loads. But how did you know there was a cake?"

"Miguel told me. I shall go out and ask Inez for a slice. If you won't be civil, I know there'll be a welcome for me in the kitchen."

In spite of herself, she laughed. "Don't be such a fool, Peter."

"Darling, it's so grand to be with you."

Well, there it was, the same old game. And since she had nothing else to do, she played it.

Before the week was over, she went for a ride with Peter at night. The stars were out, and in every star was a memory—*Did you ever hear of Mélisande?—Did anyone ever call you Merrymaid?—It's the song of the merrymaid, peerly proud.*

Peter said, "A penny for your thoughts."

"My thoughts are worth more than a penny."

"Then I'll give you this! I'll give you Juliet—'Take him and cut him out in little stars and he will make the face of Heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night.' I'm not a bad Romeo. Why not think of me like that?"

"Oh, Peter, stop your play-acting. I'm not an audience. I'm a woman, and a sensible one, I hope."

She touched her horse with her whip and was off and away. When he caught up with her, she said, "I wish you'd go back to Hollywood. I came out here to be alone on the desert and you're spoiling it for me."

"I'll be good."

"As if you could be! And there'll be no more rides at night."

On the road home she kept him away from dangerous topics.

Cecily said, "Men are beginning to talk of devils in these days. It's a battle between the forces of light and darkness."

"Well," Peter said, "I'm not going to think about it until I have to. Let's eat, drink, and be merry, darling."

Why not, Cecily asked herself as she rode along? Ahead of her stretched dull and dreary days. And here was Peter promising her glow and color and carefree adventure. Why not take him at his word, laugh with him, play with him, and snap her fingers at the future? That which was gone was gone. Why not close the book forever?

But she could not close it. Day and night she thought of Blair. She could not shut him out. And so she said to Peter, "I'll play around a bit with you,

but you mustn't expect any more than that."

He said, "Is it Blair Marburg?"

"Yes."

"You love him?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you leave Gaywood?"

"He's going to marry another girl."

"And break your heart?"

"Perhaps I haven't any heart, Peter."

And so the summer went on—and as Cecily and Inez worked often together the two women talked. Inez was a realist. She believed in taking joy and sorrow as they came. She saw no reason why Cecily should not marry Peter. He was handsome, he had money, and he wore fine clothes. Any woman might be proud of him. There were those girls at the Biltmore, for example, who were always after him. Perhaps some day one of them would get him, and then Miss Cissy would be sorry.

Out of her thoughts she said one day, "When shall I make you a bride's cake?"

"Never."

"But you must marry!"

"Do you want to get rid of me, Inez?"

"No. But if you married Mr. Peter Chilton, you would not be far away."

"But I don't love Mr. Chilton."

"Love? What is it? Just letting yourself say yes when a handsome man asks you. After that he will see to it that you love him. I know. I've been through it."

But Cecily knew that love was something different

from the things of which Inez spoke. Love was something that kept you awake at night, staring up into the darkness and wishing that life might end. Love was something that was with you by day—the hours blank with loneliness. Love was what made your imagination reconstruct those high moments at Gaywood. Love was what made you watch eagerly for letters, hoping for a line from Blair.

She had, of course, no right to expect it. She had taken herself out of his life and must stay there. Mrs. Marburg wrote often, and Cecily, replying, found the correspondence somewhat difficult. There was little to say of herself. She wondered if Blair saw her letters. The fear that he might kept her from freedom of expression.

In July Mrs. Marburg wrote that Gypsy had left for the Tyson summer home in Maine. Blair would follow her in a few days for his vacation.

He can make no definite plans, for he is very busy putting our affairs in order. I shall sell Gaywood. The Government wants to take it over, and of course we need the money. In the fall I shall take an apartment in Baltimore and have Brewster and Mazie with me. Mrs. Donovan will live in the cottage and keep it open for us.

Cecily, having folded the letter, looked up into the sky where a plane was flying. Perhaps this was the great bird of which Blair had written so long ago. *You were alone on a strip of desert . . . . There was a bird flying above you—an ominous bird like a buzzard . . . . There was something evil in it, and I tried to warn you. But I couldn't make you hear.*

She wore to the dance that night at the Biltmore the silver gown that Peter had given her. Inez had brought it out, fresh and shining. "You've nothing else to wear, Miss Cissy."

"But people don't dress at this season, Inez."

"What do you care for people? It's Mr. Peter Chilton you have to please."

So Cecily wore the dress, and Peter was more than pleased.

When they rode home together, he said, "If you'll marry me, I'll make you the best-dressed woman in Hollywood."

"That's no reason for marriage."

"I can give you a better one." He stopped the car and turned toward her. "Cissy, you've got to listen. I can't live without you. Can't you see what you're doing? Wasting your life? I've got to go to Hollywood next week and you'll be lonely—"

"Yes," she said, "I'll be lonely."

"Then say yes! Say it! Say it—" He bent his face down to her.

But she drew away. "You must wait, Peter," she said breathlessly, "until you get back."

"But I shall be gone a week, and think of the time we're wasting!"

He could not break down her resistance, yet as he left her that night he said, "You can't escape me, Cissy. You're mine, and I'll make you know it."

Chapter Thirty-Two

I'm No Longer the King Bee, Darling

Gypsy, summering on the Maine coast, had discarded her crutches. She still carried a cane, but made a joke of it—calling it her Bo-Peep's crook and tying a bow on it to match the ribbon in her hair. She lay on the beach and watched the bathers. Sometimes one of the young men from the circle of which she was the center would carry her into the water and, supporting her, would let the waves wash over her. It was all great fun after her shut-in existence, yet in the back of her mind was always the thought of Blair and her desire for his presence. She wrote to him of the young men:

I've been letting some of them make love to me so that I can keep in practice, and it's nice to know, too, that in spite of my cane and my hippity-hopping, I can make the other girls envy me. But you are still the king bee, darling. Or aren't there any king bees?

It was a wild and crazy crowd that Gypsy drew about her. It wasn't any wilder or crazier than it had been in the old days, but Blair found it impossible to be wild and crazy with it.

Gypsy complained, "Don't you want me to have any fun?"

"My dear, of course."

He tried then to do as the rest did. Danced and swam and shouted. But his heart was not in it. Gypsy, wanting what she could not get and passionately re-

senting Blair's lack of response, was impatient and at times accusing.

"But why should you go back next week?" she demanded one day as they sat under a beach umbrella.

"Business, darling."

"Oh, let the business take care of itself."

"But I don't want it to take care of itself. It may surprise you, Gypsy, but I'm having a whale of a time trying to make a success of myself. I've always had things handed out to me, and now, when I get my pay check, it's a grand feeling to know that I've earned it."

"My soul!" said Gypsy. "If you're going to be like that—"

"Like what?"

"Stupid and stuffy."

"Is it stupid and stuffy to discover powers within yourself that you hadn't known were there? It has done me more good than I can tell you to work out that tangle with Mark Keating. Joshua could have done it, but I wanted to do it myself. It's like reading a mystery story and trying to follow the clues."

Gypsy wasn't impressed. "If you want to know, I liked you better the way you were at Gaywood."

"At Gaywood I was a boy who had never grown up."

"You were a darling boy," she said, and pulled his face down to her. "You're a darling boy now. Give me a kiss, and stop preaching."

He gave her the kiss, but she was not satisfied. She was never satisfied in these days. It was not that she loved him less, but she hungered and thirsted for some spontaneous demonstration of affection on his part.

She was always the suppliant, with Blair acquiescing. He was kind, but she didn't want kindness. She didn't, indeed, want to go through life asking for crumbs from the king's table.

She said now, "Oh, run along, and I'll get my beauty sleep. Marie Trent wants you for tennis. She plays a good game, but there was a time I could have beaten her."

She choked on that, and he threw himself down beside her. "My little Gypsy, don't!"

She said, "Oh, don't be silly," and when he was gone, she lay for a long time on the sands, thinking it out. She had sent Cecily away, but Blair's heart had gone with her. The flame which had lighted him was dead. In his eyes was a faraway look, and when he spoke, his voice was tired. Well, no man should ever say he was tired of her. Not Blair, or any other!

In the weeks that followed she planned deliberately a program of withdrawal. It was not an easy thing to do. But she told herself that it was easier than to go through the rest of the years with her heart in her throat and her lips dry. There were long nights in which she wept; there were days when she flung herself into the whirlpool of social activities as if she would quench the fever which possessed her.

She began to show an increasing interest in things about her. She wore her loveliest clothes and the Tyson pearls. Finding that her injuries did not prevent her from driving a car, she ordered a smart sports model and drove it at a speed which made the hair of those who were with her rise on their heads. Men, attracted by her vividness and charm as well as by the

Tyson fortune, began to buzz about her. It was rumored that she had broken with Blair, but the actual break did not come until Blair came up for his last week-end before Gypsy's return to Baltimore.

The two of them were lying side by side on the sands, with the waves thundering beyond them and the gulls flying. Gypsy had a broad hat tipped down over her nose, but Blair, golden with tan, lay with the sun full upon him.

Turning a little, she looked at him from under her hat. "You're a glamour boy," she told him. "All the girls are mad about you."

"All except you, Gypsy."

"You think I'm not."

"Yes. I'm just the stuffed shirt you're engaged to." He said it without rancor, laughing a little.

"So you've noticed?" Gypsy said slowly.

"Yes. I'm afraid I'm no longer the king bee, darling."

She said passionately, "You might be if you cared."

She stopped suddenly as a girl in a wisp of blue bathing suit came up. "Gypsy," she said, "you're being terribly selfish with Blair. We want him after lunch for doubles at tennis."

"You can have him, Marie," Gypsy said, "if you'll promise not to wear blue. It's too devastating."

"What shall it be," Marie asked Blair, "if I can't wear blue?"

"Anything but yellow," Blair said. "That's Gypsy's color."

"It's always Gypsy, isn't it?" Marie said. "Well, just so she lends you to us," and she went off laughing.

Gypsy, looking after her, said, "It's a queer thing that I'm not jealous. I've never been jealous of anyone but Cecily Merryman. You certainly had a crush on her, darling, and I never could see why."

"You wouldn't!" Blair said.

"Still in love with her?"

"Oh, Gypsy, lay off!"

"Well, she's in love with you. I found that out the day she came to see me." She stopped suddenly. She had not meant to say it, but it had slipped out.

And now Blair was demanding, "When did she come to see you?"

"If you must know, it was just before she went away."

"How did she happen to come?"

"I—asked her."

"You asked her?" Light broke in on him suddenly. "She went away because you asked her to go? Is that it? Did you, Gypsy?"

"What if I did?" sharply. "I thought if she went away, you'd come back to me. But you haven't come back! Oh, why should we go on, you and I? I don't have to ask for love from other men. They're crazy about me. I can pick and choose. If I marry you, I'll be wanting all my life something I can't get. It isn't easy, Blair, to say that. But it's true, isn't it?"

He scooped up a handful of silver sand and let it sift through his fingers. When he spoke it was with difficulty. "Yes, my dear, it's true."

"Then that's the end of it—" She sat up, and, reaching out her hands, drew him toward her. "It was wonderful while it lasted, wasn't it? Say it was."

And because he knew she wanted it, he said, "It was wonderful."

For a moment she lay, a little hurt thing, in the circle of his arm, then released herself. "Run along," she said, with quick drawn breath, "and don't be sorry—"

"I shall never forgive myself."

"Why not?" she said. "Life's like that, isn't it? Everybody hurting everybody else, and the world all shot to pieces."

Her laugh was hard, but when he was gone and she lay alone on the sands, she spoke to the emptiness of the sky above her, "Oh, why didn't I die up there in the plane? Why didn't we die—together?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

This Little Time Is Ours—

It was so hot that the sky was like a band of beaten gold above the horizon, with the desert sands shimmering beneath.

Inez, sun-dried and desert-baked, cared not a whit for the weather, but she was worried about Cecily. "No use cooking things for you in this heat, Miss Cissy, when you won't eat."

"I'm not hungry."

But the heat was not the reason for Cecily's loss of appetite. It was something more than that. Peter was bombarding her from Hollywood. There had been daily letters, daily offerings—books, candies, flowers. This very morning there had come a box from a Hollywood florist in which was one perfect camellia. *Wear it when I come, Cissy—and my head will touch the stars.*

Peter was due that night. He would arrive by plane, and when he came he would expect her to give him her answer.

She had missed him dreadfully. He was good and gay company, and there was no one else to break the monotony of her days. Her only social outlets were at this season negligible. She needed close human relationships, and Peter was a dear. What if he did play to the gallery? He was willing she should have the center of his stage. If she married him, there'd always

be excitement, amusing and interesting contacts, thrilling adventures.

But that wasn't what she wanted of marriage. Marriage to her had to do with a little house, and Blair Marburg in it. It had to do with a home and children. It had to do with twilights when Blair would sit at the piano and sing the song of the merrymaid and the moping mum, with mornings when they would walk in the garden before he went to work and she would stick a flower in his coat, with nights when he would touch her hair with a light finger and call her Mélisande.

Well, all that was not for her thinking. Blair would marry Gypsy—

She went out into the kitchen. "I'm going for a ride, Inez. If Mr. Peter comes before I get back, tell him to come out and meet me."

Inez was glad Mr. Peter was coming. He would stay that night for dinner. She would give him chili, and he would mix the salad, say nice things to Miss Cissy, and bring back the smiles she had lost since he went away.

She hummed a little tune in deep content, but broke off as a voice said from the doorway, "I have the right house, haven't I? I'm looking for Miss Cecily Merryman."

As Inez turned and faced him, he seemed to shut out the sky back of him. He was tall and fair, and younger than Mr. Peter Chilton.

"I'm looking for Miss Merryman," he said again. "I'm Blair Marburg."

"She's out riding," Inez said, "and she won't be com-

ing back until time for dinner."

"I'll wait." Blair turned his wrist to look at his watch. "It's six now. What time do you eat?"

"Whenever Mr. Peter gets here."

"Mr. Peter?"

"Mr. Peter Chilton. He's going to marry Miss Cissy." Inez was breaking eggs into a bowl. "I'm making a cake for him now. Some day I'm going to make a bride's cake for him and Miss Cissy."

Inez was more than usually garrulous. Instinctively she felt that here in this blond young man was something inimical to the success of Mr. Peter Chilton's cause.

The way he had said, "I'll wait," had made impossible any protest on her part. She went on breaking eggs until she had a dozen in the bowl.

Then Blair said, "Don't be too sure about that bride's cake for Peter Chilton. You may bake it for me instead."

Inez planted both of her hands on the table in front of her. "Are you in love with her?"

"Yes."

"Then why haven't you been here before?"

"It's a long story—" He stopped suddenly, for, with the beat of horse's hoofs and in a cloud of dust, Peter rode up to the doorway.

He called, "Hello, Inez. Where's Miss Cissy?"

Inez went to the door. "She says you're to ride out and meet her, Mr. Peter."

But Peter was looking over her head at the tall man who had followed her.

"Am I seeing what I think I see?" he demanded of

Blair.

"You're seeing me, if that's what you mean."

"When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Have you seen Cissy?"

"No. But I'm waiting."

"I'll ride out and get her."

But Blair said easily, "Let's talk a bit before you go. And Inez doesn't want us cluttering up her kitchen."

As they went into the living-room, Inez sighed in a kind of ecstasy. Two men wanting her Miss Cissy. Two men ready to fight for her, if she knew the signs. What more could a woman wish for?

If they were ready to fight, the preliminaries were at least pacific.

"It's a charming room," Blair said as he dropped into one of the big chairs.

Peter, still standing, said, "It's a background which belongs to Cissy. Color and glow and all that. But her life here is a bit restricted."

"What do you mean 'restricted'?"

"Well, she's lonely, for one thing."

"And you would like to relieve that loneliness?"

"I intend to relieve it."

"You expect to marry her?"

"Yes."

"Has she promised?"

"Not yet. But she will."

"Perhaps you'll let her tell me that."

"You don't believe me?"

"I'll know when I see her. That's why I want you to stay here until she comes."

"Do you mean you'll try to keep me?"

"What else?"

Peter laughed. "I'm not used to taking orders, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to use physical force."

"I might," Blair said, "if it were necessary." He had risen and was looking beyond Peter through the door to the golden-lighted desert. "If it were necessary," he said again, with a lift to his voice.

Peter turned and saw Cecily on her swift-moving steed, riding toward home. Her hair was blown back, her white shirt open at the throat.

She called, "Hi there, Peter!" as she came up.

Then there was a breathless pause. Blair stood in the door. He was tall and fair and laughing, as she had seen him that first day on the stairs at Gaywood.

He said, "Hello, Merrymaid."

"Blair!" she breathed, and slid from her horse and came running toward him.

He lifted her as if she had been a featherweight and kissed her. Then looked over her head at Peter, "Well?"

And Peter said, "You win! But what have you done with the girl you're engaged to?"

Blair set Cecily on her feet, but his arm was still around her. "Do you think I'd be here if all that was not ended?"

And Peter asked Cecily, "If he hadn't come, what would you have said to me?"

"Whether he had come or not, I couldn't have married you. I'm sorry, Peter."

"Don't be too sorry. The world is my oyster. If I can't open it in one way, I will in another."

He was carrying it off with a high hand. It hurt him more than he dared admit to himself at this moment to lose Cecily. It hurt him, too, that Blair should hold the center of the stage.

He lifted Cecily's hand and kissed it. "I won't promise to dance at your wedding, but I'll send you a box of camellias in exchange for a bit of your bride's cake. I sent her a camellia this morning, Marburg. They're like her—exquisite, lovely. But she'd better not wear them for you. They might bring memories."

"What memories?" Blair asked when Peter was gone.

"What do you think?"

"Nothing that can lie like a shadow between us. I doubted you once, but never again!"

Inez called them then to dinner, and as he drew out Cecily's chair, Blair said, "You'd better turn that cake into a bride's cake, Inez. There'll be a wedding tomorrow."

Inez's eyes went to Cecily. "You want him?"

"Yes."

Inez gave a satisfied nod. If Miss Cissy wanted him, that was enough. There was little for a woman to worry about in her choice of men. If they were both handsome, one need only flip a coin to settle the matter. She decided to put the pink camellia in the center of the cake. Mr. Peter had sent it, but there was no better use for it. One man or another—what difference?

After dinner Blair and Cecily sat out under the stars, and he told her of Gypsy. "We'll talk it out now, Merrymaid, and then not come back to it. God knows

it's not easy for me to remember what I did to her and forgive myself. But she wanted all or nothing, and it had to be—nothing."

As he talked, the shadow of tragedy lay between them. But when he had finished, Cecily said, "It's over and gone, darling. Let's forget."

He spoke then of their marriage. "Tomorrow and all tomorrows you'll be mine! We'll spend our honeymoon here on the desert—" He laid his cheek against her hair. "Mélisande," he murmured. "Mélisande! Do you remember, Cecily, that night I first saw you?"

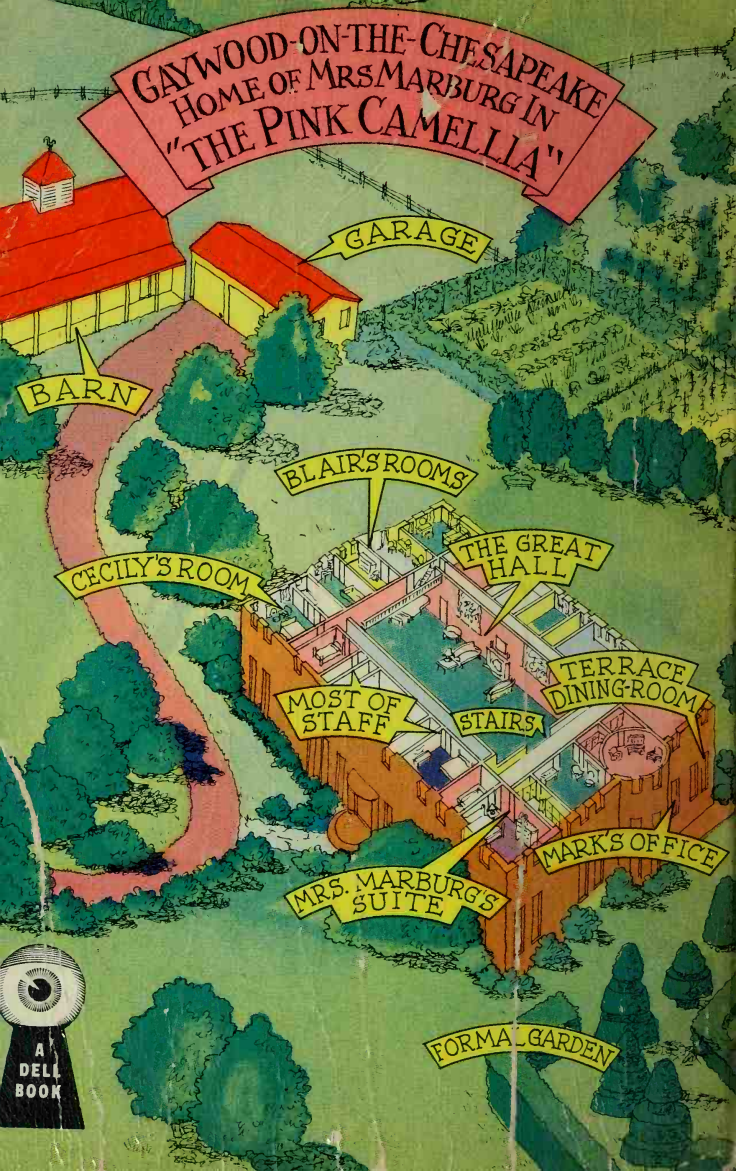
"I shall never cease remembering."

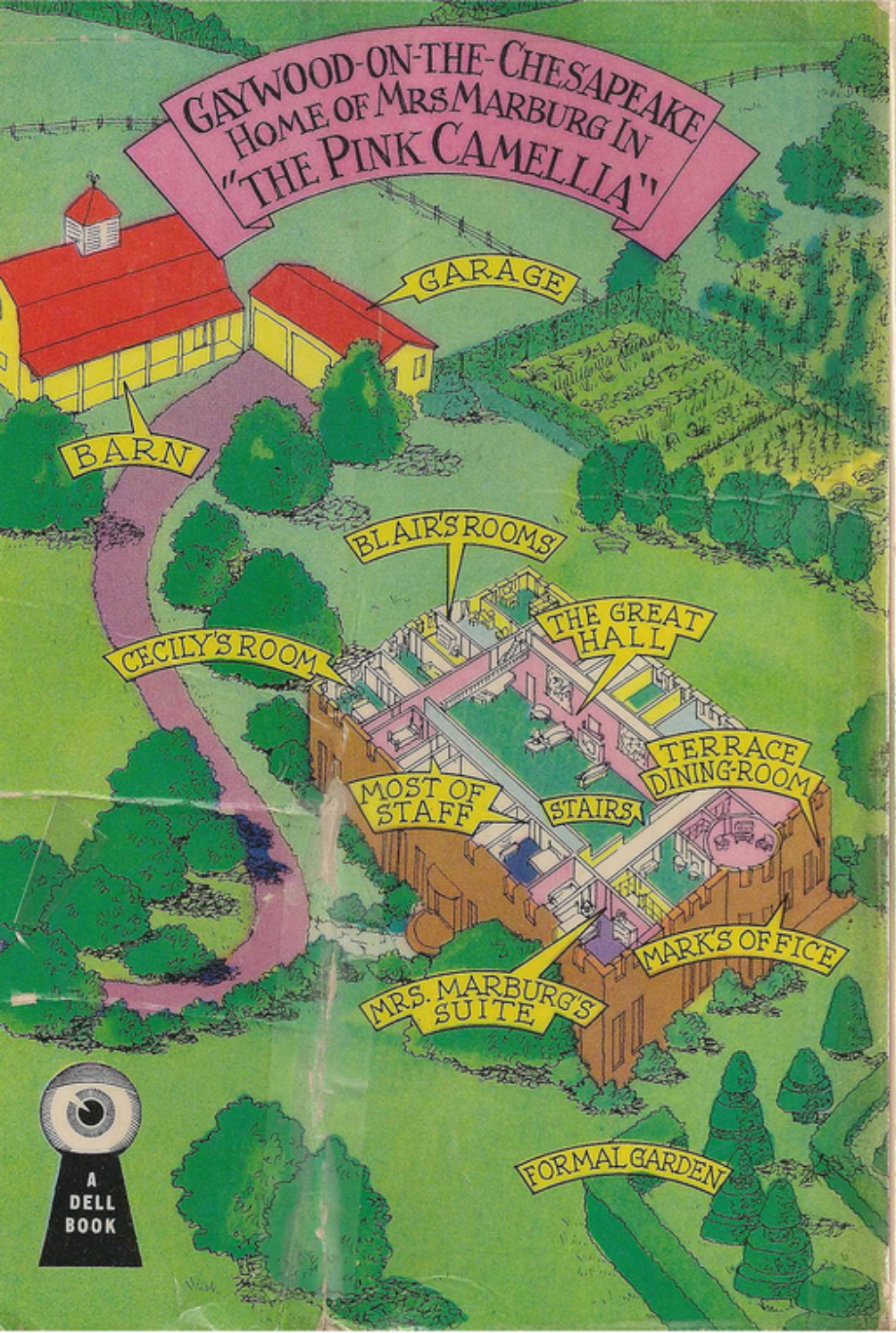
Inez, weeping the next day at the wedding, was told, "But we'll be coming back, Inez. Each year we'll be coming back, so you must keep the place ready."

And it was Blair who said that night, as they rode in from the desert with the darkness all about them, "I should like to think that some day our children will come—to know this peace and quiet against the noise and clatter of the world."

"Will there ever be real peace, darling?"

"Who knows? But why speak of that tonight? This little time is ours, Merrymaid. Let us go in."


GAYWOOD-ON-THE-CHESAPEAKE
HOME OF MRS MARBURG IN
"THE PINK CAMELLIA"
GARAGE
BARN
BLAIR'S ROOMS
CECILY'S ROOM
THE GREAT HALL
TERRACE DINING-ROOM
MOST OF STAFF
STAIRS
MARK'S OFFICE
MRS. MARBURG'S SUITE
FORMAL GARDEN
A DELL BOOK



A DELL BOOK
DELL
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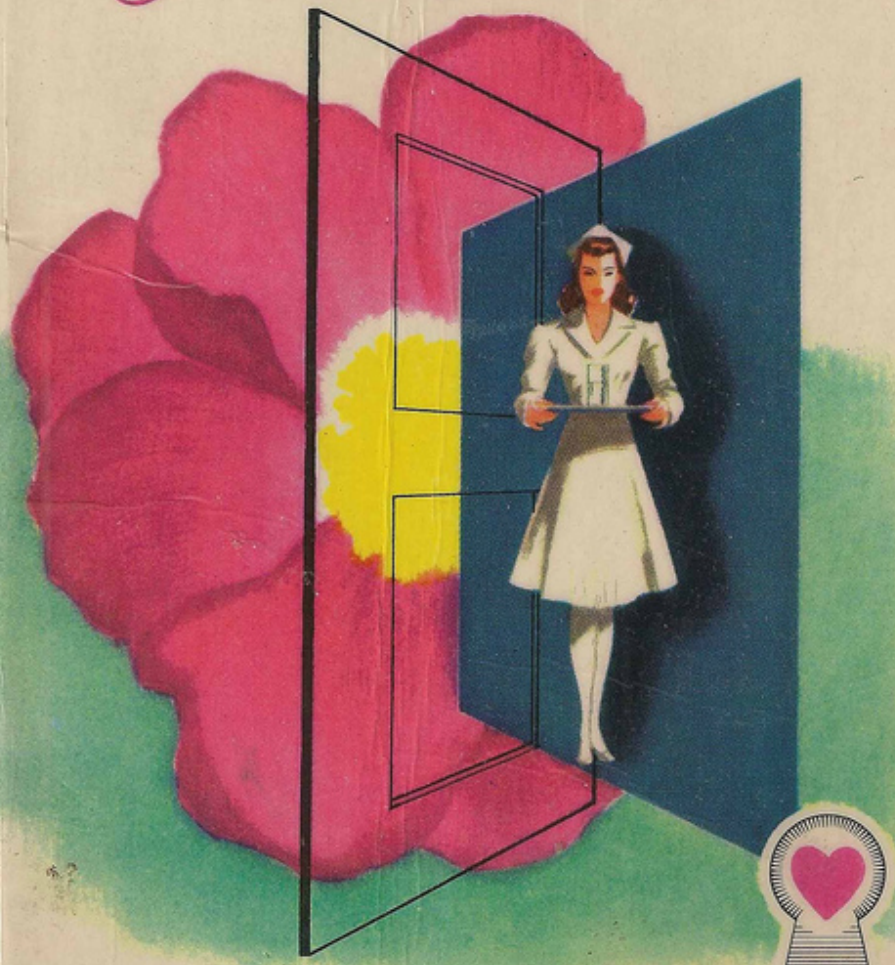
TEMPLE BAILEY

THE *Pink Camellia*



A DELL ROMANCE