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Goodbye, Gillian

(Original Title: The Weekend Girls)

"Two love stories, well sustained suspense, and a plot to please fans of Mary Stewart or Charlotte Armstrong."
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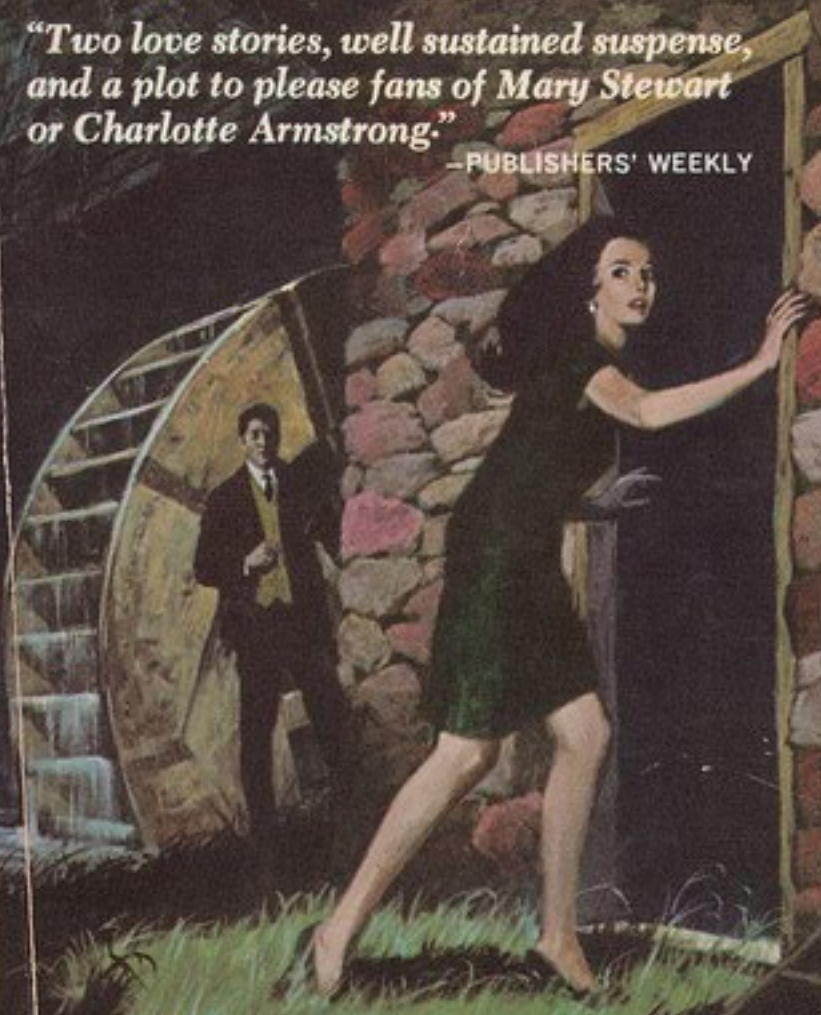

JONATHAN BURKE

Complete & Unabridged

It was on the train to London, after their weekend at home, that Meg and Gillian first spotted the mysterious man, strangely watching, following, closing in. . . . The following weekend Gillian didn't go home to the country: she was nowhere to be found.

Meg's family and friends were exasperatingly unconcerned. Gillian's headstrong ways were well known. She had gone off somewhere and forgotten to let anyone know, that was all . . . there was nothing to get excited about. Gillian would show up in her own good time. But she didn't!

This is the story of Meg's search for her friend. One day she saw the mysterious man again. This time she was the pursuer and he the pursued. But she had no way of knowing what frightening information awaited her when she finally caught up with it.

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AN ACE BOOK

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GOODBYE, GILLIAN (THE WEEKEND GIRLS)

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any re
semblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coinc
dental.

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Every Friday evening the two girls came down from London on the same train. Every Monday morning they were driven to the station by their fathers for the return journey. During the week they shared a basement flat in Kensington. Even if they had quarrelled between Monday and Friday over the cooking or cleaning or the electric light bill, they still tended to hang around together at weekends. They were unlike: Meg Waring was dark, methodical, and said by her parents' friends to be "old for her years" (which were twenty-four in number); Gillian Forshaw was fair, slipshod and impetuous; but they had in common the problem of their rootless way of life.

They were weekenders. They belonged neither to Kensington nor to Alderford. Daily commuters could enjoy a stabilising contact with home life every evening. The distance was too great for there to be any daily commuters from Alderford. Those who worked in London and came home only at weekends lost touch with the long-established rhythm of the country town while never quite adjusting to the different pulse of London life.

Meg and Gillian met a reasonable number of young men in London and some of them displayed a reasonable interest. But all the best parties, all the real fun and all the important things happened at weekends: the Saturday nights with their spontaneous, suddenly dreamed-up parties, the Sunday lunchtimes in Chelsea pubs, the communal visits to the cinema on Sunday afternoons to see really bad film epics. At that time Meg and Gillian were

down in the country—where partners for Saturday night dinners, dances and parties had been fixed up during the week by people who were there all the time. It was hard to catch up with the gossip; they were continually being surprised by shifts of relationship which had taken place in their absence.

In winter the wind blew bitterly along Alderford station platform and London was still dark and threatening when the train clanked in. Now in July the sun was bright but the birds still sounded drowsy, as though determined not to let the summer's day get energetically out of hand.

"It's going to be hot in town," Gillian's father said boisterously. "We'll think of you stifling in your wretched little offices."

His own office in the long, low factory behind the railway station was no larger than the one in which Meg worked and considerably smaller than the glossy advertising agency office in which his daughter looked decorative throughout the week. But it did of course boast a view across open fields to the smooth flanks of the hills five miles away, interrupted only by the steely, leafless branches of electricity pylons.

In winter it wasn't so bad to exchange the windswept or rain-hazed landscape for city streets. In summer, though, it did seem to be going against the natural order of things.

"Not long till the holidays," said Mr. Waring quietly.

Meg nodded.

Even as a joke her father would never express loud jubilation over someone else's impending discomfort. He was as unlike the arch, gleeful Mr. Forshaw as Meg was unlike Gillian. He worked in Alderford as a solicitor, Mr. Forshaw as sales manager for the agricultural machinery factory. They did business together, played golf together, and their daughters shared a London flat. Mr. Forshaw flamboyantly talked a lot; Mr. Waring was dry,

reserved, matter-of-fact. When he expressed concern for Meg in the stuffy heat of London he did so obliquely.

Mr. Forshaw spun the ring of his ignition key round his little finger. From it dangled a small barrel, a brewer's advertising gimmick, which Gillian had brought home for him from her office. He said:

"Mind you, it looks as though half the county is being forcibly transplanted to the metropolis."

Gillian was in fact laden with flowers and greenery—roses, asters and delphiniums from the garden, and a prickly sheaf of small branches which would be stuck in pots all round the flat. She peered out over the roses, her pale blue eyes limned with heavy black make-up to produce a wild, neurotic stare, her tongue dabbing at her lips as she tried to find something sharp to say: she wanted a throwaway line which would make her father laugh and show that she was in tune with him.

"The flowers are for throwing," she said.

"A battle of the flowers," said Mr. Forshaw, "in Bishopsgate?"

"It's Berkeley Square, not Bishopsgate. And in any case I was thinking of Covent Garden."

"If there's one place where I'd have thought there'd be enough flowers—"

"The Opera House," said Gillian. "To be thrown at Callas. Or Fonteyn. Or whoever it is this week—I've forgotten."

Meg knew that Gillian had not forgotten. She had not even known in the first place. Gillian had not been near Covent Garden for six months. At that time a devoted boy friend had been prepared to sit all night on the pavement wrapped in a blanket in order to get tickets. Gillian went to several operas before telling him that she preferred ballet. He didn't much care for ballet but seemed to have a thing about sitting on the pavement and was delighted to organise their attendance at

a couple of over-priced gala performances. Then they fell out. Gillian decided that ballet, too, was pretentious nonsense: anything she didn't understand wasn't worth the mental effort. They had an argument over the necessity for studying things if one wished to get the full enjoyment from them—a necessity which Gillian had never accepted—and she came back to the flat in a screaming rage. The young man had lasted four months, which was not bad for one of Gillian's young men.

A bell rang in the station. A wire creaked and a signal rattled at the end of the platform. The seven or eight people on the platform turned to peer along the rails, shimmering into the distance with a promise of warmth through the day.

A car swung into the station yard. Gravel hissed as it braked and skidded. Gladly the heads turned to see who was cutting things so fine.

"Well, well!" said Mr. Forshaw. He nodded slowly and significantly at Meg. "Come to bid you a fond farewell, I'd say."

His top teeth protruded slightly so that when he opened his mouth he seemed to be thrusting his smile at people. At the end of a sentence he would pause with his top lip drawn back, inviting approval, and all the time he nodded in emphasis of the most trivial phrase.

The young man who got out of the car was his stepson, Colin. He wore corduroys and a green tweed jacket. They watched him dash up the steps of the footbridge, over the track, and down the steps on this side. The train was a dark blob interrupting the dwindling line of the rails, growing larger every moment.

"He doesn't often hurry like that," said Mr. Forshaw with relish.

Colin panted along the platform and held out a small leather key-wallet to Gillian.

"You left these on the table. Thought you'd be a bit

mad if you got to town and found you couldn't let yourself in."

"Colin . . . oh, you are a dear! I must have taken them out of my white bag so I'd have them ready to put in the brown one today, and then—oh, it was that fuss everyone was making at breakfast. It's no wonder I forgot them. A miracle I didn't forget everything else as well."

The fault, Meg, observed, could never under any circumstances be Gillian's own.

Mr. Forshaw said: "Only an excuse to come to the station, really, eh?" He stood closer to Meg and squeezed her arm. A twitch in his cheek showed that he enjoyed doing this. "I'll have to warn the boy, won't I—warn him against being snared by a woman's wiles?"

"The wiles must have been Gillian's, then," said Colin curtly. "She was the one who left her keys. That's why I came to the station."

Mr. Forshaw smiled with irritating complacency. "They're in league, my boy. All women are in league. And your own motives—ah, they might seem straightforward enough, but there are complexities below the surface . . . psychological . . ."

His voice was drowned by the rising throb of the train. The diesel locomotive whined and pounded past them, slowing in to the platform. Mr. Forshaw bustled towards a door but it was Mr. Waring who neatly opened it for the girls to get in. Mr. Forshaw started to say something to Meg about not going out with too many young men in London—"Don't want to cause sleepless nights down here, do you?"—then put his arm round Gillian and hugged her as well as he was able to without crushing her flowers. Meg kissed her father lightly on the cheek. Colin closed the door; Gillian struggled with her flowers and branches; and the train began slowly to move. The men on the platform stood back.

Meg sank into a corner seat. She saw Colin raise his

hand to wave, then he pushed it back through his hair—over the neat widow's peak of dark brown hair which foamed into an unruly, brushy chaos at the back of his head.

The train pulled out of Alderford between the level-crossing gates and on into the shallow, reverberating cutting. Gillian sat back and closed her eyes as though already exhausted by a long week.

There were two men in the other corners of the compartment. They had glanced up with bristling disfavour as Meg and Gillian got in, but now settled down again with relief as they realised there was probably not going to be a lot of chatter.

Meg opened the book she had brought with her. She had tried to read it over the weekend but somehow, although there had been nothing else of any consequence to do, had been unable to settle. Now perhaps she could finish it on the train.

Her gaze wandered from the page. The fields surged back and away from the train, shallow green rollers breaking against the receding outskirts of Alderford. Meg knew every farmhouse and country lane, every small village and railway siding and eventually the church towers and chimneys of every suburb between here and Waterloo; knew them without having ever met anyone who lived out there, without having walked past any of the houses or felt any of the grass or gritty road beneath her feet.

Gillian, too, was now looking out of the window. She might have been in a trance, seeing something which nobody else could ever see. The blueness of her eyes faded to a translucent grey. She looked remote and despairing, and at the same time disturbingly intense. Meg suspected that she was in one of her yearning moods—longing for something to happen, absurdly wishing that she could walk down one of those unknown lanes, could see someone new and exciting, could see or

do something *different,* something impulsive and splendid.

"He's becoming a dreadful stodge." Gillian spoke abruptly and made one of the men in the compartment jump. "Don't you think he's getting to be a stodge?"

Meg's attention was jerked away from the fleeing hedges. "Who?"

"Colin, of course."

"He doesn't seem to change much." Meg had often wondered whether it wouldn't be a good thing if Colin could change just a little, could become just a bit less predictable and a bit more provocative. It was not that he was a stodge—just that he belonged so firmly to Alderford and seemed content with it.

"Not only doesn't he change," said Gillian, "he gets more and more like himself every week."

It had been taken for granted for a long time that Meg and Colin liked each other and that one day this would amount to something more. That was how such matters developed in Alderford. But so far the idea of Colin and herself still didn't mean what it ought to mean to Meg, even when she made a conscious effort to believe in it. The whole situation was, as Gillian might have put it, getting more and more like itself.

"These weekends!" sighed Gillian. "All that heartiness . . . and horses . . . and small-town nothingness."

Meg glanced at her watch. Yes, they would soon be slowing for Wishbury, one of the only two stops this train made between Alderford and Waterloo. At this stage Gillian, silently or volubly, began to make her mental adjustment. Half an hour from now she would be tilting the argument in the opposite direction and lamenting the horrors of the big city. In London Gillian instinctively emphasised the country girl aspect of her character: the armful of flowers was one symptom, and others were her tendency to tell friends and acquaintances how marvellous it was to get out into the fresh air at weekends,

her pouts and nose wrinklings over the grimy streets and awful traffic, and her noisy anticipation of a hunt ball some coming Saturday and the availability of wonderful horses for weekend riding. In Alderford she was transformed into a suave city girl, overdoing talk of plays which she had not seen, concerts to which she wouldn't have dreamt of going, and fashionable night life in which she played no part.

A bridge carried the train over a small stream. The remains of an old watermill huddled behind some trees. Wishbury, a narrow little town stretching for a quarter of a mile beside the railway track, was insignificant in itself but served as junction to a branch line which fed more travellers on to the main line train.

Faces stared greedily in. Doors opened and slammed along the train. Two men hurried along the corridor and dived towards the centre seats just as two others opened the outer door and climbed in. Gillian and Meg were pushed towards the corners. There were now four a side, the newcomers staring triumphantly ahead as their slower brethren looked for other compartments.

The train was moving again as a middle-aged man in a dark grey suit edged along the corridor. He peered thoughtfully into each compartment as though looking for some special person rather than for a seat. He was not one of the regulars—his suit was too casual, a bit baggy, not at all like the uniform of the stockbrokers and public relations men. He might have been a schoolmaster coming up for a day conference or a performance at the National Theatre; but he did not have the half fidgety, half domineering manner of a schoolmaster.

When he saw Gillian he stopped, studying her face until she became aware of his gaze. He half smiled. It was an odd smile, as though he was pleased with the result of his search and yet at the same time sorry he had found her.

Gillian was not unaccustomed to being stared at by men. She looked away then looked back stonily, but could not resist drawing her fingertips down her cheek—a casual movement that was not casual at all.

The man had deep-set, melancholy eyes. He sized Gillian up as a painter might have sized her up, trying to assess the problems of capturing her on canvas, of capturing her very essence.

Gillian glanced at Meg and raised her eyebrows. She over-acted as blatantly as her father.

The train racketed through a marshalling yard. The flicker of sunshine and shadow distorted the man's lean, brooding face through the glass of the compartment door. Then he turned and continued along the corridor.

Gillian mimicked a shiver. The six men in the compartment carefully paid no attention.

The factories and streets of semi-detached houses thickened and pressed in from either side, occasionally masked by hoardings. Vast posters exhorted the traveller to go to a theatre or a cinema or an exhibition of electronic components. He was ordered to see Britain by rail or to leave the country by V.C.10. Below the embankment, twisted cars decayed in scrap-yards for the incurable. Grime solidified under signal gantries and along the window ledges of houses backing on to the line.

As London took over, new blocks of flats reared up where there had been playgrounds of rubble less than a year ago. New buildings blotted out the memory of what had once been there. Meg found that she could not remember what had stood on these sites, although she had passed them so many times. This was not Alderford, where the only change in ten years had been the lengthening of the station platforms and the construction of a footbridge, followed immediately by the threat of a possible closure of the station.

Everywhere now tall cranes poked up above the roof-

tops, spindly Martians hard at work devastating the landscape.

The train stopped for nearly five minutes outside Waterloo. Gillian chose this time to sink once more into somnolence. The men began to fold their newspapers. The train jolted and rolled slowly on into the station. Meg wondered which man would be the first to lunge for the door and which one stood the best chance of becoming entangled in Gillian's vegetation as it drooped from the rack overhead.

It was Monday; it was London. Another week lay ahead, the same as every other week.

One man trampled suddenly across her feet and sprang out while the train was still moving. The door swung to and fro. Meg waited until the compartment had spilled out its remaining three men before they gathered up their belongings and got out into the thrusting, agitated crowd.

The man who had stared at Gillian was standing with his back against a luggage truck. He let them pass and fell into step a few paces behind. When they were through the barrier Meg and Gillian stopped for their Monday ritual of exchanging information which both of them already possessed—"I'll be in early this evening . . . come straight back . . . dropping in at the cleaners this lunch-time . . . stop at the delicatessen, we're out of butter. . . ."

Meg's way took her out into the open and a bus for Holborn. At the top of the steps she looked back and watched Gillian going towards the Underground.

The man with the lean face went after her, half a dozen treads behind her on the escalator.

2

"Yes," said Gillian. "He followed me all the way."

Her indignation was touched with a breathy excitement. She stamped out into the kitchen to put her flowers in water, shedding leaves as she went, and stamped back again to open her case. Then she disappeared into the bathroom. There was the explosive thump of the geyser lighting, the rattle of the medicine cabinet, and the clatter of a plastic tooth-mug in the basin. When she returned to the sitting room she slumped into a chair and repeated: "All the way."

"Here?" said Meg.

"Oh, no. Only to the office. I half expected him to be lurking when I got out this evening. But he wasn't. Probably his boss wouldn't let him off in time. Not a very good excuse for nipping away early, is it—'Please, sir, I want to follow a girl and find out where she lives.' "

"If he knows where you work, that's a step in the right direction."

"In the wrong direction, if you don't mind. And it had better be the only step. If he dares to make another one there'll be trouble."

"It wasn't just that he works in the same district and has to pass your office anyway?"

"No." Gillian was not to be done out of her emotional upheaval. "He was too furtive. He was following me all right. For all the good it will do him."

"If he comes here—"

"He'd better not."

"He might find our number and telephone."

"Oh, for heavens' sake, don't let's have one of those! I've had all I can stand."

Gillian was always telling their friends—in London, not in delicate, stuffy Alderford—some of the more extreme things men said to her over the phone and how fed up she was with their sad daydreams. "Pathetic," she would say, "and so boring. That's what's so dismal about the whole thing—their imaginations are as anonymous as they themselves are." But Meg had noticed that Gillian rarely hung up in mid-sentence. She waited for the caller to finish while she shook her head and made faces at Meg. Only when the call was ended did she sigh and murmur: "Pathetic . . . oh, so pathetic."

"Well," said Meg, "it's nice to know you have what they call a follower."

"Like those two boys who used to trail us from school. Remember? Only they never had the courage to speak to us."

"Any more than this one will have."

Gillian kicked her shoes off and reached for a cigarette from the box on the coffee table. "At his age—I'll bet he's a married man with ten kids, longing to re-create his lost youth."

Meg unpacked her shopping bag and took the packets into the kitchen. It was a small room with moist walls. Even at this time of the year it smelt damp after the weekend of emptiness. The whole flat was suffused with a smell which one got used to during the week but which reasserted itself every Monday. It seeped into clothes if they were not given an airing in rotation and sent for cleaning at regular intervals.

The basement flat was connected to the house above by a steep flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs. Meg and Gillian were allowed to use these in order to go and collect their mail. Their landlord made it clear that this was a great concession, made only because of the lack of any letter-box in the area entrance to the basement. The lack of such a letter-box was due simply to the basement not

being regarded by the real owners of the house as a separate entity. The present tenant was not supposed to sub-let. He explained even this latter restriction in such a way as to place Meg and Gillian under a great obligation to him for allowing them in the place at all.

In winter the outside steps were perilous. Both girls had to carry handbag flashlights in order to avoid pitching to their deaths. Indoors, one of the main hazards was that of falling plaster: when the man and his family were at home, their feet pounding overhead dislodged white slivers from the ceiling and showered fragments into the bath and lavatory. When they were away on holiday the house seemed to creak even more noisily, its threatening weight sagging down from above.

To retain his dominion over the nether regions, the landlord had established that the accommodation was let furnished. This meant that he supplied two faded rugs, a kitchen table, one single bed and an armchair with a faulty castor. Wedged in a corner, the chair was safe and not uncomfortable. Drawn by any unwise visitor into the middle of the room it would sag in one corner and could easily tip over to one side. Meg and Gillian never in fact offered it to a guest: one of them would use it herself, deriving a certain pleasure out of adapting to its frailties and skilfully tilting the chair as far as it would go.

The sitting room walls had originally been painted battleship grey, effectively dulling any light which filtered in through the area railings. Meg had insisted on tackling this as soon as they moved in. She decided that one wall should be daffodil yellow, but it came out ochre. Two of the others, planned as exhilarating scarlet, finished as blotchy as a hot flush. Meg wanted to start all over again but Gillian objected. She wasn't going to suffer all that mess and stink again. Besides, they might decide to move next month or the month after—and why

should they tart the place up for the benefit of somebody else? So Meg resigned herself to existing in an ambience of burnt custard and unripe blackberries.

Monday evening was always messy. An absurd number of odd jobs seemed to come into being over the weekend. Plaster and grit had piled up in the bath. The geyser over the kitchen sink refused to function and had to be poked at with bits of wire before it gave its usual terrifying belch. Some cheese had gone bad in the cupboard, and the whole shelf had to be cleared. By the time they had eaten, it was getting late—and then Gillian felt that she wouldn't get to sleep if she didn't have a walk, and she didn't want to go on her own, so Meg had to accompany her and have a coffee round the corner. The chances were that Gillian would then be unable to sleep because of the coffee.

Over their hasty breakfast on Tuesday morning Gillian said: "By the way . . ." It was her usual introduction to something important which she wanted to sound unimportant. "I'll just be in and out this evening. I'm meeting Philip."

"I thought we were going to meet in town and see that film at the Academy."

"Not tonight. You've got it mixed up."

"You know we agreed it had to be Tuesday because—"

"I couldn't possibly have agreed," said Gillian airily. "I fixed this with Philip ages ago."

"All right." Meg knew that Gillian was wrong and that the date with Philip must have been arranged only today. "I've got some mending to do, anyway."

"Mending? Oh, God—do you have to be so domesticated, Meg?"

"And a book to read," said Meg, "which I suppose makes me a way-out intellectual."

"If you'd like us to make up a four on . . . well, say

Thursday . . . Philip can probably get that hefty friend of his to come along."

"No, thanks. Really."

"Sure? Perhaps it's as well. The whole Philip business is getting a dead bore. Maybe tonight I'll tell him so. Honestly, I've had just about enough."

"What's wrong with him?"

"If you have to ask," said Gillian, "then you wouldn't understand if I told you."

She gulped down half a cup of scalding coffee, buttered a round of toast, and got out her gloves and bag.

"Leave the washing up," said Meg, as she so often said. "There's not enough to bother with now. I'll do it when I get in this evening."

Gillian didn't argue. Gillian rarely argued on such points.

As they climbed the flaky stone steps to pavement level she said, as though there had been no gap between one of her earlier remarks and the present: "Seriously, you ought to get out and about more. You might just as well be working in your father's office in Alderford and living at home."

"I sometimes think that myself," Meg confessed.

"But what's the good of that? Honestly, Meg, you're too serious about everything. You're just like your father —all neat and tidy and legalistic. You don't *give*." She saw a young man's head turn up appreciatively as they crossed the road towards the Underground, and said with mounting conviction: "You know, the only man you'll ever get will be some decrepit divorcé—or some widower wanting his home comforts again."

"Thanks," said Meg.

They travelled as usual on the same train. As usual they got in a smoker because Gillian needed a cigarette at this time of day. Gillian got off at Green Park to walk up to her advertising agency. Meg went on to Hol-

born to the solicitor's office where her employer, who had known her father for years, assumed that she would take as a compliment his frequent assertion that mentally she was her father's son rather than a daughter.

On her way back in the early evening she saw a man at the corner of the square, glancing about him as though undecided which direction to take. She could not be sure that he had seen her, but he certainly kept his head averted as he hurried off; and she could not be sure that it was the man who had been on the train, but had an uneasy feeling that it was.

Gillian was already home. Her daffodil yellow pleated skirt lay flung across the back of a chair, and a pair of stockings swayed from the mantelpiece, anchored beneath a pewter candlestick. Noises emerged from the bathroom, to be followed shortly by Gillian. She was in a flap. Even with several hours in which to get ready, Gillian usually managed to get into a flap if she was going out, and to be allowed only fifteen minutes was an invitation to hysteria.

"Oh, God," she said as Meg came in, as though her mere appearance was the last straw.

Meg sat on the window ledge and kept clear of the frenzy. It was not until Gillian had made three trips between the sitting room and her bedroom and finally assembled her full regalia for the evening that Meg ventured to say:

"Was he waiting for you?"

"Who?"

"Your admirer."

"Honestly, Meg, if you're going to ask questions like that at a time like this . . . I'm late enough already . . . having to stop and answer stupid questions, honestly. . . ."

Gillian's hands sketched an incomprehensible diagram in mid-air. In the full flow of delight or despondency she was given to flinging her arms wide, making high

tragedy or ecstasy of everything from a laddered stocking to some fancied bargain in the Portobello Road. She could not keep her hands still.

Meg said: "I thought I saw him as I came in."

"Where?"

"On the corner."

"Oh, rubbish. I'd have seen him if he'd followed me all this way."

Gillian's thoughts were not on her admirer, if such he was. She couldn't be bothered even to laugh at the idea. It was a relief to have her out of the flat, to watch her hurrying up the steps.

Meg looked up through the railings at the sky. Gillian's legs went past, her skirt swirling as she turned to cut a diagonal across the corner.

A few seconds later a man moved slowly towards the corner and stopped. All Meg could see of him were his slightly baggy grey trouser-legs. She leaned her forehead against the cold wall and then against the window-pane. But the man, after a brief hesitation, walked away out of sight.

Meg spent a quiet evening. She was slightly perturbed, at about nine o'clock, to realise how much she was enjoying it. Perhaps Gillian was right; perhaps, like Colin, she was by nature a stodge. But she didn't really feel like that at all. If she got as much enjoyment out of leisure, out of doing things casually as they came along, out of doing nothing at all if the mood took her, why should that be regarded as inferior and less rewarding than Gillian's dramatic ups and downs?

If I'm a prig, said Meg defiantly to herself, I shall at least be a cosy, contented prig.

Maybe that was the trouble with prigs: they were all too readily contented.

Oh, to hell with Gillian Forshaw.

Meg went to bed with a book.

Her bed was the divan in the sitting room. Gillian had the small bedroom at the back and was supposed to keep all her belongings there, but a large number of them had infiltrated into the sitting room so that it bore the stamp of Gillian rather than Meg. Sitting propped up against her pillows, Meg looked away from her book every now and then. Glossy magazines had accumulated in a tottering heap on the stool. It was time to throw most of them out, but Gillian would scream blue murder and insist that there was something in each one which necessitated its staying where it was—a dress she wanted to copy, an advertisement she wanted to follow up, a holiday address she must make a note of for next year, a fascinating recipe . . . as though Gillian had ever in all her time here practised any recipe or sewn a single seam. Her blue coat hung on the back of the door. She had dropped a nail file on the table, and her fluffy pink slippers poked out from under Meg's armchair.

Meg yawned. She had read the same page twice without taking in a word. She closed the book, reached for the bedside lamp and switched it off.

Shortly after midnight the door was flung open and Gillian stormed in. She snapped the light on. Meg shuddered her way up through a dream that had grown unaccountably violent, and blinked protestingly against the overhead bulb.

"Oh," said Gillian. "Sorry. I didn't think you'd have gone to bed."

She dropped her bag on the table and kicked her shoes into the far corner of the room.

Meg said: "Nice evening?"

"Oh, very funny."

"I see." Meg resigned herself to a blow-by-blow account of yet another quarrel. She turned her head away from the light and waited.

"You don't care, do you?" Gillian flopped down on the end of the divan. "It doesn't really mean a thing to you. All you can do is make polite noises."

Meg cautiously pulled her feet out of the way. "At least they're polite," she said drowsily.

Gillian clearly had a moment of uncertainty when she debated whether or not to argue this out. Then she decided to plunge straight into the main theme. She said: "He's a creep. A real little creep. How I could have failed to see it all this time . . ."

"I thought you did see it," said Meg. "You were going to break with him this evening."

"A foul, rotten little creep," said Gillian. "Do you know what he had the nerve to say to me? He told me I was unbalanced. Said that I was the sort of girl who would drive someone too far one day—the sort who finished up strangled on Hampstead Heath." She drew a trembling breath. "Just because he didn't want to listen to what I had to say to him. He's not used to being talked to as an equal. These chinless wonders never are. I take it for granted that I'm talking to a rational human being—someone who'll enjoy a frank exchange of views. . . ."

Meg suppressed a groan. She could just imagine. Gillian letting fly, Gillian flailing away with words and then bursting with indignation when the object of her wrath dared to shout back. It had happened so often before.

"He was out of his mind," she ranted on. "Like a spoilt child. He was almost sobbing. Said that one day I'd get as good as I gave—and he hoped it hurt."

"Not worth getting upset," said Meg.

"Haven't I got reason," said Gillian with infinite satisfaction, "to be upset?"

"You said you were going to break it off anyway. Now it's all over, so—"

"It didn't have to be ended in that disgusting way."

Meg said rashly: "Don't you think you ought to take

things a bit easier, Gill? Be a bit more moderate in your language—not deliberately needle the poor chaps. It's so exhausting all round."

"I can't do things that way," cried Gillian. "I can't *calculate* the way you do." She made it sound like a dirty word. "I always say what I feel. Otherwise"—she put her hands to her head in a gesture which she must have learnt from some film about one of those highly strung, lovably impetuous characters with whom she associated herself—"something would crack. Something in here would go crack."

In spite of the declamatory exaggeration, Meg thought that this might one day turn out to be so. Faced, as she must surely be sooner or later in life, with a situation which she couldn't deal with by ranting and raving, with someone she could not arbitrarily dismiss when she chose to do so, Gillian might well splinter apart.

Meg blinked. That was ridiculous. She was tired. Gillian sounded worse than she was and looked more alarming than she was simply because it was late and because Meg was staring up at her from a low angle.

"I was a fool." Gillian pounded the end of the divan. "All right. Tell me I was a fool." Meg knew better than to do any such thing. "It was my own fault," Gillian raged on, "for getting involved with someone so . . . so callow. What's the use, at our age? What's the use of mixing with these footling young men?"

Meg did not risk suggesting that a decrepit divorcé or a widower, contemptuously offered to her yesterday, might today be Gillian's cup of tea. But she ventured: "Well, if you want an older man, there's always your follower. I'm not sure, but I think he was outside this evening."

Gillian sat up straight. "Was he?"

"I can't be absolutely sure."

"I've a good mind to go out there now." Gillian got to

her feet and faced the door. "I *need* an older man—a more mature man. That would be something, wouldn't it? Going out, offering myself to him—that would make his day, wouldn't it?"

"At this time of the morning he's probably miles away, sunk in dreamless slumber."

"You've got no imagination, have you?"

"As a matter of fact, I've got a rather lurid one. And I think you'd be better off in bed."

Gillian moaned. She was on the verge of a tantrum, wanting to break something and yet at the same time wanting to be loved and soothed and petted.

"All right," she said at last in her most injured tone. "I'll go to bed. But I shan't sleep." At the door she stopped. "I ought to have known better than to bring my troubles to you. What I need—"

"If you really want my advice—"

"No! No . . . I won't listen."

Gillian went out and slammed the door. She had left the ceiling light on. Meg had to get out of bed to switch it off. The stone floor was cold through the skimpy rugs they had put down. Meg scurried back into bed and pulled the blanket up under her chin.

The sort of girl who would drive someone too far one day—the sort who finishes up strangled . . .

Meg had often felt like strangling Gillian or at the very least like burying her beneath a pile of bedclothes to muffle that persistent, self-absorbed voice. But because she and Gillian were so different in temperament, they had managed to weather all storms with only minor scratches. Other people would not be so patient. Other people, not knowing her history, would not pull their punches.

Mr. Forshaw had been a farmer in Kenya when the Mau Mau troubles broke over that country. Gillian had been sent to school in England and had spent her holi-

days in Kenya until the time of her mother's death. Then she came back to England permanently and in due course her father followed. Mr. Forshaw never spoke of those days: if anyone asked an incautious question he would frown in memory of some terrible pain—a frown as histrionic as all his grimaces, yet not necessarily any the less genuine because of that. The subject would be dismissed with unusual terseness: "Lost her during the troubles . . . hideous . . . we don't talk about it. Gillian was there. Don't ever speak about it in front of her."

It was because of Gillian that he married again shortly after his return to England. He met a widow with a son of her own and it was good for both of them and for the children. Some people muttered that he had married for money. He was then a salesman for the agricultural machinery firm of which he was now sales manager, and even as an ordinary salesman he had lived so well that it was hard to believe his wife's money had not contributed something to this comfortable existence. But Mr. Forshaw had let it be known that Gillian was the one who really counted, and he went on letting it be known. He was always attentive to her, always making a great fuss of her when they were together, almost excluding his wife and stepson. "My girl," he called her in a tone of voice which he used for nobody else, at no other time. It was hard to imagine what the mood was during the week when he had only Colin and the second Mrs. Forshaw at home. Perhaps then he never mentioned Gillian, just as Gillian rarely mentioned him while she was in London. Perhaps he was as bluff and attentive towards his wife as he was towards Meg when she came within range, or towards the farmers' and businessmen's wives he met during the course of his job.

Thoughts about Mr. Forshaw, Colin and Gillian began to blur in Meg's mind and merge with nonsense phrases,

improbable words floating up out of the world of sleep that waited for her.

Suddenly, vividly, she remembered a book which she had once read describing in great detail the Mau Mau atrocities. Terror struck at her. Her heart lurched as though she had trodden on a step that wasn't there. Shapeless, formless, yet as sharp as a murderous blade, the vision sliced across her mind. She felt a great pity for Mr. Forshaw—and yet knew that when she met him again at the weekend she would find it difficult to retain that feeling of pity. The man was so unlikeable.

She dropped slowly into a swirl of faces and voices, and woke to daylight to find that she and Gillian had both overslept.

As they left the flat Gillian caught Meg's arm and said with great enthusiasm, as though she had just been smitten by the most original idea: "Let's go and see that film at the Academy this evening. I'll meet you at the usual place at six."

"I've got to go and see my aunt this evening."

"Your aunt?" Gillian was at once derisive. "What on earth do you want to trail out there for?"

"I don't want to. You know perfectly well I have to go once a month, otherwise she writes to Daddy and I get a lecture when I get home."

"Don't they understand it's more complicated travelling from one side of London to the other than it is getting to . . . well, to Alderford?"

"No," said Meg simply, "they don't."

"You'd sooner go and see your aunt than spend the evening with me."

"Oh, for goodness' sake. . . ."

"I can't force you to come to the pictures."

"If we'd gone last night, when we arranged to go—"

"That was your mistake," said Gillian, "not mine."

They walked to the Underground in silence. Meg wondered abstractedly how long she and Gillian would go on sharing a flat, bickering like a married couple, growing older, getting less and less inclined to make up their minds about the men they met until they noticed, too late, that the men weren't around any more.

The evening with her aunt was a bore, as she had known it would be. The journey home seemed interminable. She looked forward to being back in the flat. Gillian's outbursts, so soon over, were preferable to the old lady's crotchety mutterings about the past.

There was no light on as she came down the steps. Gillian must have gone to bed.

When she closed the door behind her and switched on the light, the first thing she saw was a sheet of writing paper on the table, covered with Gillian's large, bulbous scrawl. Gillian was capable of filling a quarto typing sheet with a mere twenty words, and derived great sensual pleasure from the fine flourishes she could make with the felt pen which she had removed from her agency office.

She had written: *Had to go out. May not be back tonight. Tell you all about it tomorrow.*

She was not back by breakfast time. Meg waited until the afternoon before telephoning the advertising agency. She was told politely that Miss Forshaw was not in the building at the moment—was there any message, or could anybody else help? Meg said that it was a personal call, and the voice took this as an excuse for turning peevish. Miss Forshaw had not been in all day and they had no idea where she was.

That evening Gillian did not return to the flat and there was still no word from her.

3

Gillian had once left her job in a fit of pique and for three weeks had spent every day in the flat or desultorily looking for a new job. She went home at weekends but said nothing to her father or stepmother. She coaxed money out of Mr. Forshaw on the grounds that she and Meg needed new curtains for the flat. There was little chance of Mr. Forshaw ever coming to Kensington to check whether such new curtains had ever been put up.

"I don't want any fuss," she had said to Meg. "I don't see why I should have to tell them everything I do. I don't want to tell them things."

It was Meg who found her another job, which she kept for two months before leaving her employer in the lurch and drifting—with the sort of luck that only the erratic and the unscrupulous have—into her ideal position as receptionist and general charm purveyor in the advertising agency.

Now she was up to something again. At this moment perhaps she was recuperating from an all-night party. In the sourness of the morning after she was quite capable of leaving her job, simply never showing up there again. Meg sighed. She sensed that there was going to be trouble of one kind or another.

Gillian's soap, facecloth and toothbrush were missing, and some things had been taken from her dressing-table. Her new summer coat had gone but most of her belongings were in their usual place. She had known where she was going and roughly for how long. And she had expected to be back.

If Meg telephoned the Forshaws and reported her as missing Gillian would assuredly appear the next day and

would be furious. No excuses would be accepted. She would fly off in a rage of contemptuous denunciation.

She was bound to be back tomorrow. They would go down on the train together and Meg would hear all about it then.

Had the man from the train come to the house or had he met Gillian somewhere else? While Meg was out, had he come boldly down the steps and knocked at the door, or had he found their telephone number and coaxed Gillian out?

Gillian could look after herself. Meg said this to herself over and over again with lessening conviction. A girl who would grab up a few necessities and dash off with a man . . .

But there was no reason for supposing this was what had happened. Much more likely to be a party.

Tomorrow was Friday. Tomorrow she had to come back.

And if she didn't?

Meg was just about to make a shrimp omelette for supper when she heard someone coming down the area steps. She was halfway between the kitchen and the sitting room. She hurried into the sitting room ready to great Gillian, and was in time to see a man pass the window and approach the door. His knuckles rapped on the door. Because there was officially no front door to the basement, there was neither bell nor knocker.

Meg stood still in the middle of the room. She had been so sure it was Gillian, not a man. She was reluctant to open the door. But it might be someone bringing news—bad news, she felt with a twinge of dread. She went to the door and opened it.

Colin said: "The country cousin has come to town!"

His appearance was so unexpected that Meg did not stand back to let him in. She could not immediately accept his presence here. She was so used to seeing him

against a country background that she was slow to adjust to this picture of him in a setting to which he didn't belong.

"This is the right address, isn't it?" said Colin. "Miss Forshaw and Miss Waring? I mean, if I've come to the wrong place I'll go away again."

"Do come in. It was just that . . . well, I wasn't expecting you. You took me by surprise."

"Not washing your hair or anything?" Colin stooped instinctively, feeling himself threatened by the low ceiling, then straightened up again as he realised that there was adequate clearance. "No joyous welcome from your dormitory mate?"

"She's out," said Meg.

"Back soon?"

"I don't think so. I think"—Meg was ashamed to see that her word was accepted implicitly because it was always taken for granted that she, Meg Waring, told the truth—"she said she was going to be rather late."

"Whooping it up, eh? Good. Then let's do the same."

Colin seemed very large and booming in this basement room. Meg was alarmed by him and at the same time felt protective towards him. He looked as though he might knock things over from sheer clumsiness, and she wanted to calm him and tell him not to be intimidated by London. It was not that he was a country yokel; merely that his whole tempo of life was different.

Meg said: "Do sit down."

Colin lowered himself into a chair. He waggled his feet out in front of him. "The streets of this town are too hard—and too long—and there are too many of them."

"What are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming up."

"I didn't know myself until this afternoon. Got a meeting tomorrow with a firm we're splitting commission with. Joint handling of a sale of contents and stock the

other side of Salisbury. They can do better with the furniture than we could, but we want the livestock." Colin was junior partner in a firm of auctioneers and valuers in Alderford. He ranged over three counties, driving to sales, to valuations of property and the contents of old houses and hotels, and walking round farms, talking, listening, missing nothing. He walked like a man who enjoyed walking, with a comfortable stride and an easy swing of the shoulders that never became a swagger. Meg would not have been surprised if he had said that he had just walked all the way here from Waterloo. "Five years since I was last in London, and it strikes me the place is getting out of hand. I don't mind telling you," said Colin endearingly, "it scares me."

"You're going back on the last train?" said Meg.

"I've only just got here. Business discussions tomorrow."

"Oh, yes, of course. You said."

"Why?" he asked shrewdly. "Don't you want me around this evening?"

"No. I mean, no, it's not that I don't want you around."

"Good. Because I'm going to take you out to dinner."

"But Colin, I'm not dressed for anything special."

"I didn't say it was going to be special. I just said dinner. Though I'd *like* it to be somewhere out of the ordinary. You'll have to decide where—I'll leave it to you."

She knew that he would be offended if she chose somewhere too obviously cheap. She suggested that they walk down to the King's Road. It was a clear, warm evening and the sky was blue, bleaching to a hard whiteness along the western rooftops where the sun was still strong. Colin's crinkled, sunburnt face contradicted the dark blue suit he had put on for this trip to town.

They found a restaurant which had changed hands since Meg's last visit and which she was glad to try out.

It had a pop-art décor which would be stale in a year's time, and over-inventive lampshades which cast a camouflaging glow over the food.

Colin's defensiveness began to wear off. He began the evening with awkwardly facetious criticisms of London life and then relaxed and became a more competent, masterful host than she would have expected. Meg was enjoying herself until he asked:

"Where *is* Gillian—or is it a secret?"

"Er . . . no," Meg fumbled, "it's not a secret."

"At the opera?"

"No. No, not at the opera."

Meg sank into silence and concentrated on her goujons of sole. Colin waited for a few minutes, then said meaningly: "But it's not a secret?"

She realised that she wanted to talk to someone. She wanted to share the responsibility. She told him the truth.

Colin whistled. "So that's what you girls get up to when you're in town!"

"We don't know that she's up to anything. This is the first time anything like this has happened. And I still don't know what it's all about. But you *don't* think I ought to have rung your mother and father, do you—or that I ought to do it now?"

"No," said Colin. His firmness was a great relief to her. He sounded quite sure that she had done the right thing—or rather, that she had not done the wrong thing. "No good getting everyone steamed up. Gillian wouldn't thank you for it. I think this business of the man on the train is just a coincidence, anyway. Right at this moment she's probably wandering round with some young man she met at last night's party. You'll see—she'll be back tomorrow, looking utterly innocent or else chattering to you about the most wonderful, marvellous time she's had

. . . the sort of time that only she is qualified to savour to the full."

They laughed and went on with their meal.

Later, Meg said: "She's so unpredictable."

"Except that you're always safe in predicting trouble."

"What's it like, living with her?"

"If anyone can answer that question, you ought to be able to."

"I meant in the middle of her family. Two girls living together—it's not quite the same. We've been sharing a flat all this time, and I still don't really know her. When you share, you know, there are all sorts of things you don't ask. You . . . well, you draw lines and don't step over them. You can be very close, but you never get so close that you say things you can't go back on. Otherwise you'd have to split up. But at home, with your own family—"

"At home," said Colin, "it's not all that different. Gillian and Len—her father—have some understanding of their own. You can't get into their magic circle. Not that I want to, but it's often not so good for my mother."

He stopped and looked down at his plate, embarrassed by his own admission. Meg, realising that he had been in danger of stepping over one of those very lines that she had just referred to, did not press him further. But while they were waiting for coffee he said, of his own accord:

"Len does go on so! It's not enough for him to be fond of his daughter. He has to flaunt it. He has to twist everything she says—everything that anyone says, come to think of it—into a pattern that suits him. He tells me that I've got an Oedipus complex towards my mother and then wags his head and assures me it's nothing to worry about—everyone has it. And he tells everyone how Gil adores him. Even when she's in one of her moods,

he explains it by the love-hate relationship. He gets such a kick out of using jargon he doesn't understand."

Like father like daughter, thought Meg, remembering various phrases of Gillian's enthusiasms or the enthusiasms of her current boy friend, from jazz to rugger.

It was late when they left the restaurant and walked back to the flat. As they approached the top of the steps Meg, perhaps in a mood of mellow optimism induced by the bottle of wine they had shared, was convinced that there would be a light on and that they would find Gillian indoors.

There was no light; and no Gillian.

Colin came down the steps with Meg and waited for her to open the door.

She had not asked him where he was staying the night. Now she said: "I suppose you'll want a taxi—there are plenty of them cruising along Old Brompton Road or down the other side of the square."

"No hurry," said Colin.

When she opened the door he moved into the room behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. She was twisted rather than turned towards him. He kissed her, and in an agreeably detached kind of way she noticed what a different smell he had from the men she knew in London: instead of exuding one of the more expensive brands of aftershave lotion, he smelled of carbolic and trampled grass.

Then, startled, she gasped: "No . . . now just a minute. . . ."

She jerked away from him and put the light on. He grinned, and tried to catch her again.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Oh, come on, Meg—"

"Gillian might have come in. She may be in the other room."

"You don't believe that. Go and check, if you like—and then come back."

"I don't know what's happened to you!"

After a hunt ball or some particularly noisy party Colin had made several healthy, conventional passes at her—but none quite so vigorous as this. London and the wine must have gone to his head. Now he stood in the middle of the room with his head on one side—a large, blundering boy, she thought with a sudden and unexpected rush of affection. She went up to him, put her hands on his arms, and kissed him.

"You will get a taxi on the corner in not more than five minutes," she said resolutely.

"Oh, well . . . if that's the way you feel. . . ."

He sounded surly, but she wanted to laugh because she could tell that his main emotion was one of relief. He had lunged at her because he felt that the London code of behaviour required it. Rather sweet of him, really. Meg went to the top of the steps with him and there they kissed again—an Alderford brand of kiss, she thought appreciatively.

As he was about to go he said awkwardly: "Meg, I'm sorry about . . . well, about . . . down there, a few minutes ago."

"Don't be," she said. Her hand was in his. "It makes a nice change. Reveals hidden depths."

"Look, if that's the way you feel. . . ." He tried to push back down the steps, but she laughed and held him off. He leaned on the railings for a moment, and they smiled at each other.

"It was a nice evening," said Meg. "Thank you."

He went to the edge of the pavement and then looked back.

"I shall expect you to tell me all about it over the weekend," he said.

"All about what?"

"About Gillian's mystery interlude."

There was still no news of Gillian during the day. Meg got to Waterloo early in order to make her way slowly along the train in the hope of finding her. As she turned, disappointed, to retrace her steps she was confronted by Colin.

"I stayed on for this train," he explained. "I thought I might fall in with the two of you. I thought maybe . . . ?"

His bushy eyebrows asked the question. Meg shook her head.

"Not yet."

They got into a compartment at the rear of the train and kept watch on the platform. Gillian did not go past.

When the train started on its journey to Alderford, Colin said:

"What are we going to tell them?"

"I don't know."

"Can't just leave it in the air."

"No," said Meg.

The compartment was crowded and there was no chance of discussing the matter in the privacy it demanded. By the time they reached Alderford they had come to no decision.

4

Mrs. Waring had brought the car in to meet Meg. She looked taut and displeased. Beside her, Mr. Forshaw had all too clearly been applying himself to one of his arch verbal seductions.

He gloated at the sight of Meg and Colin together. "So that's what the special trip to town was really in aid of! And where's my errant daughter?"

Probably erring, thought Meg. Aloud she said: "She's —er—gone off to stay with friends." Lamely she added: "I thought you'd know."

She had expected bewilderment, turning to alarm, and then a volley of agitated questions. Instead, Mr. Forshaw's face set into a tight anger. It was as though he had been waiting for something like this. He showed no concern for his daughter, and no surprise; only a mounting fury which threatened to burst though all conventional restraints. "So . . . that's it!"

Colin said: "I don't think you realise—"

"Don't I? Oh, don't I? Up to her damned tricks. That's what it is. I might have known it would come to this."

He turned abruptly and marched off. Colin looked at Meg, shrugged, and followed.

"And what was all that about?" asked Mrs. Waring as she drove Meg home.

Home. From the moment Meg set foot on Alderford station platform, the house at the top of the hill was home; but by Monday morning she would be thinking of the basement in Kensington in the same way—wanting to reach it and settle down and be herself . . . whoever that might be.

Meg explained Gillian's disappearance as vaguely as possible. She didn't want to alarm her mother. It would be fatal to start up doubts about the wisdom of allowing Meg to stay on in London. She could not face a long inquisition or a great fluttering of apprehension. They had gone over this ground before: whether or not to live and work in Alderford, whether it was a good thing for her to be exposed to the temptations of London. She wanted to stir up no more unease.

Unfortunately her father was less easy to deflect. Vagueness was anathema to him. In his profession he had dealt with too many woolly-minded clients and was resolved at all times to have everything clearly defined.

He wanted to know the plain facts. Gillian's disappearance was none of his business as it stood but insofar as it affected his own daughter he wanted a detailed account. He was more disturbed about Gillian's possible fate than her own father appeared to be. But here, meticulous as ever, he stopped. He wanted to know only as much as was necessary for him to be able to assess Meg's position. What steps Mr. Forshaw took or did not take were no concern of the Warings. If Mr. Waring felt ordinary human curiosity about the situation, he concealed it. Only a direct invitation from Mr. Forshaw would prompt him to express an opinion—and no such invitation was forthcoming during the weekend.

In Meg's memory the weekend ritual had never varied. Alderford High Street was choked with cars and people from the town and the surrounding countryside. Shoppers jostled in and out, laden with string bags and paper bags and knobbly raffia baskets, grimly filling them with provisions until the time came to collapse into one of the teashops or pubs. The Red Lion was the pub for which her father's group of friends always made. As though not satisfied by their regular contacts during the week, they were drawn to assemble in the saloon bar every Saturday at noon. Meg and her mother joined them half an hour later, having dumped packages all over the back seat of the car.

They were greeted this Saturday by Colin, who miraculously found them space on one of the window seats and brought drinks before Mr. Waring even realised they had arrived.

Obscurely Meg felt that Gillian's absence ought to have made a difference. It ought to have been noticeable. But the babble of conversation was the same and the faces were the same apart from the lack of that one particular face.

If London were wiped out in an atomic catastrophe, Alderford would surely go complacently on its way, not altering its routine by as much as a backward glance. Of course nobody would go up on the Monday morning train and there might be no newspapers, even no television; but on Saturday morning the High Street would still be crowded, The Red Lion would attract its usual crowd, and before Sunday lunch the Warings would go for a drink at the Forshaws' or the Forshaws would come to the Warings'.

"Well," said Colin, raising his glass.

He was inhibited by Mrs. Waring's presence. It was impossible to say anything about Gillian. Meg was anxious to know if there was in fact anything to say.

They were saved by Mrs. Forshaw. Mr. Forshaw was standing by the bar deep in conversation with a red-faced woman. His wife stood to one side looking detached. She had acquired this manner from long experience. Nowadays she seemed quite content to be ignored while her husband talked incessantly to other women. But there was nothing downtrodden about her: she stood aggressively erect, defying anyone to suppose that her marriage was lacking in any respect. When she saw Meg and Mrs. Waring she did not at once rush gladly towards them. She allowed herself a little smile, stayed where she was for a moment, then edged casually through the crush.

She was wearing a dress and jacket in white linen as coarse as a bookbinding fabric. A blush rose was pinned to the jacket. The neckline was too low: her splash of freckles deepened and spread into a smear of dark orange between her breasts. Her hair was silver. It had been dark brown and grey a week ago when Meg last saw her.

"Yes, I know," she said in her brusque, shrill voice as

she reached them. "Silver threads. All at one fell swoop. I decided to go the whole hog."

"It looks very attractive." Mrs. Waring stood up so that they were facing each other.

"No nonsense. Couldn't bear to be grey in patches."

Her clipped speech somehow evoked an Indian military family background for her. In fact she was the daughter of a Scottish distiller, and the widow of a Liverpool shipowner. The curt mannerism had overawed Meg when she was younger until she found that either as a means of cutting through Mr. Forshaw's florid extravagances or as a corrective to Gillian's vagaries it was utterly ineffective.

Mrs. Waring said that the price of steak was shocking and she was sure that the three local butchers had got together in a price-fixing scheme. Mrs. Forshaw agreed.

"And as for that beastly little man at the grocers. . . ."

The two women were cut off by three young farmers shouldering their way towards the empty fireplace. Colin sat down beside Meg.

"Anything further?" asked Meg.

"Nothing. I've never seen such a weird example of 'business as usual'."

Between the shoulders of other men drinking and leaning on the bar, Meg could see Mr. Forshaw's busy mouth. He was tapping some point insistently home with little jerks of his forehead.

She said: "Isn't he worried about Gill? Isn't he going to do anything about it?"

"He's mad. Hopping mad. But he's mad with her rather than with the man—if there *is* a man involved. I don't know what to make of it. This morning I tried to sound him out, but all he'd say was 'She'll be back. She'd better be.' As though it's something *she's* done. Or as though he refuses to face any other possibility."

"That may be it," said Meg slowly. "But while he's refusing to face up to it, what's happening to Gillian?"

Their mothers were nudged back towards them by another surge of customers across the bar. Mrs. Forshaw glanced quickly, peremptorily at Colin. It might have been a warning to him not to say anything that Mr. Forshaw wouldn't wish him to say.

Mr. Forshaw's voice rose above the hubbub and then sank again, descending to his calculatedly rich laugh.

"Who's that he's with?" asked Meg.

"The wife of some important buyer."

Colin finished his drink and was getting up with the intention of suggesting another one when Mr. Forshaw broke away from the woman at the bar and squeezed through the crowd to join them.

"Time we were off, eh? Enough work for one morning."

"Work?" said Colin expressionlessly.

"Work I said and work I mean. Though some work can be a pleasure, I'll grant you that. Some men try the hard sell—I go the long way round because it's more certain in the end."

Meg recalled her father's dry and grudgingly admiring analysis of Mr. Forshaw's technique. While his rival salesmen at County Shows drank in the tent with the boys, Forshaw looked after the wives. He bought them drinks, admired their clothes and listened to their troubles. He was bluff when necessary, slyly sexy when he detected a note of frustration in a woman's voice. Sometimes he detected such a note where there was none and as a result of such miscalculations there were some women who detested him ever afterwards. But on the whole he did well. His attentiveness to their wives gave the men a chance to drink without interruption, and when the time came to settle a deal it was done with a joke,

a nudge in the ribs, and a quick scribble on a scrap of paper.

"We'll see you tomorrow, then?" said Mrs. Forshaw, finishing her drink. "At our place."

"We mustn't stay long," said Mrs. Waring just as she always said.

"Just an appetiser," grinned Mr. Forshaw. "Just a little something to stimulate the taste buds, eh?"

The crowd in the bar began to thin out. Cars honked and slithered out of the High Street, bumping round the vicious right-hand turn that led to the outskirts, to the larger houses beyond the town and eventually to the hills. And Saturday reshaped itself into the pattern of afternoon and evening.

Sunday morning was a great deal of coffee and toast, and the Sunday newspapers. Meg had gathered from Colin that Gillian made a big thing out of the papers. She turned at once to the theatre reviews and made snuffling noises of joy or derision over them. She spoke with familiar irreverence of the critics, shook her head over a rave notice and dismissed the play concerned with a rude noise, and let it be understood that she was well and truly in the swim. If anyone asked her for a recommendation—"Just going up for the day, thought we'd take in a show"—she would say that there were no such things as shows any more and that frankly she couldn't advise seeing anything right at this moment.

But today Gillian would not be sprawling on the divan shedding supplements from the *Sunday Times* and *Observer* over the floor.

"Do we *have* to go there today?" Mr. Waring asked about five minutes before they were due to set out.

"They came here last week," said his wife.

It was not the first time that this answer had been issued as the self-evident cancellation of this question. With practised resignation Mr. Waring sighed and put

his jacket on. The drive to the Forshaws' house on the edge of the woods took ten minutes. The Warings would spend half an hour there and then drive home. Fifty minutes gone out of their Sunday. But what else would they have done with those fifty minutes? As much as anything it was the lack of enthusiasm and the lack of the will to revolt that had convinced Meg that Alderford life was not for her. If London had its own disadvantages, at least they fell into a category she could cope with.

When they arrived, Mr. Forshaw was once more talking to a woman. This time it was the wife of the local Chief Inspector. He turned away for a moment to welcome his other guests, poured drinks for them with a lavish hand, and then steered Mr. and Mrs. Waring towards Mrs. Forshaw and Chief Inspector Perrock. With a knowing wink he manoeuvred Colin and Meg together by the french windows looking out on the garden. Then he resumed his conversation with Mrs. Perrock.

"It's my belief," said Colin, "that at some time during his travels he must have picked up a couple of paperbacks by Dale Carnegie and Freud."

Meg was delighted. "And tried to amalgamate them?"

"Exactly. A theory of how to win women and influence their husbands."

Meg laughed. She was surprised that such an assessment should have come from Colin, and enjoyed it. He detected the surprise and said huffily:

"I'm not so dim, you know."

"I never thought you were dim."

"Gillian does."

"I'm not Gillian."

"No," he said. "Thank God."

They had spoken too loudly. Gillian's name attracted Mr. Forshaw's attention. He put his arm round Mrs. Perrock's waist and brought her towards Meg. By intro-

ducing a dispassionate witness he somehow added weight to whatever he chose to say.

"I hear"—he grinned at Meg—"you've been fretting more than you should about my wayward daughter. You ought to be used to her behaviour by now."

Meg said bluntly: "Have you heard from her?"

"Not yet."

"But you know where she is?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far. But—"

"Don't you think we ought to be taking steps to find her?"

Mr. Forshaw invited Mrs. Perrock's approval by a tolerant twitch of his lips. "I'm quite sure she's in no danger."

"That man . . . you know him, then?"

"Man?"

"The man on the train—the one who followed her."

Most fathers would have been disturbed by such a possibility. This was the bogeyman against whom all girls leaving home to work in the wicked city were warned. But Mr. Forshaw went on grinning and put his hand on Meg's arm just above the wrist. If this was meant to reassure her, it failed.

He said: "Yes, Colin told me something about a man on the train. It was Colin"—the smile flickered about his mouth as he talked, but his eyes were angry—"who brought the whole thing out and insisted on my reporting it to Chief Inspector Perrock." Skilfully he began to edge their group towards the other one so that they would smoothly amalgamate. Conspiratorially he said to Meg: "But there wasn't really a man, now, was there?"

Meg was dumbfounded. To have her evidence so lightly brushed aside . . . hardly followed up at all. . . .

"He was there," she said "He looked at Gillian."

"Lots of men do that, I'm sure. And at you, too. Or do you scare them off, Meg?"

"He looked at her and he followed her to the office. And I'm pretty sure he followed her to the flat."

"It's all in the mind," said Mr. Forshaw. "You girls—you're all the same! Thinking about men all the time. Seeing men everywhere, that they're all staring at you, when half the time they're doing mental arithmetic about their expense claims and their bank balance."

As they joined the Chief Inspector and Meg's parents, Mr. Forshaw's arm slid round her waist. When she tried to escape he tightened his grasp and chuckled. It was his conviction that all women liked this kind of thing really and regarded it as a compliment.

The Chief Inspector was in plain clothes and looked large without being impressive. Without his uniform he was simply a rather heavy man with two podgy chins. He was holding an empty glass but trying not to offer too obvious a hint.

"Harry, do let me have that." Meg was thankful that Mr. Forshaw should have to relinquish his grip on her in order to refill Perrock's glass. "Very rude of me to talk shop when you're in civvies"—Mr. Forshaw was talking over his shoulder as he refilled the glass—"but aren't I right, Harry? These young women—always imagining things."

"Hm," said Perrock, taking the glass.

"They always imagine they're being pursued or that men are making eyes at them. Don't you agree?"

"Lots of them do," Perrock conceded.

"In your experience, when you've had complaints of men making advances to girls in railway carriages and that kind of thing, how often is the whole thing a figment of the girls' own wishful thinking?"

"Something over ninety per cent of the time."

Mr. Waring cleared his throat with a short, indignant rasp. "Meg's not given to flights of fancy. If she says she observed something, then you may be sure—"

"Oh, good heavens, I wouldn't want you to think I'm criticising her powers of observation," said Mr. Forshaw hurriedly. "It's just a matter of interpretation."

Meg said: "Gillian has disappeared. I'd like to know where she's gone."

"So would we all. But we all know, don't we, that when she takes a thing into her head she can go pretty wild." He sounded almost proud of his daughter, and at the same time there was still that cold flame of fury behind it all. A perverse jealousy . . . a deep sense of insult because, in spite of his attempted indifference, he could not forgive her for *not* having told him . . . or some genuine knowledge that hurt? "I expect you feel a bit upset because she hasn't written to you or been in touch with you, and so subconsciously you're making more of it than it deserves."

There was enough possible truth in this for Meg to redden and vow to herself that she wasn't going to say another word.

Perrock looked thoughtfully at her over his glass.

"What exactly is your version of the story, Miss Waring?"

Meg told him. Her story was punctuated by expressive little shrugs from Mr. Forshaw and by glances in which he invited his other guests to smile at the entertainment being provided for them.

As she was reaching the end, the telephone rang in the next room. Automatically Mr. Forshaw turned away with his glass in his hand and went to answer it.

Perrock said: "But you can't be absolutely sure it was the same man hanging about near your flat?"

"Not really. But—"

"And it doesn't look as though he kidnapped Miss Forshaw. That note didn't give you the impression of having been forced out of her—written at someone else's dictation?"

"How could I tell a thing like that? It looked normal enough when I first saw it."

"You've still got it?"

"It's in the flat. I didn't think to bring it with me."

"As far as we know, then," said Perrock in his slightly adenoidal, burring voice, "wherever she went, she went willingly." He brooded over his glass. "Have either of you been involved in anything in London—at any time—which might lead you into any kind of danger?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I'm asking you."

"Certainly not."

"Then you've nothing much to fear. Girls don't often disappear unless they want to. Not girls of your kind and age. Not as a rule."

"You mean you're not going to do anything about it?" Meg could not believe that it was all going to be left like this, as though Gillian had merely gone on a seaside holiday and they were all confident of receiving a picture postcard from her any day now.

"If Forshaw wants me to put out an enquiry, I'll do so. After all, he's her father, and if he's not worried . . . well, he should know her well enough by now."

"I know her, too. I see more of her than he does."

Mr. Forshaw was striding back into the room. He looked jubilant. Something had been proved: something which gave him the right to say "I told you so" and also to be furious.

"There!" he cried. "Just as I expected. I knew it would be all right."

"Gillian?" said Meg.

"Yes . . . Gillian."

"You've heard from her?"

"I know where she is."

"She's all right?"

"Of course she's all right. I never expected anything

else. I told you she was just up to one of her tricks, didn't I?" He paused, aiming at a good rich effect. "I'm going to collect her this afternoon."

Mrs. Forshaw was at his elbow. "Don't forget the Barringtons. This evening. Promised we wouldn't be late."

"We won't be late. I'll have her back here before then." Mr. Forshaw raised his glass as though in a toast to his own brilliance. He beamed at Meg. "She'll be on the train with you tomorrow morning. I'll deliver her to the station personally. All right?"

But it was not all right. Gillian was not on the train on Monday morning. Mr. Forshaw was not at the station and would never be at the station again.

His car was found piled up against a tree at the foot of a short but steep slope some twenty miles from Alderford. It appeared to have run slowly off the road at a corner where there was no reason for an accident, and where only bad luck could have made any accident a fatal one. Tipping off the edge, the car had swung sideways and rolled over and over before striking the tree. Glass had made a mess of Mr. Forshaw's right cheek and shoulder, but this he might have survived. The broken neck was something he couldn't survive.

5

Meg did not get the news until late Monday morning, when Colin telephoned her in the office. She had come up to London on the usual train, wondering at Gillian's absence and the apparent failure of Mr. Forshaw's promise. As well as wonder there was resentment: she could not deny the force of his jibe that she was hurt by Gillian's neglecting to get in touch with her personally.

It appeared that Mrs. Forshaw had heard nothing of

her husband until just after midnight. She had waited until the last minute before cancelling their visit to their friends the Barringtons, and had done nothing further, merely thinking with some irritation that Mr. Forshaw had been held up on the way. When the police came to tell her what had happened they took her and Colin out in the police car and brought her back shortly before dawn. She was given a sedative and slept late.

Meg wanted to return to Alderford immediately. Colin saw no reason for this. At this stage she could contribute nothing. He had wanted to let her know, that was all—and to tell her that the Gillian mystery was still a mystery. The accident couldn't have happened at a worse time. They had no idea whether Mr. Forshaw had seen Gillian or not; no idea what could have happened.

"Did the accident take place on the way there or the way back?" asked Meg.

"We just don't know. But unless he'd taken a wrong road, or was doubling back on his tracks for some reason, it does look as though it was on the way back. He was headed towards Alderford."

There was a faint singing through the telephone, emphasising the silence.

Meg said: "It . . . it *was* an accident?"

Again the silence and that faint rustling song so far away, so high up. At last Colin said:

"As far as we know. No reason to think otherwise."

"Well. . . ." It seemed incongruous to express the ordinary condolences when there was so strange an atmosphere about the whole affair—so many loose ends and disturbing elements. "When Gillian hears about it," said Meg, "she's bound to come home straight away. Let me know if she wants me to come down . . . if I can do anything."

"Of course. And if she comes to the flat first—"

"I'll let you know."

Soon after this there was another call. Her father wanted to break the news to her. When she again talked of coming back to Alderford he sided with Colin. This she could have predicted. He felt, so typically and probably so rightly, that there was no good reason for anyone not in the Forshaw family itself to break normal routine. Never volunteer answers to questions you haven't been asked: that was one of Mr. Waring's professional mottoes, and in a very broad sense he applied it to most other aspects of life. Until someone specifically asked Meg to play a part in these unhappy events he saw no reason why she should alter the pattern of her life. His only worry was about her being alone in the flat. He agreed that she ought to stay for a few days in case Gillian returned. After that, however, she might consider going to stay with her aunt.

Meg resisted this strongly. Gillian would be back. Once the tragedy had been lived through and had faded into the past, they would go on as before.

As she left the office that afternoon she asked herself: What if Gillian didn't come back—what if she never came back?

She was fairly sure that such an upsetting question would fall into one of her father's proscribed categories.

She bought an evening paper and found in it a picture of the smashed car and a small news story. There was not much to go on. The police were trying to determine the cause of the accident. Mr. Forshaw had been a good driver and there was no apparent reason for the car to tip over the edge. One odd feature was that the ignition key was missing. The dashboard was shattered, but it was strange that the key could have been wrenched out and flung aside. It was even stranger that the car should have been allowed to coast to destruction. None of it made much sense.

An element of drama was hinted at but not followed

up. Mr. Forshaw was believed to have been on his way to meet his twenty-four-year-old daughter, but for lack of any solid information the paper had to leave it at that.

There was a paragraph saying that the widow was anxious to trace her step-daughter, who was thought to be spending some days in the country with friends and who had probably not yet heard of the accident.

Meg had the paper under her arm as she turned the corner into the square on the way home. She was walking slowly, turning over the baffling details in her mind, and so was able to stop quickly and silently when she saw the figure of a man at the top of the basement steps. He was looking down at the windows and the basement door, standing at an angle which concealed his face from her.

Meg stood very still for a moment. Then she turned and walked back round the corner.

There was a tightness in her chest. She wanted to grab a passer-by and ask for help, but they all looked so preoccupied, so anxious to get home or to catch a bus, all so uncomprehending. It would take her so long to explain and it would all sound so weird.

The flat was empty. Perhaps the whole house was empty. Standing beneath a traffic signal while the cars started, stopped, started again—and a driver glared at her, thinking she was a stupid pedestrian unable to make up her mind whether to cross the road or not—she could not remember whether it was this last weekend or next weekend when the man upstairs and his family went on holiday. He had said something to her a fortnight ago and she had forgotten. And she didn't like him anyway, didn't trust him, and didn't want him to become involved in anything to do with Gillian and herself. Any difficulties whatsoever, and they would be thrown out: she knew that.

But she couldn't go back in there alone. And it was

unthinkable that she should flee to the railway that led back to Alderford.

She took a deep breath. He was only a man. If she asked him what he was doing there, waiting, he would have to tell her; to tell her, or to go away. And if he had anything to tell her about Gillian, she wanted to know it.

Meg went back, walking as steadily as Colin might have done. For the first time in her life she found that she was consciously wishing Colin was beside her.

The square was deserted save for two Indians going into a house five doors away.

Meg went more quickly down the steps than was her custom and nearly slipped on the bottom one. The edge was dangerously chipped but it had never worried her before. She fumbled for her key. As it went into the lock, a moving shadow was thrown long and slim by the evening sun, blurring the sharper shadow of the railings. She twisted the key desperately in the lock and glanced up.

The man at the top of the steps said: "Miss Forshaw?"

He was not the man from the train. He wore a lightweight blue suit with a jazzy shine to it, and his hair was meant to be crew-cut and needed cutting again very soon.

The key turned. Meg pushed the door open. The man hurried down the steps behind her. She turned to block his way.

"Miss Forshaw's away," she said, beginning to close the door.

He insinuated himself into the opening with the skill of long practice. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

"No," said Meg. "And now, if you don't mind. . . ."

She pushed the door. He was very good at keeping it open while appearing not to notice that she wanted it shut.

"Do you know when she'll be back?" he said again.

"I've told you—no."

"Has she gone away for good?"

"I don't see what—"

"Her stepmother's anxious to trace her. We want to do all we can to help."

"Who's 'we'?"

The man nodded towards the newspaper she was carrying.

"A reporter!" she said.

She felt absurdly relieved. By the time she got round to feeling irritated by his persistence, he had coaxed his way into the flat and the door was shut.

The story that appeared in the next morning's papers told of the inexplicable disappearing act performed by Gillian Forshaw. Was her grief-stricken father on his way to an appointment with her before he met his fatal accident or was he on his way back? Her flat-mate, trim raven-haired Margaret (Meg to her friends) Waring, said that dazzling blonde Gillian had vanished last week when she went to keep a mystery assignation with a man she had met on the train.

There was another call to the office from Meg's father. This time he spoke first to her employer, and the two old friends exchanged sorrowful opinions about the thoughtlessness of the modern generation. It was made plain to Meg that her boss considered she had let him down. He was disappointed in her. Babbling to the papers—an act which in the eyes of the legal profession was so prejudicial to any litigation which might follow as to be sinful.

Mr. Waring announced that, thanks to her, reporters were badgering poor Mrs. Forshaw.

"Why did you have to say anything?"

"He dug it out of me, bit by bit," Meg lamented. "And then he exaggerated like mad."

"Exaggeration," said her father pontifically, "can only come about when there has been at any rate a substratum of truth. The man couldn't colour his facts until he had some facts. If," he added with a scepticism that even the telephone could not smear, "there are any facts to go on." After he had gone on for some time in this vein he said that perhaps Meg had been right in one thing: perhaps she had better come home.

Meg, for once as contrary as Gillian, promptly decided that nothing would shift her. She would stay where she was. She had no intention of going home in order to become the butt of her parents' and Mrs. Forshaw's reproaches, spoken or unspoken. It was bad enough to see her employer shaking his head over her, regretting this lapse in one of whom he had so far held such a high opinion.

It occurred to her after her father had rung off that she was the only one who seemed in the least concerned about Gillian. The others were worried about gossip and scandal and journalistic etiquette, and their invulnerable provincial privacy. When they thought about Gillian at all they thought that she was a spoilt brat who would doubtless soon reappear to plague them. Unlike Meg, they did not know in their bones that something was wrong.

By the time the evening papers came out, Mrs. Forshaw and the police had dripped cold water on the story of the mystery man on the train. Gillian, said Mrs. Forshaw, had gone to stay with some friends, unfortunately without leaving an address. She was perfectly all right and had in fact telephoned her father last Sunday. He had driven off to pick her up—a perfectly normal thing for a father to do. The girl would undoubtedly be terribly

upset when she realised what the tragic outcome had been. She would soon be home.

The only basis for the story that Gillian had gone to visit friends was Meg's own improvisation when she had to answer Mr. Forshaw. She said so that weekend when she got back to Alderford. Nobody seemed especially disposed to listen to her. She was a child in disgrace. These matters should be left to adults. In allowing a reporter to draw her out she had proved herself irresponsible. Mr. Forshaw had obviously not been worried about Gillian's behaviour. Gillian had spoken to him on the Sunday. And if Mrs. Forshaw rightly wanted privacy after her terrible shock, what right had Meg to flaunt her melodramatic daydreams?

"But where *is* Gillian?" Meg demanded.

Gillian had not returned for the funeral on Thursday. There had been no message from her.

"She is of age," said Mr. Waring in his most precise voice. Meg knew her father well enough to know that he was not happy but that he clung to the conviction that this was none of his business. "You yourself have seen no reason to suppose that she didn't go away on her own accord. Whatever the moral aspects of it may be, there is no legal bar to her becoming involved with some man—"

"So you do believe me about the man on the train?"

"Every day there are thousands of men on trains," said Mr. Waring. "I'm prepared to accept that among those thousands there are hundreds who make eyes at presentable young women. And if you can assure me that with your own eyes you saw one particular man shadowing Gillian or actually with Gillian at any time, or that she told you in so many words that she was meeting him, I'll grant that some further investigation is called for—though even then it should be tactful. 'Invasion of privacy' is not the powerful phrase here that it is in the United

States, but a number of our safeguards add up to the same thing." He paused. "Well?"

"Well, I can't be sure it was him hanging about the flat."

"And did Gillian say she was going to see him?"

"Not in so many words."

"In what kind of words, then?"

"Daddy, there was only that note. You can't expect me to—"

"Did you bring the note with you this time?"

"Yes," snapped Meg, "I brought it with me."

"I'm sure your report on it was accurate, but it would be as well to have a look at it."

"Exhibit A," said Meg. "Am I on trial?"

"No." Unexpectedly Mr. Waring dabbed a kiss at her. "But Meg, my dear, if you're hoping to start the police and the Press on a chase after some fellow glimpsed on the train, we want to be sure there aren't any actions for slander waiting at the end of the line. For myself, I think that when the terms of the will are published the girl will show up soon enough."

The will, drawn up by Mr. Waring himself, left two-thirds of the late Mr. Forshaw's estate to Gillian. As most of the money had been Mrs. Forshaw's in the first place, transferred to her husband when they were married, she had reason to feel sour about this allocation. Meg suspected that Mrs. Forshaw might not care twopence whether Gillian showed up or not, apart from her wish to give the girl a piece of her mind—a piece as jagged as her splintery speech—on the subject of Gillian's callousness in not turning up at her father's funeral.

"If Gillian *doesn't* come back," ventured Mrs. Waring, "it'll be to Catherine's advantage, won't it?"

By her husband's rating this comment was as reprehensible as their daughter's stubborn harping on the subject of the man on the train.

Mr. Waring studied Gillian's note unenthusiastically. It was not an item which would carry any weight in a court of law and as such it had little appeal to him. With a shrug he handed it back to Meg.

"Better drop it in on Perrock. Then it's out of our hands."

All he wanted was that they should be absolved from the petty irritations of an unsought responsibility. Meg was glad that he had left it to her to pass on this one flimsy scrap of evidence. It would give her the opportunity to go to the police station and stir up some sort of activity. Her mood was not exactly one of disobedience: it was just that she did not propose to resist any temptation she was offered to speak out.

Chief Inspector Perrock received her in his office. She was glad to meet him here, in uniform and doing a job. It was preferable to those social occasions at which he was neither a policeman nor quite a friend.

He said patronisingly: "Now, what can we make of this?"

It did not take him long to read the message. He shrugged almost as her father had done.

"Not very exciting," he said. "Is it the sort of note she was in the habit of leaving for you on such occasions?"

"There haven't been such occasions before," said Meg.

"You mean she didn't often go out in a rush like that?"

"I mean that when she did go out, she invariably came back."

Perrock maintained his podgy placidity but into his voice there crept a note like that of a schoolmaster preparing to reprove an impetuous youngster if reproof should be necessary.

He said: "There's no hint here of foul play."

"The foul play came after the note was written."

"Did it? What makes you think so?"

"Gillian hasn't come back," said Meg. "She can't just have vanished into thin air. People don't."

"No," said Perrock benignly, "they don't." He made it sound as though this was the definitive answer to all their problems.

Meg said: "What are you going to do? Just sit here and wait for her to walk in?"

"As a matter of fact, that might well be the most sensible thing to do. You'd be surprised how often missing persons do just that—walk into a police station and say, 'Look, here I am'."

"But if she's trapped somewhere, or something dreadful . . . if she's . . . if . . ."

Perrock put his elbows on the desk. "I know it's upsetting. Someone you've seen around every day suddenly ups and goes. You're bound to think of all the lurid things you read in the Sunday papers. But she's not some juvenile delinquent and she's not a naive child to be coaxed away by a bag of toffees. Girls who disappear tend to fall into certain categories. From my experience I'd say Gillian Forshaw doesn't come into any of the obvious categories."

His condescension enraged Meg. She cried: "Gillian's got to be found. There must be something you can do. What are the police *for*?"

"The police exist," said Perrock, "to take care of the community. And in taking care"—he sounded as though he were quoting from some manual remembered from his training days—"we have to be careful."

"Careful? Some of you are too careful even to step off the pavement."

"Not a bad thing when the traffic is heavy. Miss Waring . . . Meg"—the personal note was belated and ineffectual—"I don't think you appreciate the problems of a job like ours. Two or three years ago one of my pals in the next county instituted a nation-wide search for a

girl in rather similar circumstances to those we're presented with now. He went at it hell for leather—publicity, descriptions of a man who was supposed to be with her, identikit stuff, the lot. And it turned out she was with somebody else and not our suspect at all, and the fellow got very nasty and the girl wanted to know what business we had to be snooping into her private life." He shook his head and repeated: "Very nasty."

"So you're just going to sit tight because once somebody handled a job clumsily?"

"No," said Perrock. "I'm not going to sit that tight. But I'm not going to be clumsy. What we do will have to be done without a great commotion."

"And the man on the train—"

"The man on the train is the trickiest bit of the lot." Perrock reached for one of the telephones on his desk. "But I'll have an officer in to take down some notes." With some relish he added: "Let's see how accurately you can describe this mystery man."

Meg knew dismally that Perrock was enjoying the next few minutes. She fumbled her way through a description which could not possibly evoke that watching face and its brooding quality. When she had finished, Perrock smiled as though she had somehow proved a point against herself. The constable who had taken down her dictation wore the same knowing expression as he went out of the room.

"It's doubtful if we'll find anyone," Perrock warned her. "If he's a regular traveller and you bump into him again on the same train, the chances are he's innocent—or brazen enough not to worry. If he's not innocent and he wants to hide, he can easily cease to appear. Or even if he's innocent he may remember that he did let himself leer at a pretty girl—lots of blokes do it, as I'm sure you know—and he won't take the chance of coming forward and getting tangled up in a police investigation.

Any way you look at it, all he has to do is start using a different train. I've known men who talked to each other every morning for five years and then lost touch for another five years because one of them took to catching an earlier train."

Even the likelihood of the stranger having got on at Wishbury did not narrow things down as much as might have been hoped. The branch line fed in a large number of passengers every day. Many of them were prosperous, influential men. One injudicious question from the police and they would be after the Chief Inspector's blood.

Meg wanted to say that Perrock was stalling, that he didn't want to find Gillian. But that was over-simplifying it. He would do what he was empowered to do and no more. He didn't take her very seriously but he would conscientiously follow up any lead. It was the slowness of it that upset her. Until a corpse was found there would be none of the things for which she clamoured—a nation-wide alarm, telephones ringing, men leaning out of squad cars, and the net remorselessly closing.

Perrock was waiting for her to bow to his superior wisdom and then leave like a good little girl. Meg got up. As he showed her out she said spikily: "If you don't find her, *I* will."

"We'll be glad of any help you can give. But do have a word with me before you do anything rash."

As Meg stormed away she vowed that she would act. She wouldn't waste time. She'd show them. But by the end of ten minutes a grudging appreciation of the difficulties slowed her down. Where did one begin? Perhaps she had already done all she could. Perhaps she had prodded Perrock into slightly more resolute action than he might otherwise have taken; but in all fairness she had to acknowledge that her contribution had been far from inspiring. This became even more obvious when she read

the story which was leaked to the papers, monitored to compromise between the journalistic demand for sensation and the police need for help without too much fuss.

The headline was dramatic enough:

POLICE SEEK HELP OF MONDAY MORNING MAN

What followed was a description based on Meg's attempts to conjure up a picture of the deep-eyed man. In print it was even worse than it had sounded while she was trying to put it across to the police. It was amazing how inadequate words were—how unevocative, and how misleading the impression they created.

She realised their inadequacy to the full when, the following Friday, she saw him on the train with an attractive girl.

6

It was the last down train of the day. Meg had been kept late typing urgent amendments to a complicated personal injury claim. She had telephoned home to tell her father that she might stay overnight and come down on Saturday morning. Mr. Waring had no objection to bringing the car to meet the late train, so in the end she decided to go home. She finished work in time to have a quick meal before catching the train.

The man she had so lamely tried to describe was getting into a first-class compartment as she walked along the platform. Meg slowed as she passed, managing to observe him without being seen. This was not difficult, as he was being very attentive to his companion, an attractive girl who could not have been more than eighteen or nineteen. The girl was carrying a white train

case and chattering excitedly. The man nodded, smiled, and put his hand under her elbow to help her into the compartment.

Meg got into the same carriage two compartments away and wondered what to do.

There was no time for her to get out and telephone the police. And even if she had been able to get through to the right person and persuade him that she could really point out the man here and now, what action would they take? It was hard to imagine the police swooping on the train in force, or stopping it at an intermediate station and carrying out a spot check like the Gestapo in all those war films.

They ought to have telephones on trains, thought Meg wildly as there was the familiar slight jolt and the train drew out. They emerged from the station into a world of dark towers, towers pinpricked with light, squat masses of concrete and blazing glass. She was alone. Her reflection in the glass strengthened and faded, blurred by light from the river and sharpened by the dead wall of a building.

She could not let him get away. But she did not know how she was going to stop him.

A lurid little drama began to play itself out in her mind. She saw herself going along the corridor and confronting the man and his latest girl friend. She would challenge him. What she had to say about Gillian's disappearance would open the eyes of the gullible youngster he had with him. The man would cower away and confess the terrible truth about Gillian.

But would he? At bay, knowing he was faced with exposure as a savage Bluebeard, he was more likely to open the outer door and throw Meg out. Perhaps the girl would follow.

The howl as the train rushed through a station shook Meg out of her reverie.

It was no good attempting a bold confrontation. For that kind of thing you needed a gun or, at the very least, a posse of hefty police constables to back you up. Any open challenge would fail anyway: all he had to do was deny all knowledge of what she was talking about and sit tight until he reached his station. Then he would disappear into the night with his latest conquest and there would be no way of tracing him.

Meg could not sit still. She got up and went along the corridor towards the lavatory. When she reached the compartment in which he sat she did not dare to pass it. She didn't want to alarm him prematurely. She edged close enough to see the girl in a corner seat, her legs crossed, still talking. A very pretty girl, with very fair hair falling almost to her shoulders, she had a fair complexion which, though lacking make-up, did not look pallid. Her long legs sprawled out across the compartment.

Meg crept back to her seat.

If only she could hop out at Wishbury and tell someone to follow that man, to find his home address. Then there would be ways of starting up an investigation.

Assuming that he got off at Wishbury, of course. . . .

But at this time of night there would be no one to tell. No one, she was sure, but one of those grey-featured, grey-minded ticket collectors anxious only to close up the place and go home.

Decisive action was called for; but Meg couldn't see where such action would lead.

When the train slowed into Wishbury she had still not made up her mind. And she still could not envisage the end when she stood there on Wishbury platform and allowed her train to leave on its way to Alderford—the last train of the day.

The man looked back once as he went towards the little hut where the ticket collector stood. Meg lowered

her head and fumbled in her bag as though searching for her ticket. She allowed the man and his girl to go through the doorway and then went to the collector, who looked at her curiously. She kept her head down, aware of the two shapes silhouetted against the outer doorway of the waiting room.

The ticket collector said: "This is for Alderford, miss."

"Yes, I know. I'm . . . I'm just breaking my journey to stay with friends for the night."

"I see. Well. Mm. Not sure if you can do that, miss."

"Oh, of course I can do it." Meg was suddenly panic-stricken, seeing the outer doorway now empty.

"On a three-month return, yes. I'm not sure about a single. You might be right, mind, but I'll just have to see—something about using it on the day of issue, you know." He turned back into his little cubby-hole to pick up a dog-eared book of instructions.

"Oh, for goodness' sake *keep* it!"

Meg rushed out. The station approach was lit by two gas lamps and by a garish shop sign in the main street below—the only bright spot in the whole street. Now that the train had gone and she was alone in a place which she had never visited in her life, Meg realised that her quarry had only to get into his car and drive off for her to be stranded, having achieved nothing at all.

Follow that car. . . .

Even if there had been a taxi in the station approach, Wishbury was not the kind of place where such a terse command would be unprotestingly obeyed.

In her single-minded concentration Meg had not been aware of other people getting off the train at this station. Now she saw two or three other men, and one group of four, splitting up, saying goodnight, walking away or crossing the station approach to cars parked against the railings. The man she wanted was lost in the middle of them—might be one of those getting into a car.

Then she caught the flash of the white train bag and saw that the man and the girl were at the bottom of the slope, turning into the street. Meg's spirits rose. If he lived within walking distance of the station she could follow him, making a note of his address, and then find some way of getting home. There must be a garage here from which she could hire a car. She would speak to her father—or her mother, if Mr. Waring had already left to meet her at Alderford—and tell them she was on her way with startling news. They would be alarmed at first but humble later when they learned how much she had accomplished.

Meg went down the slope and turned right. The shopping street was made up of old houses with teetering upper storeys and drab modern shop-fronts below. The street lamps were widely spaced. Her footsteps were loud on the pavement at this time of night. Once she was sure the man looked round, and she slowed in order to keep out of the pool of light beneath a lamp standard. Then she crossed the road, swinging her case like any girl on her way home to a back street in Wishbury.

The man and the girl turned down a dark side street. Meg had to cross the road back again. The gloomy mouth of the side turning was far from welcoming. She blinked and then stepped into the darkness. The houses stopped with disconcerting abruptness. This narrow street was little more than a lane. Trees rustled on either side of her, forming an avenue for fifty yards or so. After that there was nothing but an emptiness, a sense of fields and space stretching away. They must have walked under a bridge carrying the railway over this lane, but Meg had not noticed it in the sombreness of the night.

Ahead, against the sky, she could just make out the hump of a building. No, there were at least two—some-

thing hunched, oddly formed, and beside it a large, square house.

Meg slowed, putting one foot carefully in front of the other. There was no sound. The footsteps ahead seemed to have stopped. Gradually she detected a faint whisper of running water. A few steps further, and she saw slivers of a lighter grey through the black hulk of the buildings ahead—the slightly paler hue of the sky showing through slats or through a curiously twisted wheel.

Suddenly she realised what it was. She had seen it from the train often enough, half hidden by the trees. It was the old watermill.

The man stepped out from the impenetrable shadow of a tree.

"Have you lost your way?"

Meg let out a little squeak of horror. She swayed and nearly overbalanced. Her overriding fear was that he might touch her and try to steady her. She knew she would have screamed if he had done that.

He said: "You don't seem to know Wishbury. You've been following us. All the way from the station you've been behaving most oddly."

Meg wanted to turn and run—back towards the incredibly distant lights of the tatty main street. But there was only one thing for it. It was no good stammering out ridiculous excuses. Here she was, and here was the man who had to answer for so much. She said:

"Where's Gillian?"

It was too dark for her to see his face. But she was sure that he stiffened; sure that for a second he, too, was at a loss.

There was a shuffle of feet a few yards behind him.

"Daddy, what is it? Is it all right?"

"It's all right, dear. Go on up to the house. Aunt Miriam will let you in."

As if on cue, a rectangle of light opened in the wall of

the house. The girl hesitated, then turned and walked towards it, glancing over her shoulder as she went.

The man said to Meg: "It's late . . . but I think you'd better come in and explain what all this is about."

It was a plain, square room which could have looked bare if it had not been decorated and furnished with such skill. In a building of this kind one would have expected oil lamps, smoke-blackened beams and a lot of brass. Instead, three jagged, unsymmetrical alcoves had been used for electric bulbs in deep plum-coloured shades, and the lumpiness of one heavy stone wall had been exploited in a light wash of abstract design: it could have gone wrong and floundered into affectation, but the danger had been averted. There was a crispness, a clarity about the room that was immediately appealing.

Yet Meg was frightened. Not by the man and not by his daughter or his sullen-faced sister, but by this attractive room; by her unsettling conviction that she had been here before.

It was a creepy sensation. And it was ridiculous. She had never got off at Wishbury station before. She had never even passed through the little town in her father's car. Yet she knew without turning her head that on the wall to her right there was a picture—not centred, but eccentrically placed in a high corner to counteract the irregularity of the ceiling. The bookshelves angled like fans on either side of the old fireplace were just as she had seen them. Curtains were drawn across a window in the wall facing her. She knew it was a window although there were three steps leading up to it. A french window, not just an ordinary door. Beyond it there would be a garden rising slightly.

"The rain," she said, frowning through the mesh of memory, "floods the floor twice a year."

"Not any more," said the man who had introduced him-

self as Jason Lucas. "Not since I installed two conduits at this edge of the lawn."

"How is it that I know this place?" Meg fretted. "How could I have been here before?"

"You've never been here before," said Lucas. "And I'd like to know what you're doing here now."

Seen from this close range his eyes were not so much sad as filled with a lasting seriousness. One felt that life's absurdities could summon up a wry smile from him but that it would take a lot to produce an unabashed laugh. His eyebrows flicked up in a permanently sardonic question at each end, and there were three grooves across his forehead which formed not so much a frown as an expression of melancholy surprise.

The woman he had introduced as his sister, Miriam Lucas, blinked short-sightedly and suspiciously at Meg. When she put her head back, the folds of skin pulled away from livid grooves that might almost have been bitten into her skin by tightening string.

She said: "I don't know . . . at this time of night . . ."

Lucas pursed his lips. Instead of prodding Meg out of her silence into speech, he said to his sister: "You'd better take Pauline up to bed. Better both go, in fact."

"Oh, Daddy—"

"We'll talk about everything tomorrow." He smiled slowly at the girl. "Now run along. I'll settle this odd little matter, whatever it is."

Pauline went reluctantly to the door. She looked at her Aunt Miriam, waiting for her to get up and follow.

"I think I'll stay," said the woman.

"Miriam, there's no need—"

"I think I'd better know." The voice was petulant and stubborn.

Lucas did not argue. The girl went out and closed the door. Meg braced herself. She was sure that everything was going to go hideously wrong in some way she

couldn't have foreseen. She couldn't imagine how she had ever let herself think it would be simple and dramatically satisfying.

"Well, Miss Waring—why *did* you follow us here?"

"Because of Gillian."

She was sure that Miriam Lucas tensed, just as Jason Lucas had done when she first challenged him. But already, in the normal atmosphere of this room and its two ordinary three-dimensional people, she was beginning to lose confidence in all that was either romantic or sinister. She became gloomily aware of the possibility that she was reading too much into every movement. Every cough or blink could be suspicious if you were looking for something suspicious. Absolute stillness could be just as provocative.

Humiliatingly, she was unable to suppress a yawn.

"I'm tired, too," said Lucas. "For all our sakes I suggest you explain these peculiar references to Gillian, whoever she may be, and then go home. Where do you live?"

"Alderford."

"But that's miles away!" exclaimed Miriam Lucas.

"We come up on the train every Monday morning—as you know," Meg accused Lucas. "Or we *did*. You made eyes at Gillian a week last Monday—"

" 'Made eyes'?" Lucas demurred.

"That's the only way I can put it. You went on staring at her. And when we got off the train you were waiting for us. And you followed her all the way to her office. You can't deny that."

"But I can," he said quietly.

"You followed her to her office," Meg insisted. "And what's more, I'm pretty sure it was you hanging about outside our flat."

Lucas looked at his sister. She burst out as though waiting for this signal: "I never heard anything like it in my life. How anyone can dare to come in here . . . at this

time of night . . . with such a story . . ." Was she overdoing the indignation; or, if she genuinely knew nothing about Gillian, was it possible to overdo the indignation?

"Go on," said Lucas.

"Gillian's disappeared," said Meg. "What have you done with her?"

Miriam Lucas said: "I think you'd better get out of here before . . . well, before. . . ."

"Before what? Before you call the police? Go ahead. That's what I want."

Lucas dipped in his pocket and brought out a pipe and a tobacco pouch. Slowly he filled his pipe, tamping the tobacco in with the un-fussy assurance of a perfectionist. When he had lit it and allowed the smoke to wreathe once, soothingly, round his head, he said:

"I'm beginning to see. This is that business that's been in the papers."

"You know jolly well it is," said Meg.

"And in your view I am the mystery man they've been looking for?"

"I saw you staring at Gillian, and she saw you following her." Meg realised that this was all there was to say, and it wasn't nearly enough.

"Miss Waring, I could be very angry with you over these absurd accusations."

"I should think so, indeed," said Miriam Lucas.

"On the strength of a brief and obviously misleading glimpse of me on the train, you have issued statements to the police and the Press which I now gather are aimed at me. It's most disturbing."

"It's a disgrace."

The woman's overdoing it, Meg repeated desperately to herself. She clung to the tattered shreds of her belief that this was the man. She had to be right. This man did know about Gillian and there was something seriously wrong somewhere.

When Jason Lucas went on, however, there was nothing extreme about his displeasure. His dignified, rather sad tone made Meg feel very mean.

"I'm sure you're sincere about this, Miss Waring. How can I persuade you that you're on the wrong track?"

"You can't."

"Please . . . there must be some way of settling it, one way or the other."

"All right," said Meg, "send for the police."

"Very well."

"Jason, you can't!" Miriam Lucas rose in outrage. There was a plaintive rasp in her voice. "You're not going to let this creature—"

"We'll get no peace until we do," he said wryly.

"I'm not going to sit here"—she was standing, her hands twitching as she reached out in a futile unfinished gesture—"and have the police all over me. You're going to let us be cross-questioned and bullied in our own home?"

"Nobody's going to cross-question us or bully us. But I don't intend to have this thing hanging over me. First thing tomorrow. . . ." He anticipated Meg's protest before she had even framed it, and apparently at a tangent he said: "Won't your parents be anxious about you? Particularly with all these menacing men on trains."

Meg thought of her father driving to the station and not finding her there. He would assume that work in the office had delayed her, but he would expect her to ring and confirm this.

"I . . . I ought to let them know."

At once she felt she had weakened her whole position by accepting his implied reproof.

"There's a telephone through here."

He led the way through the door without waiting to see if she was following. The telephone was on a low, heavy table at the foot of the narrow staircase. Lucas

stood over Meg as she sat by the table and dialled. Then, when the ringing tone started, he said:

"Tell your father to come and collect you—and to bring a police officer with him."

"But—"

"Provide your own policeman," said Lucas. "You'll have more faith in him than you might in our local sergeant."

Miriam Lucas stamped past him and up the stairs. Meg would not have been surprised if boiling lead had been poured on her from above. Jason Lucas went back into the bright, square room.

There was a click and her father's voice came on at the other end. Meg gulped and haltingly began to explain what had happened.

7

It took Mr. Waring just over forty minutes to pick up Chief Inspector Perrock and drive to the watermill. For Meg it was the most wretched forty minutes she had ever spent. Ordinary conversation was impossible. She had made her accusations and they lay between her and Jason Lucas as they drank coffee and waited for her father to arrive. Lucas offered her a brandy. She longed for it but made a point of refusing. Already she was being made to feel like a captured truant, enduring severe kindness while waiting to be reclaimed and carted off.

Chief Inspector Perrock was in plain clothes—"Off duty strictly speaking," he explained as he shook hands with Lucas, "and I didn't want to arouse too much attention."

Meg nearly said "What—in the dark?" but was able to restrain herself. She was going to need all her re-

sources. Perrock looked grumpy but determined. Things were going to be settled one way or the other, just as Jason Lucas had wished that they should be. From his brusque greeting to her, Meg was in no doubt which way he expected things to go: his grumpiness was directed mainly at her and not at the suspect.

They all sat down. Lucas poured more coffee.

"Now, sir," said Perrock. "I've come over here at Mr. Waring's request—"

"And at mine," said Lucas gently.

"Now, look," protested Meg. "*I* started all this."

She wanted only that credit should be given where it was due. Her father's sidelong glance told her that he regarded her conduct as being far from creditable.

Perrock said: "You know, sir, what this young lady's accusations are?"

"They're not very specific," said Lucas. "Speculations rather than accusations, I'd have said."

Mr. Waring's eyes narrowed slightly in appreciation.

"It never occurred to me when I read the story in the newspapers," Lucas continued, "that I was the mystery man on the train. I didn't recognise myself in the description. But then, there was no reason why I should."

"You don't remember Miss Waring's friend?"

"As there has been no picture of her in the papers, I've no way of telling. One sees so many people. Shown a photograph, I might recognise her."

"You know very well what she looks like," Meg burst out. "You stared at her for ages."

Perrock said: "Do you happen to remember Miss Waring?"

"No. This is the first time I've seen her."

"Miss Waring, you and Miss Forshaw were sitting together?"

"We were in corner seats facing each other. But he

didn't look at me. He spent his whole time goggling at Gillian."

Lucas said: "My whole time?"

"Well, a minute or two. Long enough."

"On a crowded Monday morning train," said Lucas, "it's not unusual to find oneself wedged in one position in the corridor for a minute or two or even longer. I can only assume that you misinterpreted my expression of agony as one of lechery."

"You followed Gillian. You were waiting for her—"

"Chief Inspector." Lucas put down his cup and saucer and spoke very gravely. "I am a widower. My wife died five years ago. I have one daughter, whom I did my best to bring up on my own until my sister moved in with me. I'm very fond of my daughter—in fact, she is all I have. I would hardly be likely—"

"She was away at school when all this happened." Meg was triumphant. "She's just back for the holidays now, isn't she? Isn't she? You were bringing her down on the late train."

"Quite true. But"—Lucas appealed to the two men for their support—"not relevant. Let me stick to the main point. I have never contemplated marrying again and I have never been interested in more casual liaisons. I have not been in the habit of following young women. Perhaps men in my situation do occasionally see an attractive young face and feel some nostalgia . . . wish that we could live the past over again, or bring lost things back to life. But we're old enough and wise enough to do nothing about it."

He sounded so sincere that Meg's inside lurched in sympathy. She glanced at the set faces of her father and Perrock. They were on Lucas's side.

But she had *seen* his face that morning; had seen him waiting; had heard what Gillian had to say about him. It couldn't all be imagination.

She said: "Gillian can't just have vanished into thin air."

Still concentrating on Perrock, Lucas said: "Would you like to see round the building?"

"If we're going to make it official, sir, that side of it'll have to be handed over to the local branch. They'll have to apply for a warrant."

"Are you likely to recommend that they should?"

Perrock hesitated, then said: "I doubt it."

"I thought not. Nevertheless"—his faint smile at Meg was courteous, without a trace of condescension—"for this young lady's benefit I think I'd like you to make sure that the place conceals no ghastly secrets." He got up. "Perhaps she would like to accompany us?"

Meg loved looking round old houses—any house, in fact. She was fascinated by other people's lives and backgrounds. But under these circumstances she did not enjoy the tour of inspection. They went into the old kitchen, where the space which had once been occupied by a range was now used for a comprehensive modern kitchen unit. They saw a breakfast room, a dining room, and a study. In each case Lucas snapped on a light switch and stood back as though defying them to find a corpse or a clue.

The dining room stuck in Meg's mind after they had left it, as tantalising as a blurred picture fading from bright colours to an out-of-focus smear on the eye. Just as she had seemed to recognise the sitting room, so she was nagged by certain familiar features in that other room.

On the upper floor there was one room in which Lucas would not put the light on. He opened the door, stood inside for a moment, and said: "Pauline's asleep. If you really want to wake her. . . ."

"I don't think that'll be necessary, sir."

"How do we know it's Pauline?" said Meg. "How do we know what's in that room?"

Lucas, half in shadow, looked at her. She could not make out his expression. He turned and went on into the room. They heard the swish of curtains, and he said quietly: "Come in."

Perrock went in. Mr. Waring stayed where he was. Meg stood beside him. She had never felt further away from her father. His disapproval was a physical emanation. Through the open door she could just make out the faint light of the night sky touching the edges of a chest of drawers and the handle of a built-in cupboard.

There was another swish of curtains, and Perrock came out. Lucas followed and closed the door quietly.

Further along the landing a door stood half open, with light flooding out.

"Come in!" called Miriam Lucas aggressively. "I'm sure I shall never get to sleep tonight anyway."

Perrock silently consulted Mr. Waring. They both glared at Meg. Lucas stood by the door and waved her on. Meg took two steps into the room.

Miriam Lucas was propped up against two pillows. Her wispy grey hair hung down the sides of her head like a medieval cap. She wore steel-rimmed glasses and was holding out in front of her a romantic novel with a lurid jacket. Over the top of this book she stared at Meg, as though willing her to turn into stone. At the same time there was something pathetic about her. In spite of her voice and the attempted ferocity of her gaze, she was spiteful rather than powerfully vindictive. Propped up in the large bed, she seemed more shrivelled than when Meg had first met her.

Meg went out on to the landing. The three men waited for her verdict.

"All right." It was no more than a whisper.

They went downstairs again.

Mr. Waring ostentatiously pulled his cuff back from his wrist-watch.

"Before you go," said Lucas, "there's the mill itself."

"You use it?"

"As a studio. I do a lot of work in the main room there. I had it converted some years ago, without spoiling the outside."

"A quick look round, then," said Perrock. He said it in such a way as to exclude Mr. Waring and Meg. He wanted to have a confidential chat with Lucas. Meg watched them go, and waited for her father to say his piece.

He found it difficult. She was sorry that she had put him in the position of having to express his dismay at what she had done. He couldn't understand how she could have been so thoughtless. Nobody wanted to find Gillian Forshaw more than he did, but this was no way to go about it. One had only to meet Jason Lucas to know that he couldn't have been mixed up in any distasteful situation with Gillian. Did she realise what a shock it was to a respectable family man to have cheap novelettish melodrama thrust upon him? There wasn't a shred of evidence, there never had been a shred of evidence—and even if there had, what had possessed her to do something as foolhardy as getting off the last train at a place like this at this time of night? It was a good job for her, concluded Mr. Waring, that Lucas was *not* the kind of man she had accused him of being, or she too might have disappeared without trace.

When Perrock and Lucas returned they were talking easily like new acquaintances who had discovered mutual tastes.

"That side room I showed you," Lucas was saying, "looks pretty bare now, but that's a help. I have to fill it. And then, of course, pull it to pieces again."

"You just never think of the amount of work that goes

into it," said Perrock admiringly. "Wouldn't have struck me if I hadn't met you. Now I'll be on the lookout—when I have the time to watch, which isn't often."

Mr. Waring and Meg got up. Obviously this was the end. It was time to go.

Lucas said: "If you wish to come back in daylight, please let's arrange it now. I'd like to get it over with. I don't want my daughter's holiday ruined."

Again Meg was subjected to the scrutiny of her father and Chief Inspector Perrock. They didn't ask her in so many words if she was finally satisfied but in fact this was exactly what they were asking her.

She lowered her head.

"Perhaps before we leave," said Mr. Waring frigidly, "you'd consider it not inappropriate to apologise to Mr. Lucas."

Meg felt that her breath was draining out of her. She was a punctured balloon, sighing her life away. It was all she could do to take another breath.

"I'm sure Miss Waring has acted with the best intentions," said Lucas. "I'm sure she believes in her version of the story. Or . . . that she believed."

It was a question. They waited for her to speak. She could not look at him. Shakily she said:

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry to have been such an awful nuisance."

They were not to know that she was really apologising to her father for upsetting him. She hadn't wanted him to be upset.

On the drive home she knew that she was in the deepest possible disgrace. Mr. Waring and Perrock had nothing to say to each other. Her father was ashamed of having dragged his old friend out on such an errand.

Meg made one last effort. "Miss Lucas certainly managed to stay awake a long time."

Her father, sitting beside Perrock in the front, glanced back over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"She and the girl—Pauline—went off to bed while Mr. Lucas was talking to me. Miss Lucas had gone by the time I telephoned you. Considering the time it took you to get there, and then to discuss things, and then to start going round the house. . . ."

"Considering the way you must have shaken her up, it's not surprising the poor woman couldn't sleep."

"Women like that *say* they can't sleep, but really—"

"What are you getting at?"

"She had the better part of an hour to . . . well, do anything that had to be done. Covering up clues. Removing . . . traces."

"Traces of what?" asked Perrock without taking his eyes off the road.

"I don't know."

"Exactly," said her father. "You don't know."

"And don't you think it was odd the way he wanted you to come over?" Meg was so tired that she was dizzy. She knew what she wanted to say but was not sure that it was coming out the right way. "Asking for a policeman, too. Wouldn't an innocent man have been furious at the very idea? A really innocent man would just have thrown me out of the house and let me find my own way home—and then he'd have raised hell if anyone had tried to search the place. There can only be one reason for it—he wanted to put on a big demonstration quickly so that we'd go away and never bother him again."

"In which case he has succeeded, as far as I'm concerned," said her father. "And now . . . I don't want to hear another word about this. I want a promise from you."

"Daddy, I still know there's something fishy—"

"A promise," said Mr. Waring. "You are to leave well alone in future. Is that understood? I'm not going to

spend another embarrassing evening like that. Evening? Heavens, we're well into the morning."

The unyielding back of Chief Inspector Perrock's neck provided a soundless echo. Tired, despondent, utterly beaten, Meg promised.

In The Red Lion Colin hurried up to her. "What's all this I hear . . . ?"

"Whatever you hear," said Meg curtly, "it's wrong."

Colin thought it was all a great joke. Meg was in no mood for seeing the funny side. They had a brief row and did not see each other at all for the rest of the week-end.

On the way to the station on Monday morning, Mr. Waring talked about holidays. He and Mrs. Waring were going to Scotland on Friday. Wouldn't Meg come with them? They had suggested it months ago and she knew how much it would mean to them. But she had agreed to go on a later holiday to Spain with Gillian. There was still time to go. Gillian might be back.

"But if she doesn't come back?" asked Mr. Waring. And he went on: "You know, your mother and I would be happier if you'd give up that flat. Especially now. We don't like to think of you there on your own. And you can't afford it."

"So you *do* think something's happened to Gillian? You do feel she'll never be seen again?"

"Margaret." Only in time of real annoyance did he call her Margaret rather than Meg. He turned into the station yard and stopped. The train was already signalled. "I thought you promised. . . ."

"Yes," she said resignedly. "All right."

On the platform he kissed her with his old unfailing affection. She was sure she wouldn't change her mind and come to Scotland? She was sure. If she did decide she must telephone. In any case they would meet for

lunch on Friday when he and her mother went through London on their way north.

The train came in. Meg found her usual corner seat and settled into it.

Another weekend over, another week beginning. She hoped weeks and weekends in future would be a bit less eventful.

During the next few days she would have to do some serious thinking. Without Gillian, a new routine would have to be established. Her father was right in saying that the flat was too expensive for her to maintain on her own. But she was reluctant to take any irrevocable steps immediately.

At Wishbury, Jason Lucas boarded the train.

Meg became aware of him a minute after the train had started again. He looked in from the corridor just as he had looked in at Gillian that day. Then he slid the door open.

"Miss Waring—I wonder if you'd care for a cup of coffee in the buffet car?"

She sat motionless, unable to find words. The other people in the compartment, all men, pretended to pay no attention but kept their newspapers absolutely still.

"It's only the next coach," said Lucas.

She couldn't just sit here and somehow couldn't say a curt no. Not with all these men silently speculating. They would laugh to themselves if she brushed Lucas off. She would have to sit here in the middle of their suppressed laughter and their silly guesses.

She got up. "How nice to see you," she said as airily as possible.

In the buffet car he asked after her father as though they were old friends. He prophesied that it would be a warm day. And when he asked her if she had got home all right on Friday night—or, rather, Saturday morning—

he might almost have been apologising for the ordeal she had gone through.

The train rocked on its way. Coffee spilled into her saucer. A man leaning on the bar was drinking double gins with a deadly earnestness. Meg shuddered and looked away.

Jason Lucas smiled at her and said something. His words were lost in a sudden explosive clatter of points beneath them.

"I'm sorry . . . ?"

"I was asking if you'd have dinner with me during the week."

Meg swayed with the train, holding the cup and the saucer together. She could think of no reply.

"Tuesday, perhaps?" he said.

By the time they went back to their compartments she had agreed. It was crazy, but she had agreed. She wondered what she was walking into. This, or something like it, had been how it all started for Gillian. And where was Gillian now?

But it was just because of Gillian that she had to go through with it; because of Gillian and something else which she couldn't explain yet. Puzzled and apprehensive, she knew that she couldn't have said no.

8

That explained it. They sat in a small restaurant behind Charlotte Street and, after asking Meg about her job in London, Jason Lucas admitted that he was a film and television art director. It came out as an admission rather than a declaration: he went on to say, with a self-deprecating little shrug, that many people found it difficult to regard this as a proper job of work. Like Chief

Inspector Perrock, they had never thought about it and didn't know what went into it. He was literally the man behind the scenes. Without him there would be no setting.

He would never be a public idol, but leaf by leaf, stone by stone, assembling fragments or conceiving a whole background in a few intuitive flashes, he created the world in which the public idols lived and moved for an hour or two.

"Even the actors themselves hardly know I exist unless they trip over a badly devised bit of scenery," he said. "I don't get chased around by starlets—they recognise at once that I have no influence. The casting couch . . . I may design it for some drama about the great days of Hollywood, but it's always someone else who tries it out."

He spoke without envy or self-importance. He gave the impression of standing slightly apart from himself, shrewdly appraising the pros and cons of his own life and work. His verdict was favourable without being complacent.

"Those rooms!" exclaimed Meg. "Your sitting room—and the other one we went through. . . ."

She was almost sorry she had allowed herself this outburst. It reminded them both of the circumstances under which they had met last Friday. It could hardly help but be a delicate matter. While they were discussing their jobs and getting to know each other, diffidently and respectfully making those first advances that add savour to the first evening together, they had tacitly ignored the echoes of the recent past. Now Meg had conjured up a picture which could not easily be dismissed. The empty stage was peopled with characters, and their dialogue had contained some uncomfortable lines.

"Of course!" she hurried on. "It was a stage setting.

But I thought you said you worked in films and television."

"From necessity. I prefer the theatre, but there aren't that many new plays in a year. Television provides the bread and butter."

"You copied your room from the stage setting of that play—"

"The other way round," he said. "My room came first."

"That line about the flooding—was that just a coincidence?"

The wine waiter topped up her glass. Jason Lucas watched the glow of light in the claret depths as though seeking a suitable use for it or a striking contrast for it. He said musingly:

"It was one of the few occasions on which the author was influenced by the designer. I showed him my sketches for the set, and told him about my troubles at home. He wrote in that line, and used it again later to make a good comic point. You remember?"

"Oh, I remember it very well. Gillian and I saw the play last year."

Gillian's name was like a glove tossed on to the table—like the challenge that had lain between them while they waited for her father to arrive on Friday night. Jason solemnly cut a cube of steak and ate it, then reached for his glass. His eyes met hers, very straight and very serious. Meg automatically raised her glass. A gulp of wine went down the wrong way and she spluttered.

He said: "You've still had no word from your friend?"

The pleasure of the evening sagged. She wanted to snap at him, wanted to say that he knew perfectly well that she'd had no word from Gillian. One day he would have to break down and tell her the truth. One day . . . and she hoped it wouldn't be too late.

All she said was: "No."

They ate in silence for a while. The restaurant was

filling up. The buzz of voices, the clink of glasses and the sudden agitated but friendly exchanges of insults between the Cypriot waiters were warming, soothing, reassuring. Perhaps she ought not to be so easily lulled into a false sense of security. Perhaps the whole thing was calculated: he had planned just this so that she would be confused, unsure of herself, and from now on would keep her mouth shut.

Not that she had anything very practical to say if she opened it, thought Meg ruefully.

As he sat back and asked the waiter to bring the menu back, he smiled at her. It was a forgiving sort of smile. Meg felt a twinge of revolt. She wasn't asking to be forgiven. She was nowhere near surrender yet. Brashly she asked:

"Why did you speak to me on the train? Why did you want to take me out this evening?"

"I don't know." He was amused at himself.

"I thought you'd be only too happy not to see me again"

"So did I." He looked up at the waiter, looked at Meg, waved at the sweet trolley. When she had chosen peaches, he went on: "I can't even put it down to impulse. Unless there's such a thing as premeditated impulse, which I doubt."

"You don't come up on the train every Monday."

"Far from it. My work's spasmodic. Sometimes I'm travelling for weeks at a time, taking hundreds of photographs as background material. I spent a month in Holland collecting reference pictures for a television series. When I work in London I use my flat—scruffy little place, but I'm not there often enough to need anything more sumptuous."

He was evading the issue but it was impossible to tell whether this was deliberate or not.

"You had to come up this Monday," said Meg.

"No. It wasn't essential. I've got a couple of meetings

on a new production tomorrow. I had some things to pick up first thing this morning. But I didn't have to come up on Monday morning. So what do we make of that?"

Meg was not prepared to accept responsibility. She said:

"There must have been some reason for your . . . your premeditated impulse."

"There must, mustn't there?"

"Perhaps you've got something to tell me about Gillian, after all?"

"Oh, dear." He put his spoon down as though his appetite had deserted him. "Oh, dear. We come back to that, do we?"

"You *looked* at her!" Even as she forced the words out, Meg had a dismal feeling that they would soon be back where they had started.

"If I did," he said, "it could only, on your own reckoning, have been for a minute. And here I've been looking at *you* for the last hour, but you're not imputing any sinister motives to me, are you?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you want—what you're expecting to happen."

"Neither do I," he said. His diffidence was so boyish that she found it hard to see him as a man many years older than herself. He slipped, as it were, out of focus, and she was listening to a gauche young man struggling to express himself through the mouth of a self-conscious, older self. He said: "Damn it, I'm out of practice. I've lost the knack. If I ever had it. I'm not used to saying things to attractive young women."

"You must meet plenty of them in your job," said Meg, determined to keep her distance.

"One can talk to thousands of people without ever really meeting any of them." His lips tightened resolutely. "I was attracted to you the moment I saw you. You

were so scared, and you hadn't the foggiest idea what you were going to do—but you were determined to go ahead. It was all a dreadful shock to me, but still I found that I was watching you and thinking how enchanting you were. You did it all so magnificently."

"I wasn't doing a circus act," Meg protested, "or appearing in some play. It was real!"

"For you it was. For me—well, nothing could have been more unreal. Can you imagine it? A spiky, beautiful girl walks in out of the night and accuses one of being a sex maniac—"

"I didn't put it like that."

"I don't see what other interpretation one could put on it."

Neither did Meg, when she considered it.

"But still I was fascinated," he said. "After I'd collaborated with your father and that policeman in slapping you down and sending you home, I knew that I wanted to see you again."

"Nonsense," said Meg ungraciously.

"Nonsense it may be. But here we are having dinner together. It hasn't been too painful, has it?"

"I've enjoyed it." Then Meg added scrupulously: "Some of it, anyway."

He laughed. It was a short reluctant bark of a laugh that could have belonged to nobody else in the world.

"We'll do it again, shall we?" He did not wait for a reply. "And what about coming to one of my sessions at the studios? There are plenty of dull patches, but if you haven't been in on one before you might find it entertaining."

"I'd like to."

"Tomorrow's rather short notice, I suppose?"

"I couldn't get away tomorrow. I could say I'd got a headache, but. . . ."

"But you wouldn't say it with any conviction? No, I

can see you're the type who needs time to work up to a prevarication. Do you think you could talk yourself into it by next Tuesday? I'll be up again for some discussions then."

"I oughtn't to."

"That's not the point," he said. "*Will* you?"

The rest of the week dragged. This could be attributed to Gillian's absence and the lack of the stimulus that Gillian provided, or to Meg's awareness that when it ended there would not be the usual change of scene: with her parents away, she was not going to spend the weekend in Alderford.

Mr. and Mrs. Waring came through London on Friday and took her out for a better lunch than she usually allowed herself. They were anxious about her. Meg reminded them that she was not a twelve-year-old and told them to enjoy their holiday. They wanted to know if she would be all right. She assured them that she would be all right. What was she going to do with herself all over the weekend? Meg said that several millions stayed in London over the weekend and didn't find it too depressing. Mrs. Waring was sure that it wouldn't be good for her. If only she could have made up her mind to come to Scotland with them, she'd have found it so bracing.

Meg was glad when they proceeded on their way. She wondered if she would ever reach any age when they would stop fretting over her and predicting dire ills for her.

The flat was quiet over the weekend. The family upstairs had certainly gone on holiday by now. Instead of being disturbed by the unaccustomed stillness, Meg found that she enjoyed it. The only interruption came on Saturday morning from a young man tinkering with his sports car in the square outside. When he had finally tuned it

up to give the maximum volume, he snarled happily away and peace descended once more.

On Saturday evening she went to a party. Hearing that for once she was staying in town over the weekend, a young man who had never quite been one of Gillian's boy friends and who had therefore never quite drifted away from them invited her to a bit of a do. "You know the sort of thing—come when you like, any old thing will do. . . ." It was, she discovered, very much a case of any old thing doing. The party was noisy and confused. The host had his record player turned on full blast until one of the guests reeled into it and knocked the stylus right across a cherished record. After that there was a merciful silence—from that part of the room, anyway. The young man had the sulks for a while, drank too much in order to work it off, and then got very aggressive towards half his other guests.

There were two fights. Three girls got fed up and went home early in the proceedings. Meg was inclined to follow their example but got penned in a corner by a not too repellent boy who had interesting if long-winded opinions on Confucian strands in Christianity.

After her fourth drink Meg, growing somewhat owlish, thought how young everybody was. Everybody except herself, of course. She couldn't throw herself into the general uproar.

Perhaps she was waiting for that widower Gillian had mentioned.

She wished she were at home in bed.

"Meg, love, have you found him yet?"

"Found him?" she echoed blearily.

Her host was filling her glass with an unsteady hand. "The mystery man. Read all about it. Gorgeous stuff. Do you think they'll ever find him?"

"Take me instead," said a tall youth with a Guards tie and a fat lower lip. "I'm far from mysterious."

"Positively obvious," screamed a girl who was trying to cling to his arm.

They began to crowd around, all babbling at once. Meg realised that she had been asked to the party mainly because of the newspaper stories. One or two of them knew Gillian and herself, but not very well. Now they wanted to be able to tell their friends that of course they'd known Gillian and Meg for ages and that Meg had told them the most fantastic details, but fantastic, love, on Saturday.

She left as soon as she could without it appearing that she was running away. A red-haired youth—she thought he was the one who had scarred their host's favourite record—intercepted her and tried to persuade her to spend the rest of the night with him. She was glad to be out in the night air. The noise dinned on in her ears until she had reached the flat and closed the door behind her.

If they discussed her behind her back the verdict would almost certainly be that she was a stodge. It was sad to think that she was getting so staid, so hostile to the casual, rowdy gaiety that ought to be so invigorating.

By the middle of Sunday afternoon time was hanging heavily on her hands. She admitted with some trepidation that she was impatient for Tuesday to come.

In Tuesday morning's paper there was a brief reference to Gillian. Two women were prepared to swear that they had seen her in Dover. Police thought she might have left the country. It was conceivable that, embarking on a holiday in France on the spur of the moment, she might have missed all references to herself in the English Press.

Meg found herself wanting to believe this.

When they met, she said nothing to Jason about the

rumour. For his part, if he had seen it he made no reference to it.

The meeting he was attending was held not, as she had anticipated, in a sleek modern studio but in a seedy church hall. The smell of damp had some affinities with the smell in her flat, but the predominant flavour was that of damp woodwork, whereas the flat basked in that of stone and plaster.

There were chalk marks on the floor, and in one corner thin battens had been nailed in angled patterns. A bearded man with a pink shirt paced obsessively round these like a solemn boy playing his own non-hopping version of hop-scotch.

"They'll bang their heads together," he greeted Jason. "Walk bloody smack into each other, mark my words."

Jason introduced Meg as Miss Waring and gave no further explanations. None seemed to be required. Men and women sauntered in and out with sheets of paper, tape measures and chipped teacups, sometimes nodding at each other and sometimes cutting a path from one side of the hall to the other as though surrounded by complete strangers. Meg met the producer, the director, and a balding albino with a nervous handshake who was the story editor and who at once began to complain that someone must have forgotten to give Jason the latest version of Episode Eight because he hadn't allowed for a door that had been written in.

"Just what I mean," said the director in an anguished whinny. "They'll meet head on in the middle of the screen."

Jason sauntered through them at a pace that must surely have been deliberately slower than his normal one, unless it was just that it seemed so in contrast with the frenetic bustling all around him. He led Meg to a dais in a corner of the hall and found her a chair.

"You'd think they were rehearsing a crowd scene,

wouldn't you?" He stood beside her and contemplated the scurryings to and fro. "A mob scene from a bad film. Any minute now they'll cry such convincing slogans as 'Down with the decadent oppressors of our exploited nation' or 'Rhubarb, rhubarb'."

From her eminence of a few inches, Meg was able to adopt the same Olympian aloofness.

"What sort of film *is* it going to be?" she asked, as one planning the expenditure of some shillings on a stalls seat.

"Film? Oh, it's not going to be a film. This is a television series." He waved to a man who had just come in through the far door. "There are three times this number of people pacing up and down in a film studio."

He sighed and, like a swimmer deciding to brave the cold water at the deep end, stepped off the dais.

"Please," somebody was shouting at the top of his voice. "Please. Please, everybody."

There was a general convergence on one end of the room. Meg found a wide space opening between her and the others. She was unsure of her best policy—to stay here looking indifferent until Jason came to collect her, or to drift into the middle of the mass as everyone else was doing.

Jason looked round and raised his hand in a slow, casual summons. Meg went to him.

Two girls looked at her. One of them, holding a clipboard and waving a pencil officiously, muttered something to her friend. They both pouted incredulously and then glanced at Jason with what might have been dawning admiration. Probably they had never thought of him as having a girl in tow. Probably it was the first time they had consciously studied him. Meg sensed that Jason was not unaware of this and not displeased. She was not sure whether she altogether enjoyed the implications.

She enjoyed watching Jason in action, though. It was impossible not to feel a personal loyalty to the man who had brought her here. If you're with someone, you want to make a good showing; you want to associate yourself with him, even to feel in some way responsible for his small successes. You want him to be firm in the middle of chaos, and constructive when everyone else is falling apart.

Jason was all this. He was rarely addressed directly—the producer, director and story editor kept the uproar seething around themselves, scared of any shred of their authority floating away on an unfavourable breeze—but when they reached some key point and loudly declared that such and such a scene wouldn't work and they couldn't afford another penny on last-minute alterations, Jason would suggest removing a wall. "So that you can have a direct cut and still dolly your Number Two through in time for the next scene." The director's beard tugged, the producer turned on the story editor saying "Well, what page is it on, for God's sake?" and an elderly man in a carpenter's apron said "easy". Then the girl with the clipboard scribbled a few notes and the producer said "If we don't get a move on we won't use up this quarter's allocation and then we'll have lost the perishing lot" and the director went into a huddle with a curly-haired boy in a massive woollen jersey.

After an hour of what in any other walk of life would have seemed frenzied incompetence, Meg realised that without an emotional crisis every fifteen minutes these people would not have been able to work. They regarded it as unnatural not to squeal and lash themselves into agonies over every detail. This was why Jason would never belong—why he operated as a free-lance, coming in when they needed him and then going off and doing something for the live theatre before the necessity for money called him back into the tumult. Jason dealt in

facts and measurements, in the dovetailing of scenes or fragments of scenes, in swift construction and the swift demolition so essential in a world that was made afresh every few hours of the day. He refused to be flustered, and because of this they either did not notice that he was there or, every now and then, wondered why he kept getting in their way.

"There's something sinister about that deadly self-control of his," said the director within Meg's earshot. He put his arm round the shoulders of the curly-haired boy as they strolled off towards a tea urn on a side table. "Secretive."

Meg caught Jason's eye. He smiled faintly in a complicity that made her feel absurdly fond of him.

He invited her to lunch the following day before he caught the afternoon train back to Wishbury. While they were eating he asked her casually—too casually, she felt at once—if she had told her father about their meeting.

"No," said Meg. "Why?"

"I . . . just wondered."

"Is there some reason why I shouldn't?"

"Not at all."

"Even if I'd thought of mentioning it," said Meg, "I couldn't have done it yet. I haven't been home since that morning on the train—the morning when you spoke to me."

It seemed an age ago.

"Not been home?" said Jason, startled.

"They're away in Scotland. On holiday."

"What did you do last weekend, then?"

"Spent it in London. A nice quiet time."

He thought for a moment, then said quietly: "And what about this next weekend?"

"Oh, I don't know." She spoke quickly because she was sure she could guess what was coming and she didn't know how she was going to respond. "There's plenty to

do. I've got plenty of friends I can go and see, if I want to."

"Would you come to Wishbury? I'd like you to see it under more favourable conditions than last time."

"Last time," she said, "my father was very angry about my coming."

"It's different now, isn't it?"

"Goodness knows what he'd make of it."

"He doesn't have to know."

"Oh, but I—"

"He doesn't have to know anything about it," said Jason earnestly, "until you're ready to tell him."

9

In daylight the watermill looked squat and sullen, the rotted teeth of its wheel hanging impotently over a green trickle of water. Beside it the house was less substantial. The house's thick walls of soft chalk were crumbling and fragmented, but the mill had been solidly built of craggy grey stone and had a stone tiled roof.

The lane leading to it must be muddy in winter. Visitors would be discouraged by it. If the mill had been closer to a main road it might well have been turned into an olde-worlde restaurant years ago instead of being left to moulder away above the shrunken stream.

On the Saturday morning Jason, Pauline and Meg went for a walk. Miriam had curtly refused to join them. "I've got work to do." Her attitude made it plain that it was all she could do to endure having Meg in the house, let alone contemplate going for a walk with her.

Pauline wore a white blouse and slim blue slacks. Meg had brought a new grey-striped dress with heavier grey at the cuffs and collar.

"You both look so cool," said Jason. His manner combined paternal approval of Pauline and frank admiration of Meg.

They went along an overgrown path beside the stream. The railway line ran parallel for a few hundred yards and then swung off in a slow curve towards the north-east. Willows drifted their skirts idly on the slow surface of the water.

It was odd to think that beyond the chalk ridge, beyond that dark hummock fringed by beech trees, lay the main road to Alderford. On a side road between here and Alderford—Meg turned her head, trying to get her bearings—Mr. Forshaw's car had crashed.

She had an impulse to start running, to get away while there was still time. But away from what? From fear of Jason—or from fear of her growing obsession with him?

"Is this your Saturday routine?" she asked.

Jason's deep brown eyes widened in a query.

"In Alderford," she explained, "we all have a week-end timetable. A certain time for driving the car in, a time for parking it behind the church, a time for meeting in The Red Lion, and a time for walking up the hill to the beacon."

"I'm afraid I lead an irregular life," said Jason.

"And I'm not here enough to get into a rut," said Pauline.

She was not the eager, chattering girl Meg had seen on the train with her father. Presumably by now she had exhausted all her tales of the term's doings. She walked slowly and gracefully with her arm lightly in Jason's, every now and then glancing at Meg. It was not surprising that she didn't know what to make of the situation. So far as she was concerned, there had been a strange young woman appearing out of the night and

startling her father . . . and now that same young woman was a guest in the house.

Meg slowed her pace. The timelessness of the sultry morning and the glassy stream made nonsense of all movement. There was no need for hurry, nowhere to go. She stopped, drugged by the heavy scent of meadowsweet. Jason also came to a halt. He was drawn by her into the same mood. Pauline slipped her arm free from his and sauntered away from the bank. After a few steps she crouched beside the water and watched the tiny circles and ripples made by dancing, skimming insects.

Meg said without resentment: "Your sister hates me."

"I wouldn't put it as strongly as that."

"Hates me," Meg repeated. "Does she think I'm a threat to her?"

"I don't see why she should." He sounded reluctant to break the spell of the warm, uncomplicated eternity.

"A threat to her position in this house, perhaps?"

He touched her hand. His fingertips were warm and dry, rather coarse. He said: "I'm sure it's not that."

"I don't know what made me say it." Meg tried to wake up. She had just made a brazen remark, implying all kinds of things that hadn't happened and weren't likely to happen—a remark that could only have been made when she was off guard, allowing unformulated desires to float up through her drugged haze into words. "What I really meant—"

"She takes time to get used to things," he said gently.

"And Pauline can't make me out."

"Neither can I. That's part of your charm."

"I hate the word 'charm'," said Meg.

"So many words in our language have been tarnished by misuse that it's difficult to choose an inoffensive one."

Pauline stood up and came back towards them. They crossed the stream by an old stone bridge and made a

wide circuit of the meadows before returning to the mill.

Lunch was cold, eaten in the cool breakfast room "because it saves trouble laying it in here," grunted Miriam. That was all she said, in spite of Jason's efforts to draw her into a general conversation.

Meg looked round the room. Jason anticipated her.

"The window seat comes straight from a television play two years ago," he said. "In fact it's one example of the play giving me the idea for the reality." He pursed his lips. "I may alter it soon."

"Oh, Daddy, not again," said Pauline. "It's so nerve-racking—one never knows where to sit down. It's just not safe"—she tried nervously to make Meg her confidante—"to move around this place in the dark."

"It must be rather fun," said Meg. "Spring decorating rather than spring cleaning."

"When I come home from school I never know until I get here what atmosphere I'll be living in—modern Swedish or Pennsylvania Dutch."

"It's good for one," said Jason. "By altering the designs of the rooms from time to time, I give my own life a new slant. Everyone ought to do it more often. It's possible to become a totally different person in different surroundings."

"Is it?" Meg doubted. "And are you so keen on becoming a different person?"

Miriam flashed her a malevolent glance. Pauline sat back with an air of academic interest, waiting as she might have waited for someone at her school debating society to rise to the occasion.

Jason said: "I suppose . . . being on one's own for so long. . . ."

"On your own!" sniffed Miriam. "I like that! You've got me now, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Jason. "I have, haven't I?"

In the afternoon Pauline went into Wishbury to see some friends. Miriam brusquely refused Meg's offer of help with the washing up and made a great deal of noise in the kitchen for fifteen minutes. After that she creaked upstairs, presumably to lie down while the heat of the afternoon closed in across the meadows.

Jason unfastened the top buttons of his olive green sports shirt and sprawled on the lawn behind the house. Meg lay a few feet away, surrendering herself to the sun. A local paper and a few magazines were scattered between them. There was not a breath of wind to lift the corner of a page. Through the ground and up through the palms of her hands spread flat on the grass, Meg felt a tremor that became the pulsation of a train approaching along the low embankment. It throbbed past —she closed her eyes and let herself experience the rhythmic crescendo and diminuendo—and the afternoon was even more richly empty after it had gone. It was incredible that anyone should want to go from anywhere to anywhere on a train on such an afternoon.

She twisted her head away from the glare of the sun. When she opened her eyes slightly, her eyelashes were fringed with a gold and crimson dazzle. Then the brightness was dimmed. A shadow fell across her face. She looked up. Jason, bending over her, was shading her from the sun. His mouth descended on hers.

She let her arms spread wide on the grass, so that she and Jason touched only where their lips touched. When he lifted his head again she could not look at him because light was spilling in molten fire all over her. She rolled to one side. Jason put a hand possessively on her shoulder. He kissed her again and this time she put her arms round him and moaned into his mouth.

When she gasped free, he still clung to her. She thrust her chin into his shoulder and stared unseeingly past him at a world blurred and tilted sideways. The wall

of the house reared up and away from her, propped against the sky.

Behind an open window a face swam pale in the cool depths of the room. Miriam was not asleep, not resting. Miriam was spying and hating.

That night Meg was in bed when her bedroom door creaked open. She had pulled the curtains back so that moonlight fell across the floor, splashed over the corner of her sheet, and sparked reflections from the uneven panels of the heavy door. It was a snug little room with a sagging floor and an erratically sloping ceiling. The door did not fit properly and she was not used to the latch: she heard the click as it slipped, and then the creak of the hinges. A gap of three or four inches opened up. A faint light that was not moonlight filtered in.

Jason's voice murmured from the foot of the stairs. Miriam's reply was wavering but clear. She was speaking too loudly. Jason told her to be quiet, but Miriam was incapable of being quiet.

"How could you bring her here? How could you?"

"I told you. I thought she might help. I thought we could use her."

"That's a likely one!"

Meg recalled that Miriam had been drinking fairly steadily through the warm evening. Each time her glass was empty she had reached for the gin bottle without offering it to anyone else. Jason had glanced once or twice at the bottle, obviously making a mental calculation, but had shown no great alarm. Miriam was presumably keeping within her ration. She had all the signs of being a steady, committed evening drinker. A marked harshness crept into her voice but she did not grow any more quarrelsome. Her face began to go puffy and she asked Jason the same trivial question three times

in less than five minutes, not registering his answers; but otherwise she was no more difficult than she had been from the moment of Meg's arrival.

Only now, with Meg in bed and supposedly out of hearing, was she letting herself go.

"An excuse," she said. "That's all it was."

"Do keep your voice down."

"You're in love with her," snarled Miriam.

"Am I?" It was so quiet that it reached Meg only as a whisper.

"Do you deny it? At your age—a schoolboy infatuation over that creature."

"Why not?" said Jason.

Meg did not dare to get out and shut the door now. She had to lie quite still until they reached the landing and walked past. Jason hesitated by her door. She wondered if he was pointing out the gap to Miriam. The urge to turn over, to scratch her arm, to sneeze, came over her. She longed for Jason to come in and at the same time prayed that he wouldn't.

The two of them went away. She heard the harsh crackle of an exaggerated whisper from Miriam but could not distinguish the words.

Then Jason said: "Goodnight, Miriam." He said it with a strangely pedantic clarity, as though meaning it to carry.

And Miriam, with the same careful enunciation, said: "Goodnight."

Meg allowed herself to turn over and twitch her pillow into a new position now. It soon grew sticky under her cheek, and even the single sheet was oppressive.

In her mind there was turmoil. She had told herself that she must come here because of Gillian, but Gillian was receding into the background. She felt guilty about this and tried to call her friend back. There was no re-

sponse. Part of her wanted to deny Gillian's existence and the problems it raised.

She dozed and dreamed. In one of her dreams she was Gillian lying in this bed, and Jason came into the room and kissed her just as he had kissed her—or had that been Gillian too?—this afternoon. If Gillian had come to this house and been loved by Jason, she didn't want to see Gillian again. . . .

All at once she was wide awake. The moonlight had fingered its way along the wall and crept round until there was only a faint beam above her head. The suspicion of a breeze scratched under the eaves.

And there were footsteps in the yard below, and the creak of a door.

Meg tossed the sheet aside. She went to the open window, instinctively keeping to one side.

Miriam stood by the door of the mill. Her head sagged. She was either exhausted or increasingly drunk. Jason stood beside her. She appeared to be explaining something to him; or explaining something away. Perhaps, Meg speculated, she kept a secret hoard of spirits tucked away in the old building and Jason had accused her of serious drinking bouts in the middle of the night.

After a few minutes Miriam crossed the cobbled yard and entered the house below. Slowly she climbed the stairs and passed Meg's door. Her own door closed.

Meg waited until she was sure the door would not open again and then drew on a coat over her pajamas and crept down those same stairs. She carried her handbag flashlight. Hurrying from the house to the mill, she found that the door was still open. She pressed herself closely against it, trying to hear some sound from within. When she was sure that there was nothing she cautiously pushed the door open.

The interior was in darkness. She pressed the button

of her flashlight. A beam of brightness stabbed into the gloom.

She was in a large main chamber with oak beams lowering from the shadows above, carrying the roof and what was left of the grinding machinery. The wheel shaft thrust in through the wall. Dust settled on the huge millstones.

The chamber had been chopped into segments by flimsy partition walls. In a couple of these partitions there were lightweight doors. In another there was a gap without a door. Meg stepped through the gap and found herself in a half-finished room. Two walls were distempered and hung with pictures, two were bare. From one angle the room was almost cosy; from another it was a thin mockery. In this narrow, selective light there was something eerie and unbalanced about it.

From above came the faintest of murmurs. Meg was sure she recognised the lilt of Jason's voice. She turned out the light and stood absolutely still. But the darkness was so acute that she felt giddy. She thumbed the light on again and picked her way out, to find herself in another travesty of a room. An African mask grimaced at her suddenly, and behind it, incongruously, loomed the heavy shape of a Welsh dresser.

Abruptly a door opened, seemingly under the very roof. Jason stood silhouetted against a rectangle of light. Meg thumbed out her flashlight once more but was too late. The rectangle was immediately obliterated. Jason said from the darkness: "Who's there?"

Meg stood frozen while her palms grew damp.

"Miriam . . . ?"

Then an overhead light blazed down on the eccentric saw-edge of plywood walls, battens and unfinished backdrops.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

Jason clattered down steps from a small landing, from the door which he had just closed behind him. He danced with cat-like sureness through the mad maze of which he must have been the creator.

"Well?"

"I . . . I couldn't sleep," said Meg.

"And when you can't sleep, you normally get up and pry into other people's affairs—into places where you haven't been invited?"

She braced herself to hit back. "What are you doing at this time of night?"

"This is where I work. If I feel like working, I work. It's nobody's business but my own."

"There's something strange going on. You asked me here and I think you ought—"

"You forced your way into my life." He was gripping a flimsy door jamb as though to tear it away and beat her with it. "All right, I've accepted you. I couldn't help myself. I may be a fool—but I accepted and I invited you here. But I didn't invite you to peek into every little private corner. It's still *my* life. This is a part of it I don't share with anyone who cares to come blundering in. *I* will decide how much of my life you can occupy."

His hand closed on her arm. He forced her towards the door. When they were on the cobbles he locked the door behind them and they went on across the yard.

In the stillness of the night, twisting herself round to face him while he still gripped her, Meg seethed: "I can make some decisions of my own, you know. And as to being a fool, I'm the one. Whatever possessed me—"

"Go to bed." He released her when they were indoors. "Go to bed."

10

At breakfast Meg said: "I'll be leaving this morning."

Pauline looked surprised, then studiously concentrated on her toast and marmalade. Miriam directed a sly grin of satisfaction at her brother.

"This morning?" said Jason stiffly. "But it's Sunday. The weekend—"

"I think I'll go home."

"I thought there was nobody there."

"The flat, I mean. I'll go up to London. I've got rather a lot to do."

She was afraid that he would say that he knew very well she had nothing to do. In front of his sister and daughter he restrained himself. All he said was:

"This is rather sudden."

"I think it would be best." The room was cool and beautiful in the morning light, full of a leisurely Sunday promise. But everyone was tense and Meg wanted to get away from this tension. After last night she could not possibly stay here. Remembering last night, she also remembered the afternoon with Jason; and now she avoided his gaze. She said: "I'll catch the next train."

"There isn't one," said Jason, "until two o'clock."

"There must be. The ten-fifteen from Alderford—"

"Doesn't stop at Wishbury. There's no main line train until two o'clock."

Jason was very quiet, almost apologetic. She was sure he was laughing at her. But after the way he had snarled at her in the night, she could not believe there was anything but contempt in his laughter. He was sneering as a jailer might sneer. She wanted to throw her plate at him, tip the table over, make an absurd

scene just to show that she was not going to be intimidated. She didn't want to stay; he had made it clear that he didn't want her to stay unless she allowed herself to be organised his way, following the paths laid down, keeping off the grass; so why couldn't she just get up and go? She ought to have known about the trains. It was galling to be left like this—having sounded so decisive, to be made to look incompetent and rather pathetic.

"More coffee?" said Pauline politely.

Meg watched the black stream pour into her cup. It could have been such a pleasant morning . . . She wanted another round of toast but she wasn't going to ask for one and she wouldn't accept if one was offered.

Perhaps there was a bus she could catch.

Meg sipped her coffee and looked fixedly at the window and the brightness outside.

Jason said: "It's a long walk."

"If she wants to go," said Miriam abruptly, "let her."

There were dark pouches under her eyes. Her mouth drooped in a sad scowl round which all her features threatened to shape themselves, preserving the expression for ever.

Miriam's unconcealed desire to have her off the premises stirred up a swirling contradiction in Meg: she wanted to leave now, long walk or no long walk, and yet she wanted to stay and defy Miriam.

Jason said: "Let me show you round."

Miriam pushed back her chair. "Oh, really! You're not going to . . . oh, it's too much."

"You wanted to see the mill, didn't you?" said Jason. "To see it properly?"

Pauline spoke eagerly, welcoming this return to normal, understandable conversation. "Oh, you can't take Meg into that dump." She smiled at Meg. "You never

know whether it'll be a torture chamber or a bistro, or simply a rubbish tip for old planks and canvas."

"There's no train until two o'clock," said Jason. "Do come and have a look round."

It was Miriam's intransigence that tipped the scales. To the very last moment Miriam must be defied. And if Miriam was scared of something, so much the better. Let her be scared. Let her give herself away.

Or, if it was her brother she was anxious to protect, let her give him away.

Meg crossed the yard with Jason. It was all different from last night. It was all so innocuous.

She said: "Trying to lull me into a sense of security?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Trying to gloss over last night's display—"

"I'm sorry about last night," he said. He stopped with his hand on the door of the mill. "I'm so used to being left alone. I hate being interrupted. It may seem odd that I should be in there at such a time, but if I choose to be so isn't it my concern and nobody else's? I'm sorry, though. It was . . . rude of me. Rude—and very petty. But as you'll realise"—he opened the door and waved her in—"the whole set-up is an odd one. I'm a bit self-conscious about it."

The flimsy rooms were less ghostly in daytime. Their obvious artificiality robbed them of menace. It was only now, seeing them like this, that Meg realised she had been frightened by them in the darkness. And frightened by the wild over-emphasis of Jason's denunciation.

They went through an inter-connecting sequence of rooms which were no more than sketches for some reality which would in itself be unreal.

Meg said: "You go to this much trouble every time you have to visualise a scene?"

"Not every time. I couldn't afford the time or the money." He led her into a totally blank area. "As it

is, I'm sure I'd be in trouble with the Unions if they knew how many of their functions I usurp!"

The severity of this featureless space was that of a cell. Meg could not decide whether it was a prison or a monastery cell.

"This is the one you mentioned to Chief Inspector Perrock?"

"That's right. My inspiration room."

She pushed a door on the far side. It stuck. She looked back. "And this one?"

There was a shade of hesitation in his reply. "Oh, a discarded set."

"May I go through?"

"I suppose so."

He gave the door a hard push and it opened.

Although she knew this was a make-believe world and had been expecting any kind of room or backcloth, the incongruity of this one came as a jolt. It was finished in more detail than any of the others. There were cane chairs, a table, an ugly cabinet carved from black wood, a native shield on the wall and a carved wooden eland on a small shelf. The place looked complete, almost lived-in.

"A set for one of those plays about the decline of Empire," said Jason.

"Do you really have to set everything up in such detail?" she marvelled.

"Not always."

As they left the room and went back towards the main door, Meg stumbled over a pile of wood blocks against the wall. Jason caught her and turned her towards him. He kissed her. The smell of freshly sawn wood mingled with the smell of Jason's pipe in his hair.

Meg pulled away.

He said: "You're not going on the two o'clock, are you?"

"I think it would be the sensible thing to do."

"Are you so keen on being sensible?"

"I want to be," said Meg. She ought not to say this aloud; ought not to let him know how incapable she was of dealing with the situation. "It wasn't very sensible of me to come here, but now that I *am* here—"

"You're going to be sensible and go away as quickly as possible?"

Meg looked helplessly around. Further along the wall a flight of steps with a handrail went up to the door just below the roof. It was down these steps that Jason had come raging last night.

"That room up there," she said wildly; "did Perrock see it when you showed him round?"

"No."

"Clever of you. What did you tell him?"

"I told him what my profession was and what all these rooms represented. I asked him if he wanted to see every nook and cranny, and he said no."

"Clever of you," said Meg again.

"Yes." The echo of his recent savagery crept back into his voice. "That's where I keep Gillian Forshaw locked away—isn't that what you've been thinking?"

She stared up into his face and heard herself say wretchedly, revealingly: "I don't know what I've been thinking. I don't know that I've been thinking about Gillian at all—not the way I started out."

"And you're not going back on the two o'clock?"

She did not catch the train.

Miriam was less antagonistic over lunch but seemed in a hurry to get the meal over. She was waiting not very patiently for something: for something to go wrong, something to be said . . . or simply for Monday morning to come with its assurance that now Meg would definitely be leaving?

After lunch Meg half expected Jason to lie in the sun

with her again. She could not be honest with herself about what might happen or what she wanted to happen, now or next week or next month. But she was not on the train. She was here, and she expected to be with Jason, talking or questioningly silent. She was taken aback when he said:

"Pauline, perhaps you'd like to take Meg up to the old barrow. It should be glorious up there this afternoon."

"You're not coming?"

"I've got one or two things to do."

Pauline glanced shyly at Meg, who could do nothing but return an encouraging smile.

Just before they left, Jason took Meg on one side. "I hope you don't mind? I want you two to get on together. And . . . well, she's a bit at a loose end down here. I'm sending her off to stay with some of her school friends in Wales soon—but right now . . . if you talk to her . . ."

Meg did not comment that she had been given little choice. She and Pauline set out along a winding path that sometimes led straight towards the hummock on the top of the ridge and at other times twisted infuriatingly away from it. It was as though dark powers, slumbering in that ancient burial mound, had cast a spell which allowed the barrow to be always visible but never accessible. Tantalisingly close, it could never be touched.

"Don't lose heart," said Pauline. "We do get there in the end. I know—I've done it before."

Meg wondered if she would ever reach Jason: if she could come close enough to know him and forget all doubts and be sure and safe with him.

In the shelter of the ridge there was no wind, but above them the beech trees hissed and moaned softly like sentinels issuing a solemn warning. At last the path reached the top. Beyond lay a green and golden val-

ley scarred by a main road and two small rashes of villages. When they turned to look back, Wishbury was small and straggling. The mill was concealed behind a windbreak of trees which from here appeared to crowd in closely around it, though in fact they were quite a distance from the buildings.

She tried to visualise Jason at work in his complex studio. If that was what he was doing . . .

Had the two of them been sent up here just to get them out of the way? Or was there, behind that remark of his, the veiled implication that she, Meg, was being tested as a possible companion might be tested . . . or a possible stepmother?

"The Beaker Folk," said Pauline.

"Mm? Sorry, I didn't—"

"The Beaker Folk left goodness knows how many of these mounds," said Pauline. "They're all over this part of the country."

"Yes." Meg strove to remember whether there were any comparable barrows near Alderford. "I think," she hazarded, "there's a long barrow a few miles from us."

"Different culture," said Pauline.

"Yes, of course."

They continued over the ridge and came to a lane which Pauline said would make a more interesting way home. For some time they walked in silence, then Pauline said:

"Have you known my father for a long time?"

"Not long."

Pauline must know this. She could hardly have forgotten that Friday and that first meeting. But she was putting it out of her mind, just as Meg herself was trying to dismiss awkward memories, pretending they had never existed.

"He's . . . worried about something," said Pauline.

"His work must take a lot out of him."

"No, not his work. It's something else. He's changed while I've been away. He's preoccupied. And Aunt Miriam's getting worse."

"Worse?"

"She's always been a bit odd, since she came to live with us. Though perhaps I shouldn't say that. I've only seen her on a couple of holidays and half-terms. But . . . well, she *does* seem worse than last time. All steamed up about something."

"Perhaps that's what's worrying Jason—your father."

"It's all tied up with it somehow," Pauline agreed. "But what the whole business is about, I just don't know." She set one foot carefully in front of the other like a dance step, her toes flicking up the dust from the dry lane. "I thought you might know something about it."

"No," said Meg. "I'm afraid I don't."

Pauline glanced sideways at her. Any minute now, thought Meg apprehensively, she's going to ask me about that first evening. She's going to ask who Gillian was and why I threw her name at Jason. And then how much do I say and how do I justify being here on these terms and what kind of friend or stepmother will I look like making?

But Pauline said no more. She had the bearing of a proud self-possessed girl, but this in itself required a certain reticence: she had gone as far as she could today, and it would take some encouragement from Meg before she would venture further.

Meg asked the name of a village that lay below them and wondered where this lane brought them out. Pauline told her. They walked on. There was no real awkwardness between them, but no real communication.

Jason and Miriam were waiting for their return in

the sitting room. They were strangely still and looked exhausted, as though they and not Meg and Pauline were the two who had walked four or five miles on a hot Sunday afternoon. Pauline glanced significantly at Meg as if to say, There, I told you so, you see what I mean?

Meg was irresistibly reminded of a stage on which the curtain had just gone up. The actor and actress, who had just been involved in some personal problem off stage, were in position and ready to play their parts. Their lines rehearsed, they awaited their cue. The curtain had gone up, the audience had arrived. The show must commence and for a while illusion would be more important than truth.

Jason said: "Enjoy the pilgrimage?"

"It was beautiful up there," said Meg.

"I knew you'd like it."

Miriam with a great effort at sociability said: "I wish I had the energy to climb up there. I just don't feel up to it nowadays."

"You never *have* felt up to it," said her brother, making an affectionate family joke out of it.

Pauline said something about going up to her room for a few minutes. Jason waved Meg towards a deep armchair facing the window, up the line of the steps and the shallow incline of the garden. She was glad of the prospect of sitting down for a few minutes after her walk.

As she crossed the room, sunlight through the window struck a bright flash from something on the floor. It was something small that had been dropped and kicked half under the slightly raised lower shelf of one of the bookcases. Meg glanced at it and glanced away; and then stopped because she knew what she had seen. As she turned, slowly and incredulously, Miriam was darting forward and stooping.

"Well, can't sit here all afternoon." Miriam ran a finger along the lowest bookshelf. "The dust! I really must get down to it tomorrow." She straightened up.

Meg said hoarsely: "What was that?"

"What?"

"You picked up a key."

"A key? Really, I can't imagine—I haven't picked up a thing."

Jason said: "Have you lost a key, then?"

"No, but—"

"And neither have I," said Miriam. "Neither lost nor found." She patted the front of her dress with her hands, like a woman dabbing them dry on an apron.

Jason sat still and strained. His face was taut. Meg wanted to go down on her knees to him—Please won't you tell me, let's be finished with it, you *know* you'll have to tell me sooner or later. . . . And at the same time she wanted to wipe the wretchedness and overpowering weariness from his face and not hurt him.

Miriam's face was a mask of defiance. All the old enmity was back. She stared at Meg and dared her to speak out.

Meg looked from one to the other. Already something within her was working to persuade her that she had not seen what she knew she had seen. It could have been anything—could have been the flash of light on a book spine, the reflection from the polished if dusty surface of the shelf, some wayward trick of her imagination.

What it surely could not have been was a key and a ring attached to a small barrel. It could not have been, as she had seen it in that split second, Mr. Forshaw's ignition key.

That night she carefully closed her bedroom door and made sure that the latch was firmly in place. She found that there was a bolt just above shoulder level.

She hesitated, tried to laugh herself out of it, and then shot the bolt—not against what arguments she might unwillingly hear on the stairs, and not, oh dear heaven, not against Jason, but against the murderous hostility of Miriam.

11

On the way to deliver documents to an office in Euston Road, Meg found herself studying passers-by with unusual intensity.

The pavements were harsh and bright. Dust blew up into the eyes. The smell of petrol and diesel fumes was overpowering. Yet couples strolled languidly through the noise and smell of heat, uncaring. A remarkable number of people seemed free to saunter about on a Monday afternoon. There were young men and women, the middle-aged, and of course the inevitable London complement of old men with crooked backs and straight sticks, lowering themselves on to public benches and staring for hours at the ground. Also there were the mixtures, the permutations: the young in the company of the older.

Just as, when her employer was handling a certain type of case, Meg would come across stray references to similar topics in every newspaper and magazine as though the subject were in everyone's mind at the same time, so now she saw older men with young girls everywhere. A bald man with heavy lips got out of a taxi and behind him was a tall young brunette with a fixed smile. A red-faced, stocky Irishman in a loud check suit had his arm round a slim girl who looked away from him in boredom but did not try to wriggle free. No, it wouldn't be like that with Jason. He was different.

There would be no reason to stare in distaste at Jason and herself when they walked along a street together or got out of a taxi.

But then she saw a man like Jason—the same build, the same colouring—on a bench. There was a girl of Meg's own age beside him. Both of them looked sadly at the ground as though they already belonged to the legion of the old, the stooped, the disappointed. The man held her hand limply.

Not like that, either: it didn't have to be like that.

What would it be like when she asked Jason point-blank about that ignition key?

The suffocating fumes grew worse. The noise, bearable until now, swelled into an intolerable clamour. The faces of the passers-by became grotesque, and when a Liverpool drunk, staggering towards Euston Station, laughed, he was laughing at her.

If she told her father he would be furious that she had disobeyed him; so furious, she fancied, that he would not listen. In a way it was a relief that he was in Scotland. The decision could be deferred. Any excuse for deferring it was welcome. As to reporting the matter to Chief Inspector Perrock, she could imagine what he would say. And if they went so far as to search the mill and the house, the key was a pretty small object, easy to hide and hard to find.

The terrible thing was that she didn't want anyone to find it. Let it be lost, forgotten; let it never have existed.

Could she bear never to ask, never to know what it was doing there anyway?

A young couple went past her laughing about something, and this laughter was different. They were happy with themselves and with the world.

Meg stopped on a corner to let buses sway past her, followed by a stream of heavy, jolting lorries. Through

gaps in the traffic she glimpsed a girl with sleek black hair and a very red plastic raincoat over her shoulders. She stood on the far side of the road laughing up at a man of Jason's age, both of them oblivious to the din and confusion. Three maudlin drunks swayed to and fro beside them, in imminent danger of tottering under the arrogant trucks, and suddenly one vomited into the gutter. But the two were uncaring, happy in their discovery of each other, in something new and good beginning for them.

That was how it would be with Jason. Already it was like that. Already there was the sweetness, the newness, waiting to grow if nothing stupid occurred to upset the whole balance.

Jason was coming up to London tomorrow.

Jason was taking her to the theatre tomorrow.

Jason had said, as he saw her to the train at Wishbury this morning: "And perhaps you'll come along to my flat for a drink afterwards. It's a bit of a hovel, but it's time you inspected it."

Left like that, it meant that she could lightly and pleasantly refuse the invitation on the evening itself, or that she could go and inspect it and have the drink and then go home. But the other possible interpretation had been strong between them like an unspoken mutual promise.

Brazen, astonished at herself, Meg took her toothbrush and a small plastic vanity bag with her on Tuesday, tucked away in her large white handbag.

She felt a brief qualm as she left the basement flat. There was no one for whom she could leave a note saying she would be back tomorrow and would then tell all about it.

Jason left Wishbury in the late afternoon and came straight from the train to the theatre, meeting her in the foyer bar. Meg was surprised by the enjoyment he

got from the play. She would have expected him to be too familiar with the workings of the theatre to derive an unforced pleasure from it, but in the interval he said that he hadn't watched a play for ages just for the sake of watching a play. Her company made all the difference. With her beside him, he was a spectator and not a niggling technician.

Over dinner they discussed the play and other plays. He spoke more quickly than usual, sounding nervous, and Meg found that she was interrupting him and stumbling over things she said.

As coffee was poured for them he said: "A brandy with it—or would you like a liqueur?"

"I . . . er, no . . . not just now."

When the waiter had gone, Jason slowly stirred his coffee, watching the swirling surface rather than Meg. "This is where I believe the young woman gets invited to the wicked seducer's flat."

"I thought she'd already been invited."

"Is she coming?"

"I think she is," said Meg.

The streets retained the warmth of the day. Meg's face was burning as she and Jason left the restaurant but her hands were icy. He hailed a taxi and put his hand under her elbow as she got in. When they sat back in the seat they braced themselves in the corners and were silent.

Meg broke her way through the silence. "Do you drive?"

"Not in London. I hate bringing the car up—it's not worth it."

"I didn't even know you had one."

"There's a garage at the end of the house. It didn't occur to me to show it to you. Not one of the architectural treasures of the place."

"I suppose not."

They swayed through a tangle of traffic and then into a quieter side street. Only in one or two spots was there still a surge of cars and people, a coagulation that thinned out and dissolved into separate trickles.

Jason said: "It comes in useful, though, when I have to go into the country to do some research."

"Yes, it must be useful then."

A minute that might have been an hour went past in a blur of lights and converging taxis, and then he said: "When I drive Pauline to these friends of hers in Wales I'll have some work to do en route. Would you like to come? I could make it last a week—and I wouldn't need to concentrate too hard."

"When will this be?"

"A week or two from now. Towards the end of Pauline's vacation."

"I've booked to go to Spain," said Meg feebly.

"You can cancel it."

"We both booked."

Jason held on to the strap as the taxi made a violent turn and accelerated. "Both?"

"Gillian and I."

"Oh. I see." He let himself sink back against the leather. "But you'll still have to cancel it, won't you?"

"Will I?"

"If your girl friend still hasn't shown up—"

"Do you think she won't ever show up?" said Meg recklessly. "Jason . . . do you?"

He stared straight ahead, light and shadow flickering across his face as it had done once before, on the Monday morning train, when he was watching Gillian. Meg remembered him then and wished that she could not remember; regretted having spoken as she had just done, but knew that nothing would come absolutely right until she had asked a great deal more.

All right, she said to herself: all right, later, there'll be a suitable time later.

She reached out and put her hand on Jason's knee. After a pause he covered it with his own.

She said: "Jason. . . ." Not a name, not an endearment, not a way of tugging at his attention—just a reassurance, if he needed it, that she was with him and was going to stay with him and wasn't going to spoil everything.

When he had paid off the taxi and was taking her up in the lift to the fifth floor of a neat, impersonal block of flats, he said:

"Are you in any hurry to get home?"

"Not particularly wild," said Meg.

He led her from the lift to a door some twenty feet away. When he had turned the key in the lock and given the door a preliminary push, he stood back and waved Meg in. She pushed the door further, but it stuck.

"Probably a few letters accumulating on the mat," said Jason.

He made a move to squeeze past her, but Meg edged round the door and freed a large legal envelope from beneath it. She was used to handling long document envelopes like this, and glanced without thinking at the name and address on it as she handed it to Jason.

It read: *Mrs. Forshaw, c/o Jason Lucas, Esq.*, . . . at this address.

"Thank you," said Jason.

There was no way of dodging this one. Meg took a step back so that Jason could close the door, and then wondered whether she ought to have prevented his closing it.

She said: "You've got to tell me. It can't go on like this."

"Let's go in and have a drink."

"Only if you're going to tell me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Nothing?" she said. "Nothing? I've kept trying to tell myself I didn't see you staring at Gillian that morning—but I did, I did! And it was you who followed her. And Mr. Forshaw's ignition key—the missing ignition key—was lying on the floor in your house. And now this—"

"Which has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing!" she cried again. "You never told me you knew Mrs. Forshaw . . . she's never breathed a word of it. . . . What's going on? Jason—you've got to tell me."

"It's ridiculous," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "standing out here in this tiny space." He put his hand on her arm. Meg recoiled. "Come in and sit down," he implored her.

"And you'll tell me everything?"

"One day. . . ."

It was the first admission she had ever had from him. If there was something to be told one day, then there was something to tell.

"Now," said Meg.

"You've got to trust me."

"How can I trust you? You haven't told me the truth, you've made a fool of me—"

"Meg! I won't let you say that." Again he tried to hold her, and they fought a silly, degrading fight in the confined space of the poky hall.

"I don't know what game you've been playing," she sobbed, "and I don't know what part I'm supposed to play in it, either. Why have you been stringing me along? First Gillian, now me. But I'm still alive, there is that. I'm still alive—so far."

She was almost daring him to strike her. And in his face, beginning to work, to darken and tighten, she saw that he was closer to a breakdown than she could have guessed. Even while she railed at him she was sick with a hopeless love for him—a love that would distort everything once more unless she was firm.

"Why did you speak to me again, after you'd got rid of me? Why did you pick me up on the train? Why did you take me to the mill?"

"Why did you *come* to the mill?" he snarled back. "Haven't you been playing your own little game, too? Snooping . . . trying to find out what you could at the mill, and now pouncing on other people's property and doubtless building up another of your pet theories on it."

Meg reached for the knob of the door. He knocked her arm down. She made another attempt and he seized her, holding her as she struggled.

"Why couldn't you have left me alone?" she cried. "If you had something to hide, why not hide it . . . and leave me alone? Why did it all have to go like this?"

"Because I wanted you."

Jason kissed her. She wanted to answer his savage mouth with savagery of her own, and go on into the flat with him; but she hit him about the head until he let go and stood back, panting.

"You wanted to use me," she flung at him. "I don't know how, but I know you only wanted to use me in whatever game you're playing."

"A charade," he said bitterly. "A deadly charade."

"What?"

"Never mind. You can't be told. I won't let you be told. All right—perhaps I had some idea of using you. But I soon changed. And even at the start I think I wasn't being honest with myself. Even then I knew there was something else about you—that the crazy idea wouldn't work."

They were like antagonists resting in their corners. They were wary, ready to attack again—or to slink away.

Meg said: "Stop talking in riddles. They don't impress me. Tell me why you went after Gillian and tell me what happened to her."

"I can't," he said.

"You've got to."

"For your own sake," he said, "and for the sake of a promise which I've made, I can't tell you."

"They'll catch up with you in the end."

"Maybe."

"Jason"—she saw him wince at the desperate appeal in her voice—"isn't there anything you can say to me?"

"Yes. I love you."

"No! Don't! What does that mean—what can it possibly mean if you don't trust me enough to—"

"Trust!" It was his turn to spit the word back at her. "I'm the one who asked for trust. I'm still asking. If you'll let well alone, trust me until it all comes all right—"

"I can't." Meg took a deep shuddering breath and felt painfully sober and painfully tired. "I couldn't go on seeing you with this . . . this fog hanging over us. Wondering what you'd been up to. Wondering if there would ever be truth between us. And," she challenged him, "always waiting for some clue, some sign that you'd had Gillian in the house and that . . . that . . . oh, I don't know. I can't think straight any more."

"Now I suppose you'll be reporting back to your father and your tame policeman."

She tried to find something in his deep, sombre eyes that was not bleak and unyielding, but she failed.

She said: "I'd never do anything to harm you, Jason. I couldn't. Not now. Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't that what you've been concentrating on just lately?"

"You'd better go," he said very quietly.

Meg put her hand up to the door and this time he made no move to stop her.

"Yes," she said, "I think I better had."

12

The basement flat resounded once more to the pounding of feet overhead. The family had returned from its holiday. In Alderford, too, people were coming back and settling gladly, whatever they might say to the contrary, into the familiar routine. For a few weeks there would be an unusual proportion of bronzed faces in the High Street throng on a Saturday morning, but gradually the suntan would fade and everything would be back to normal.

Mr. and Mrs. Waring were home from Scotland. Meg had cancelled the Spanish bookings. "So you might just as well have come with us," said her mother. "What have you been doing with yourself while we've been away?" A few vague improvisations were enough to satisfy her, and for once Mr. Waring was not too probing in his enquiries: all his attention was reserved for the two hundred colour transparencies of Scotland which he had taken and which were now to be shown by viewer or projector to anyone rash enough to come within range.

Colin had taken his mother away for a quiet fortnight in the country to get over the shock of his stepfather's death. They returned to find interest in the case reviving. An advertisement had been inserted in several major newspapers asking Gillian Forshaw to get in touch with Mr. Waring, when she would hear "something to her advantage". This sparked off several reporters, who told the public that the public was beginning to ask questions about Gillian Forshaw's disappearance. How could a girl simply vanish in England in this day and age? At the age of twenty-four she was entitled to do as she chose—but had she really chosen

to vanish? As the inheritor of a large part of her father's estate, she would surely come forward if she were able to. What were the police doing?

The police were in fact intensifying their enquiries. This useful phrase meant that photographs were circulated to police stations all over the country, the new rash of reports from cranks who claimed to have seen Gillian was conscientiously dealt with, and three men from different parts of Great Britain spent some hours in cramped offices helping the police. This help did not amount to very much.

When Meg met Colin in The Red Lion at the usual time, surrounded by the usual faces and voices, he was in a fit of sour antagonism such as she hadn't seen before. It was not directed against herself or anyone in particular but against blind circumstance. He and his mother were still baffled by Gillian's failure to turn up, and still basically confident that the whole business was somehow Gillian's fault. But they were beginning to worry. Gillian herself might have started things moving, but then the avalanche of events might have got out of control. It was all too likely that Gillian had asked for trouble; but even if you blamed her for it, you couldn't help worrying about the trouble that had answered her plea. On top of that there was Mr. Forshaw's death and now the persistent, petty stings of reporters and rumours. Exasperated and alarmed by Gillian, shocked by the death of her husband, Mrs. Forshaw had hoped to come back to Alderford rested and able to regain her balance. Now it was worse than it had been before. There was no peace. Colin wanted to hit every reporter who came near, while admitting that they had legitimate grounds for curiosity. Talking to Meg, he clenched his tankard as though determined to snap the handle off, and when he put it down on a ledge it was with a quarrelsome thud. Bewilderment

was a web in which he struggled helplessly, lashing out and breaking strands without ever being able to disentangle himself or see a way out.

He said: "The next thing you know, they'll be hinting that mother or I pushed Gill into the reservoir or something." And after taking his tankard to be refilled and buying Meg another drink, he raged: "Damn it, the girl must be *somewhere*. There must be a way of getting at her."

He could not face the possibility of the months going by while false trails were dutifully explored and scattered items of information were pieced together until perhaps a picture began to emerge. He wanted to stamp straight in and pull everything apart, drag Gillian out of hiding or captivity, and be done with it.

Meg felt guilty. She could not tell her father or Chief Inspector Perrock what she knew—not a word about the ignition key or the envelope or the half admission she had wrung from Jason, even if they were prepared to listen—but she was tempted to tell Colin. Yet in the end that would amount to the same thing. There was nothing he could do single-handed. If he tried, he would achieve no more than she had done, and might even land himself in trouble by charging head down at the watermill like a sort of commando Don Quixote. He would have to tell the police, and either they would find nothing—which would be a waste of time and would provoke renewed anger against her—or they would find something which she didn't want them to find, something which would incriminate Jason.

Gillian was safe. She had to cling to the belief that Jason would not have harmed Gillian: it was her only excuse for not speaking out.

If she had not quarrelled with Jason would she finally have learned the truth? And how long would she have had to wait; how long were Colin and his mother

and the reporters and the police going to have to wait?

Three times since that evening Jason had telephoned her. Three times she had hung up on him. If he was scared of what she might do or say, let him be scared. She would be silent, but not because of his coaxing.

Colin said: "I don't know if my mother can stand much more of this uncertainty."

For someone who was upset by recent events and their persistent echoes, Mrs. Forshaw was putting up a good show of normality. She was drinking in her usual corner with two women friends, hemmed in by wickerwork baskets jammed with food. Her silver head bobbed emphatically as though she felt it her duty to take over some of her dead husband's mannerisms. Her concern for Gillian might be real enough but it was somewhat belated. And how would she or her son explain the large envelope addressed to her at Jason Lucas's London flat? Meg wondered how Colin would react if she tried out this one on him.

Her parents, newly returned from the north, were still not fully immersed in the local mainstream again, and in any case Mr. Waring would not have wished to join in speculation about matters which could only be speculative. He said blandly to Colin:

"You're looking fit."

"You look as though you've had a good holiday," returned Colin in the same spirit.

The Saturday morning formalities added up to a great roar which from outside must have sounded like a meeting of potential revolutionaries.

Meg, letting the noisy trivialities ebb and flow about her, glanced again at Mrs. Forshaw and went on pondering the mystery. When Mrs. Forshaw caught her gaze and waved, Meg smiled and looked away.

She was just in time to see Jason and Pauline Lucas entering the bar.

Jason surveyed the crowd. It was Pauline who saw Meg first and pointed. Her lips framed words which came through the turmoil as a faint new note:

"There she is."

They came on across the room.

Meg was suffused with an unreasoning panic. I shall have to denounce him, she cried wildly inside her head. She saw herself pointing an accusing finger and stopping Jason in his tracks. As he and Pauline apologised their way through the crush a scream of despair built up inside her. She had been hating him and lying awake trying to make sense out of his behaviour and longing for all these nights in a row—not many of them, yet so many—longing to see him again, and now here he was. Here he was and she wanted him to go away. She couldn't cope. She couldn't go on loving him because the man she loved was her own invention and had nothing to do with Jason Lucas. Jason Lucas was a crook of some kind, perhaps a killer, perhaps a kidnapper, perhaps so many things; but nothing certain, nothing secure.

If she had told Colin about him, Colin might now have been equipped to deal with the man.

But in front of Pauline—how could she denounce him in front of his daughter, who was worried about him without understanding what there was to worry about? Cunning . . . so skilful, bringing Pauline along so that the risk of a dangerous confrontation could be minimised!

Jason said: "Well, Miss Waring!"

Mr. and Mrs. Waring turned, polite and puzzled. For a second Mr. Waring did not recognise the newcomer; then he saw who it was and looked even more puzzled.

"Hello, Meg," said Pauline.

Whatever the plan might be, she was not part of it.

Her father had managed to keep her in ignorance. Her greeting was fresh and spontaneous.

Meg forced a smile, knowing that it was a poor response to Pauline's sincerity. She felt herself tightly enclosed, penned in by the questioning looks of Colin and her father and mother.

Jason said smoothly: "Mr. Waring—nice to see you . . . in a rather more convivial atmosphere than last time."

"Er, yes." Mr. Waring was at a loss.

"Didn't Meg—Miss Waring—tell you that we had met again? We bumped into each other on the train. That fatal Monday morning train." Jason smiled, and Mr. Waring managed a dubious smile in return. "I think she must have been afraid you'd feel she was still persecuting me!"

The bluffness sat uneasily on him. He kept it up, though, through a muddle of introductions, while Meg tried to make him look at her and tell her in some way what he wanted here.

Mrs. Forshaw, attracted by the flurry of activity in their group, decided to add herself to it. Meg got a grip on herself. Before her father could bring the two together, she said loudly:

"And this is Mrs. Forshaw . . . Mr. Lucas. I think you know each other?"

They shook hands. Jason said: "I don't think we've met."

"I'm sure we haven't," said Mrs. Forshaw.

Mr. Waring looked unhappily at his daughter. Colin, at her left shoulder, muttered: "Why should they have met? What makes you think so?"

Jason insinuated himself into the group with the smoothest charm. He might have been totally unaware of the awkwardness he had created, but Meg knew that he was not. For some purpose of his own he was

organising and manipulating these people. He did it with the unobtrusive skill she had already seen in operation during the television planning session. Within ten minutes he had succeeded in bringing Pauline and Colin together and then banishing them to the fringe of the group. He started a conversation in which Mrs. Forshaw and the Warings became absorbed, and then Meg found herself close to him, several feet away from the others.

Jason said: "I've got to talk to you."

"You said enough, the other evening."

"I've been telephoning you—"

"And I," Meg reminded him, "have been hanging up on you. What good do you think it'll do you to come here?"

"I thought of getting on the train on Monday. But trying to argue with you in a crowded compartment . . . and if you'd said no. . . ."

He shrugged expressively, trying to make her smile with him at the scene she could so easily imagine. The more she wanted to ally herself with him, the more her resistance hardened.

"And I wasn't going to hang around your office like a lovesick schoolboy," he said.

"You've done too much of that sort of thing with Gillian already?"

"I want to explain as much as I can. Meg, I didn't get involved in this mix-up because I wanted to."

"You mean you can't help yourself when there's a girl around?" She kept a fixed smile all the time so that anyone a few feet away would think this was an ordinary, casual conversation.

Jason said: "I can't talk to you here."

"No."

"Come to the mill. Come over this afternoon—say

you're coming to tea, to see Pauline. Say anything . . . but come."

"I can't. I don't want to."

"If you come, I swear I'll tell you as much as I can."

"Why not tell me here?" she said. "Why not tell the whole room? I'll guarantee you a spellbound audience."

The group reshuffled. Meg's father found himself talking to Jason and plainly did not relish it. He hated not being at grips with a situation.

Colin stood close to Meg and said: "A bit long in the tooth for you, isn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Just what is going on?"

"I still don't understand."

The crowd began to thin out as the shoppers went home. Mr. Waring glanced at his wife and daughter to indicate that it was time to leave. Pauline, as though sensitive to the possibility of her father overstaying his welcome, said hurriedly: "We'd better be getting back to Aunt Miriam." Jason shot Meg an imploring glance which she ignored. Pauline said goodbye to her with a perplexed smile and to Colin with a warmth that gave Meg the chance of getting her own back. When she stood with Colin in the porch of The Red Lion she said pettishly: "Cradle snatcher."

"Free tomorrow afternoon?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"That means you're free. I've got to drive over to see a belted earl with some junk to sell. Sunday's the only day he can spare from his various activities. A nice afternoon out."

"I don't think I'm in the mood," said Meg.

Colin stood on the step watching her drive off with her mother and father. He looked so stupid, she thought crossly—so bossy, as though he owned her and had the right to know everything that went on in her head.

At lunch her father said: "Now, what's all this about you seeing that chap while we were away?"

"Do we have to go into this while we're eating?" sighed his wife.

"I want to know."

"It's nothing," said Meg.

"Nothing? If you've been playing detective again, after your promise—"

"No," said Meg, "I haven't been playing detective. He spoke to me on the train, and we started talking, and . . . well, we got to know each other."

"After what happened to . . . er . . ." Mr. Waring took in a large mouthful of food as an excuse to stop in mid-sentence.

"Yes?" said Meg. She waited implacably for him to finish chewing. "Go on."

"After what you *said* happened to Gillian—"

"But you didn't believe me."

"It's not what I believed: it's what you believed. You mean to say you let yourself be picked up by him, just the way you claim he picked up Gillian?" Mr. Waring put his fork down with a clatter. "Confound it, the only possible explanation is that you still had some hare-brained intention of following him or questioning him —making trouble for the fellow."

"No," said Meg firmly. "It's not like that at all. Now that I know him, I . . . I like him."

"Oh, my God—women!" It was unusual for him to indulge in such a ready-made denunciation.

His wife said: "Do you think we can get on now?"

Mr. Waring was normally a fast eater. Today he ate more and more slowly and was last to finish, a fact which he hardly noticed. When they left the table, instead of sitting down in his armchair and surrendering to the luxury of a cigar—one after Saturday lunch,

one after Sunday lunch without fail—he astonished them by saying:

"I've just got to go down to the office for a little while."

"Now?"

"There's something I've forgotten to do."

After he had gone, Meg's mother said: "Your father never forgets anything."

This aberration disturbed her, but not nearly as much as it disturbed Meg. Something was in the wind. She had half intended to go out for a long walk on her own this afternoon in an effort to blow the mists out of her mind. Now she could not bear to leave the house. Whatever it was that had prompted her father to go back to his office on a Saturday afternoon, she was convinced it had something to do with Jason.

When he returned his face was grave. Before he even sat down he said to Meg in a tone oddly combining sheepishness and belligerence:

"Maybe you were right about that man Lucas. Right in the first place, I mean."

Meg felt dizzy. She wanted to shout at him that he must stay away, not probe any further. The blood drained from her face. She did not dare to look at him or risk a question that would give her away.

Her mother looked at the clock and said: "I was just thinking of making a pot of tea."

"It ought to have rung a bell earlier than this. I had to go through Forshaw's papers just before we went on holiday, and it was staring me in the face."

"What was, dear?" Mrs. Waring prompted him rather because she wanted to go and put the kettle on than from any real desire to hear of his discovery.

"It's a common enough name, though, and I didn't think anything of it until just now. I remembered something the girl said this morning—about her aunt."

"What name?" Meg did not recognise her own voice.

"Lucas. It was the maiden name of Forshaw's first wife."

"Gracious me, is that all?" Mrs. Waring turned cheerfully towards the door. "You're right about it being a pretty common name."

Mr. Waring looked full at his daughter and said, "Miriam Lucas. Later she was Miriam Forshaw."

"But she died," said Meg. "She was . . . murdered out there . . . wasn't she? In Kenya."

"There's nothing about it among his papers. Not," said Mr. Waring dryly, "that one would expect a man to keep grisly newspaper cuttings or official reports of his wife's violent death. And if she wasn't dead, then of course there wouldn't be any cuttings."

It was impossible. Or, if one had to accept that it was not only possible but true, still it was meaningless. Meg had been scared of being presented with some terrible revelation which would explain everything brutally and inescapably. This explained nothing—except, as she thought about it, the envelope in Jason's flat. Some legal documents sent to his married sister care of Jason Lucas: yes, that was reasonable enough. But why, if he was Gillian's uncle, had he approached her so deviously? It made no sense.

"The sister we met that evening," said her father: "her name was Miriam, wasn't it?"

In a last-minute effort to protect Jason from she knew not what, Meg said: "I'm not sure."

He sat on the arm of a chair and put his hand on his knees. "Why are you lying to me, Meg?"

"Yes," said Meg. Silly to persevere. He had heard Pauline refer to her Aunt Miriam. He could establish the truth in a matter of hours now that he had got this far. "It's Miriam. But it doesn't have to be the same Miriam Lucas. How can it be?"

"That's what might interest the police."

Mr. Waring went to the telephone in the hall. He closed the door so that Meg heard nothing until her mother came in with the tea tray. As the door swung slowly back, her father was saying:

"Yes, used to be in the Colonial Office. No . . . I'm sure he won't be. Not on a Saturday afternoon. But can't you trace him? . . . True. True. Possibly no significance at all. But it's worth following up. A call to Nairobi, if necessary. . . ."

Mrs. Waring put the tray down and loyally went back to close the door. She was placidly pouring tea when Mr. Waring came into the room again and sat down.

"I wonder if the present Mrs. Forshaw knows that her predecessor is still alive?" he mused.

"You can't be sure it's the same one, can you?"

"Not yet. But we'll soon find out."

"You can hardly ask her."

"I wasn't thinking of doing so. No. . . ." Mr. Waring took a hold of himself, shocked by his lapse. "It isn't anything to do with me personally," he said, and reached for the cup of tea which was being handed to him. "Or," he added with stern finality, "with any of us. It's in other hands now."

At least this meant that he would not ask Meg any awkward questions for a while. He had effectively shut himself up. She feared that the respite was temporary: sooner or later there were bound to be some difficult ones for her to answer.

If Jason hadn't come recklessly marching into The Red Lion this morning, there might have been none of this. It was his own fault if something awful happened now. He must have been mad to think that he could achieve anything by tackling her in Alderford, on her home

ground. He had tried to catch her off balance and had failed. He must have been desperate.

She tried not to admit to herself how glad she had been to see him.

Her father allowed himself one reluctant question later that day. It must have been nagging at him.

"You didn't know about all this before, did you?"

"All what?"

"About Miriam Lucas being . . . about her *possibly* being Forshaw's first wife?"

"No," said Meg firmly.

"How much do you know about them, really?"

"Nothing," said Meg, "really."

It was left at that. Meg wondered what telephone calls the police were making and whether they were already talking to Mrs. Forshaw. But if there had been any sudden flourish of activity their own phone would surely have started to ring; and in fact it remained silent until early Sunday afternoon.

Mrs. Waring had asked whether Mr. Waring thought they should ask Mrs. Forshaw and Colin in for drinks. The Sunday routine had been upset by Mr. Forshaw's death and then by holidays. It was time they got back to normal. Mr. Waring thought not. Until this disquieting business was cleared up it was better to keep their distance. One could never tell what embarrassments might arise. Mrs. Waring misunderstood with her usual docility and invited Mrs. Forshaw and Colin anyway. She even suggested they might stay to lunch.

The question of staying or not staying was still being debated when Chief Inspector Perrock arrived. He had not come for a sociable drink. He went into Mr. Waring's study and there they talked for twenty minutes. When they emerged, Mrs. Waring was ready with an additional invitation, decided upon after a quick mental calculation involving a joint of mutton and a

mixture of vegetables. Before she could get the words out, the telephone rang and her husband answered it, to find that the call was for Perrock. It was a brief call. Perrock gave his host a nod of confirmation when he came into the room.

"Over here all right," he said.

Mrs. Waring again gathered her forces for a cordial invitation, and again faltered when she saw the two men's expressions.

"One thing has been established, anyway," said Mr. Waring. "The first Mrs. Forshaw didn't die in Kenya. Far from it. She took somebody else's life."

Colin looked at his mother. She did not blink. Mrs. Waring, who had been about to speak to Perrock, had her hand out to him. Now it appeared that she was asking him to deny this so that they could go on discussing rational things.

He said: "That's right. She was a murderess."

13

Twelve years ago Miriam Forshaw had killed Walter Blake in his bungalow in Kenya. He had been found with two hideous gashes in his head, almost certainly made by a panga snatched from the wall of his bedroom. After the killing the weapon was never traced. At first the crime was regarded as yet another terrorist act. So far there had been little Mau Mau activity in this area but a series of atrocities in the neighbouring district could all too easily be spreading. Precautions against bestial raiders were tightened up. Then some disquieting aspects of Blake's murder came to light.

A police office, risking unpopularity with those white elements which wished to believe all the evil that could

possibly be believed of the natives, pointed out that the two savage blows bore little resemblance to the usual death strokes of the Mau Mau fanatics. They had been wild, sidewise swipes. Amateurish, said the police experts with gruesome contempt. If the blade had not been razor sharp it could have failed in its job. If it was suggested that the dead man had surprised an intruder and had been attacked in a fit of animal panic, why were there no signs of a scuffle? As far as could be checked there had been no robbery. Set apart as it was from the rest of the community, the bungalow was especially strongly protected and the owner had taken every precaution against a surprise attack even when such an attack had seemed a remote possibility. Anyone who got in must have been invited in. The door had been opened to admit a supposed friend. A table top near to the bloody corpse had been neatly wiped clean. The door had been closed behind the killer.

Whispers added up to theories, and theories accumulated proof. The community wished to protect its own but, after all, it was no use blinking certain little facts of which a fair number of people were aware. They didn't blame Mrs. Miriam Forshaw for being a hard drinker, since most of them were the same. There wasn't much else to do in the evenings. Besides, Forshaw was not the most sympathetic person in the world. Some of the women liked him but others marvelled that his wife had not taken even more devoutly to the bottle. No; drinking was not to be condemned out of hand . . . and sneaking off to another man's bungalow in the afternoon while her husband was at work was not too outrageous a sin provided it was done with discretion. But Miriam Forshaw had been getting careless. She did not trouble to conceal her destination and defied the code of conduct, applying most rigorously of all to misconduct, which other women in her position ac-

knowledged. At parties she leaned amorously against Walter Blake and whispered in his ear and giggled and even quarrelled with him—the sort of spiteful, naked duel indulged in only by people who go illicitly to bed together.

It had been rumoured for some time that Walter Blake was getting fed up. What had once been fun was becoming an ordeal. There were other married women who would be less of a tribulation, at least to start with. No one could or would say whether Blake was known to be making tentative approaches in any particular direction, but no one was surprised when at last Miriam Forshaw confessed that she had killed him in a fit of jealous rage after finding evidence of his betraying her.

The confession did not come until the police had made it clear that in their view the murder had been committed by someone who knew Blake well enough to gain admission to his bungalow without difficulty. They revealed that they had found one small trace of matting carried on the sole of a shoe from the Forshaws' bungalow to Blake's. And once it had been decided that she was fair game, there were plenty of people willing to build up a mass of circumstantial evidence against Miriam if she insisted on pleading ignorance. She saved them a lot of trouble or perhaps a lot of pleasure by not holding out.

It was a killing of passion, carried out in the red heat of the moment. She admitted that she must have grabbed the panga from the wall but her memory of the whole thing was blurred and she could not vouch for her every move. The evidence was that she had taken two maddened swings at Walter Blake and she could feel herself doing just this but didn't know what she had done with the weapon afterwards or how she had come to wipe the table and go home.

The instrument of death aroused a lot of comment in the club and at parties. It was ironical that Blake should have died from this of all things. He had kept it sharp and polished, deriving a sadistic pleasure from the thought that one day he might have a chance of using it: he boasted that if any Kikuyu bastard tried anything on *him*, he'd give the hooligan a taste of his own medicine. His friends considered that even by talking in this way he was lowering himself to the level of the black fanatics, and could not help seeing a certain poetic justice in the way he had met his end.

After he had completed his summary, mainly in the style of a report on some traffic infringement but with a few unexpected flourishes, Perrock said:

"Did you know about this, Mrs. Forshaw?"

The name rang oddly in the context of what they had just heard.

"Yes," she said.

"All of it?"

"He didn't tell me the whole story at once. I got to know it gradually—or his version of it."

"What do you mean by that?" As she hesitated, Perrock added with pompous but genuine courtesy: "You don't have to tell me here, if you don't want to. But I may have to ask you for help later."

"I don't mind. He's dead." She made it sound like a condemnation of Forshaw's typical ineptitude. "At least we can be sure of that. He told me that *she* was dead."

"His first wife?"

"She died in prison. That's the way I heard it."

Meg had been stunned. Now she groped for meaning in this tangle of deception. "And Gillian?" she said. "Did she know any of this?"

"She did," said Mrs. Forshaw.

"And she thought her mother had died in prison?"

"She did."

Gillian had been spending her holidays with her parents in Kenya when the murder took place. It was almost time for her to go back to school, and when it became clear that the investigation was likely to take an unpleasant turn her father cut short the holiday and sent her back to England some days early. It was not until she was there that she heard about the charges against her mother. Her father wrote to her and explained that her mother had been very wicked and deserved her punishment. He also wrote to her teachers and sought their assistance in shielding Gillian from too great a shock. Fortunately the case aroused no major stir in the English newspapers and none of her school friends ever knew of it.

Forshaw returned to England himself in due course after winding up his affairs. He sold up the farm and divorced his wife.

"While she was in prison?" It was Mrs. Waring's first contribution.

"If a woman is a murderess and an adulteress, and hasn't got the nerve to defend the case," said Mr. Waring, "such proceedings are not absolutely impossible."

With her father back in this country, Gillian was told that her mother would not be mentioned again. Adapting to this as children do adapt without visible psychological scars, Gillian duly accepted the later announcement that her mother had died in prison, and never spoke of her again. "At least not when I was around," said the second Mrs. Forshaw. The story of her own marriage to Forshaw did not concern anyone else, and even if it had done it was doubtful whether Perrock would have wished to pursue the subject. What he did ask was:

"When your husband had that telephone call from Gillian, after she had disappeared, did he say anything to

you—anything about his first wife being back in this country?"

"Not a thing. I've told you: until today I'd had no idea she was still alive."

"It seems safe to assume," said Mr. Waring in the tone of one who never felt safe in assuming anything, "that Miriam Forshaw returned to this country on her release from prison and wanted to get in touch with her daughter. She may have got Forshaw's address and tried to phone him to ask for permission to see Gillian. Not that she needed permission."

"It's a free country," said Colin ludicrously, and then subsided.

"He can't have been very pleased to know that she was back. And he must have been furious when finally her mother contacted Gillian through Jason Lucas, and the girl went off without saying a word to stay with her." Mr. Waring observed that they were hanging on his words. Abruptly he shook his head and reprimanded himself. "No. This is purely speculation."

"Not too improbable," said Perrock. "And then when she phoned him, and he went to fetch her. . . ." He glanced at Mrs. Forshaw, inviting her to take over.

"He didn't tell me anything about it," she said. "I just got the impression that it was another of Gillian's little games. He was so angry, and trying not to show it. Gillian could always get him like that. The two of them struck sparks all the time—they just couldn't be satisfied unless they were rowing half the time . . . and playing a sickening daddy-and-little-girl act the other half. It was so unhealthy," cried Mrs. Forshaw vehemently into the embarrassed stillness. "But he said it was the way it ought to be. You know that jargon of his—all that stuff about a love-hate relationship and the rest of it."

"He may have been trying to make up to her for the

loss of her mother in such dreadful circumstances," said Mrs. Waring charitably; "protecting her from those awful memories."

"I'd like to think it was that. I tried to tell myself it was. But really . . . no, what it amounted to was a greedy possessiveness. On both sides. And all that love-hate rubbish . . . oh, dear," said Mrs. Forshaw piteously, "it wasn't so far-fetched really. He had that effect—I should know. But with her it was ten times as bad. She'd have a screaming row with him and then fling herself down and be a little girl begging his forgiveness. She had to be everything to him."

Everything to everybody, Meg silently confirmed. Mrs. Forshaw's picture of Gillian was smudged but accurate.

"So"—Perrock bridged the awkwardness of these stark personal revelations by getting back to the mechanics of what must have happened—"Mr. Forshaw drove off to meet Gillian and bring her home. He had an accident, and since then there has been no word of Gillian. If he met her, why didn't she come back with him? If he hadn't reached her when he had that smash, why haven't we heard from her?"

Both he and Mr. Waring looked at Meg. The three of them mutely but vividly recalled the scene in the mill house outside Wishbury.

"I suppose you'll have to take it up again with Lucas and his sister," said Mr. Waring, "in the light of what we now know."

"Treading carefully," said Perrock.

"This time a search warrant—"

"On what grounds?" The policeman was reproaching the solicitor, and Mr. Waring's flush of annoyance showed that he acknowledged the reproof. "In the first place we have to find a J.P.—on a summer Sunday! And he has to be convinced there's good cause for the warrant. And what's the cause? If we're right and Lu-

cas's sister is Gillian's mother, there's no reason why she shouldn't have seen her daughter. And at Gillian's age there's no question of abduction unless . . . well . . . h'm. . . ." He looked meaningly at the ladies, and Meg assumed that the technical phrase had something to do with carnal knowledge and the running of brothels. "I'm going to get in touch with Wishbury," said Perrock, "and this time we'll keep at it until we find what there is to find."

He was all at once eager to leave. He would be glad to be back in the official atmosphere where things could be organised impersonally and unemotionally.

When he had left to start his tactful but unflinching operations, Mrs. Waring discovered that it was late and that no one had had lunch. "All this talk. . . ." She insisted that Mrs. Forshaw and Colin stay and eat with them. Colin also discovered how late it was and said that he must start out at once to keep his appointment halfway across the county. Meg thought of the telephone and realised with dismay that she didn't know Jason's number. The idea of asking directory enquiries and then ringing Jason and warning him, with her father and mother going to and fro while she tried to give him all the details, was out of the question.

She said: "Colin—I think I'll come with you, after all."

"Fine. But you'd better get a move on."

"I'm ready."

Her father protested. "But the police may want to talk to you. You do seem to have stumbled on something."

It was clear that he still deplored her methods of detection. Right she might have been, but if so she was right for the wrong reason—which to a legal mind was slightly more reprehensible than being flagrantly and unequivocally wrong.

Meg said: "I've already told you and the police all

I know. And I got sneered at for my pains."

"Now that all this additional material has come to light—"

"They can add it to what they already know. Until they catch up with me"—Meg flung his own philosophy back in his face—"I shall carry on as usual. And right now I'm ready to leave." She turned to Colin. "Shall we go?"

Colin looked at Mr. Waring for help or forgiveness. Mr. Waring, worn out by the stress of events, made it obvious that he had neither to offer.

Meg went out with Colin.

Over the ridge was a fertile valley and beyond it another ridge with a cluster of standing stones. Then there was a narrower valley and a chalk ridge before you came to Wishbury. The main road swung through a fault in the hills and would take them to Wishbury. The secondary road which Colin had chosen would pass within a few miles and then swerve away.

Meg said: "Let's take the main road."

"We're not going that way."

"I'd like to."

Colin kept his eyes on the road. He said: "Why?"

"I'd like you to drop me off somewhere."

"Wishbury?"

"Will you, Colin—please?"

"I haven't much time to spare. And I can't think of any good reason for going that way."

She tried to keep it flippant. "You liked Pauline, didn't you? You'd like to see her again."

"Not specially. And that's not why you want to go there anyway."

For a while he drove grimly in the same direction.

"You're just being cussed," said Meg.

"I haven't got time to spare. Besides, you'll be grate-

ful to me in the end. I'm probably saving you from a fate worse than death."

"Maybe I don't want to be saved," she said.

They were approaching a crossroads. Colin did not slacken speed until the last minute. Then he said, "Oh, what the hell," and skidded into a sharp left turn. Neither of them said another word until they were approaching Wishbury. Then he slowed and glanced at her for directions.

"The turning on the right a little way beyond the station," she said. "No, not this one—the lane, a bit further on."

Colin drew up on the far side and peered along the rutted lane. The edge of the mill wheel was just visible through the arch of the railway bridge. He glanced at his watch and said doubtfully:

"Down there?"

"I'll get out here," said Meg.

He leaned over to open the door for her, and their faces were close together. The tinge of churlishness in his manner faded. He said: "I'll pick you up on the way back. Time to get there, fight it all out, see round the place . . . say two and a half hours. Maybe three. I'll drive down to the house—that's it, is it?" He nodded at what could be seen of the mill.

"Not if it takes you out of your way," said Meg.

Their politeness was now becoming absurd. "I'll have plenty of time on the way back." Then, as she stood on the pavement and waited for him to drive off before she crossed the road, he said: "You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course I'll be all right."

When he had gone she crossed the road in the Sunday afternoon somnolence and quickened her pace down the lane, over the hard ruts and the tufts of grass and weed. As she came out under the railway arch, she saw a

flash of white blouse and blue jeans ahead, bright against the dull red and grey of the mill. There was Miriam as well, looking away over the stream, not seeing Meg approaching.

Meg couldn't bring herself to call Miriam by name. She cried: "Pauline. . . ."

Miriam started as though a pellet had flicked past her ear. She spun round, her arm went out, and she appeared to jerk Pauline out of sight.

Meg sighed. What she had to say was going to be difficult enough without her having to cope with Miriam's hostility the moment she arrived. She went on towards the buildings. The sun was shining just as it had shone that blissful afternoon when Jason kissed her. A tortoiseshell butterfly danced ecstatically on air. There could be nothing wrong here; nothing sinister and nothing that could not be explained and put right.

When she reached the yard there was nobody in sight. She went to the kitchen door, opened it and looked in.

"Pauline . . . Jason. . . ."

Her voice echoed through the house, awakening no reply.

Meg waited for a few seconds, called again, and then turned and crossed the yard to the mill. The main door was shut and would not open. If anyone was inside, he or she must be locked in—unless the bolts had been deliberately shot from the inside, not so much to keep someone in as to keep someone out.

Miriam dropping a hint that I'm unwanted, thought Meg wryly.

She went round the side of the mill and called again, once more without result. If Jason were working in one of his mock-up rooms, it was quite possible that he could not hear her through the thick walls. Miriam, having scuttled for cover, was deliberately not telling him that she was here.

Meg found a small side door which she had not seen before. A couple of steps led down to it at such a steep pitch that even a small person would have to stoop when going through. The handle grated as she turned it. She pushed, and the door opened stiffly. Over her shoulder the sunlight glittered on dust and on the edge of further steps.

It was impossible to guess what the function of such a room had been in the working days of the mill. Today it was evidently not in use. Meg was about to pull the door to again when two hands took her firmly by the shoulders.

She tried to turn. Fingers dug into her flesh and pushed her downwards. Her right foot twisted and as she fell her knee struck the edge of the door. She collapsed down the steps, and the fingers let go so that she could roll freely into the darkness.

The door slammed shut behind her. As she tried to get up on one knee, wincing with pain, she heard the screech of a rusty bolt being forced into position after years of disuse.

Dust made her sneeze. It stung her eyes. Every move she made raised a fresh cloud of it, tickling her nose and throat with its staleness. Cautiously she groped in the darkness for the bottom step. A few feet above it was a fine line of light under the door. Meg climbed up the four inner steps and tried to shake the door, but it was too solid to budge.

She wondered if Miriam was squatting gleefully outside, listening to her.

At least there was a faint draught of fresh air coming in through the cracks. Meg leaned her head against the wood and massaged her bruised leg.

Even Miriam could surely not expect to keep her locked in here for ever.

But Miriam was a killer. Threatened, enraged, she might well be capable of killing again.

The darkness made Meg dizzy. She felt the steps begin to tilt beneath her so that she had to push her palms firmly against them. Gradually they steadied. In the nothingness before her eyes she saw a few floating sparks. Pictures formed and dissolved in her mind.

The mother, half crazed after years in prison, had longed to see her daughter again. Jason had reunited them. That was understandable—a touching reunion, the shock of discovery on Gillian's part, and the announcement to Mr. Forshaw that his first wife did not intend to let herself be forgotten. But what followed was not so easily understandable. The only reason for Gillian's failure to reappear, either before or after her father's death, was that she was forcibly prevented from showing herself. And the reason for that must be that she knew something which must not be revealed. They—Jason and Miriam—preferred to run all the risks involved in imprisoning Gillian rather than let her go free to tell the truth about something.

About her father's death. . . . That could be it. Meg again pressed against the steps, commanding them to be still. Faintly she heard a train go along the embankment, so near and yet so remote. Miriam had murdered Forshaw. She had lured him to his death by a telephone call. When he was dead, the larger part of his money would come to Gillian and, through her, to her mother—if the mother had Gillian under her thumb. That alone would have fitted the facts if Gillian had reappeared and claimed her share of the money. Her continued absence could be explained only by her knowing too much about her father's death.

First there had been Miriam's lover, then her husband. And now perhaps Meg was to be left here until she

died and decayed. In Miriam's view she had been too inquisitive.

Meg turned and hammered with her fists against the door. It was surprising how little noise she made.

She had to speak to Jason. She had to come here not to accuse Miriam but to warn Jason. He must stop shielding his sister. Before the police came with their polite enquiries and then their tougher enquiries he had to make up his mind to withdraw. Let Miriam carry the responsibility for what she had done and release him from his family loyalty. It had gone too far. If there was a way out for Jason, he must take it now.

In a far, impossible distance beyond the swirling darkness she heard the sound of a car. It was louder than the noise of the train and then, like the noise of the train, it ceased to be. There was the illusion of Jason's voice, too—muffled and lost.

It was coming closer. Footsteps crunched towards the door. "In *there*?" said Jason. "You mean you. . . ."

Meg began to hammer again. "Let me out! You've got to listen to me. Jason, please . . . !"

The bolt shrieked. Meg was so close to the door that when it began to open she had to stumble back down the steps, keeping her hands up to stop the edge of the door smacking across her face.

The daylight was a flood that made her gasp, like a wave pouring down the steps to drown her. Jason's hand was out. She grasped it, and he drew her up the steps into the open. She sagged into his arms. Jason held her as she sobbed:

"Where have you been? Jason, you weren't here . . . it was her . . . where've you been?"

"Taking Pauline to meet her friends," he said, soothing her with a matter-of-fact ease. "I drove her up to Gloucester this morning. They met her there."

"I thought," she mumbled against him, "you were

going all the way into Wales, and staying on for a holiday."

"I didn't feel like it. I turned back this morning and got here as quickly as I could. I hoped you'd come. I wanted to be back here in case you came. And if you didn't, I wanted to be close enough to London to speak to you somehow—get in touch somehow." He looked past her and she knew that Miriam must be standing not so far away. "A good job that I did come back, isn't it?"

Meg pulled away from him and was glad to discover that she could stand on her own two feet. She turned to see Miriam in the doorway of the house.

Things were coming into focus again. Meg said: "But Pauline—you said you took her to Gloucester this morn—I thought . . . when I got here . . . I called Pauline, and Miriam dragged her away, and—"

"I'm sorry about Miriam." He began to lead her towards the house, where his sister waited implacably in the doorway. "She acted on the spur of the moment. She didn't realise it was hardly the way to solve anything. A bit too impetuous, that's all."

"So I've heard," said Meg. "Always the quick, simple way out for her. If you've killed once—or twice—it can easily become a habit."

Jason did not answer. They had reached the house. Miriam stood aside, and Jason led Meg indoors.

14

Meg said: "They're on to you."

It sounded crude but she was convinced by now that a brutal directness was the only way to the truth.

She sat in the room where she had first faced Jason

and Miriam. Again she was about to accuse them, but this time she had facts that she had never dreamed of on that first occasion; and this time it was Miriam she wanted to lay low, not Jason.

"Who are 'they'?" asked Jason.

"The police. And my father."

"The police and your father have been here before. They went away satisfied. Who has provoked them to second thoughts?"

She felt the sting of the barb and tried not to flinch. "They've found new evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"Well . . . things they didn't realise at the time."

"Such as?"

Meg looked at Miriam. She said: "You're not really Miss Lucas any more, are you? You've been married."

"I don't know why you came here," said Miriam. "I don't know what business you think you have here."

"That letter in your flat," said Meg to Jason: "it wasn't addressed to the second Mrs. Forshaw, was it? It was addressed to the first."

Miriam said: "I told you she'd bring nothing but trouble." Her face worked. It was petulant rather than menacing. The years in prison must have shrivelled her up and damped down the fire in her. She had summoned up the energy to push Meg down those steps—but then she must have told Jason so that he could release her. Had she had the same qualms, the same desire to undo what she had done, after Forshaw's death in his car?

"It was bound to come sooner or later." Jason surrendered to a thankful weariness. "You know about . . . you know where Miriam has been until recently?"

"They know all about Walter Blake's death."

"It was bound to come," he said again. "Only pro-

fessional criminals know how to hide their tracks—or how not to leave any tracks at all."

"And what are you?" asked Meg, suddenly revolted by the bitter taste of his evasions and deceptions since she had met him. "Just amateurs? They say that murder is an amateur's crime." She took a deep breath, tempting fate and Miriam, not knowing how easy it might or might not be for a killer to kill again. "That was Mr. Forshaw's ignition key I saw on the floor here. It's no use denying it. I know it was. How did it get here?"

"Interfering little bitch," said Miriam. She swung on her brother. Accomplices about to fall out, thought Meg with a surprisingly cool pedantic interest. "Just because you've gone senile . . . letting her worm her way in here . . . and now look. . . ."

Meg said: "How did that so-called accident happen?"

"It was nothing to do with us."

Jason said: "You'd do better not to push this too far, Meg."

"Don't you see, it's going to be pushed as far as it will go?" It was wrung from her. "The police will be here soon. They may even be on their way now. If she did it, Jason, don't try to cover up for her. Don't tell white lies—they'll be turned into black lies, and you'll suffer. Jason, I don't want you to suffer!"

So far, even through his tiredness, she had seen only an icy self-control. Now there was tenderness as he looked at her. He said: "You're implying that Miriam, having killed her lover years ago, recently killed her ex-husband?"

Meg could not even nod.

"The implication would seem to be that murder is habit-forming," Jason went on. "If so, I'm afraid you'll have to look somewhere else for—"

"No," wailed Miriam. She stretched out an arm imploringly to her brother.

He said to Meg: "In the first place, it wasn't Miriam who killed Walter Blake."

"No—please don't." It was only a whimper now. "Not after we've got this far."

Jason said: "It was Gillian."

There was a terrible stillness. Out of it Miriam spoke in despair. "Well—now are you satisfied?"

"Gillian?" said Meg. It was grotesque. "But at that time . . . at that age. . . ."

"At that age," said Jason, "she was just as erratic, just as jealous, just as wrapped up in her father, and just as self-willed as she is now."

Meg wanted to laugh. It would have been a horrible laugh if it had come out: a laugh triggered by black humour, by a lunatic picture of herself and Gillian bickering in their flat and of Gillian grabbing a panga from the wall and lashing out with it. There had been times when she had been glad there was no weapon within easy reach of Gillian's flailing hands.

Miriam got up. "So we're throwing in the sponge now, are we? Blabbing it all out to this rotten little spy and then giving up."

"Nobody's talking about giving up," said Jason. "I suggest you get ready to leave. Go on, now—get *everything* ready."

"While you tell her all the rest?"

"I've come a long way for your sake," said Jason. "Perhaps I've done more than I ought to have done. But I'm prepared to go on for a few more days—for as long as they'll leave us alone. I'm probably being a fool, but it's a bit late to turn back. And as to Meg"—he rubbed his jaw nervously and spoke quickly as though to get it out once and for all—"she has been the only good thing about it. And now I'm going to tell her."

Miriam went out of the room. Jason began to tell Meg the story.

It was Gillian who had killed her mother's lover. During her vacation in Kenya she must have seen them together and perhaps even followed them. Miriam was being pretty blatant about the whole affair at this stage and it would have been easy for an observant child to guess what was going on. There would have been no lack of unguarded gossip in her hearing. Shown off to friends at cocktail parties, she would have had ten minutes of jocular fuss made of her and then would have been left in a corner with a lemonade, listening, hearing more than they realised.

She was by nature a jealous child. She demanded the undivided attention of anyone she was with. Seeing her parents only during one holiday a year, she craved for intense emotional satisfaction to be packed into that brief period so that it would last her when she was back at school. Together or separately, she wanted all they had to give.

Better balanced parents would have worked together to calm her and subtly to lessen the demands she made. But Forshaw and Miriam, too, were emotional, self-centred people. Each wanted Gillian's attention just as greedily as she wanted theirs; but they wanted other things as well, and in moments of personal stress they used her in their mutual battle, only to brush her impatiently aside when they had an appetite for something or someone else.

Forshaw was the dominating partner. Unable to stand up against his flamboyance and self-satisfaction in open combat, his wife adopted methods that were devious, self-pitying, insidious, guilt-creating. And Gillian inherited the worst characteristics of both parents. She, too, played a game—playing them off one against the other. She really favoured her father though: she was under his spell even when she hated him. And Forshaw loved it. He got a sly pleasure from provoking her tantrums,

driving her to the threshold of an almost physical pain in order to get the satisfaction of a warm, cloying, mutual forgiveness.

"You must have had some inkling of those weird tendencies of his," Jason said to Meg.

"Yes. We did. Kinky is the word they use today."

"So it is. Though I don't know that I'd go as far as that. Temperamental clashes and heightened emotional relationships are very common within families, though people don't like to admit it. Forshaw and his wife and Gillian carried it to extremes, that was all."

Then he smiled as though, like Meg, he had seen the inappropriateness of this. Possessiveness, adultery, murder, and later the hints of kidnapping and another murder—this was indeed carrying things to extremes!

He went back to the starting point, to the death of Miriam's lover.

"The way you've heard the story," he said, "it probably comes out as a commonplace black and white tale. The loose-living wife in a boring Colonial community takes a lover, boredom sets in again as far as he's concerned, and after a row she kills him. She gets a life sentence and everyone makes a show of feeling sorry for the wronged husband, who has to give up his life out there and return to England to do the best he can for his difficult, unstable daughter. But why did Miriam take a lover in the first place?"

Forshaw had been a far from faithful husband. He had talked and behaved as insidiously and salaciously then as he had done when Meg knew him. He had neglected his wife—but the reasons for this neglect were not her failings but his own. Putting it bluntly—and Jason was disarmingly shy rather than blunt as he explained it—Forshaw was a bit of a washout from a woman's point of view. His boasts and sly implications and his

unflagging pursuit of women were provoked by his own inadequacy.

"In my line of business," said Jason, "I meet a lot of them. The film business attracts them because of all those young women eager to make the grade, and not very scrupulous about their methods. All those poor tycoons . . . !"

Forshaw had indeed been like one of those figures in the public eye whose enviable succession of beautiful young mistresses was due not to his insatiability but to his inability to satisfy any one of them. He was continually trying to stimulate his failing appetite.

From such a failure his wife turned away to another man.

But Gillian knew nothing about such complexities. At her age she saw everything in simple terms. She was jealous on her father's behalf. She dreaded the thought of going back to school and leaving things as they were —her mother visiting Blake's bungalow, her father being cheated and becoming a laughing-stock. The end of the holidays always intensified her hysterical moods, and now there was this added element to tip her over the edge. She must have marched up to the bungalow in a blazing fury, to some extent revelling in the righteousness of her indignation. The schoolgirl and the young woman were the same in this: they were at their maddest and happiest when surrendering utterly to some current frenzy.

Perhaps she had no clear plan in her mind. She simply intended to scream at Walter Blake. He must have been amused when he opened the door to her and let her in; or maybe perturbed, wondering if his mistress was now being so unprincipled as to send messages by her own daughter. If he had mocked her, Gillian would have been demented. The panga was there on the wall. She grabbed it and used it.

Meg interrupted the flow of the narrative. "This is Miriam's version, isn't it?"

"You can't imagine she'd have made it up? There'd be no reason for it, after all this time."

"There's something wrong somewhere."

"There was plenty wrong," said Jason. "And it all added up to one thing."

"But Miriam's confession—"

"Miriam confessed in order to save the child."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe she would."

"It makes no difference whether you believe it or not. It's the truth." Jason smiled sadly. "She's my sister, remember. I know a lot more about her than you do. When it came to it, she was quite capable of making the grand gesture—to protect Gillian, to prove something to herself and, if you like, to expiate her sin with Blake. After all, you could say she was responsible for the whole situation. It was her relationship with Blake that had goaded her daughter into becoming a murderess. Even a woman as self-centred as Miriam couldn't have let the girl carry the whole weight of the crime."

A few days after the killing, when it became clear that the police were not accepting the nice straightforward explanation of a terrorist attack but were asking awkward questions, Forshaw hurried Gillian back to England to spare her any unpleasantness. It was only after she had gone that they discovered the traces of her guilt. When Miriam took clothes from Gillian's room to have them cleaned and put away until next year—by which time she would have grown out of them—she found that a favourite white dress was missing. It was not one which Gillian would have taken back to school with her. Miriam was sure it had not been packed. She found it crumpled up and pushed to the back of a drawer. It was dark with blood.

Forshaw came in as she was staring at it in horror.

He examined it and pointed out the things the police would certainly deduce if they got their hands on it: the stains on the upper part of the dress were obviously splashes from the blood that had spurted from the cloven head; the marks along the hem were probably where Gillian had madly rubbed it along the table to remove blood and fingerprints.

And in the pocket was a tuft of human hair. Did Miriam recognise it? Forshaw was savage now, ranting at her as no policeman would ever have done. Wasn't it her lover's hair? Her precious lover, his head dragged down with one hand by the hysterical Gillian while with the other she hacked at him. That was how it must have been. And was the child going to be dragged back from England to undergo a gruelling examination, an ordeal which would ruin the rest of her life?

Now Forshaw rounded on his wife. This was her doing. He had nothing to say against Gillian: he raged at the woman whose folly had led to this ghastly business. Dazed by the loss of her lover and by this shattering revelation of his killer, Miriam for once could not fight back. For once she had no defence. Forshaw was right. She was the guilty one, she rather than Gillian must suffer.

When the police, still knowing that they had very little to go on, began to concentrate in earnest on the Forshaw household, Miriam cracked. She made her gesture. She confessed.

And Forshaw wrote to Gillian in England. He told Miriam what he was going to put in his letters. Only the three of them would ever know. By now, Miriam told her brother many years later, Forshaw was deriving a certain grisly enjoyment from the situation. He described to Miriam with relish the roundabout way in which he had phrased his first letter to Gillian, so that if it fell into the wrong hands no suspicion of the truth

would leak out. The main theme was Miriam's guilt: she admitted it and wanted Gillian to forgive her. She was paying for the terrible things she had done. All she could pray for now was that Gillian would be able to wipe it from her mind. She should try to forget the whole thing—and Forshaw added that from now on it would be better if they didn't mention her mother again.

"And Gillian accepted all this?" protested Meg. "Knowing what she'd done, she let her mother take the blame?"

"There's no record of her having issued a statement to the contrary," said Jason dryly.

"I don't see how anyone . . . the thought of it . . . all those years. . . ."

"You ought to know her better than I do."

Yes, it was feasible. Even while she was denying its possibility Meg was remembering Gillian and her refusal ever to face up to the consequences of her wilder actions, her fits of temper when challenged, her pushing away of everything unpleasant, her assurance that she, Gillian Forshaw, could never in any circumstances be in the wrong. And if something was too awkward to explain away, she didn't explain: she managed to make herself forget it.

Such a person could perhaps forget a murder. She could persuade herself that it was a childish nightmare. It couldn't possibly have been her fault, so after a while she would decide that it couldn't have happened anyway. Gillian had taken to extremes the normal person's faculty for remoulding memory according to desire, filling in gaps with facts which formed a favourable pattern rather than genuinely recollected facts.

Forshaw's ban on any mention of her mother would have been a help here. There was nothing to trigger off memories which were best subdued. Only once was the first Mrs. Forshaw referred to again, when Forshaw reported that she had died in prison. He wanted her

neatly disposed of. It was all so much tidier. Gillian found it suited her admirably. She had a whole new life to lead with her father permanently back in England and with a new stepmother and stepbrother.

Meg said: "And then at last the mother comes out of prison and wants to see her daughter. Couldn't Mr. Forshaw have predicted this would happen?"

"Forshaw was never, as far as I can make out, a long-term planner. He coped with things as they happened. He had a glib tongue—that's why he became a pretty good salesman—and he prided himself on being able to talk his way out of anything. Or talk other people *into* things. Perhaps it amounts to the same in the end."

Miriam came to stay with her brother in Wishbury. He helped her with various papers and legal problems, dealing with these from his London flat. Pauline knew nothing of her aunt's past and Jason didn't intend that she should be told. The search for Miriam's ex-husband and daughter must be carried out discreetly. It would be a shock to Pauline and a much more serious shock to Gillian if any clumsiness attracted the attention of some newshound who might rake up Miriam's past and write a dramatic sob story for his paper.

This point was made with great vigour by Forshaw when at last he was located and Miriam got in touch with him. He ordered her not under any circumstances to see Gillian or to communicate with her. Didn't she realise the mental danger? All the good work over the years would be undone: Miriam's own sacrifice would have been in vain. It would strike a cruel blow, perhaps shattering Gillian if after all this time she had to face up to a clear, honest recollection of what she had done. Mr. Forshaw revelled as usual in a great deal of psychological jargon. On one thing he was firm: Miriam was to stay out of his life and out of Gillian's. What he had done was for the best; he wasn't going to

have it ruined now, and he would take every possible measure to prevent her if she made a move.

"But she wouldn't listen?" said Meg. "She still wanted to see her daughter."

"Oh, she listened," said Jason. "Forshaw was a great bully and even after so many years the mere sound of his voice was enough to put the wind up her. But, as you say, she still wanted to see Gillian."

"So you approached Gillian on her behalf."

"Yes," said Jason, "this is where I come in."

It had been impossible for Jason not to sympathise with his sister's longing to see her grown-up daughter. His own daughter, Pauline, had meant so much to him since his wife's death that he was in no position to be hard-hearted. If there was any help he could offer, it had to be offered.

"I know now that it was a mistake. I should never have gone along with her in this plan. But when it started I was foolish enough to believe that it could be kept under control." Jason shook his head. "I ought to have realised that Miriam's self-pity would bubble out all over us—more deadly than acid."

In prison Miriam had built up a rosy, romantic picture of Gillian, herself, and the whole situation. After the sacrifice she had made, was she never to see her child again? That was all she asked: just to see Gillian and spend a few hours or a few days with her. She wouldn't upset the girl. Although Forshaw's voice had awoken all the old urge to wrangle with him and to strike back at him, she had to accept his warning. The news that she was still alive must be broken gently; and she solemnly promised Jason that she would not drag Gillian back into the past with her. No reference to the murder, no dark memories dredged up from their hiding place.

Jason agreed to find where Gillian lived in London

and to approach her carefully. He would tell her that an old friend of her mother wanted to see her—titillate the girl's curiosity but, if she tried to brush him aside in the belief that this was just a cunning sort of pick-up, he could add enough details about herself and her mother to convince her.

It worked out as planned. He found which train she travelled on but also found that there was always a friend with her. The same friend shared the flat in Kensington. Nobody else must get even a glimmering of what was going on. No word must ever get back to Forshaw.

Jason hung about until the opportunity presented itself. He spoke to Gillian on the telephone, came round to the flat to see her when Meg was out, and persuaded her to come down to Wishbury with him that same evening. He would drive her down, she could stay overnight, and he would make sure she got to the office on time next morning. It was easier than he had expected. Gillian regarded the whole thing as great fun.

"You got her just at the right time," said Meg reminiscently. "She was in the mood for something to happen—something extraordinary. And there you were!"

On the way down in the car Jason carefully planted the idea in her mind that her father might have been mistaken about her mother's death. Both of them had wanted to shield her from the horror of what had happened, and perhaps they had gone too far. Gradually he led her towards the realisation that her mother was still alive.

"How did she take it?" asked Meg.

"Again it was easier than I'd expected. It was a surprise to her—took her breath away all right—but she recovered very quickly. She didn't look worried. Hardly even thoughtful. In fact, she seemed to enjoy the idea. I got the feeling that she was . . . well, tasting it . . .

trying it over on her tongue. She got quite a thrill out of it."

So there came the meeting of mother and daughter.

It went well. Miriam grew suddenly shy and nervous, but Gillian put on a great show. She at once decided that she couldn't be bothered to go back to the office this week. There were only two days to go before the weekend. No, she wasn't going to ring them. All her attention was beamed immediately upon her mother. They would spend days and days together, getting to know each other again.

Miriam was overwhelmed. It did not occur to her that this was just another of Gillian's fickle enthusiasms and that it would soon die. For the time being all was wonderful.

"I ought to have known it wouldn't stop at that," said Jason. "Once the first rosy flush was fading, Miriam began to feel peeved. Gillian had dismissed the blacker aspects of the past as though they had never existed. Miriam sat waiting for some recognition of her sacrifice. She had promised the subject would never be mentioned, but what she really longed for was a great emotional wallow. She wanted a conscience-stricken, adoring admission from Gillian—wanted it all out in the open between them."

"Did she ask her outright?"

"She didn't ask her," said Jason, "she told her. Took a long time getting round to it, but in the end she came out with it. A nice little time bomb!"

"And Gillian . . . ?"

"Gillian denied it."

"Denied the killing?"

"She flew into the most fiendish rage. A paranoid screaming fit. She yelled at Miriam that she was a liar. How dare she accuse her—the years in prison must have unhinged her. I've never seen such naked fury. Miriam

cowered in front of it. She had wanted a weeping reunion, forgiveness all round, mawkish satisfaction; and instead she got this screaming denunciation. But it was precisely what she had gone out of her way to provoke."

Meg said: "I think that if my mother were to accuse me of being a murderess, I'd be liable to fly off the handle."

"But for rather different reasons. Gillian was in a rage because she had to drown even the faintest stirrings of unease in her own mind. She wasn't just shouting her mother down: she was trying to deafen herself. When you heard her, you knew Forshaw had been right in insisting that she must not be provoked."

Jason had had enough. He ignored his sister's pleas and telephoned Forshaw. Meg recalled that Gillian's father had from the start been angry rather than concerned about Gillian's disappearance. He had had a pretty good idea of whom she must be with. Now he knew the place, as well. He drove to Wishbury to pick her up and take her home. He refused even to speak to his first wife. Jason brought Gillian out to him.

"And why didn't she leave with him, in the end?" asked Meg.

"She did."

"But the accident . . ." Meg looked into Jason's careworn face. "It *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

"That's what we'd like to know."

"You mean she went off and really disappeared this time?"

"No. She came back here. Walked all the way, we imagine. It must have taken her two or three hours."

"But what had she got to say about the smash?"

Jason got up. "You'd better come with me."

15

They crossed the yard and went into the mill. The door at the top of the wooden steps was open. Jason stood back to let Meg go up first. She approached the door with a trembling fear of the unknown; she had given up even trying to guess what came next.

The room within was small but bright, with a sloping ceiling and a large skylight. Walls and ceiling were white. There was a faded picture of horses on the wall. Beside the bed was a shelf of children's books. It was a young girl's room, clean and shining and almost too flawless to be true.

Gillian was sitting on a stool immediately under the skylight. The sun dropped a halo around her sleekly brushed fair hair. She had her hands demurely crossed on her lap.

Miriam was folding a white blouse and a pair of blue jeans. They might once have belonged to Pauline, but Gillian had certainly been wearing them today when Meg arrived. Miriam laid them on top of the clothes in an open suitcase, and then put the lid down.

Meg took a step into the room. "Gillian. . . ."

The pale, vacant eyes stared at her with no flicker of recognition. "Who are you?"

Meg was glad of Jason immediately beside her. He was strong and patient. He was real. They were all real, yet Gillian was looking at her as though she did not truly exist.

"What's happened?" asked Meg. She glanced up at Jason. "Why doesn't she know me?"

He was continuing to watch Gillian. Meg saw him tense. She looked back at Gillian. Gillian's eyes nar-

rowed slightly and there was a hint of puzzlement in them. When she spoke it was in a high, distinct voice.

"You don't belong here. You. . . ." She struggled to express it, then like a triumphant little girl said: "You don't *fit!*"

Jason said mildly: "You don't remember Meg?"

"No. Ought I to?"

"She's a friend of yours."

Miriam sniffed.

"Well, I don't remember," said Gillian.

Miriam fastened the suitcase and swung it off the bed to the floor.

"We're ready," she said to Jason.

"Mummy, where are we going?"

"I've told you, dear," said Miriam with cooing patience. "We're going off on holiday with Uncle Jason."

Gillian stood up, her hands at her sides, playing the part of an obedient little girl. Playing the part . . . ? Meg shivered in the sun-warmed room. She knew Gillian's moods and affectations as well as anyone could, and there was nothing false in her present manner: she was living, not playing.

"Wait for us down below," said Jason. "Don't go outside until I've brought the car round."

Miriam and Gillian went down the steps. Their voices drifted back through the open door, Gillian's like that of a child newly returned from an elocution lesson.

Meg said: "She really doesn't remember me. Does she remember anything?"

"Nothing that will help us. She couldn't face up to her memories, so she decided not to have any. The pressure was applied, and part of her mind blacked out. Like those pressure points that expert fighters know. Hysterical amnesia—a pain grows too great to bear, so the victim shuts off the nerves carrying that pain."

"When did this happen? After that row with Miriam?"

Jason shook his head. "She was unsettled by that, trying to keep reality at arm's length, but she was still in control of her faculties. She was in a rage—still in it when her father came—but she went off with him all right."

"The crash . . . do you think a blow on the head . . . ?"

"There was no sign of any blow when she got back to us," said Jason. He clenched and unclenched his fists, racked by his powerlessness to get through to the truth. "Somehow she had found her way to us—but she had forgotten everything else."

"It sounds too convenient."

"At first we thought she was shamming. But she was too consistent. That's the frightening thing about a pathological loss of memory. Your mind protects you just enough to get you where you want to go, even to remember things that are of practical use in everyday life. But it creates a yawning gulf to swallow the more unpalatable facts. The car smash might have provided a temporary physical knockout which later became a mental excuse. But we don't know. There wasn't a scratch on her. We don't know," he repeated in anguish. "We've tried everything. We've talked to her, listened to her, coaxed her and played charades with her."

Meg said: "This room—"

"Is a replica, as nearly as I can interpret Miriam's hazy recollections, of one Gillian had when she was ten. We thought we'd start here and then try to lead her on; or jerk her on."

He moved out through the door to the head of the steps. From here it was possible to see over the partitions into many of his mock-up rooms. He waved towards the complete set on the far side of the main chamber.

"That was meant to be their home in Kenya. We played games in there with her and tried a dozen little ruses to jolt her into remembering."

"Wasn't it a terrible risk? She'd been kicked in one direction—mentally, I mean—and you were going to kick her back again."

"There were other more serious risks," said Jason. "We had to choose which one we'd take."

He began to descend the steps. Meg followed. Miriam and Gillian were waiting. Instead of going straight to the main door, Jason took Gillian's arm and led her towards one of the sketchier sets. He flicked a light on, watched her face, shrugged and guided her away. They made a brief tour, and each time Gillian stared uncomprehendingly. The most she allowed herself at one stage was a bored pout. She had ceased to find the game amusing.

"Still nothing," said Jason.

Miriam put her arm protectively round Gillian's shoulders. Gillian wriggled. Miriam tightened her grasp.

Meg wondered suddenly whether Miriam really wanted her daughter to regain her memory. Now she had a pliable, pretty child to play with—the daughter most mothers look back to nostalgically, the daughter who usually grows up too fast but who here could be permanently her mother's little girl. Quite apart from which, Gillian's later memories might not be to Miriam's taste.

They went to the main door. Jason indicated that Miriam and Gillian should stay inside.

Sunlight gleamed on something in Gillian's hand. At first it was like the brief reflection from a ring. Then Meg saw what it was. She had seen it before. It was Mr. Forshaw's ignition key, dangling from Gillian's little finger as she swung it idly to and fro.

Jason said: "Come round with me and collect the car."

Meg, hypnotised by the tiny barrel and the sparkling key, did not realise that he was speaking to her until he put his hand under her elbow and urged her out into the open.

As they walked round the building she looked along the lane. Her head was in a whirl. Time had fled past. Colin would be arriving at any minute to collect her. At any minute a police car could turn down the lane.

She said: "How did Gillian come to have that ignition key?"

"More than anything I'd like the answer to that. She was dangling it from her little finger when she got back that night."

The garage doors were open. Meg stood back while Jason drove the car out. He leaned over and opened the door on her side.

She got in and said: "Wouldn't it be safer to have a good doctor—a specialist in this kind of thing?"

"We daren't."

"I'd have thought you were daring too much in your present tactics."

Jason sat with his hand on the gear lever, not moving. "Only this afternoon," he reminded her, "you were building up a case against Miriam on the grounds that she had killed once and might therefore be suspected of killing again. First Blake and then Forshaw. A dubious proposition, I may say, but it might hold in the case of a real paranoiac. And since it wasn't Miriam but Gillian who killed Blake. . . ."

"You're afraid she killed her father?"

"Gillian's the only one who can tell us. It may be just this that drove her into the comfort of amnesia. For her own sake, would you want her to be in the wrong company when her memory comes back?"

Meg could find no answer. Slowly Jason edged the car forward and bumped it over the cobbles to the mill door. They got out and stood by the bonnet.

Meg said: "Why didn't you tell me all this at the beginning?"

"I wanted to sound you out gradually. Miriam was

opposed to the idea, but I brought you down here in the hope that if we could trust you we might get some help from you with Gillian. You were an old friend from a later environment. As we've seen today, she doesn't react—but when I spoke to you on the train the idea didn't seem any crazier than some of our others. And then. . . ."

He faltered. Meg remembered the bickering she had overheard between him and his sister.

"You didn't want me to become involved," she said softly.

"I didn't see why you should have to share the responsibility of all this—of knowing all about the depressing past, and having to accept the burden of knowing that perhaps there had been another killing. I'm sorry you know now. It was selfish of me to come over to Alderford yesterday. I ought to have left you alone. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she said.

She put out her hand to him. He took it and drew her close. They kissed lightly and Meg had the sickening feeling that it tasted of farewell.

When they drew apart she saw that Miriam was standing, as might have been predicted, in the doorway of the mill.

I still don't believe it was Gillian, thought Meg in terror.

She wanted to clutch at Jason's arm and hold him back, but he was already on the way towards the door. Miriam handed out the suitcase and he put it in the boot of the car. Miriam and Gillian got into the back seat.

Meg could not bear that he should go off like this. Desperately she tried to delay him.

She said: "I want to come with you."

"No." Jason was ludicrously struck for the first time

by the problem of her arrival here. "How are you getting home?"

"Colin brought me. Colin—Gillian's stepbrother. He'll be calling for me on his way back from a meeting."

"Don't hang about here," grated Miriam from the back seat. "Let's be off."

Meg said: "But it doesn't matter about Colin. I want to come with you, wherever you're going."

"We're merely going to London," said Jason. "No panic measures. Just time to think it out. If the police are really taking action, we can't hold off for long. It can't go on. But just for a few days—"

"Please! I haven't really had a chance to try with Gillian. If I come with you now we can talk about it. Work something out."

"And your friend returns to find you gone," said Jason. "Then the hunt will be up! You did quite a bit of spadework establishing me as Bluebeard only a few weeks ago. They'll be more ready to believe it if you disappear." He smiled. "It's a role in which I just don't see myself."

"But. . . ."

He abruptly put the car into reverse and backed across the yard, swinging into position to drive up the lane. Short of flinging herself in the path of the car, Meg could do nothing to stop him now. She stood back. Nobody waved to her as the car rocked into the lane. She caught a glimpse of Gillian's pale face turning to watch her through the rear window, and then it had gone under the bridge.

Silence settled on the mill, the yard and the stream.

Jason would come back. He could not simply leave the mill for ever, furnished and full of his belongings and his work. Besides, she would see him in London. She would go to his flat, somehow they would solve

the whole problem of Miriam and Gillian, and then they could start all over again.

Colin arrived fifteen minutes later. In that time she had walked five times up and down the lane, and was waiting on the corner of the road when his car came racing along.

"Been thrown out?" he said.

"They've gone away."

"Gone away? What—leaving you on the pavement for heaven knows how long? Marvellous hospitality, I must say."

They went towards Alderford. At a main junction the traffic thickened. A slow crawl of cars from the coast blocked a crossing for several minutes.

"Thank God we're not heading in that direction," said Colin when he had freed himself from the tangle and could accelerate along a side road.

Meg knew all at once what she must do. She thought suddenly and vividly of Jason's flat and the three of them there, and of her own flat, and she wanted to be there without delay. She couldn't wait until tomorrow. She said:

"Colin, would you be an angel?"

"That's an ominous beginning. It means you're going to ask something monstrous, just the way Gillian does—or did."

"It's concerned with Gillian."

"Go ahead."

"When we get home, will you give me a few minutes to grab my bag and then drive me on to London?"

"No bloody fear," said Colin.

"It's terribly important."

"Get snarled up in that deadly traffic? What's wrong with the morning train?"

"It's too late," said Meg, "and there isn't a decent one up this evening."

"A good night's rest is what you need."

Meg assembled the pieces in her mind and they seemed to make sense. Certainly they were no more absurd than Jason's. If there were risks to be taken, these risks might pay off better than his had done.

She made her decision. She said: "I've seen Gillian."

The car swerved.

"Don't do things like that," said Colin.

"You've got to come with me to London," she said.

It was a long shot but it might work. Caught up in the excitement of her plan, she could not wait to put it into operation. She was sure Jason would be willing to try it.

16

It was late. If they made a lot of noise there would be complaints tomorrow from upstairs. For once Meg was indifferent to such considerations. Often she had implored Gillian to stop yelling or stamping about or playing the radio deafeningly at midnight. Tonight she wanted to hear Gillian's genuine voice, even if raised in a scream. She wanted her to storm through the flat as she had so often done in the past.

She switched on the light and stood by the basement door until they had filed in.

"Those steps," said Miriam with a disparaging grimace back at the area. "A proper death trap."

They looked round the sitting room of the flat. Meg saw it through their eyes and was conscious of its deficiencies, but above all longed to know what it looked like to Gillian. That blank face gave nothing away. Gillian examined the room as a well-brought-up child would have done, displaying polite interest without a trace of inquisitiveness. The others instinctively left a good clear space round her.

"You haven't made any major changes since she was here?" asked Jason in an undertone.

"None. It's just as it was."

"Authentic," he mused. "Well, we shall see."

Gillian turned her attention from the room to Meg. It might almost have been that she refused to look any more at the walls and furniture because they were too real. Jason's attempts to re-create a background for her had been makeshift guesses at her childhood environment. This was her adult world. She was going to find it more difficult to lie to herself.

Meg felt a pulse beating in her cheek. She detected a gleam of the old Gillian showing through, bristling and defensive, ready to leap at the slightest provocation.

Miriam could not endure the silence. She said: "Well? Do you remember being here before?"

Gillian continued to stare at Meg. Then she said: "Who's coming to my birthday party? When we get home—"

"Where is home?" Jason demanded sharply.

"Last year there was a little boy called Geoffrey."

"In cases of hysterical amnesia," said Jason loudly, as though indifferent as to whether she heard him or not, "answers to questions are wildly far from the point—so far, in fact, that they indicate the correct answer must lie close to the surface. The victim has to make outrageous attempts to cloud the surface over. Now, Gillian . . . *where is home?*"

Gillian said: "Now it's gone wrong again. You don't belong here. None of you fit." But she was staring at Meg, knowing and at the same time trying to deny to herself that one of them fitted.

Miriam was about to speak again but Jason made a swift peremptory gesture. Gillian shrank from their unwavering concentration. She stamped her foot—an in-

congruous recession to her spoilt childhood but with some of the older Gillian's tempestuousness in it. Child and woman existed here simultaneously.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked petulantly.

"Whatever you want," said Jason.

They were like beaters hoping to drive an animal into a trap. Meg had started the drive and now felt guilty; but had to go through with it. She picked up a magazine from the stool and held it out to Gillian. It was one which Gillian had bought.

There was no response.

Colin began uneasily: "Look, I don't see what we can—"

"Why don't we all sit down?" said Meg. Suddenly and clearly she knew what to do.

As Jason looked at her, puzzled, she went to the corner and began to drag the armchair out into the room. She steered it so that there was no weight on the faulty castor.

She waved Miriam towards the chair. Miriam grunted in the nearest thing she could manage to gratitude, and began to lower herself into the chair.

"No!"

Instinctively Gillian made a grab for the chair as it started to tip.

Miriam squeaked and bent forward as the chair rocked.

Gillian snapped at Meg: "You know perfectly well we never let anyone else. . . ."

Then she stopped. Jason's smile blazed at Meg. Gillian looked from one to the other and whimpered. She raised her hands before her face as though to push the two of them away. Then she turned and ran.

She ran towards the inner door and opened it. In the corridor beyond she snapped on the light without having to grope for the switch. Meg went after her and was a few feet behind her when the bedroom light also

went on. Gillian whirled round in the middle of the room. Loathing flushed into her face and drained away again.

"It was so much easier here," she whispered. "Away from them all. So much simpler."

Colin stood in the doorway. "Gill—"

"What the hell are you doing in my room?" She spread her arms wide like a witch about to pronounce a curse. "Get out. Go on, get out." Colin stepped backwards and collided with Jason. Gillian began to scream. "The lot of you—out of here!"

She drove them back into the sitting room, yelling and waving her arms. Meg followed, longing for the release of hysteria that Gillian found so easy.

Miriam stepped forward as though to catch her. "My baby. There, my baby."

"You fool!" It started low and rose to a shout. "You fool, you *fool . . . !*"

Then Gillian spun round on one foot and threw herself at the divan. She lay on it face down and pummelled it with her fists. She was sobbing and raving into it.

Meg sat on the edge. She summoned a reassuring smile for the others. This was something she knew, and she knew there would not be long to wait.

The fists opened. Gillian's shoulders went limp. She breathed a long sigh into the divan and then pushed herself up on her arms like a baby learning to crawl. In a long silence she looked at Meg. Miriam fussed forward, trying to attract her attention, but Gillian went on contemplating Meg. Finally she said:

"Why did you have to do it, Meg? Why didn't you leave me where I was?"

Then she swung her legs off the divan and sat up.

There were two bottles of Spanish Burgundy in the cupboard. Jason opened them while Meg fetched glasses

from the kitchen. There were in fact only three glasses, so she had to bring two cups as well.

"I'll drink out of a cup," cried Gillian with hospitable eagerness. "I insist."

It was reasonable enough, since there had once been six glasses and Gillian had broken all three of the missing ones.

There was a sudden burst of noise. Everyone talked at once without uttering a single coherent sentence. It was like the aftermath of a funeral, with a noisy gaiety fizzing up through what had been dark and restrained for too long.

With equal abruptness there was a lull.

Jason ended it. "Do you feel all right, Gillian?"

"I'm fine."

"You'll need a rest before you tell us—"

"Tell you? Have I got something to tell you?"

"I think so."

"I suppose I have." Gillian looked from one to another of them with a brittle, mocking grin. "Are you all in on this?"

"We'll all have to know sooner or later."

Gillian swilled the wine round in the cup, drank it down, and held the cup out for more. As Jason refilled it, she frowned and moved the cup aside so sharply that he nearly poured wine on to the floor. She stared at her fingers, put the cup down, and examined her hand.

"I had a feeling I'd lost. . . ." She shook her head. "What could it have been?"

"This?"

Jason took Mr. Forshaw's ignition key from his pocket and held it out to her. Slowly Gillian took it.

"You've been carrying it everywhere," said her mother tragically. "You'd hardly ever put it down. Such a fuss we had one day when you dropped it."

"Funny. I remember the feeling—but now it doesn't mean anything."

"Doesn't it?" said Jason.

"Oh, I know how I came to have it, if that's what you mean. But I don't feel any need to hang on to it now. That part is fading."

Meg saw that her hand was shaking.

Jason said: "The key itself—and how you came to have it. Can you talk about it now?"

"For God's sake take it easy," snapped Colin. "Don't rush her."

"I can talk." Gillian hugged the cup with both hands as though somehow the wine would warm through. "The key . . . I had to pull it out. It was the only way of stopping the car."

"You mean it was out of control?"

"He wouldn't stop. After what he said—after what I'd found out—I told him I wouldn't go any further. I wasn't going back to Alderford. Never. I wanted to get out. And he wouldn't stop. He said he wasn't going to have me going back to that woman and making a fool of him." Gillian's head jerked up. "He called you 'that woman'," she said to Miriam. "And he wouldn't listen to me. He said I'd get used to the idea. There was no way of going back and altering anything and I might as well make the best of it."

She was breathing faster and faster. Meg, sitting beside her, edged closer. Gillian did not seem to be aware of her, but her voice steadied and she went on:

"I yelled at him, and I even made a grab at the wheel, but he hit me. Then I switched off the ignition and took the key out. He swore at me and coasted in towards the side of the road, and put the footbrake on. I started to get out before the car had stopped, and he tried to reach out for me. If he'd put the handbrake on first, maybe he'd still have had time to chase me

along the road and catch me. But . . . he just lunged. And he slipped sideways a bit, and the car started to roll. It . . . just rolled." Her eyes dilated. She peered back into the nightmare. "It seemed so slow. I watched it, and I couldn't move, and it just toppled so dreadfully slowly off the edge, and over on its side, and over and down. . . ."

They all sat as Gillian was sitting, with their hands round their glasses, the knuckles white.

Colin said hoarsely: "And that's the lot?"

"That's all I remember. I know I had a sort of headache that came on all of a sudden, and it built up and built up until I was sure something was going to crack open. And that was all. Really that was all."

"My poor baby," said Miriam. "The shock. . . ." But there was a predatory bite behind the mawkishness. "On top of everything else, too. It's no wonder you couldn't face up to it."

Jason said: "Miriam—"

"Why did you want to get out of the car in such a hurry?" she rushed on. "What did you find out that you didn't want to remember? Getting used to the idea . . . there was something about that. What idea? Why were you so upset?"

Gillian shook her head as though trying to brush away a cloud of nibbling insects.

"Because he reminded you of what I'd already said to you? Because he made you remember killing Walter Blake?"

Gillian was ready to throw the cup, ready to explode. She was teetering on the edge of another abyss. Meg wanted to hold her back, but she needed more than the grip of a human hand. No one but herself could hold her back from plunging into hysterical forgetfulness once more.

A great shudder ran through her. Then she said level-

ly: "Mother, you're a fool. A gullible fool. I didn't kill him."

"If you dare to go on pretending it was me, after all I told you—"

"No," said Gillian. "I know better now. My father was the murderer."

17

The man from upstairs came halfway down the uncarpeted basement flight in his dressing-gown.

"Miss Waring!"

Meg went impatiently to the foot of the stairs.

"Miss Waring, I really must ask you to make less noise. This is no time of night for a party."

"It's not a party. It's a murder trial," said Meg recklessly.

"I don't think that's very funny."

"It's not meant to be."

"If you adopt this attitude, Miss Waring, I shall have to ask you to leave."

"You can have a fortnight's notice," said Meg.

She hurried back into the sitting room and closed the door behind her.

Gillian was strung up and quivering but not irrational. She spoke quickly but without histrionics. She had a story to tell and for once she wanted to tell it as tersely and plainly as possible.

She had been boiling with indignation in the car that evening. As her father drove back towards Alderford she had told him of the lunatic accusation her mother had thrown at her. He had listened and nodded, but she had detected amusement rather than outrage in his reaction. "That smugness of his," she recalled, "as though of

course he knew more about everything than anyone else. He always had to show that he was in the know." And she started to ask him whether her mother had told him any of this nonsense at the time of the trial, or whether it was something she had dreamed up in prison. Instead of giving a straight answer he asked what difference it made now. The memory of his own cleverness was too much for him. He let the cross-examination drift until it was too late for him to make a flat denial; and by then Gillian was feverishly adding up facts and guesses and conclusions of her own.

It was her father who had sent her away early on the pretext that there was going to be some unpleasantness and he didn't want her mixed up in it. He was the one who had written to her and solemnly explained what had happened, telling her that her mother was a wicked woman who was paying the price of her misconduct. It was he who had told her to put it out of her mind from now on and who had later ruled a heavy line under the whole tragedy by telling her that her mother was dead.

"And," Miriam broke in, "he did everything he could to stop me seeing you. He kept us apart—"

"Because if you ever got together there was a danger of your comparing notes," Jason finished for her.

Gillian smiled ruefully at her mother. "We didn't compare notes, did we? We just shouted at each other. And when I was in the car with him I was still so shaken that if he'd simply agreed with me and then shut up, I might have gone on believing that you were mad. And that would have been that. But he just couldn't do it. For one thing, he was still pretty wild about me seeing you at all. Under that know-it-all complacency he was angry. When he was like that I was as bad as he was, I suppose: I couldn't resist needling him until he lost control."

"I've seen you do it a hundred times," Colin confirmed.

"Sure enough, the outburst came. All at once he began to bluster. 'Wasn't I right?' he yelled at me. 'Wouldn't it have been better if you hadn't seen that meddling bitch?' And a lot more besides. It was all a jumble—one minute he was blaming me for not doing as I was told, and then he was going on about poetic justice and Mother having asked for it anyway. With the usual slabs of psychological jargon to make out that he was all right and everyone else was all wrong."

"He was sanctimonious in a very modern way," said Colin. "He trotted out Freud the way people used to trot out religious texts—excusing all his own faults while condemning the failings of others."

"And all the while he ranted," said Gillian reflectively, "I was remembering the way Mother"—she used the word nervously, lacking practice in it—"said what she had to say. And I knew one thing: she had believed in it when she said it—I could tell."

Miriam blushed as though someone had paid her the most tender compliment of her life.

"When I told him this," Gillian went on, "he told me he didn't want to hear any more about it. I went on. And he tried to laugh, and he said: 'You're a big girl now.' And you know, he was half admitting that I was right, and inviting my approval! I'd got him in quite a state . . . and I went on and on. . . ."

They began to see the pattern as Gillian had seen it. Forshaw had hoped that his jealous, berserk slaying of Walter Blake would be put down to terrorists. When the police got suspicious—the thread of matting, the rumours, the known relationship between Miriam and Blake—he had to improvise something else. It was no use trying to pin the crime on Miriam direct: she hadn't committed it, she would deny it, and the police would concentrate on him as being the most likely killer

of his wife's lover. Because that was, after all, the truth! When he realised that the net was closing in he sent Gillian back to England before the end of her holiday and then planted the evidence. If Miriam had stood firm and even been callous enough to denounce her own child to the police, they might well have found that the blood on the dress was not human at all. But Forshaw arranged that Miriam should find the dress and then insinuated into her mind that morally speaking she was the real sinner. If ever a woman should shoulder the blame for someone else's apparent crime, that woman was Miriam.

"He was always so convincing," said Miriam. She was very pale. The full import of it was only just beginning to reach her. It was as though she felt for the first time the true weight of those years in prison. "I let him get away with so much, but I never dreamed. . . ." She marvelled at herself and at what her husband had been able to achieve. "We were always squabbling over something, and I never trusted him—never—and yet in the end, what was so strange about him, even when you weren't convinced you . . . well . . . you *had* to be convinced. He was so stubborn. And so plausible"

"The thing about a congenital liar," said Jason, "is that each time you deal with him he can persuade you that *this* time, just this once, he's right in what he says."

"When he said that I must sacrifice myself," said Miriam with maudlin relish, "he made it sound so . . . so noble."

It would be her great consolation for the rest of her life. Nobody was going to deny that she had been noble. A gullible fool—but noble.

"And to think that he was jealous of Walter!" She was awestruck, almost admiring. "I'd never have thought it of him."

"Masculine pride," said Jason curtly, to shake her

out of this. "All that big talk of his—and everyone in the community knowing, from what you've told me, that his wife had to seek satisfaction somewhere else. No, that wouldn't have suited him. It must have been twisting at his guts for a long time."

"I'd never have thought it," said Miriam again.

Meg realised before any of the others that Gillian was crying. It was not one of her demonstrative fits: she was simply crying, the tears running down her face unchecked.

"She's all in," said Colin. "Look, this has gone on long enough. . . ."

"I'm all right." Gillian groped for a handkerchief but sat upright without trying to disguise the tears. "It's over now, and I know it's over. But . . . when I had to face up to what he was . . . my father . . ." Her mouth was wrenched in agony. "That's when I cracked," she said. "Because he was right, you see—right about him and me. I was always under his spell. Love-hate, the therapeutic value of personality clashes—all right, the lot, the silly phrases—they weren't so far wrong. I always needed him. We did seem better than the rest. We could take the mickey out of everyone else because the two of us were . . . the two of us. But he could say that about *me!* He could tell my mother that I'd killed that ridiculous man. And"—she rubbed her hand across her wet eyelashes and blinked at Miriam—"you believed him. Pathetic. . . . But that's what hit me—that he could invent a story like that about me. And deceive me all these years. Because that's what he was doing, wasn't it?"

Meg touched her arm. "Let's call it a day, Gill."

"It's over," said Gillian numbly.

Colin said to Jason: "Look, don't you think we ought to—"

"I'm all right," said Gillian. "No more forgetting. Don't

be afraid." Her head sagged. They could hardly hear her. "It's all over."

Miriam wanted Gillian to come back to Jason's flat with them but she insisted that she was too tired to walk a step, too tired to consider staying anywhere other than her own bedroom. She left them and went to the bathroom. Her tooth-mug clattered into the basin. They heard her laugh unsteadily, disbelieving, denying that everything could be so familiar and ordinary again.

Meg said that she would take a mattress in and sleep on the floor in case Gillian woke up and was lost. *In case* . . . a vague threat, the shadow of yet another problem they were all too tired to contemplate. Colin could sleep in here.

Tomorrow they would drive home. Colin could take Gillian with him. Jason would take Miriam to Wishbury and then continue to Alderford to help with explanations to the police and Gillian's stepmother. If they needed Miriam later she would of course be available, but Jason wanted to spare her as much as possible. Nevertheless, explanations there would have to be.

"Another bout of breaking things gently," said Colin sardonically.

Jason looked at Meg.

She said: "I think I'll go back to Alderford with Gillian. I think it'd be a good thing."

Meg escorted Jason and Miriam to the top of the area steps. Miriam got into the car. Jason closed the door on her and then turned back towards Meg.

"When I've tidied up all the loose ends. . . ."

"Yes," said Meg. Her eyelids were so heavy that she could barely see him.

"It's all been a bit of a mess. I haven't been very brilliant, have I?"

"Who has?" said Meg. She was not sure what they

were talking about and not capable of thinking farther into the future than ten minutes from now. In ten minutes she could be lying down and closing her eyes. "It all happened so long ago," she said.

"We all have our pride. Forshaw had his own special brand. And some of us like to believe in our brilliant intellect and organisational ability. In the end we all make a mess of it and look just as fatuous."

"Jason, it's all right," she said.

He went round his car like a sleep-walker. She was glad to think that the streets were pretty well deserted at this time.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," he said to her across the car as he opened the door, "in trying to populate my rooms. I'm not bad with sets—but I can't handle flesh and blood characters."

He drove off. Meg went down the steps to make sure that Colin would be able to settle comfortably, that Gillian was all right, and that there was now no reason why they shouldn't all sleep.

She lay on the mattress in a draught that sneaked in under the door, and supposed that Jason would telephone her in the office during the week. She wondered how and where they would start again and if it would be worth it and if they would mean anything to each other now that the strange tensions had been relaxed. There had to be a true, essential excitement kindled between them if it was to mean anything at all—an excitement free from the mysteries and complications of the last few weeks.

She groped through uncertainty into sleep, and struggled up through more uncertainties when Gillian leaned over her and said:

"What time are we leaving?"

It was morning. It was nine o'clock. She did not feel

that she had slept, but Gillian was cleansed and exuberant and ready for the day.

They left at ten. Colin, yawning every now and then, drove without saying a word. Gillian chattered frenetically. She was busy talking herself into the person she proposed to be from now on. The past was not yet totally discarded, but it soon would be. The main characters were not yet wraiths, but Gillian was determined to rob them of substance as she talked.

"Uncle Jason, for instance," she said as Colin liberated them from the south-western suburbs and picked up speed down a long slope: "what did he really imagine he was up to?"

Colin watched the road. Meg said nothing.

"Such a bungler," Gillian laughed. "Just like . . . well . . . like his sister." She was defiant, renouncing any intention of calling Miriam her mother from now on. "And even when he'd started something, he didn't follow through, did he? A bit of a defeatist."

"He was plunged into something," said Meg tightly. "He didn't ask to get involved. But once he was in, he tried to help."

"Good intentions," said Gillian. "We know all about *those,* don't we?"

She was rebuilding herself at the expense of others. Meg remembered through the mists of exhaustion the sound of Jason's voice and his humility so few hours ago. She said:

"How many people have you known who were strong and infallible? How many do you expect to meet in your lifetime? And what hell it would be to live with one! Defeatists, bunglers. . . . You can find such names for people who try to help. If Jason's in a muddle it's because he's kind and sensitive—an awfully nice sort of muddler."

"Well!" said Gillian in her old, most characteristic tone. "Well, well! What have we here?"

Colin said: "Shut up!"

"Do I hear the voice of jealousy?"

"No," said Colin. "As it happens, you do not."

Meg sat in silence until she was sure that her voice would be steady. Then she said: "Colin, you're sweet."

"I wouldn't bank on it," he said wryly. But he flashed her a grin that made everything all right. A few miles on, he slowed and said: "Anyone fancy a cup of coffee?"

"It may give us all some strength," yawned Gillian.

Colin drove on to the black grit of a pull-in. He said to Meg: "And maybe you'd like to ring your office and explain why you didn't show up this morning."

Meg had not even thought of this. Now, when she did think of it, she laughed.

"They'd be startled if I showed up today. I've only just realised—all these goings-on put it out of my mind—this is the first week of my holiday. I can do what I like."

"We were going to Spain," cried Gillian.

"We were."

"Is it still booked?"

"I cancelled it."

Gillian got out, straightened up, and inhaled ecstatically. The wind through the trees was mingled with the smell of sausages and petrol fumes. She said:

"Where are we going, then?"

"I don't know about you," said Meg, "but I have an idea I may spend a week or so touring around—finishing up in Wales."

Colin fell into step beside her as they walked towards the hut. "When you bring Pauline back, you might keep an eye on her for me. I might consider her when she's grown up a bit."

"You've got a nerve," said Meg. "What makes you think that a nice young girl—"

"The age difference isn't all that colossal," said Colin meaningly.

Gillian looked sullen. She was being excluded from something she didn't understand. Colin and Meg separated, and went one to each side of her. Colin took her right arm and Meg her left, and they went into the hut in search of coffee and whatever buns the place had to offer.

They were young, pretty--and away from home for the first time....

Meg Waring and Gillian Forshaw shared a flat in London during the week and traveled home together on weekends. When Gillian disappeared after being followed by the mysterious Jason Lucas, no one but Meg seemed concerned —certainly not her family.

Determined to find her friend, Meg followed Jason to his bizarre house in a deserted water mill. In spite of her fears and suspicions, she found herself falling in love with this strange, brooding man.

Meg soon discovered that a twelve-year-old murder had played a vital part in Gillian's disappearance—but a rickety old chair in their own apartment was the key that finally unlocked the mystery of the missing girl.

"Starts off well, with a quiet genre picture of London-countryside commuting and the disappearance of a girl who caught the eye of a stranger on a train." —THE NEW YORK TIMES