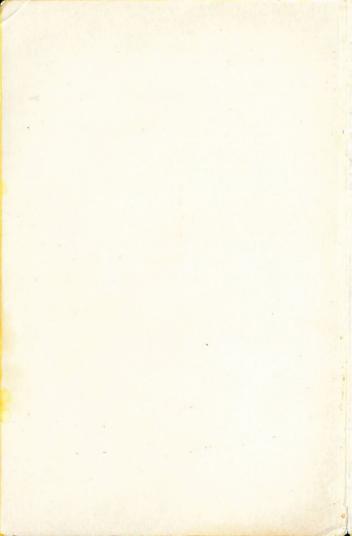
Dare He Date the Nurse the Whole Town Looked Down Upon?

CALLING WERRYNAN MARGARET



STRANGER IN TOWN

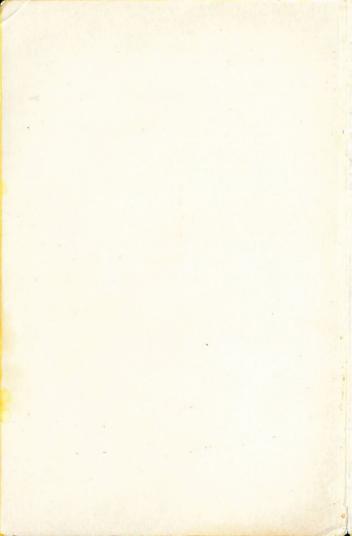
Returning to the home of his grandfather, who had been a horse-and-buggy doctor, Mark Merryman finds a definite attitude of antagonism. Here where Mark feels that he belongs—the town his forefathers founded—he is made to feel a stranger.

In all Ridgeway, only Dinah Farley seems glad to see him—and Dinah, like himself, is an outsider.

The hill people gradually come to admire and trust the new doctor—for, unlike the other doctors in Ridgeway, Mark has dedicated himself to helping the sick wherever they may be. But the townspeople continue to hold themselves aloof. In fact, many of them—among them the newly rich Joe Pepper—definitely have it in for the "upstart young doctor," who scorns the rich to look after the poor.

A young doctor finds a place for himself in an Ohio town—and the girl he loves reveals her past—in a startling climax to Miss Howe's exciting story of love and mystery.

Turn this book over for second complete novel



by
MARGARET HOWE

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CRUISE NURSE
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THE Ridgeway Memorial Hospital stood near the outskirts of the town of Ridgeway, both named for old Dr. Ridgeway, who had practiced medicine on this spot for forty years before he died.

Ivy clambered over the red brick walls of the main building, once the old Ridgeway home and Dr. Ridgeway's office. On the west a new addition had been built which bore no resemblance to the old structure. The late afternoon sun shone brightly on the broad windows of this modern new wing as Mark Merryman brought his car to a stop across the street and sat viewing with affection the place which possessed so many happy memories for him.

Ridgeway had been his grandfather's home. His mother's home. Although it was now twenty years since he had visited Ridgeway, Mark remembered it well. He had romped beneath those elms as a boy. Followed his grandfather about, fascinated by the shiny instruments in his office, the skeleton which dangled in a dark closet. He had driven deep into the Ohio hills on Country calls and, even then, as a youngster of eight, had determined that he, too, would become a doctor.

And now he was, thought Mark soberly. Because of that early decision he had returned to this town, his years of colege and internship behind him. Eager to try, at least, to

follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, if not to match his reputation. A doctor today might not be able to fill the function of one of another generation—when a doctor was only second to a minister in the hearts of his patients. A healer of souls as well as of bodies, A friend and confessor.

All this ran through Mark's mind as he contemplated what might lay ahead of him. It was growing dark before he realized that he must find a place to stay for the night. As he took one last glance toward the hospital, an ambulance appeared in the distance. Mark watched it race toward him and turn into the emergency entrance before he drove away.

Someday he would be at the hospital to receive an incoming patient. Someday he would take his place with the other

doctors at Ridgeway Memorial . . .

As Mark drove on, a girl in a nurse's uniform crossed the street ahead of him. She turned and smiled. It was just as though she welcomed him, thought Mark. As though she said,

"Hello, stranger."

Well, soon he wouldn't be a stranger to Ridgeway. This was the town his ancestors had founded. And the spot toward which he directed his course now was his father's old home—the Merryman place. It was his inheritance, after a long and bitterly contested suit. His father's parents had disinherited his father when he left Mark's mother, years ago.

Mark's thoughts did not linger on the subject of his mother's unhappiness. He was too busy with plans for his own future. He would ride through these same streets someday soon on his round of house calls. He would know the people well who passed him now without a second glance. He would travel the country roads his grandfather had traveled in horse and buggy.

Mark was not a religious man but something like a prayer of

dedication rose to his lips.

He reached the square in the center of town where four streets which enclosed a park were crisscrossed by walks. There were stores on three sides of the square. On the fourth, Mark found his destination.

It was a low, rambling cottage-type house facing the square. The courthouse stood in the same block on the far corner. The yard was overgrown with weeds and shrubbery. Vines sprawled across the porch roof and twined about the fluted columns of the porch. An ornamental iron fence surrounded the property on three sides, and flowering fruit trees furnished an attractive background.

Mark parked his car and sat for a moment trying to evaluate his inheritance.

Would it serve his purpose as an office?

The location was fine. Much to be preferred to a secondstory situation, he decided. Valuable, too, for he had received a barrage of letters from a local real-estate dealer named Joe Pepper urging him to sell it.

He left the car to stand outside the iron gate, hands plunged deep in his pockets. This is mine, thought Mark. Shabby and run down and not too prepossessing, but it will serve my purpose.

He opened the creaky gate and walked quickly up the

porch steps.

As the door creaked open, dust and musty air greeted him. Light came only dimly through the small-paned windows and the stillness was uncanny. Mark opened a door which led from the hall, remembering that this was an ell approached by two steps down to a slightly lower level. There were three connecting rooms in this wing, with a street entrance from outside.

Mark's spirits rose.

This would be his office, he decided. There was good light

from the west and little street noise penetrated the sturdy walls.

The stillness which had depressed him was an asset now. There was something about the whole atmosphere of the house which suggested that it was waiting for him to bring it to life. The thought was whimsical. But here he would work, thought Mark. Here he would have his home. And someday he would bring someone here to share his home. Someday his children would play in the old-fashioned garden.

His excitement mounted as he considered what changes would be necessary in order for the rooms to serve as offices. Soap and water and paint would work wonders. When he got through, the place would in no way resemble the rooms as they appeared now. He felt more and more optimistic. Living quarters must wait until his offices were in order. There must be some sort of hotel in Ridgeway and he could stay there for the present.

Which thought again reminded Mark that he must find a place for the night. He was just about to act upon this idea when a small voice from the hall doorway piped, "What are you doing in this house, mister?"

Marker whirled.

A very little boy in a cowboy outfit stood regarding him curiously from the steps leading to the ell. He had brick-red hair, freckles, and bright brown eyes which surveyed Mark with open suspicion.

Mark grinned. "Put up your gun," he said, for the boy flourished a cowboy pistol in one small hand. "I happen to own this house. I have a right to be here. Who are you?"

"Danny Farley. What are you going to do with this house?" He came forward now, his tone still belligerent.

"I plan to have an office here. I'm a doctor."

"My mother's a nurse. I know all about doctors."

The boy restored his gun to its holster, hoisted himself to the corner of a dusty table and sat there studying Mark with round brown eyes. He said that he had just recovered from the measles. That he was not afraid to stay alone and did so quite frequently, because his mother had to leave him alone when she was on duty. That he was four years old going on five. Before he paused for breath he demanded. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight," said Mark, who was busy pacing off di-

mensions of the connecting rooms.

"How tall are you?"

"Six feet three."

"Where did you come from?"

"Albany, New York."

"My mother lived in New York once. We lived in Chicago, too. I was born there. Are you married?" he went on.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't afford to get married-for one thing."

"You haven't told me your name," Danny reminded him.

Mark gave him the requested information and then suggested, "Your mother may worry about you if she doesn't know where you are."

"My mother never worries about me," said Danny loftily, but he slid off the table and started to leave. "Do you mind if I climb your trees?" he asked.

"Not at all. But be careful. I don't want to have to start to work immediately on a broken leg or arm."

Danny hooted. "You should see me climb."

"Probably I shall."

A moment later he saw Danny race through the garden and disappear through a hole in the hedge.

Mark brought in his luggage from the car, then selected

one bag to take across the park to the hotel with him. But before he left, he opened a door at the end of the front hall. Here, too, there were dust and cobwebs. Furniture was swathed in yellowed sheets. Old-fashioned pictures hung on the walls. Mark closed the door softly. Later this might be his bedroom.

As he locked the front door, a girl came along the fence and paused at the gate. She wore a nurse's uniform and a blue sweater was slung about her shoulders.

"Have you seen a little boy with red hair?" she asked anxiously.

"Danny?" Mark came down the steps and joined her.

She nodded. "Usually he stays at home until I come off duty. You must be Doctor Merryman?"

"I am."

She smiled. She had a lovely smile although she had no great claim to beauty beyond the bluest, most honest eyes Mark had ever seen. Her skin was milk-white, the type that would never tan, her hair a soft auburn, cut quite short. But her eyes were her best feature. There was warmth and tenderness, too, in her low voice when she spoke.

"I'm Danny's mother, Dinah Farley. We live just around the corner in that white cottage. We've been curious about you, Doctor Merryman."

At that moment a shrill treble yelled, "Hi, Mother," and Danny scrambled out from the branches of the gnarled old apple tree in the rear of the garden, and raced toward them.

"He's a doctor," he explained breathlessly, "and he's going to live in our house all the time and have a doctor's office there."

"Danny thinks the house belongs to him because no one

lives here," she explained. "If he proves a nuisance, send him home, please."

"I think Danny and I will get along fine," Mark assured her. "As long as he doesn't threaten my patients with that terrifving gun."

"I won't," promised Danny earnestly. "And I like you,

Doctor Merryman."

"That's fine," said Mark.

He watched them leave together. She looked too young to have a boy that size, he thought. He wondered about the father. As though it concerns you, Mark told himself as he strode across the park toward the hotel.

However, they were an interesting pair. A precocious small

boy and a girl with the bluest eyes . . .

Mark broke off the thought. Blue eyes should be no concern of his, even though the girl were the sister instead of the mother of the irrepressible Danny. Women could be a young doctor's major problem and it was a lucky thing the girl was married. He liked nurses and it wouldn't be difficult to become interested in one as attractive as Dinah Farley.

Mark was tired but elated as he walked along. There had been an element of uncertainty in the wisdom of following a childish dream and setting up a practice in a town which had probably undergone many changes in the past twenty years. Now he knew the worst about the old place he had inherited. He had assessed its possibilities and found them good. After a night's rest, he would start to work.

The hotel stood on the opposite side of the square. It was a wooden structure, more or less old-fashioned outside, but quite modern inside. The room which he entered after registering offered a fine view of the little park.

Mark felt like a new man after a shower and shave and a change of clothes. He struggled to force his short wiry brown

hair to yield to a stiff brushing, but as usual it showed a tendency to curl. His mirror reflected a strong face, with a broad fine forehead, well-marked brows above keen gray eyes; a strong nose and a mouth which was large and sensitive. Mark wasted little time on clothes but wore them well. Military training had given him a good carriage. He knotted his tie with more than usual care this evening. Small-town people would be curious about any new arrival and swift to judge him by his appearance, he thought soberly.

Belowstairs, he found the dining room similar to a hundred such rooms in small-town hotels. A large room with long whitecurtained windows. Just a scattering of people at the tables. All turned to regard him curiously as Mark entered and

took a seat near the front window.

A chunky waitress, who informed him that her name was Fanny and asked if he would be in town long, put down a menu card.

"I plan to live here." Mark told her who he was, and she announced at once that folks were always interested in a new doctor. She recommended the chicken pie and, upon her suggestion, Mark ordered that and a green salad and coffee.

A man at a table near the door rose at once and came toward him.

"I'm Joe Pepper," he said. "You're Doctor Merryman, aren't you? We've had some correspondence, I believe."

Mark had disliked the correspondence he had had with Joe Pepper, and now that he had met the man, he liked him even less. He was a short man with a balding head, sandy hair, a pair of bulging blue eyes, and an unctuous manner. His handshake was moist and he displayed a great many gold-filled teeth when he smiled. The smile was a surface smile; it failed to hide the hard expression of his eyes.

"I think you are making a great mistake to turn down my

offer on your property," he said now. "The place has a low market value."

"I plan to use the place myself."

"I can up the price I gave you," Pepper insisted.

"I'm going to use it for my office."

"You may find it difficult to establish a practice here." There was no mistaking the man's anger now. "We have four excellent doctors in Ridgeway."

"I can try my luck," said Mark coolly.

The waitress brought his dinner just then, and he hoped that Joe Pepper would leave. Instead, he lingered and motioned to the man who had sat with him. "That's Jeff Harrison, our most promising young attorney. It pays to know certain people."

Mark tried to conceal his impatience. Jeff Harrison came toward them, but gave no evidence of great interest as Pepper introduced him. He was a very thin young man, with a Florida tan and sharp gray-green eyes. He was indifferent almost to the point of being rude, and turned and left Pepper to join a girl who had just appeared in the doorway.

"Hi, Jeff," she said. "Sorry I'm late." He took her arm and led her over to Mark's table. She gave Mark an interested

glance from brilliant black eyes.

"This is our new doctor," said Pepper. "Doctor Merryman, this is my daughter, Genevieve."

Mark stood up. The girl extended a slim hand.

Genevieve Pepper bore not the slightest resemblance to her father. She was a beauty. A full mouth curved in a smile as she met Mark's glance. She had a perfect figure and the smart suit she wore was cut to show to advantage every soft curve and line of the lovely body.

There was something fascinating about this girl. Not only because of her beauty. She disturbed Mark. He guessed that

she knew the impact of her appearance and delighted in it. The expression in her eyes was an invitation and made him uneasy.

How could a man like Pepper have such a daughter?

He was relieved when they left him to his dinner and returned to the table where he had first seen Pepper. But every time he glanced up, he caught the girl's eyes fastened speculatively upon him, a fact that did not seem to improve Jeff Harrison's disposition.

Mark couldn't help overhearing bits of their conversation,

for Harrison's voice was high and angry.

"I resent having you make eyes at every man you meet," he observed hotly. "Doesn't being engaged to me give me the right to object?"

Mark couldn't hear her answer. He knew that the conversation turned to him, for he caught his own name presently. He tried to concentrate upon the really excellent dinner and forget the Peppers, father and daughter.

Genevieve Pepper might be dangerous. Especially to a young professional man not yet established in the community.

"Everything all right?" asked his waitress.

"Everything is fine." said Mark.

"That's Genevieve Pepper over there with the man she's engaged to marry."

"So I gathered."

"Handsome, isn't she?"

"Very."

"She's just come back from Honolulu. It must be wonderful to be a girl like that." The waitress sighed.

Mark finished his dinner and left the dining room. He had to pass the table where Pepper sat with his daughter and Harrison. The men showed a great absorption in their eating, but Genevieve looked up and smiled.

Her dark eyes had golden flecks in them, Mark observed, and her teeth were white and perfect.

Don't be an idiot, he told himself impatiently as he left the dining room. That girl would be dynamite to any man.

Mark smiled to himself. I've been in town only a few hours, but I've covered a lot of territory. I've seen my house and assessed its possibilities. I've met two of the town's leading citizens—and if I'm not mistaken, two girls who are just about as opposite as any two girls can be.

2

MARK strolled all over the town that evening. He liked what he saw. He had never spent much time in a town the size of Ridgeway and the quiet in contrast to the bustle and confusion of the city delighted him.

He had made no mistake in his selection of a place in which to begin his practice of medicine. Moreover, Ridgeway

was ideal as a place to have a home.

Tonight the air was perfumed with the scent of spring blossoms. Stately trees cast shadows across the uneven pavement. There was a green lawn before even the humblest home. Young men were busy with gardens and building this May evening. Children raced about. Lights glowed in windows through which Mark could see families grouped together.

In the beginning, Ridgeway had been a farming community. Probably there had been many changes in twenty years, thought Mark, but he doubted if those changes reached the hills which lay ten miles beyond the town. Back in those hills

lived people who had drifted across the river from Kentucky, and not many miles beyond their homes the river wound between two states.

As Mark remembered it, there had been a ferry then; probably now everyone used the new bridge farther south.

He tried to orient himself as he passed old buildings and landmarks. But he could remember little from his childhood about the town of Ridgeway. Those childhood visits had taken place shortly after his mother's separation from his father, whom he scarcely remembered. A slender dark-haired man whose name he bore.

The reason for that separation was never revealed to Mark beyond the brief statement that his parents were unsuited to one another. His father had died in South America—that much he knew. That had been when he was fifteen.

Well, the past was behind him now.

As for the present, he spent a short time puzzling over the girl he'd met whose name was Farley. Vaguely he remembered a Mrs. Farley who had worked for his grandmother. Also there had been a boy about his own age who came with her when she brought the laundry.

Could this be Danny's father-and if so, where was he

His walk took him to the edge of town and Mark paused as he had paused that afternoon before the brightly lighted windows of the hospital ahead.

He stood quietly smoking, dreaming again of the time when he might prove his own usefulness there. Then remembering that he had some purchases to make, he turned back toward the square and entered a drugstore.

The drugstore was just a few doors from the hotel. Mark saw a group of teen-agers crowded about the small tables in the rear and jamming the booths which lined one wall,

The druggist, a bustling harried-looking man, was busy behind the soda bar. The one other clerk was not in sight.

Mark looked around, and the first person he recognized was Genevieve Pepper. She stood at the cosmetic counter and turned and smiled as he entered.

"Well, we meet again, Doctor Merryman." Her tone was warm and intimate as she continued, "Come here. What do you think of this?" She held a bottle of perfume in her hand and held it out to Mark as she spoke. Her eyes held a mischievous gleam as he hesitated.

"I'm no judge of perfume," Mark said stiffly.

"It's called Seduction." She returned the bottle to the case in front of her but continued to view Mark with a speculative glance.

Why should the girl confuse him? thought Mark angrily. He moved past her as he saw that the druggiest was free and stated his list of purchases.

"That's Joe Pepper's daughter," observed the druggist.

"Quite a gal, ain't she? Joe dotes on her, too."

"She's very attractive," said Mark, and called the druggist's attention politely to the list he had placed on the counter. Through the broad front window he saw a yellow convertible draw up outside, and a little later Genevieve left the store and crossed the sidewalk toward it.

When the druggist appeared with his purchases, Mark inquired whether he might know the name of a woman who would help clean up his place the following week.

"Let me see," the druggist puzzled. "Help is mighty hard to get since they started that new plastic factory. But you might try Delia Maxwell." He gave Mark an address.

Mark wrote it down.

"You're the new doctor?" the druggist inquired.

"That's right."

"Name's Merryman."

"Mark Merryman."

"Knew your father. He and I were youngsters together."

"I never knew him," said Mark, and immediately wished he had kept still.

"I've heard that he and your mother didn't make out together. Too bad for the youngsters when that happens. You

going to set up practice across the square?"

Mark assented and picked up his parcel as the druggist remarked, "Maybe it isn't ethical for men to try to solicit your business, but I'd mighty well like to have it, Doctor Merryman."

"You mean-"

"I mean prescriptions. I do a good business with these teen-age kids and all this fiddle-faddle that we have to stock nowadays, but I'd sure like to have a chance at a bit more regular prescription business. I could help you, too. The hill folks like me and buy a lot of patent stuff, but if you wanted to bother with them—"

"What do you mean-bother with them?"

The druggist shrugged. "We got four doctors here, but with the exception of old Doc Foster I don't get any of their business."

"Why shouldn't you get the business? Is there another drugstore in town?"

"Sure. Two others. One doesn't do any prescription business. One gets the most of it. Several years ago they got excited because I did a bit of prescribing for simple ailments. I did it because the hill folks just couldn't afford a lot of these high-falutin' drugs they use today. Not that they aren't all right. Well, all I wanted to suggest was that I'd appreciate any trade you send my way. My name's Dave Gordon, and I'm glad to welcome you to Ridgeway, Doctor Merryman."

Mark made his escape. The old fellow was garrulous. There might be some good reason for his lack of prescription business. Quite often druggists found themselves in trouble for innocently trying to diagnose a case better left to a regular physician. On the other hand, he had something in his statement that plenty of poor people hesitated to become involved in huge bills for professional services.

Being in no mood to return to his stuffy hotel room, Mark crossed the square again and stood by the fence viewing his

property by moonlight.

The vines patterned the old porch floor. The moon silvered the gray walls. Suddenly Mark realized that someone sat on the steps.

Dinah Farley. Mark opened the gate.

"I thought-" She stammered and broke off.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"This is your house, isn't it?" She smiled. She could not compare with Genevieve Pepper for beauty, but she possessed another charm. Was it her eyes? Deep blue even in the moonlight. She didn't wear her uniform tonight, but a dress of soft blue, with a fleecy white sweater slung across her bare shoulders.

Mark sat down beside her on the step and for a little while neither spoke. Dinah sat with her small sturdy hands clasped about her knees, her face upturned.

"I didn't intend to come back," said Mark finally. "Maybe the moon was responsible. It's never like this in the city, you know."

"I do know. I had the same feeling you must have when I first came here. I had never lived in a small town."

"You like it?"

She hesitated. "I love the quiet, and it's wonderful for Danny. There are other aspects, however."

Mark started to question her and then, acting upon a sudden intuition, waited. Was he free to ask her what troubled her, for it was quite evident that something did. Her face had lost its composure as he watched her. The blue eyes had darkened. Suddenly he felt baffled at his own reaction to this girl. A married woman with a son, he reminded himself. A husband whom she did not discuss. Unlike Genevieve Pepper, she would not rush into confidences upon first acquaintance. There was nothing impulsive about this blue-eyed girl.

They talked about the town. She had lived here only two years, she said. Then, as though in explanation of her first statement, she remarked, "I know few people here. Like most towns, there are many cliques and I don't belong to the Country-Club set."

"Probably I shall be no great social success either." Mark laughed. "I'll have plenty to do making this place presentable.

I hope it isn't haunted."

She laughed. She had a lovely laugh—soft and engaging. And her eyes had lost their sober look. "I've often tried to imagine the people who lived here. I love old houses. Especially this one. There's something about it which intrigues me as well as my son."

"Just so it doesn't discourage my patients."

"Don't worry about that. Folks need you here." Her voice was serious now. "Not that I belittle the local doctors. But the old ones can't minister to the needs of the hill people and the younger men are indifferent to them. There, I mustn't bore you with my ideas."

She rose. Mark walked with her through the gate and around the corner and stood and saw her disappear through the door of the cottage he had seen above the hedge.

He must be moon-struck, he told himself, as he strode swiftly back to the hotel. He must remember the vow he had

made to let no woman interfere with his plans for the future, and it would be quite easy to become attracted to this blue-eyed girl whose Irish voice held so much charm.

3

Over the weekend, Mark worked hard clearing away the tangle of vines that shrouded the porch, and made some headway in cleaning up the untidy garden. He made numerous trips across the square to the stores for supplies, where he found people curious about him and his plans. A few old men remembered his grandfather. All spoke highly of the Ridgeways and the Merrymans.

One asked about his father. He was dead, said Mark briefly. But as he worked in the hot spring sunshine, he couldn't help wondering about the father whom he had never known. There were pictures of him as a child on the walls of the old house. There were bundles of letters with foreign stamps which might have come from him. Someday he would sit down and read them.

A man should have a father, thought Mark.

This made him think of Danny, who played across the hedge and occasionally slipped through the hole which Mark imagined he might have made, to appear suddenly with his toy pistol aimed at Mark.

"Sorry, son, but I'm too busy to play cops and robbers,"

Mark told Danny.

"I'm playing Indians," Danny corrected him politely.

He was a lovable youngster with his brown, curious eyes

and bright red hair. They had something in common, he and Danny. Both had been raised with the idea that the were-abouts of a father must be kept secret. The thought brought Mark closer to the boy.

Mark had plenty of observers as he worked. One old man leaned on his fence for over an hour plying him with questions

and relating stories about Ridgeway citizens.

"Joe Pepper wanted this corner real bad," he observed. "Bad man to tangle with, Joe Pepper. His father used to be the bartender down at the junction saloon. Don't call them that today. Bars. Same thing. I can remember . . ." The man's voice droned on, but Mark only half-listened.

"Ain't that Ed Farley's kid?" he demanded, and received

instant attention.

Mark looked up angrily and then advanced toward him. "Yes, it is. At least I suppose that is the boy's father's name."

"Ed was a bad 'un. Always in trouble. Ran away and joined the Army. Couldn't keep out of trouble there, I hear. Married a girl back East and guess she had to take up nursing to support herself and her son. Know what become of Ed?"

"No. And I don't want to know. I have work to do and I don't want Danny to overhear you gossiping about his father."

"Tain't gossip. It's the truth."

"No reason a child's feelings should be hurt. Here," Mark fished a quarter from his pocket, "go across to Dave Gordon's and get yourself a cold drink."

The old man took the money, but his eyes narrowed.

"Might as well know the truth," he insisted belligerently.

"Not from me," said Mark.

Danny came slowly toward Mark and stood staring after the old man. "What was he saying?" he asked.

"Nothing of any importance. When men get that old they

like to talk."

Danny skipped away.

What was the truth? Mark asked himself, and then was annoyed at his own curiosity. When Dinah Farley wished to give her confidence, all right. Until then, he might take the advice he had just given that old man and not concern himself about her affairs. But as he worked, Mark wondered how many in the town had been poisoned by malicious gossip about this gallant girl.

He caught a glimpse of her later in the day working about the cottage, but reminded himself of his determination not to allow his sympathy to lead him into a situation which

might prove embarrassing for both of them.

On Sunday, Mark rose to the sound of church bells. As he dressed, he saw children trooping by to Sunday School. There were only a few people in the dining room of the hotel this morning, and Fanny told him that not many transients remained in Ridgeway over Sunday. They found the town too dull.

"Everyone goes to church here," she said as she brought an excellent breakfast of bacon and eggs and griddle cakes.

"Maybe I should get the habit and do likewise," said Mark, and smiled.

He liked Fanny in spite of her tendency to gossip. She was big and jolly and took a personal interest in his welfare.

He wondered if he would see Dinah at church. But there was no sign of her either on the street or around the cottage when he strolled by a little before eleven. A few minutes later he found himself in a pew in the beautiful old white church a block beyond his house. Its exterior told its age. Its spire was a thing of beauty against the blue spring sky. The air was soft and balmy, and today there was a peaceful hush quite unlike the city atmosphere with which Mark was familiar.

In a pew near the front he recognized Genevieve Pepper and her father. The druggist, Dave Gordon, sat with a couple of active youngsters directly opposite him.

The service was dignified and impressive. When it was over, Mark was aware of curious glances from many present. He was a stranger but a number of people stopped to welcome him, and the minister, who stood at the door, asked his name.

At the same moment he caught a faint perfume, a hand touched his arm and Genevieve Pepper said, "I want you to meet some people." She slid her white-gloved hand through Mark's arm with a possessive gesture. "It's unusual for us to have a new young man in town. This is our new doctor, Doctor Merryman," she explained, and gave Mark no chance to retreat.

Did he want to? he asked himself, half-amused at the girl's attitude and yet not unwilling to take advantage of the opportunity to meet many whom he judged might be influential in the town. Her friends. She made this quite evident. Without a word, she let Mark know that she could help him to get a start here.

She was beautifully dressed. A pale yellow flannel suit, a hat faced with white and yellow daisies. She might be dangerous and no doubt would be, but she was charming. And today there was no trace of the almost insolent air which Mark had first resented.

Had he misjudged the girl? he asked himself as he walked along to her car with her.

Joe Pepper was not pleased with the situation. He reminded his daughter that they had a dinner engagement at the Country Club with Jeff Harrison. He showed no desire to encourage an acquaintance with Mark—in fact, quite the contrary. Pepper was resentful because he had refused to sell his property.

Mark had no feeling that the girl had any personal interest. He was a stranger. Maybe she liked to annoy her father. But she was spoiled and stubborn, and it would be unwise to antagonize a man like Pepper right at the start of his career, Mark told himself as he left them.

Later as the car swept past him, Genevieve waved her hand and gave him a smile.

Again Mark found himself contrasting the two girls he had met this first week in Ridgeway: one who appealed so strongly to his sympathy and one who made an appeal to the senses no man could resist; beauty and a certain highhandedness which pricked a man's curiosity.

What was Genevieve Pepper really like? A strong personality. A self-willed girl. An attractive girl.

Leave it at that, Mark thought sternly. Just remember to keep at a distance and don't fall for those spectacular eyes.

Sunday passed quietly, but early Monday morning the cleaning woman the druggist had recommended appeared. She lived up in every way to the reputation Dave Gordon had given her. A slight colored woman, Delia Maxwell went to work with soap and water, and Mark followed in her wake with paint and varnish. By the end of the week all three rooms he planned for his office were bright and shining.

Spring air had blown the last of the mustiness through the windows. The sun poured across the scoured floor boards. There was a job to do with linoleum and screens. There would be endless finishing, but now he was assured that his first hunch was right. This place was not only a perfect location but well adapted for his purpose.

Hank, Delia's stout husband, helped to move furniture from the gloomy old part of the house. Delia polished it until it shone. They unpacked Mark's equipment and an old secre-

tary held his instruments in the small surgery. Desk and chairs were placed in the consultation room.

This is all mine, thought Mark. For the first time in my life,

I have something all my own.

On Saturday afternoon, late, Hank affixed the bracket which would hold the sign to the fluted column of the front porch. Mark, himself, put out his sign, and all three—Hank, Delia, and himself—stood on the walk outside the fence to admire it.

Passersby paused. Smiled. Approved.

Mark walked down the block and could find no fault. As he walked back, he saw Dinah and Danny approach and stop. Dinah's face was upturned, the sun bright on her auburn hair. Danny danced about with excitement.

"What does it say?" he asked. Dinah read the words:

MARK MERRYMAN PHYSICIAN and SURGEON

"But I thought he was a doctor."

"I am." Mark joined them with a growing awareness of his own pleasure that Dinah should be one of the first to see his sign. "I thought you were going to come and help me?" he said to Danny.

"Mother wouldn't let me."

Dinah's face flamed. "I didn't want him to bother you."

"Was that the real reason?"

"Not entirely," she said honestly.

Mark did not press the matter. He guessed some silly gossip

must have reached her ears. "Come inside and see what we've done," he urged. "I want you to be the first to see it."

For a moment she hesitated.

"Please," begged Danny, and ran ahead through the gate as she nodded assent.

"People can be pretty brutal," said Mark flatly. "I guess that must be the reason you hesitated to let the boy come often."

"Thanks for understanding," she said hurriedly.

"I'll do anything—any time—to help you," said Mark recklessly. "Promise?" His hand reached down and touched her hand and held it.

She freed her fingers. "Thanks," she said cooly. She went ahead of him through the door to the house and turned and stepped down into the room which would be his reception room.

Mark led her through the office, explaining his plans for each room. "All I need is a few patients," he said ruefully. "I'll have to wait for those. That will be the hardest part—wondering whether I shall succeed."

"Of course you will," she said stoutly. "Have you met the

other doctors?"

"I've been too busy."

"It might be wise to meet them."

Mark agreed.

"When will the sick people come?" asked Danny, swinging round and round on Mark's office chair.

"Soon, I hope," said Mark.

They returned to the main part of the house where Delia was working removing the yellow sheets which covered the furniture, and opening windows.

"Hello, Delia," said Dinah. "I suppose you are responsible

for this marvelous job of cleaning."

"Doctor Merryman helped. He's mighty good help."

"Delia is a good friend of mine," said Dinah. "I took care of her boy at the hospital a year ago. How is Lennie, Delia?"

"Just the same, thank you, Miss Dinah."

On the porch outside, Dinah explained to Mark that Delia's son was a cripple. She spoke warmly of the woman and said she wished someone could help her. So far, nothing had seemed to help her child.

"I'll stop by and see him someday," Mark promised. He stood and watched Dinah leave with her boy, and again found himself wondering just what type of man she had married.

4

THE SHINGLE had swung in the breeze several days and not a single patient had entered the little reception room which was now equipped with a group of modern chairs and a table on which were spread a sheaf of popular magazines. There was even a small chair and a smaller table with activity books which a child might enjoy.

But no one came.

Mark fretted as the days went by. The rush of preparation was over. There was little more to do and things she could do about the house and yard couldn't be started, for who would accept a doctor who rushed in hot and perspiring from weeding the garden, or dusty and soiled from helping Delia put to order the old house?

So Mark sat in his consultation room and tried to concentrate on a medical journal, an ear cocked to hear the first indication of someone at the outer door.

Doubts arose. Had he been wrong to come to Ridgeway, instead of accepting the offers made in the East to enter a clinic with other young doctors? To take a place as assistant to an established practitioner?

Maybe.

How long could he endure this suspense? Mark wondered. Expenses mounting on equipment and nothing coming in to pay his debts. Medicine might be a noble profession, but the desire to help did not offset the fact that a doctor had a great deal of expenditure in addition to his expensive education.

Maybe I should have been a plumber, thought Mark gloomily one morning.

Just then he heard a light step on the walk, and the door

to the reception room opened.

Mark was all thumbs as he slid into a white coat and hurried to open the door that connected the room where he was with the outer office.

A girl sat in one of his new chairs leafing over a magazine. She looked up and smiled demurely as Mark appeared.

"Hello," said Genevieve Pepper.

"Good morning," Mark stammered. For a moment he was too stunned to go beyond that greeting.

She wore no hat upon that shiny black hair, and her dark eyes held a gleam of pure mischief as they met Mark's. She wore a scoop-neck gingham summer dress, no hose on her tanned legs, and white sandals on her narrow feet. A beaded sweater lay on her lap beneath her white purse.

"Am I your very first patient?" she asked.

She was, but not for worlds would Mark acknowledge the fact. "The first this morning," he evaded.

She rose and dropped the sweater on a chair. Then she advanced and stood peering over Mark's shoulder. "Is that where you check my heartbeats?" she asked impudently.

Mark stiffened. He was in no mood for games. "That is my consultation room."

"May I come in?"

"Are you a patient?" asked Mark bluntly.

"Why else would I come, Doctor?"

She took the chair he indicated and crossed slender bare ankles. She sat with her hands clasped together in her lap, and her left hand, which wore a huge diamond was in full view as Mark sat down and struggled to assume a grave and professional expression. "What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"Headaches, Doctor." She cast down her eyes in a manner Mark found exasperating as he forced a cooler note into his deep voice.

"Do you get plenty of sleep?"

She shrugged. "You're making fun of me, aren't you? I really do have severe headaches."

"Possibly you need glasses."

"Me . . . with glasses?" She made a face.

Mark kept his face expressionless. "Many people find them helpful," he said flatly.

"I thought shots might help."

"Rest might be beneficial."

"Don't you take your patients' pulse, Doctor?"

Mark took the hand she extended. His fingers slipped up to her wrist. He checked her pulse and returned the hand to her lap. "Quite normal," he said briefly, hoping that she was unaware of the thrill the touch of that slim hand gave him.

Furious with himself because she had the ability to upset him, Mark made an excuse, rose and left her alone while in the cool little back office he fought a desire to take her in his arms.

When he came back he tossed a white envelope in her lap. "Take three a day," he said curtly. "They may help you."

She sat twisting the envelope in her fingers for a moment. When she looked up her black eyes were serious. "Why don't you like me?" she asked directly.

"A doctor's relationship with his patients is neither like nor dislike. He has only one aim—to be helpful."

His answer did not satisfy her. "I've discovered something about you, Doctor." Her low voice held a challenge. "Someday I'll tell you what I've discovered about you."

"That will be interesting." Mark made a notation of the date of the call on the tablet before him, but she opened her purse, tossed a bill on the desk, and swept out of the room.

She was gone before Mark reached the door. She was staring straight ahead as her car shot off around the corner of the street.

Angry, thought Mark. Just as well. She didn't mix well with his stern resolution to ignore women. She was the most provoking, disturbing girl he had ever met.

What had she discovered about him? he puzzled.

The day dragged by with no other patient. Mark went across to the hotel for dinner and returned in no mood to open the office for the evening. But to acknowledge defeat would never do. So he turned on the lights and retreated to the consultation room to wait.

This time his patience was rewarded. Presently he heard a car rattle up the street and stop. A minute later his office

door banged. Mark opened the connecting door in time to see a man enter followed by a woman who carried a child.

"Come in," said Mark cordially.

They were obviously country people. The husband, a tall angular man with a deeply tanned face and a two-day beard, had a strong horsy smell. He wore faded overalls and a sweat-stained hat. The woman was as round as a dumpling, obviously pregnant, with a pink-cheeked face and bright blue eyes.

They were ill at ease as Mark brought forward chairs. He spoke to them gently and the woman explained that they were worried about the child, who was small for his age and weakly. "Can you help him?" she said anxiously.

"Have you taken him to any other doctor?" asked Mark, anxious not to interfere with some other local practitioner.

The man said that they had seen no doctor. Neighbors had suggested remedies, but they had not been successful. The child continued to lose weight.

Mark took the child, and the boy whimpered feebly. He examined him carefully and brought him back to the woman. He asked what she fed him and concealed his surprise and shock when she told him.

"He needs a different diet," he said simply, and made several suggestions.

They listened attentively, showing every evidence of wish-

ing to co-operate. Mark liked them.

The man told Mark that his name was Adam Hagen and that he lived fifteen miles south of town in the hills. They couldn't afford to spend much on doctoring, but they were anxious to find someone who could help their child.

"I'm expectin' in September, Doctor," the woman said

shyly, "and I'd like you to take care of me."

"A neighbor woman brought this young'un into the world,"

said the man doubtfully. "Could that be the reason he ain't healthy?"

Mark hastened to assure them that he thought the boy would be all right soon and gave them a prescription.

"Dave Gordon can fix this?" asked the father.

"That's right."

"Dave's a good friend of the hill people, but we don't want to get him into trouble again. He had some when he told my neighbor what to do for the flu."

"Gordon can fill this prescription for you. Have you a telephone?" Mark asked. The man nodded, and Mark said he would call and check results.

Adam Hagen pulled a bill from a greasy wallet and paid him, and Mark went to the door and watched them leave in a battered and mud-spattered car.

He felt elated. This was quite a different experience from that of the morning. Before the car was out of sight, another car drove up and stopped. A man came in who worked in a small chemical plant at the edge of town. Several others drifted in. Possibly their ailments were unimportant and they were just curious to meet Mark, but at any rate he locked his door at nine o'clock that evening in high spirits.

The experience of the morning with Genevieve Pepper only amused him now. The meeting with Adam Hagen and his wife pleased him; they had left him with the impression that they accepted him as a real friend and wanted him for their family physician. This was the spirit in which Grandfather Ridgeway had worked and won for himself the love and confidence of the whole community.

Somehow tonight it was not enough to have this feeling of success without sharing it with someone. Unconsciously Mark found himself eager to share his new experiences with Dinah Farley.

He left the house hurriedly, but checked himself halfway to the corner of the street and reluctantly turned back and walked in the opposite direction from the one which led to Dinah's cottage.

It would be selfish to impose his friendship when it could only mean further gossip.

Dinah would be interested in what had happened tonight, he knew, but he conquered the impulse to see her.

Mark was thoughtful as he walked along the shady streets that evening. There was a personal side to his future which he must consider seriously. A doctor must guard his reputation at all times.

Although the temptation to take advantage of Dinah's interest would be strong, he must be careful.

5

During the weeks that followed, quite a few people drifted into Mark's office. Some, he guessed accurately, came out of curiosity. But there was the usual number who were disgruntled because other doctors were unable to diagnose their ailments to their personal satisfaction. And there were the old, who hoped that someone might be able to restore youth and agility to tired nerves and old muscles.

A week after the Hagens' visit to his office, Adam Hagen called Mark. He said that his wife had overdone working in the garden and he was anxious for Mark to see her, but he did not want to bring her into town as the drive was over a rough road. Would it be possible for Mark to make a call? He gave

directions, when Mark agreed to drive out after his evening office hours.

It was a beautiful evening. There would be a full moon. All through dinner Mark debated an idea which came to him when he thought of the country drive. Why not ask Dinah and Danny to go with him? What harm could there be in a simple neighborly gesture? And it would be a help to have a nurse see the woman. Dinah could possibly approach Mr. Hagen easier than he could.

Excuses, Mark thought impatiently. Why not be honest? I'm lonesome. Work is all right, but I can't find any great satisfaction in nothing but work. And surely Dinah is sensible enough not to mistake my reason for making the suggestion that she and Danny go along tonight.

Mark went off at once to ask her. He found the Farleys having a late supper, and at the suggestion that they drive out into the hills, Danny shrieked with joy. "Can we go, Mother? Please," he urged, jumping up from his chair and tugging at his mother's arm.

Dinah hesitated. There was a soft flush on her cheeks and her eyes held a troubled expression.

"Please." Danny danced up and down excitedly. "I never have a ride. Never."

"We'll go, and thanks," she said.

"I'll keep my usual office hours, but we can start promptly at nine," said Mark.

"We'll be ready."

Mark went off quickly before she could change her mind or read in his face his delight at her willingness to join him.

Tonight he hoped there wouldn't be any patients to delay them. He fretted as the evening dragged on with quite a number in his outer office. But at last he heaved a sigh of relief and turned out the office lights.

He found Dinah and Danny waiting, Danny's eyes bright with excitement. Dinah looked quite different in a white blouse and wide striped skirt. Her hair curled damply about her face, she wore more lipstick than usual, and her blue eyes sparkled. "Danny was afraid you might not be able to come," she said as they started off.

"And you?" Mark glanced down at her and their eyes met. He looked hastily away. He must watch his step, Mark determined. No matter how difficult it might be to conceal his

happiness at being with her.

They took a winding road which led toward the hills. It was quite dark now. The moon was just rising above the trees. "Eventually this road leads to the river," Mark told Dinah. "In my grandfather's time it was greatly traveled, for it led to a ferry."

"What's a ferry?" asked Danny.

Mark explained, glad to keep the conversation on an impersonal level.

"How are things" asked Dinah presently.

"My practice? Not too bad." Mark omitted the mention of that first disturbing patient. "Of course, so far no one has been seriously afflicted." He smiled. "Simple ailments and bruises. Except for this case in the country."

Then he told her about the Hagens. Dinah had had experience with hill people at the hospital. She declared that they were fine people. Simple folks. Strongly religious. "But more or less afraid of doctors," she ended. "You have really accomplished something if you have won their respect, Mark."

She said his name quite naturally and then the color

flooded her cheeks.

"Thanks, Dinah," Mark said.

The use of his name showed that she accepted him as a friend. That should satisfy him, thought Mark humbly. Why

expect more? Not for the world must he do anything to distress or embarrass her.

The moon rose higher and flooded the landscape with whiteness. Lights twinkled deep in the valleys as they drove higher and higher into the folds of the hills. At last they turned into a lane before which stood a lopsided mailbox upon which Adam Hagen's name was printed.

"Is this it?" asked Danny eagerly. "Is this the place?"

"Must be," said Mark, and pointed to the low, rambling farmhouse ahead.

Adam Hagen walked forward to greet them as Mark brought the car to a stop before a side porch. "So you made it." His voice held a note of surprise. "I hardly expected you."

"I told you I'd come," said Mark.

Danny fell out of the car to chase a yellow cat, and Dinah and Mark followed the man into the house. It was neat but bare. A glowing wood stove in the kitchen; beyond was a central living room and opening from that a bedroom, in which Mary Hagen lay.

"This is Mrs. Farley, who is a nurse," Mark told her.

The man lingered for a moment and then said he would keep an eye on Danny, whose shrieks of delight penetrated even to this room. Through the window they could see him racing about in the moonlight and presently the farmer called and went off with him toward the barn.

"Yours?" Mary Hagen's bright eyes rested upon Dinah.

Dinah nodded.

"And how is your boy?" asked Mark.

For a while the talk was about the child whom she had brought to the office. Then Mark said she must be more careful in the future or she would lose the baby she carried. "No more working in the garden," he ordered.

After a little while he left her alone with Dinah and went

in search of Mary's husband. He repeated his warning when he found him inside the barn with Danny. "There may be some trouble because of improper care when her other child was born," he cautioned. "Keep her in bed for a week and get someone to come in and help you."

They walked together toward Mark's car. Adam Hagen wrung Mark's hand at parting. "Thanks, Doctor. We feel we've found a friend," he said warmly. He insisted that they should wait and went into the house to return with a basket. There were fresh eggs and berries and crisp green vegetables.

"But I'm not married," Mark stammered as he presented his

gift.

"Maybe Mrs. Farley can use them."

As they drove back to town, Mark said soberly, "I feel today that I really belong here. I like these people and they like me. They are eager to take my advice and they make me feel I have something to give them."

"That's the best thing in life," said Dinah simply. "To be

needed. To have something to share."

"I begin to grasp the responsibility of being a doctor," said Mark. He wished he could tell Dinah that this experience tonight would have meant less if she had not been with him. He had learned something about her tonight as he heard her talk to Mary Hagen. As another woman, she could say what it was difficult for him to say, and Mary had listened and held Dinah's firm hand fast for a moment before she left her.

He had not mistaken the warmth and generosity in those blue eyes. He was happy as he had not been for a long, long time as they drove toward home.

Danny, worn out with racing about the farm, slept with his red head pillowed on Dinah's shoulder. The moon poured a silvery light over the changing landscape. Wisps of mist

filled the hollows. They crossed a creek which wound on through the hills to join the river.

They drove in silence mostly. And for Mark everything was right tonight. There was no turmoil in his heart, nor uncertainty about the future.

When they reached the cottage, Mark insisted on carrying Danny upstairs. The boy didn't waken but gave a few sleepy murmurs as Dinah removed his clothes.

"I'll get him to bed," said Dinah as she saw Mark linger.

Was it a dismissal?

She thanked him for the evening and then Mark had no alternative but to go slowly down the stairs. He should leave now, he told himself, before some heady impulse got him into trouble.

Instead, he sat down on the porch steps and waited for Dinah.

Dinah gave a little exclamation of surprise when she came down and found him there. "I thought you had gone," she said.

"I hated to go back to my hotel room. What a night this is!"

"It is a lovely night. It was so kind of you to take Danny. He will talk about this experience for weeks."

"We must do it again."

She was silent.

"Sit down," urged Mark. "Tell me what you thought of Hagen and his Mary."

After a moment she obeyed.

They talked about the hill people for a while.

"I wanted you to meet them," he said, and then added impulsively, "I've wanted to share this experience with you, Dinah." Once started the words came tumbling out without his ability to check them. "The first night I had a patient I

wanted to rush right over and tell you. I knew that I was a fool . . . Just an impulsive fool—" He broke off abruptly, checked by the sudden change in her expression.

"Please don't," she said, getting to her feet. "Please . . ." Her voice was low and broken.

Mark was standing beside her. "You're crying. Are you angry with me?"

She shook her head. For a moment she let him hold her hand in his big warm one. She tried to speak but the words choked her.

"A man must run to a woman when he has any luck," said Mark, trying to speak lightly. "I don't know a soul here and you've been so kind—"

"I'm not kind." She withdrew her hand and stood apart from Mark, fighting for selfcontrol. "On the contrary, I've been careless and selfish. There's something you should know. I'm surprised that the local gossips haven't told you anything about my past long ago."

"I refused to listen to any gossip about you." said Mark roughly.

She dropped down into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Mark stood awkwardly beside her. He was absolutely miserable. If he'd only gone straight home, this wouldn't have happened, but like a blundering fool he had to precipitate a situation which made Dinah unhappy and might end any chance to be of help to her.

Was he in love with her? Mark wasn't sure. Was it sympathy which made him want to take her in his arms and protect her from whatever this trouble was that threatened her?

"When she did not speak, he said harshly, "I suppose this concerns your husband. Right?"

"You've heard?"

"I've already told you that I wouldn't listen."

She looked up and smiled faintly. "Don't worry. It's nothing that concerns you."

"If it makes you unhappy, it does concern me."

"Danny's father is still alive," she said in a toneless voice. "I'm not separated from him—at least not in the way you might think."

"There's no reason why that should prevent us from continuing to be friends."

Dinah disagreed. "There is a reason, a good reason, Mark. Believe me, I need a friend. I have had none since I came to Ridgeway. But—"

Mark broke in stubbornly, "Then for Danny's sake, don't let silly local gossip influence you to make a foolish decision. We're neighbors. You can't avoid me and I don't intend to avoid you."

"We'll keep it that way. Neighbors," she said firmly, and held out her hand.

Mark had no choice but to agree. Secretly he determined that this was not the end of the matter, regardless of how Dinah felt. But he could not press her until he knew more about this mysterious husband who was separated from Dinah and was alive and yet made no effort to claim her or his son.

6

Well, now he knew exactly where he stood, thought Mark bitterly when he reached home that evening after the trip to the country with Dinah and Danny. Why hadn't he been satisfied with a simple friendship, instead of alarming Dinah

as he had tonight? Could anything be more disastrous to his future than to fall in love with a married woman?

Was he in love with Dinah? Mark asked himself.

He was not sure. But to have his name linked with hers by the village gossips would help neither Dinah nor himself.

Where was her husband? he wondered later as he lay in bed unable to go to sleep. As though it should matter to him where the man was or why he did not remain with his family. In the future, he would confine his attentions to girls who were not attached, Mark resolved.

Someone like Genevieve Pepper, he thought wryly. There was one girl who could be trusted to know her way about and not become seriously involved with any man unless she wanted to. What kind of man would interest Genevieve? Why should he think of her tonight? She was dangerous and provocative. Dinah was sweet and aroused his sympathy. It was ridiculous that either girl should distrub him or shake his resolution to skip girls until he could think seriously about them.

Mark overslept as a result of tossing and turning most of the night, and was awakened by the ringing of the doorbell. He had forgotten that Delia was coming to clean today.

"You sick, Doctor Mark?" Delia asked in alarm.

"Just lazy," said Mark briefly, and wondered just what Delia would think if she knew the reason for his bad night.

He hurried off to dress and then walked across to the hotel for breakfast. He sternly dismissed all thought of Dinah this morning, and upon his return sought out Delia and inquired about her boy Lennie.

Delia seemed reluctant to discuss the matter. The boy had been run over by a car. His leg had been badly injured and a local doctor had operated with poor success. Lennie had

been in and out of the hospital several times, but Delia had decided finally that she couldn't afford to spend any more money for a case which seemed hopeless.

"Miss Dinah took care of Lennie when he was at the hospital," she told Mark. "Miss Dinah sure has had a hard time." observed Delia moving about the offices and working as she talked. "That no-good husband leaving her to support her baby. Poor lamb, it's not her fault that she made a bad marriage, but everyone in Ridgeway blames her."

"I vaguely remember the Farleys. I think Danny's grandmother worked for my grandmother," said Mark, pretending a great interest in some correspondence on his desk.

"Mrs. Farley was a good woman. She left the house to Miss Dinah."

With a little encouragement, he could have known all the details about Dinah's unhappy marriage, but Mark was reluctant to pursue the subject. It was not fair to pry into matters which Dinah herself had not revealed. If the time came when she wanted his help, she knew she could have it. Probably the less he knew now the better for his own peace of mind, thought Mark, and was glad when the door opened and a patient entered the outer office.

Delia disappeared into the main part of the house. The day's routine began. There was the usual scattering of patients—and then just before noon a car drove up which he recognized at once as Genevieve Pepper's yellow convertible.

Genieve was not alone today. A very elegant little old lady clung to her arm.

"Tve brought you a patient," said Genevieve, with that mischievous gleam in her dark eyes which so disturbed Mark.

"This is Doctor Mark Merryman, Aunt Hetty. And this is my great-aunt, Miss Hetty Garrett, Doctor."

Her expression was demure as she made the introduction.

She was solicitous of her companion. She followed Miss Hetty into the inner office and took a chair at a little distance.

Miss Hetty was tiny. As pink and white as a Dresden figurine, but with a pair of bright skeptical black eyes which viewed Mark cautiously. "Gen tells me you're an excellent doctor. You cured her headaches."

Mark listened gravely, as Miss Hetty launched into a long list of symptoms. The old invariably thought a doctor should possess some magic formula by which he could restore agility to old limbs and bring the glow of youth back to wrinkled cheeks, and Miss Hetty was no exception. She was rich and spoiled, Mark judged. He listened patiently and, as he expected, discovered that she had tried numerous doctors and lost confidence in them because they gave her vitamins and tonics and never, according to her, discovered the cause of her stiff joints and wakeful nights.

She would be a demanding patient but a profitable one. No doubt she wielded a big influence in the community. Like her great-niece, she possessed charm and had the power to wheelle those she met into bending to her autocratic will.

Mark gave her a prescription which probably differed little from those she had received from other doctors. She demanded flattery and unconsciously he gave it. Before she left, Genevieve remarked that she had an errand across the park and would have the prescription filled while Miss Hetty waited in the office.

It was quite evident Miss Hetty relished this opportunity to talk about her great-niece. She launched into a long recital of Genevieve's attractions and the number of men who had wanted to marry her. Although only twenty-two she had been engaged seven times, she declared. "Once to that scamp, Ned Farley," came one unexpected bit of news, which Mark managed to receive with an expressionless face although he

was startled. "Now she plans to marry Jeff Harrison in the fall," said Miss Hetty. "I wonder if she will?" The bright black eyes held a knowing look as they met Mark's. "Gen is absolutely unpredictable. Spoiled to death, too. Her mother died when she was a child and her father hasn't a grain of sense."

Just then Genevieve herself returned to the office.

"Talking about me?" she asked lightly. She put an affectionate arm about the little old lady's shoulders. Miss Hetty made no answer, but turned, stared through the side window of the office and gave a sharp exclamation. "That must be the girl," she said abruptly.

"What girl?" asked Genevieve, and went and stood beside

her aunt.

"The girl Ned Farley married."

Genevieve turned to Mark. "Have you met her?" she asked directly.

She knows I've met Dinah, thought Mark, angry with himself as he felt his face color. "Naturally I've met Mrs. Farley and her son," he said quietly. "She lives just beyond the hedge in that cottage and we're neighbors."

"I was simply curious," said Genevieve carelessly.

"Pretty, isn't she?" said Miss Hetty.

To Mark's relief, a patient entered the room just then and the conversation ended. It annoyed Mark that Dinah should be viewed with such disapproval by everyone. It was not understandable. What mystery surrounded her and her marriage to justify the curiosity shown in her affairs?

Dinah remained in his thoughts in spite of his attempts to forget her. Several days later he saw Danny perched forlornly on the porch steps as he worked in his garden. "Come and help me," he invited warmly.

Danny jumped to obey, his small face eager. "I'm lone-some," he stated.

"So am I," Mark acknowledged. "When we finish these weeds, you and I will go over to Gordon's and have the biggest soda you ever saw."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"You don't think Mother will care?" asked Danny soberly.

"I'll take care of that."

"Do men get lonesome?" inquired Danny unexpectedly as they crossed the park together an hour later.

"You bet they do."

"But they don't cry like girls do," remarked Danny, hurrying to match his short legs to Mark's long stride. "My mother cries sometimes. She cries whenever she gets a letter."

Here was another chance to solve Dinah's trouble, but Mark changed the subject. When they entered the drugstore the girl who came forward to take their order gazed curiously at the little boy with Mark. "Isn't that Mrs. Farley's little boy?" she asked.

More curiosity, thought Mark angrily. "It is," he said coldly. "Please bring us two of your special sodas, will you?"

"The works," said Danny, and giggled.

"Right," said Mark.

Danny seemed too absorbed in his soda to be aware of the girl's curiosity, but on the way home he surprised Mark by saying gravely, "Why do they always ask me questions about my mother? Why do they want to know where my father is, Doctor Mark?"

"Do they?"

Danny nodded soberly. "No one asked me questions when we lived in Chicago. That was before my father got sick."

Was that the story? thought Mark. Was the man a mental case? Did Dinah support him in some institution?

"My father took me to a ball game once," observed Danny thoughtfully. "I wish he'd come back and take me again."

"Maybe he will someday," said Mark.

At the gate in front of the old house, Danny thanked Mark for the soda. "I like you because you don't ask questions," he said gravely.

Mark smiled. "As I remember, you asked me plenty when you first met me. Remember? How tall I was? Whether I had a little boy and why not?"

"That's different."

Yes, that was different, thought Mark as he watched Danny skip away down the street toward home. Danny's questions were innocent ones. Those of the people he encountered were almost malicious. A meddling desire to pry.

See that you are never guilty of that, Mark cautioned himself, resolving that the best proof of his friendship for Dinah Farley would be to leave her alone to fight her own battles.

7

BEFORE June was over, Mark had more or less established himself in the community. Indirectly he heard that Genevieve Pepper was visiting in the East, where she was to be maid of honor at a wedding. Jeff Harrison became an active candidate for the office of state attorney in the fall elections and

the weather belied the usual prediction for June and was hot and humid.

"Typical weather for this river valley," Dave Gordon told Mark.

Meanwhile, Mark made the acquaintance of the other doctors in the town. Dr. Foster, who was over eighty, announced his retirement from general practice. Dr. Hale, who had been in Ridgeway for twenty years, showed no interest in Mark and was most pessimistic about his ability to establish himself as a physician.

"There are too many doctors in town already," he announced scornfully. "The only chance for you would be to encourage the hill people—and the minute you do that you'll lose the profitable class."

"Why?" demanded Mark, who had taken a violent dislike to Hale, who impressed him as a man who was not too well-grounded in his profession, who kept an office which was definitely untidy and had a silly receptionist who batted her eyelashes at Mark and spoke in a faked Southern accent.

Later, Dave Gordon told him that there was plenty of gossip about Hale, who didn't hesitate to indulge in some shady practice and had been suspected of providing dope for some unfortunates in the town.

Mark liked the pediatrician, Joe Hadley, and talked to him about Delia's son, Lennie.

"It would take a lot of money to finance an operation such as he would need," Hadley told Mark, "Moreover, there is no assurance that it would be successful. Delia Maxwell went to Hale and he bungled the job and the boy's badly crippled now. We might look into the matter later. I'd be glad to help."

Hadley was a graduate of a fine school. He was a thin sandy-haired young man with a pair of keen gray eyes and a definitely homely face, but when he smiled he had an en-

gaging manner. He was Mark's own age and, like Mark, observed that girls could be a dreadful nuisance to a young man making a start in the medical profession. "I've met the best the town affords," he grinned and sat swinging back and forth in his office chair flourishing a cigarette in one lean freckled hand. "Have you been introduced to the town belle, Genevieve Pepper?"

Mark said he had.

"Quite a dish, isn't she?"

Mark agreed.

"Joe Pepper has it all arranged for her to marry Jeff Harrison. Know Harrison?"

"I've met him."

"Old family. Pots of money. Went to a Southern military academy and then managed to squeak through college and law school. Pepper has money, too, but Harrison has background. The only hitch is that the girl isn't too enthusiastic. On the surface, Gen Pepper may appear all froth and flirtation, but she's plenty solid. She's got a keen mind and a good head and makes Papa a bit unhappy occasionally when she gets out of hand."

"She's definitely engaged to Harrison, isn't she?" asked

Hadley shrugged. "She's been engaged before; once, when she was just a kid, to someone on the wrong side of the tracks, a wild Irish youngster named Ed Farley. Pepper sent her East to school and broke up that, and then had to hotfoot it to stop her from eloping with a Broadway actor twice her age. Gen keeps the town gossips busy when they're not sharpening their curiosity on another girl who is equally attractive. She's a nurse who works part time at the hospital and is wonderful with children. Have you met Dinah Farley and her boy?"

"She lives in the cottage just beyond my office," said Mark. "So you've met Danny?"

Mark still had a perverse feeling that he didn't want to know Dinah's personal history from anyone but herself. He rose, observing that he had overstayed his visit and taken up Hadley's time as well.

"Glad you dropped in." Hadley unwound his long legs from the rungs of his office chair and went with Mark to the door. "We'll have to get together sometime soon. Belong to the Country Club, Merryman?"

"Mark said he didn't.

"Better join. I'll put up your name, it isn't too expensive and you get around and see the folks that count in this town. Small-town practice depends a lot on contacts. I'll get in touch with you. So long."

Mark felt he had made a friend. He needed the companionship of a man like Hadley. Hadley impressed him as a competent physician and an all-round fine fellow.

The last doctor he visited was the most popular practitioner in Ridgeway, so Dave Gordon informed him. "Spent a mint on his office, has a cute receptionist, belongs to the Country Club, is a good mixer and presents a fine appearance," Dave stated.

Mark wondered whether his own impression of Cass Merton would be the same as the druggist's, and found that it was. There was something about the man which repelled him. Maybe it was his too unctuous manner. Merton had a good education, had interned at a famous hospital, and his office was the last word in surroundings, his equipment the best. His staff consisted of a pretty and efficient receptionist and a dark-haired nurse.

Mark thought ruefully of his own office and wondered how he could hope to compete with Merton.

In contrast to the loose-jointed Hadley, Merton was a small compact man with smooth light-brown hair and a close-clipped mustache over a mouth which was too full.

His white coat was as perfectly tailored as a Brooks Brothers sport outfit. His hands were square. In every detail, he fitted perfectly the picture of the successful doctor.

He was cordial to Mark, but his eyes were cold. He insisted upon showing Mark through his offices, which were better-equipped than the average city physician's. "A setup like mine costs a lot of money," he boasted, "but it pays off eventually. I owe plenty and sometimes wonder how I'll ever make enough to keep my head above water, but if you want the luxury trade you have to have this." He waved a smooth hand toward his office. He grinned and winked as he indicated the pretty receptionist. "She helps, too."

"Would this setup encourage the country trade?" Mark

could not resist asking.

Merton's manner changed. "I don't go in for the hill folks," he said coldly.

"Someone has to take care of them," said Mark dryly.

"I don't encourage them."

Definitely he didn't like Merton.

Mark met Merton several times later when Hadley invited him out to the club for a golf game.

"Do you like Merton?" he asked Hadley bluntly.

Hadley grinned. "It's unprofessional to criticize a fellow medico," he said, and turned to speak to his caddy.

At that moment a girl came out of the clubhouse. Mark recognized her before Hadley spoke. "There's our Gen. Back in circulation again, I hear. Someone told me her engagement with Harrison was off. She met some guy back East who has the inside track now. Ready?"

Mark said that he was and they moved off across the course.

When they returned to the clubhouse Mark saw Genevieve seated at a table playing cards. She waved and smiled.

"Well, well, said Joe Hadley, "you didn't tell me you knew her."

"I said I'd met her."

Joe grinned. Watch it, boy. She's dynamite and she gave you a mighty speculative glance just then."

"I'm out of her class," said Mark hastily.

"No male is out of that gal's class. Especially a good-looking, unattached one. I might add that being attached is no handicap for Gen Pepper, either."

Secretly Mark agreed. He felt a touch of excitement when he remembered her glance. The call that evening came as not too much of a surprise and to Mark's annoyance again he experienced a thrill when he recognized Genevieve's voice. Low. Husky. Provocative. Who could mistake her?

"I won't take you away from your patients," she said mockingly. "I just want to invite you to a dinner—the buffet dinner at the Country Club Saturday evening. Don't make excuses. It will do you good to have a little fun. The orchestra is second rate but I'm considered fairly light on my feet, Doctor. I hope you won't be bored."

Mark had been restless and low-spirited ever since the evening when Dinah Farley had told him bluntly that they could not be friends. Since then, he had seen her only at a distance. She showed a definite inclination to avoid him and Mark was too proud to trespass unless welcome.

So Genevieve's invitation came at a time when he was ready to accept it. His immediate acceptance seemed to surprise her. "That's wonderful," she said. "I know your office hours will keep you after the party gets under way, but come out to the club and have dinner even though it is late."

His patients were always late on Saturday evening and Mark was too conscientious to cut them short. Many were country people. Already they liked and trusted him. They had been the first to accept him and recommend him to their friends. They paid cash when they came and never asked credit although he would have given it gladly. Mark had built a fine relationship between himself and them.

He thought of this as he dressed that evening. It was his first party in Ridgeway. This would be his introduction to a group of people who had shown no interest in him as a doctor. He hadn't worn formal clothes for months and his midnight blue trousers and coat of white tropical worsted were not the most expensive but Mark had broad shoulders and a good carriage and wore his clothes well.

He experimented with ties and settled for a blue and white polka-dot bow tie. He took one last appraising glance at himself in the old-fashioned mahogany dresser and wished Dinah could see him. Then he cursed himself for a conceited fool; clothes would make no difference in Dinah's attitude toward him.

He drove out to the club, parked, and mounted the long flight of steps that led to the wide veranda. The first person he saw as he entered the lounge was Genevieve Pepper. She wore a white dress. Her shoulders were bare and her black hair curled softly above them. The golden flecks in her dark eyes as she came forward to welcome him made Mark's heartbeat quicken. Tucking a slim hand through his white coat sleeve, she said softly, "So you really came."

"Glad?" asked Mark recklessly.

"We'll discuss that later," she said with an impish smile. "Come along . . . You must meet some people and have your dinner." She led him forward, still with her hand tucked in his arm. She introduced him to the group seated in a circle

in the center of the lounge. They greeted Mark curiously. Some lifted eyebrows. Mark guessed that all believed him the latest victim to this dark-eyed girl.

Maybe he was, he thought recklessly. Why not? No one could be lovelier than Genevieve Pepper was tonight. No one could be more gracious. Then he added uneasily, nor anyone more possessive and determined than Genevieve when she wanted something.

8

GENEVIEVE PEPPER would turn any man's head, thought Mark uneasily as she led him through the club lounge and into the dining room where a buffet table was set up and where a few belated diners still lingered.

"Sorry to be late," he apologized, "But a doctor's time isn't

his own, you know."

"You can have your dinner and I'll have a cup of coffee

with you," she suggested.

They found a table in the corner of the room. A waiter followed them with Mark's filled plate and coffee. Cozy, thought Mark uneasily, and again questioned his judgment in accepting Genevieve's invitation.

"You look quite different," she observed archly.

"So do you." Mark wondered if she knew just how beautiful she looked to him. Tonight she wore delicate make-up and her hair was as smooth as satin except for its short curling ends.

"Is that a compliment, Doctor?" she asked teasingly. "I didn't know you ever made pretty speeches."

"I don't," said Mark honestly. Then added, "Not as a

rule."

"Shy?" She put her elbows on the table and sat with her slim fingers laced together. The ring which sparkled on the finger of her left hand reminded Mark of her engagement to Jeff Harrison and he wondered just where Harrison was tonight.

"I've never been accused of being shy," objected Mark. "But frankly, I'm in no position to make pretty speeches to any girl at the present moment. I'm just a poor doctor up to his eyes in debt. I don't belong in a setup like this one, although I'm thoroughly enjoying myself and thank you very much for asking me."

"Almost a pretty speech," she cocked her dark head on one side, "But you are difficult, you know. I thought it might be another girl."

"I've just made it clear. I have no time for girls right now."

"Later, maybe?"

"Possibly." Mark laughed and finished his excellent coffee. He offered her a cigarette, then lighted hers and his own. He could not deny that he was glad to be here. It had been a long time since he had met a girl as charming as Genevieve Pepper. Tonight there was little of the arrogance in her manner which he usually associated with her. Her voice might hold a challenge but her eyes softened when they met Mark's and for a moment he thought there was something wistful in them.

Did a girl like Genevieve Pepper make many real friends? he wondered. And then scoffed at himself. Why pity someone who possessed everything? Money, beauty, and charm.

Yet the thought lingered as they left the dining room and

crossed the lounge later. The dancing had started and the crowd was drifting in the direction of the ballroom.

Genevieve tucked her hand through Mark's arm. "Do you like to dance, Mark?"

"I do."

"Do you know my name?" she demanded.

"Genevieve?"

"Folks call me Gen."

"I like the whole name better. It's an old-fashioned name, isn't it?"

"I'm not at all old-fashioned."

"I'm quite sure you are not."

"Is that another pretty speech or a criticism?"

Mark smiled. "I like the name because my mother used to sing a song by that name."

"I never knew my mother. I wish I had."

You never knew what to expect from her, thought Mark. One moment she was a girl ready to start a light flirtation, the next a girl with an appealing softness in her lovely dark eyes. Which was the real Genevieve?

"The music has started. Let's dance," she said quickly. She declared the selection was one of her favorites.

She could dance—Mark had never doubted that. But he had not realized the thrill he would experience as she moved into his arms and the music carried them along, neither speaking until they had circled the room.

"Well, Doctor?" Those black eyes were close. So close he could see again the golden flecks in their brilliant depths.

"You're a wonderful dancer."

"So are you. We get along fine together. Tell me about yourself. Where did you live before you came here? Where did you intern? And did you fall in love with a pretty nurse

somewhere along the line?" The black eyes were mischievous now.

"No pretty nurse. I interned in the East." Mark named the hospital. He found it easy to talk with her in his arms, the music a background. He told her about his father's separation from his mother, a thing he had never discussed with anyone before. "I visited in Ridgeway when I was a small boy."

"Is that why you returned?"

"I wanted to be a doctor like my Grandfather Ridgeway," Mark acknowledged.

"I've heard about him from Aunt Hetty."

She told him a little about herself then. "I've never had a real home," said Genevieve. "Maybe you've heard plenty of gossip about me. Once I almost eloped with the town's bad boy. Did you know that?"

"I never listen to gossip," said Mark briefly.

A clumsy dancer stepped on her dress and tore it, and Genevieve went off to the powder room to repair the damages. In her absence, Mark stepped out on the club veranda and took a deep breath of the cool spring air. He must be careful, he cautioned himself. It would be easy to fall in love with this girl. Easy! It would take no effort whatever; in fact he would have to watch his step to avoid it. But suddenly his interest in Genevieve faded and his thoughts went back to another girl who could not take life so lightly, who was too honest to indulge in light flirtations, or to accept favors which might bring trouble to him and injure his reputation.

He remembered that Genevieve Pepper was engaged to a man prominent in the town and her father was a man of influence. She would not hesitate to try to trap him for the mere satisfaction of adding another to her string of con-

quests. Because he had been reluctant, she was determined to succeed.

He knew that with a girl like Dinah Farley he could give his confidence and it would never be betrayed. But with this girl he must be constantly on his guard.

Mark felt a bit guilty for the thought when Genevieve returned.

"Miss me?" she said lightly. She perched on the porch rail beside him and balanced herself with a slim hand on Mark's shoulder.

"Shall we dance?" Mark asked hastily.

She shrugged. "Let's watch the moon." She moved closer. The moon was not the same one he and Dinah had watched on that first evening when he arrived in Ridgeway. But again it was full and it still had magic.

"Harrison isn't here tonight?" said Mark abruptly.

"You knew we were engaged?" Her tone was indifferent.

"I heard that you were."

She was silent for a moment. Then, "We're engaged to be married in the fall. Jeff wanted me to marry him right now and tour the state while he campaigned. He thought I might help to win votes for him. But I hate politics, so I promised to marry him after the election in November. He and Father are downstate together. Is that what you wanted to know?"

Mark laughed. "I apologize for my curiosity and I hope Harrison will be successful."

"In his political career?"

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"What else?"

She shrugged, and began to hum a bit of the tune the orchestra was playing. She swung a foot in a high-heeled sandal as she sang softly.

"I like that tune," she said finally. "You wouldn't think me

sentimental, would you, Mark?"

It was the first time she had used his name so directly. Her next remark startled Mark by its suddenness. "Are you interested in Ed Farley's wife?"

Mark concealed his annoyance with difficulty. "I believe you know that Mrs. Farley and her son live near me. Being neighborly doesn't necessarily indicate a sentimental interest in a married woman."

"Marriage makes no difference."

"It does to me."

She laughed. "Naturally I was amazed when someone hinted that you had been seen together."

"I took them out on a country call with me one evening."

She shot him a quick glance. "Still planning to build up a hillbilly practice?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because the people I could help you to know would refuse to sit in your office with that type."

"That type being all good honest American citizens."

She tucked her arm through his. "What a stubborn person you are, Mark. Don't you understand that contacts count in every line of business today?"

"I'm not in business."

"It's the smart doctor who goes after the luxury class."

"My ambition is in another direction."

"That's silly."

"Maybe so."

Mark met several of Genevieve's friends during the balance of the evening, and they all viewed him curiously. One or two inquired about Harrison. The Jamiesons, with whom Genevieve had come, told her that they were driving down to a night club in the valley for a final drink. Would she like to go . . . Would the doctor care to join them?

Genevieve's quick glance caught Mark's reluctance. "Doc-

tor Merryman will take me home," she said. "You won't mind, Doctor?" Again there was that mocking note in her voice.

She thought him a fool. He wished heartily that her friends had been more persuasive. The prospect of a moonlight drive with her dismayed Mark. She would try to distrub him, tease him, enjoy arousing his temper—and she was quite capable of doing all three.

Settled in his car a half hour later she snuggled down, her arm touching Mark's and her dark head on his shoulder.

"Nice," she said softly. "I like this. Don't you, Mark?"

Mark set his chin hard and stared at the moonwashed road ahead. "I don't know where you live," he said flatly.

"In a hurry to take me home?"

"I thought you hinted that you had a headache when your friends suggested-"

"I didn't want to go with them."

Mark could find no answer to this remark although he knew Genevieve expected him to express his pleasure at her company.

It was not the first time a girl's head had rested against his shoulder but he could remember no time when he had had to struggle so to keep a cool head. The thought angered him and the check he had put on his self-control threatened to slip. As they reached the top of a hill and the town lay spread out in the valley below them, she said sharply, "Stop the car."

Mark brought the car to a stop with a jerk. He took a hasty glance about to see why Genevieve should seem alarmed. There was no car in sight. No evidence of trouble. When he turned toward her, she began to laugh. "What's wrong?" Mark asked, bewildered.

"You are," she said softly, and reached up and pulled down his face and kissed him.

Mark was caught off guard. She was all softness and sweetness and loveliness. The touch of her lips made his head whirl. When he said nothing, she whispered, "Mark . . . don't you know how to kiss a girl?"

His temper flared, and he caught her close and kissed her. He held her tightly, his heart pounding, his hands trembling. Then just as quickly he released her and set the car in motion. "Was that what you wanted?" he asked harshly.

She moved away from him and said nothing. He drove fast, almost recklessly. Then entered the town and she told him where she lived. A big, sprawling, English-type house near the outskirts of town. Finally she spoke. "I'll try not to annoy you again, Doctor Merryman."

"I did enjoy the evening," he stammered.

She smiled. "Good night, Mark," was all she said.

With that brief farewell she went quickly away and entered the house.

Mark sat for a moment and watched her go. Then he backed out of the drive and started home. His emotions baffled him. It would be a long time before he forgot the violent feeling he had experienced when he held Genevieve Pepper in his arms.

What did she feel? he found himself wondering.

9

WHATEVER Genevieve's reaction to his impulsive embrace, she had puzzled Mark by her silence when he left her. How-

ever, he had little time to dwell upon Genevieve Pepper and her charm, for the morning after the Country Club buffet dinner he had his first really serious case, an emergency operation for a ruptured appendix. The woman had persistently refused to have an operation, Mark learned later.

Joe Hadley assisted him in the operation, congratulated him on the result, and then observed, "So you do know the

town siren?"

"Miss Pepper invited me to be her guest last evening," said Mark briefly.

Joe grinned. "Remember my warning."

"I shall," said Mark grimly.

To his surprise, he found that Dinah had been assigned to his surgical case. Another surprise was the fact that Joe Hadley seemed to know her well. "Dinah's one of the finest," Joe observed as they left the hospital together.

Mark had seen little of Dinah since the trip to the country. Danny often raced back and forth through the hole in the hedge in pursuit of imaginary Indians. "My mother told me not to bother you," he told Mark upon one brief visit he made to the office to have a bandage put on a cut finger.

"You don't bother me." The words stung Mark. Shortly after this, the Hagens appeared in his office one evening and presented him with a basket in which Mark found a dressed

chicken, eggs, and berries from the Hagen farm.

They told him that this was small return for all his kindness. When would he bring his friend and the boy to see them again?

them agains

"Mrs. Farley is a nurse. Her free time is limited," said Mark hastily, wondering just what he would do with the uncooked chicken and the other contents of the basket set down on his office desk.

"Her husband is dead?" asked Mrs. Hagen.

Adam Hagen frowned thoughtfully. "Could that be Ed Farley's wife and boy?"

Mark nodded as he busied himself writing out a prescrip-

It was unusual for Hagen to talk, but he began to tell Mark what he knew. And the news shocked Mark into a new understanding of the burden Dinah carried.

"Ed Farley was never any good," said Hagen. "He used to come out to the farm and steal everything he could lay his hands on."

"Do you mean that redheaded boy who wanted to help with the haying?" said his wife.

Her husband nodded. "He got into serious trouble in Chicago and has tried to break jail repeatedly."

The thought of how all this must worry Dinah sickened Mark. After office hours he picked up the basket and strode around the corner to the Farley cottage. He found Dinah in shorts and a plaid shirt trying to mow the lawn.

Mark set the basket down on the step. "Why do you do that?" he demanded angrily. "I've begged you to let me help you."

She pushed back the tangle of damp auburn hair from her forehead, and made no answer.

"If you're worried because a few gossipy females will presume to call a neighborly act an evidence of sentimental interest . . ."

"I am." But she smiled.

"Forget it." Mark dropped his coat on the step and finished the mowing. Then he joined her on the porch. "The Hagens brought me some stuff." He indicated the basket. "I can't do anything with a raw chicken and two dozen eggs and a couple baskets of berries. Don't say someone will talk because I bring them to you rather than waste them. Please."

"Of course I'll accept them. And don't be angry with me, Mark," she begged.

"Sorry," said Mark gruffly. "But I miss you. Even Danny acts shy and tells me you have sugested he shouldn't bother me."

"You know why, don't you?"

"No," said Mark bluntly. "Why should a child be punished for something for which he isn't to blame? Have you told him about his father?"

"The truth?"

"Certainly. He should know the truth. If not, someone will tell him in a way which will shock him and leave a mark impossible for you or anyone else to erase. Danny may be a child, but he's more than average in intelligence. A time will come when you must reveal to him where his father is."

"You know?" she asked simply.

"Yes. I know that he is in a state penitentiary and likely to remain there."

"He hates prison." Her tone was defensive.

"Do you pity him?" Mark could not conceal his astonishment.

"He's my husband."

"How did you happen to marry a man like this Ed Farley?" demanded Mark. "From what I hear, he never was any good. Is there any good reason why your life should be ruined because you made one mistake?"

She was silent for a minute, and then she began to tell him a little about how she met Farley while he was in the service. "I was very young, seventeen—just a silly, impressionable girl who fell for a uniform," said Dinah. "After Ed left for Korea I knew that I had made a terrible mistake. Then Danny came. I adored my baby. I forced myself to try to make an adjustment when Ed returned from the Army. We

lived in Chicago and before Danny was two years old Ed was in trouble. He was let off with a light sentence. Then it happened again. Sometimes I blame myself for what happened."

"Blame yourself?"

"I didn't understand my husband, I had no real affection for him. He was the father of my child and I was determined to do the best I could to hold my family together, but he became acquainted with some men who were ruthless and stopped at nothing. They attempted to hold up a bank and several people were injured and a bank officer killed, and although Ed declared he was not guilty of the actual killing he was sent to prison for twenty years. He hasn't behaved well there. He's restless and resentful and determined to get out. I live in constant fear that he will succeed someday."

"Modern prisons are well guarded," Mark answered her. "Let's discuss something more cheerful. Danny tells me he's having a birthday Saturday."

"He wants a party."

"He shall have one," declared Mark. "We have the beginnings right here." He picked up the basket and carried it into the house for Dinah. He had the wildest impulse to take her in his arms and comfort her. But if he did, he would destroy any future possibility of their meeting, so he stood idly smoking while she put the things the Hagens had brought in the refrigerator. Afterwards they sat down at the kitchen table with a bottle of Coke and Mark told Dinah about his satisfaction because of the operation he had just performed.

"Old Doctor Foster heard about it," said Dinah. "He's treated that woman for years and has never been able to persuade her to have surgery. Now she can't sing your praises enough, Mark."

Mark was happy about the whole evening. He blessed the Hagens for giving him the excuse to make the visit to Dinah. He felt a keener understanding now of her problem, although he still hated the thought that she was tied for life to a scoundrel. Women had queer ideas of loyalty. Moreover, Danny might prove a serious problem when he learned the truth about his father.

Danny was a sensitive child, a dreamer. He might secretly idealize the father he had never known, and the shock of discovering his true character could be dangerous. Women were born protectors, thought Mark as he went home that evening. Sometimes they made mistakes.

The next day he visited Dave Gordon's drugstore and purchased a kite and a cowboy pistol for Danny. The gun was almost an exact replica of the real thing and was certain to delight any small boy, Mark decided.

"Kids think of nothing but shooting someone today," observed Dave Gordon as he wrapped the presents. "Take this gun . . . you might fool anyone into thinking it was the genuine article if it was pointed at you. Suppose the kid stumbles upon a real one someday. What would happen then?"

"As long as every other kid has a gun, why bother?" said Mark good-naturedly.

"This for your kid?"

"I'm not married," Mark reminded him.

"Probably for that Farley youngster?"

"That's right."

"His mother made a mistake when she brought him back here where everyone knows Ed Farley's record. Ed was a real bad one. He always got some girl to fall for him. I remember when he ran off with Gen Pepper and her father went after them and brought her back. He was older than

Gen, but there's a girl as old as Eve from the time she wore rompers."

Mark laughed. Dave was right. No one could deny Genevieve Pepper's ability to estimate the power of her charm.

"I must run along," he said, and paid for his presents and picked up his bundle.

He had a busy day. And at five-thirty, he changed in a hurry and walked around the corner and rang the bell of the cottage.

Danny greeted him. "Did you bring me a present?" he asked excitedly.

"You bet I did." Over Danny's red head he met Dinah's glance as she came forward. She wore a dress that matched her blue eyes. Her cheeks were pink and her glance welcomed Mark.

"This is for you," said Mark, and handed her a second box. "For me?"

She tore off the paper and buried her nose in the flowers. "You shouldn't." she said softly.

Danny stood up and his glance traveled from one to the other. "You should kiss someone when they give you a present," he observed gravely.

Should he? With sudden daring, Mark bent and kissed Dinah's soft cheek.

"Men don't kiss." Danny flourished his revolver, and he and Mark played a game of make-believe ambush until Dinah called them to dinner.

Danny said grace. Dinah had pinned Mark's flowers to her dress, and the scent of them drifted across to him as he ate the excellent dinner. There was a birthday cake. Then Danny blew out the candles and settled back in his chair with a happy sigh to finish his icecream.

Mark consulted his watch. Just five minutes until his evening office hours.

"I must fly," he said regretfully. "It's been a wonderful party, Danny. Thanks for asking me." This last to Dinah, who followed him to the front door.

"You've made Danny very happy," she said in a low voice. He wanted to kiss her—to cup her chin in his big hand and really kiss her. Instead, Mark turned away quickly and strode off fighting the compulsion to spoil the peaceful pleasure of the evening by telling her what was in his heart tonight.

What was in his heart? he asked himself. Mere pity for a girl who had had a bad break? Could that explain his feelings when he was with Dinah Farley?

10

From the daily paper Mark learned that Genevieve Pepper was out of town attending a wedding in the East. He heaved a sigh of relief. Up until this time his house calls had been infrequent but a week after the Country Club buffet dinner he received a call from Miss Hetty. She had a touch of cold and did not wish to come out . . . would he call that morning?

Mark felt a tinge of excitement at the prospect. Miss Hetty lived in a big old-fashioned brick house. A neat maid answered Mark's ring. "You the doctor?" she asked.

Mark said that he was and the girl led him through a long hall to a bedroom in the rear which opened onto a terrace. Miss Hetty sat on a chaise longue with her small feet covered

with an afghan. Her hair was curled as carefully as it would have been for a reception. She wore a glitter of rings on her delicate old hands.

"Sit down," she invited him. "Right here beside me. Belle, close the door and don't disturb us."

"Yes, Miss Hetty." The girl flashed a smile in Mark's direction and disappeared.

Miss Hetty had a slight cold. She recited the same symptoms which she had given on the visit to Mark's office. "Your prescription helped me, but my aches and pains continue. I suppose nothing can make me feel like a teen-ager again," she ended fretfully.

"Nothing will. But would you like to be a teen-ager again, Miss Hetty?" Mark took the slender wrist. Her pulse was rapid, and there was a flush on her thin cheeks which he did not like.

"Don't tell me I must give up coffee. I'm too old to begin to worry about a diet," she grumbled.

"I won't bother you about a change in diet," Mark promised. She eyed him shrewdly. "I'm seventy-nine. I have a feeling I'll be lucky to reach eighty. Am I right, Doctor?"

Mark was noncommittal. "You have a slight fever," he said later. "There's some congestion in the right chest which we can remedy. But a cold can be dangerous. Take care of yourself.

"I doubt if anyone would miss me," said Miss Hetty flippantly. "Unless it might be Gen. What do you think of my girl?"

"Miss Pepper? She's beautiful."

"She's a fine girl, too. Got a lot of character. Doesn't let anyone know it, though. No one knows Gen like I do. She likes you, Doctor."

Mark's face reddened. "She's very attractive."

Miss Hetty waved a small hand with its heavy old-fashioned rings. "Rubbish! You know what I mean. Gen doesn't take a fancy to every man. She could do a lot for you, too. Gen is a leader. But don't cross her, or she can be rather difficult to deal with. Gen likes to have her own way."

"I've discovered that," said Mark dryly.

He busied himself writing out a prescription, which Miss Hetty said her chauffeur would have filled for her. He suggested that she call him the following day and she promised that she would.

"Old age is a lonesome business," she said thoughtfully as Mark rose to leave. "I wonder why I bother with drugs to prolong my life, when there is so little to gain by living."

"Nonsense," said Mark briskly. He took her small, soft hand and held it close in his big one for a minute. "What would the doctors do if everyone shared your opinion?" he asked. "People your age are the ones who give us a practice."

She laughed. She had a tinkling little laugh. Once she must have been a beauty, thought Mark. Now she was as fragile as old china.

He liked Miss Hetty. Children and old people were his favorite patients. But he had serious doubts about Miss Hetty; she had a tricky heart.

The maid called the following day to report that Miss Hetty was better, but thought it best for him to call again that morning.

Mark halted outside the house when he saw the yellow convertible drawn up in the drive.

Genevieve was back.

He tried to control his feelings as he entered the house and returned to the room bright with sunlight. As he had guessed, Genevieve was there—seated beside Miss Hetty, a soft expres-

sion in her bright black eyes which disturbed Mark more than her former flippancy.

"Hello," she said. "Aunt Hetty told me you had been taking

care of her."

"We're old friends now," said Mark, avoiding her glance and directing his attention to his patient, who looked listless today but brightened when he took her hand.

"Just an excuse to have a good-looking young man come to see me." Her sharp eyes traveled from Genevieve to Mark and back again. "You know my great-niece, don't you Doctor Merryman?"

"I know the doctor." Genevieve's eyes had a touch of the old lightness, but her glance wavered when her eyes met

Mark's grave ones.

She wore shorts and a bright shirt opened at the throat. Her hair was bound back by a ribbon. She wore moccasins and swung one foot back and forth nervously as she sat with the other foot beneath her. Mark made a quick examination of his patient, and smiled. "You're better," he said.

"I did just what you told me." Miss Hetty bobbed her gray

head.

"Fine. You don't need a doctor any longer. Just continue to take the medicine I prescribed and watch your diet a bit. Easy on the coffee."

"I'll live to dance at your wedding," said Miss Hetty

rashly.

"Which guarantees that you have many more years to live." Mark snapped shut his case and rose. "It will be a long time before I think of marriage. I'm just beginning to establish a practice."

"What a pity," Genevieve stated with a hint of sarcasm in

her tone.

"Don't believe a word of it," observed her aunt. "When he

meets the right girl, he'll rush into marriage just like every other, healthy young man."

Mark said goodbye, started to leave the room and was halfway to the door when Genevieve joined him. "Mind giving me a lift?" she asked idly. "My car won't start."

"Certainly." Mark stiffened. Was this going to be another battle of wits? Why couldn't she leave him alone, instead of constantly poking fun at him? She must feel something for Jeff Harrison, or why had she become engaged to marry him? All this ran through his thoughts as Genevieve walked down the hall beside him and stood outside on the steps while he brought his car around.

"Sorry to bother you," she said as she slid in beside him.
"I did frame an excuse to talk to you but not about myself.
I'm worried about Aunt Hetty. How is she?"

Mark tried to be evasive, with no success. In the end, he explained that her aunt was old, her heart was weak. With care, she might live for years; on the other hand, she might go to sleep someday soon and never wake up, which would be a happy ending for any life, he added.

"She's the only person in the whole world who understands me," said the girl. Her face wore an expression that baffled Mark today. Had he misjudged her? He was glad when she told him to stop in the square. He watched her leave with an uneasy feeling that this new Genevieve might prove much more disturbing than the other one.

It was almost eleven. There was a scattering of patients in the office when Mark arrived. He was kept busy with flu symptoms and a broken arm until one o'clock, but in the background of his mind the thought of Genevieve and her sympathy and consideration for her great-aunt lingered, much to his annoyance.

His surgery patient was ready to be dismissed that after-

noon and Dinah said that she expected to be with her for a day or two. Did he imagine that Dinah looked worried, and was she evasive when he asked about Danny, whom he had not seen for several days?

"Danny has a cold," she said hurriedly. "I've kept him indoors."

"I'll drop by and see him," Mark suggested.

"It isn't necessary." Her tone was almost cold. "Danny often has a cold."

They stood in the hospital corridor with nurses passing by who viewed them curiously, and Mark realized that Dinah had no desire to continue a conversation with him.

The fact puzzled him. "What's wrong?" he asked urgently. "Have I offended you in some way. Dinah?"

She shook her head and her eyes avoided his questioning glance. "Of course not. I must go and get Mrs. Kelton ready to leave. Please try to understand, Mark." Her blue eyes were pleading now.

"How can I understand, when you refuse to tell me why it's necessary to maintain this silly caution about gossip? I gave you credit for more common sense."

She shook her head instead of replying. Mark watched her disappear down the hall and enter the room of her patient. He was angry with himself. Angry with Dinah. Angry with Genevieve Pepper. He smiled at a nurse who had tried for days to win his attention and, in a spirit of rebellion, asked her to go to a movie with him that evening.

Maybe the company of other girls would help him forget the two who seemed to obsess him, thought Mark gloomily.

He spent a boresome evening with Eve Hanna, who insisted that they visit an all-night restaurant after a poor movie. The first person Mark saw was Genevieve Pepper seated at a table with Jeff Harrison.

So Harrison was back, too—and a good thing. Now he might be able to convince himself once and for all that the girl took a delight in testing out her skill upon any personable man she met but was definitely engaged to this tall, restless young man whose ring she wore.

"That's Genevieve Pepper," said Eve Hanna, turning to

stare.

Mark nodded.

"Do you think she's pretty?"

"Do you?" Mark countered, and shoved back the Coke he had no desire to drink.

"Too thin." Eve slanted a glance at her own plump figure which looked much better in her white uniform than in the flashy dress she wore this evening.

To Mark's surprise, Jeff Harrison rose and crossed the room. "Why not join us?" he suggested, and added, "Hello, Eve."

Eve was the type every man in town would know, thought Mark crossly. Her exuberance at the invitation annoyed him.

"We're just leaving," he answered. "I have to stop by the hospital before I go home."

Eve pouted. "What a shame."

Mark had no desire to form a foursome with Jeff Harrison and Genevieve. He wondered who had suggested the invitation. He nodded to Genevieve, who waved a hand and smiled. On second thought he led Eve across the room and explained, "I have a hospital call to make. Sorry."

Genevieve's glance hinted that she understood his reluctance. Her black eyes swept Eve carelessly. "I don't think

you've met Miss Hanna," said Jeff Harrison.

"Pleased to meet you," said Eve, looking impressed.

Mark was silent on the way home. He would not repeat this experience, he vowed. The date had done nothing to erase the annoyance he felt when he made it.

He walked Eve to the nurses' home and went on to the hospital. As he entered the dim corridor to his patient's room, he felt his mind clear. This is where I belong, he told himself. Forget this nonsense about girls. Work will prove the best antidote to any foolish dreams. No doubt, every man longed for companionship, missed it, but tonight had emphasized the uselessness of substituting cheap entertainment for the deep pleasure he had felt the night of Danny's birthday party.

He was anxious about Danny and determined, in spite of Dinah's orders, to discover just why Danny remained in-

doors. Sunshine was the best cure for a cold.

The next day proved a busy one. Hadley called him to get his opinion on a critical case and it was late before Mark remembered his plan to check on Danny.

The next afternoon he strode around the corner and was surprised to see the cottage tightly closed. It was a hot day, too. Possibly Dinah thought the house might be cooler closed was his first thought, but there was an air of secrecy about the house. He rang the bell and no one answered.

If Danny had recovered from his cold, he would have been seen darting about through the hole in the hedge as formerly, wouldn't he? If the boy was really ill, it was unfair for Dinah not to tell him, when she knew how much affection he had for her small red-haired son. Mark went around the house and peered in the windows of the lower floor, but saw no one. He returned to his office and called the home of Dinah's patient. Yes, Mrs. Farley was there. Did he wish to speak to her?

Better not talk to Dinah, thought Mark and hung up. But all afternoon he watched the cottage. Finally he went to the door and rang the bell repeatedly.

Again no one answered. But as he left, Mark looked back

and saw Danny's red head dodge away from an upstairs window.

Danny was there. He had heard the bell. He had seen him. Had Dinah instructed him not to answer the door?

Why? Mark found no answer, although he had an unpleasant feeling that something was dead wrong at the Farley cottage.

11

Possibly Mark might have put down his uneasiness in regard to Danny to an overactive imagination if something else had not occurred to puzzle him before the week was out.

He kept an anxious eye on the cottage. He saw Dinah return one evening and debated asking her why she kept Danny locked up in the house on a bright summer day, when he loved to run about the yard and garden. But on second thought he reminded himself that what the Farleys did was no concern of his. Dinah had not hesitated to make it clear, and why risk another snub when he was still smarting from her coolness that day at the hospital?

Several days went by. To his relief, Miss Hetty improved and he did not encounter Genevieve Pepper again. On a Saturday evening Hagen came into the office and said that he was worried about a man who had come to work on his farm.

"What seems to be the matter?" asked Mark, and listened while Hagen went on to explain that the man was a complete stranger to him who had wandered into the place one day

and told him that he wanted work. Although not too prepossessing, Hagen took him on, for help was almost impossible to find and the man was willing to work for less than the average worker. However, he had more than once regretted his action. The man proved to be surly and bad-tempered, and Hagen's wife, Mary, was afraid of him. Hagen was about to tell him that he could not remain on the farm any longer when the man cut his foot horribly with a scythe and was unable to work.

"I treated his foot the best I knew," said Hagen. "He was upset when I suggested we drive in to town and have you treat his injury. This happened a week ago and the foot hasn't healed properly. Today I didn't tell him what I planned to do, but if you can, I want you to come out to the farm for dinner Sunday and take a look at the foot. Will you?"

"I'll come," Mark promised, and dismissed the matter from his mind. His anxiety about Danny continued, although Mark

could think of no way to approach Dinah.

On the Saturday before he expected to visit the farm Genevieve Pepper called to ask him to a Sunday cocktail party. Mark was glad to have an excuse to refuse. Maybe sometime she would realize that he meant what he said when he told her that he was too interested in his practice to think seriously of any girl.

He looked forward to the trip to the farm. The Hagens were real friends. They had sent many people from the surrounding community to his office, all of whom seemed to have the same rigid ideas of honesty and independence. He did regret that he must make the trip alone. If he could only take Danny, thought Mark, what a treat it would be for the boy.

The cottage looked deserted, but on Sunday morning he took a chance and drove by and parked, still uncertain whether to risk Dinah's displeasure by suggesting that she

allow Danny to accompany him. Finally, having determined that it was stupid to magnify the silly feeling that something was amiss with the Farleys, Mark went up to the door and rang the bell.

Odd how you could have a feeling that someone was just inside, even though to all appearances the place was deserted. Presently Mark rang again impatiently, the door opened, and Dinah stood inside with the screen door closed between them.

"Danny here?" asked Mark.

"Why do you want him?" Her tone was expressionless and her face white and tired.

Mark explained about the invitation to the Hagen farm. "It would be good for Danny to get outside today. I haven't seen him around lately," he stated pointedly.

Dinah made no explanation, but stood avoiding Mark's direct glance. The hand which twisted her uniform trembled. "I've been afraid, Mark," she said simply.

"Afraid?"

"I can't explain. Maybe it would be all right to let Danny go along with you today. He loves the farm." She smiled faintly and Mark opened the door and went inside.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Please don't be angry," she begged. "You wouldn't understand." Her blue eves filled with tears.

"How do you know I wouldn't understand? Is it more stupid gossip?" Mark asked angrily. He started to take her hand, but she shrank away.

"I'll go tell Danny," she said hurriedly. "He'll be so happy

to go with you . . ."

He watched her mount the stairs. Above, he heard Danny's voice and a moment later the boy appeared. "Must I change my clothes?" he asked anxiously.

"Certainly not."

"Wait a minute." A little later he raced downstairs with his cowboy pistol gripped in his hand. "I'll shoot any bears we see," he promised solemnly. "I can shoot good now."

Dinah smiled, but there was something in the smile that wrung Mark's heart. "Take good care of him," she cau-

tioned as she kissed Danny goodbye.

"What could happen to Danny at the Hagen farm?"

"I am foolish to worry, I know."

"We'll discuss that later."

She shook her head, but followed them to the edge of the porch and waved goodbye as they drove away.

"Gee, am I glad you asked me." Danny gave a happy sigh and snuggled down beside Mark on the car seat. "Why does Mother cry all the time now, Doctor Mark?"

"That's what I intend to find out," said Mark grimly.

The memory of Dinah's troubled face haunted him throughout the drive to the farm, although Danny kept up a running fire of chatter and fired his pistol at every moving object they passed.

"Someday I'm going to shoot a real robber," he boasted. The Hagens gave them a warm welcome at the farm, and Hagen took Mark off to see the man who was still unable to walk because of his foot injury.

He was lying on a bunk bed in a small room over the Hagens' kitchen. Through the window Mark saw Danny dashing across the farmyard as he entered the room.

"This is Jake Landon," said Hagen. "Jake, this is Doctor Merryman from the village. He wants to take a look at your foot."

The man was reluctant, but finally exposed the injured foot which Mark found badly in need of treatment.

"Another day or two and you would have lost this foot," he

said sternly. "Why didn't you come to town with Hagen when he suggested it?"

The man only mumbled a reply. He showed no appreciation and seemed nervous and ill at ease.

"I'll have to see that again. Can you come to my office?"

"I'll bring him," Hagen promised.

"Where did he come from?" asked Mark as he and Hagen descended the stairs to the kitchen. "It isn't safe to have a rough customer like that around your house."

"I realize that," Hagen agreed, "but I can't send him off in

that condition, can I?"

Mary Hagen, rosy-cheeked and hospitable, greeted Mark below and said dinner was ready. Would he call Danny, who was racing about the pasture now?

Mark walked through the farmyard and leaned on the fence and watched the boy as he ran back and forth as though free for the first time in days. What was behind Dinah's anxiety? Why did she persist in keeping Danny indoors?

At his call, Danny joined him and with his arm about Danny's shoulder they entered the farmhouse kitchen together. Dinner was served on a round table in a window bright with red geraniums. The small boy who had been so frail the night his parents brought him to Mark's office sat in a high chair today, the picture of health.

"I wish Mother was here," said Danny, finishing a second

ample helping.

"Why didn't you bring her?" asked Mary Hagen.

"I think she may be on a case," said Mark evasively.

"No, she isn't," declared Danny firmly. But she's scared." At a warning glance from Mark, he went no further, and

the Hagens were too polite to continue the conversation.

patient, and when Hagen asked if he would like to inspect some cattle he had just purchased, Mark went with him while Mary promised to watch Danny and keep him out of mischief.

They were away for an hour. "About this man," said Mark, "get rid of him as soon as possible. I don't like anything about him."

Hagen promised he would and said he would bring the man to town for a final treatment of his injured foot in a day or two and then tell him that he had no further need of him.

They walked back slowly. It was good to have a friend, thought Mark. Hagen was a plain man but far from unintelligent. Mark had quite forgotten Danny until they reached the house and Mary came out with an anxious expression on her face. "I just left to put Joey down for his nap and Danny disappeared," she said. "I thought he might have followed you?"

Mark and Hagen set off in opposite directions to search, Hagen assuring Mark that nothing could have happened to the boy. Possibly he thought it fun to hide from them. But Mark felt no such assurance. He was responsible for Danny. He had made the suggestion that Danny accompany him. He was both relieved and irritated when he made the circle of the farmyard and, looking up, saw Danny at the window of the room above the kitchen.

He was sharp with Danny when they joined him. "What were you doing upstairs in that room?" he demanded.

Danny's lip puckered. "Nothing."

"Why did you go up there?"
"The man called to me."

"Where were you?"

"Out in the yard watching the chickens."

"What did the man want?"

"He said he got lonesome."

"He's no one for you to know," said Mark, relieved and yet annoyed.

"He wanted to see my gun," said Danny excitedly. "I showed it to him."

Mark and Hagen exchanged glances.
"I'll get him out of here," Hagen stated.

Somehow the day was spoiled. Mark was glad when he deposited Danny at his own door.

"Not one word to your mother about the man who saw your gun," he said. "Promise?"

"I promise," said Danny, but he looked puzzled.

"Just think no more about it," ordered Mark. "Tell your mother that Mrs. Hagen missed her and wanted her to be with you. Tell her all about the chickens and the horses you saw."

"But not about the man and the gun." Danny nodded his red head sagely.

"Right. Now run."

Mark watched Danny race up the walk and a moment later Dinah swung open the door. She made no sign that she saw him seated in the car outside.

All this was ridiculous, thought Mark as he drove away. She might have thanked him.

On Monday Hagen brought the man in to town and Mark inspected the foot, which was better and healing rapidly. The man made no sign of interest in its improvement, but his sharp weasel eyes traveled about the office and finally reached the window. Mark followed his glance and saw Danny darting about his own yard.

"That the kid that came to the farm?" the man asked.

Mark made no reply to his question. "Take care of your foot and you'll be all right," he said curtly.

Hagen offered to pay him, but Mark shook his head, "It's not your foot," he said pointedly.

The man had limped from the office. Mark saw him stand on the walk outside and talk for a few minutes with Hagen. Then he went off down the street, but not before Mark saw Hagen hand him some money.

That's the last we'll see of him, I hope, thought Mark thankfully.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. After office hours the same night he decided to walk off a feeling of depression which could not be attributed to work, for he had been more than usually successful that day with his patients. It was a warm summer evening, but there was no moon tonight and the street was dark. As he turned the corner, he was startled to see a man standing close to the cottage yard staring up at the second-floor windows. He was about to hail him when the man, half-turning, saw him and hastily limped away.

Mark stood stock-still and watched him go. It was the man who had been in his office that morning for treatment. The man who had shown so much interest in Dinah's boy. What possible interest could he have in Danny now?

Mark debated ringing the bell to the cottage, but it would only alarm Dinah, he decided.

12

AFTER a night's sleep, Mark could almost convince himself that he had allowed a lively imagination to alarm him unnecessarily. What if the man whom he saw outside Dinah's cottage was the one whose leg he had treated? Was that any

reason to believe that he had any evil purpose in lingering in this particular neighborhood?

Moreover, thinking back to the trip to the farm, had it been mere uneasiness that had caused him to read secrecy into Danny's actions in regard to his visit to the room above the Hagens' kitchen?

What possible connection could there be between a strange man who had wandered into the hill country and Dinah or her boy?

To allow a feeling of uneasiness to persist was stupid, Mark told himself. Even to consider mentioning his alarm to Dinah was out of the question. She had enough to worry her without the addition of his own unfounded suspicions.

Mark encountered Genevieve Pepper that day for the first time since her invitation to the Country Club. If she felt any embarrassment, she gave no evidence of it. She sat in a booth at Dave Gordon's drugstore drinking a Coke. She looked up when Mark entered, smiled when she saw him half-turn as though to retreat, and joined in his laughter as he came forward and sat down opposite her.

"Hello, stranger," she said, her black eyes dancing. "I

haven't seen you for ages."

"I've been busy."

She set down her glass. "You'll be busier soon."

"What do you mean?" asked Mark warily.

"You're going to be appointed to the staff of the Ridgeway

Memorial. How do you like that?"

"How do you know?" asked Mark bluntly, and ordered a Coke from the girl who came forward and stood viewing them with a bit too much interest for his liking.

"My father told me. Jeff's on the board, you know."

"I can imagine that he encouraged the appointment," said Mark dryly.

"I've broken my engagement to Jeff." She linked her hands together and displayed her left hand minus the ring she always wore.

"Are you expecting me to congratulate you?"

Odd how she made his temper flare with that knowing gleam in her dark eyes.

They softened now as she said, "We broke the engagement by mutual consent. Jeff never was too keen about me. He likes them soft and appealing. He found the going rough with my tongue. Probably you do, too."

"I never thought seriously about your disposition." The moment the words were spoken Mark knew that he lied. Why refuse to recognize the fact that he was on the defensive constantly when with Genevieve Pepper? Right now, he could not deny the thrill of her touch as she reached over and her hand brushed his.

"Nonsense. You hate my disposition. Why do you always fight me, Mark?" she asked teasingly.

He grinned. "Scared, maybe."

"That's wonderful." The yellow lights gleamed in her dark eyes.

"Did you meet a new heart interest in the East?" asked Mark.

"Several. But I like home folks best."

"Do I rate as that?" asked Mark recklessly.

"You rate high. You know that."

"I acted like a fool that night after the dinner."

"Because you kissed me?"

"Didn't you expect me to?"

"I was a little startled," she confessed. "When are you going to join the club, Mark?"

Mark took a hasty glance at his watch. "I can't afford luxuries like the Country Club."

"Nor me?"

He nodded. "How's Miss Hetty?"

"She seems better."

"She can't show too much improvement, I'll drop in to see her again soon."

She sat biting her full lower lip, "What about me? Shall I see you again soon?"

"I'll give you a ring," Mark promised.

He had completely forgotten his errand and was halfway across the park when he remembered it and turned back. Genevieve Pepper stood on the curb in front of Dave Gordon's store searching in her purse for her car keys. She looked up and saw him.

"I forgot what I came for," said Mark, and then reddened.

"Because you met me?"

"Maybe," he acknowledged sheepishly, and stood and watched her car until it disappeared around the corner.

Dave Gordon filled the prescription he needed, then observed that quite a few of the hill people had remarked that they were delighted with their new doctor. And Miss Hetty had spread the news that she had never felt better since she changed physicians.

"Miss Hetty is a real gold mine for a doctor," said Dave.
"She has money to indulge every whim and her last doctor
boasted that he could flatter her and give her sugar pills. He's
hinted that he's not at all pleased that he's lost his most
profitable patient to you."

Mark smiled, but he felt annoyed.

He found several patients waiting in his office when he returned. He had a busy day, with a visit to the hospital between office hours, a hurried hotel dinner and an evening which dragged out interminably. It was after ten when he

turned off the office lights. Should he take a walk? Mark debated.

Why not step around the block and call on Dinah? Was there any reason why he should avoid her, in spite of her apparent reluctance to encourage any further friendship with him? If she had some new cause for anxiety, shouldn't he try to persuade her to reveal it to him?

Mark was just about to turn toward the cottage when the telephone rang in his office.

An emergency? he wondered as he quickly unlocked the office door, crossed the dark room and took down the receiver.

Mark?" He recognized Genevieve's husky voice at once, although it was unsteady and frightened.

"Talking."

"Can you come to Aunt Hetty's at once? I'm all alone with her and she suddenly became unconscious."

"I'll be right there."

Mark collected his bag, and raced outside to his car.

There were lights blazing in the hall of Miss Hetty's old-fashioned house. Genevieve flung open the door and flew ahead of him to the bedroom in the rear.

"I couldn't move her," she said in a low, frightened voice. "Is she dead, Mark?"

The little old lady lay back in her armchair, her hands limp, her eyes sunken. Mark lifted her gently and put her down on her bed. He made a hasty examination. It was very still in the room. The night air moved the stiff lace curtains at the windows. An ornate clock on the marble mantelpiece ticked off the hours which Mark knew were Miss Hetty's last. There was just a flutter of breath after the hypodermic he gave her. Then a sigh and she was gone.

For the first time he looked at the girl who stood motionless

beside the bed, her dark eyes enormous. "Is she dead?" she asked in a low voice.

Mark stood up and with a sudden impulse put his arms about her.

She clung to him, her slight body shaken by harsh, dry sobs. "She was the only one in the world who understood and loved me," she sobbed.

This was quite a different Genevieve from the inpudent, devil-may-care girl Mark had known. His own heart beat thickly at her nearness. Her dark hair was soft under the touch of his hand. "This is better for her," he said gently. "She told me she hated old age. She died peacefully. She just went to sleep."

"I know. But I'm so dreadfully alone, Mark." She spoke half to Mark and half to herself as she freed herself from Mark's arms.

larks arms.

"All right now?" he asked gently.

"There are things to do, aren't there?"

"I'll take care of them. Can you drive home alone?"

"I'll call Father." She had regained her self-control, and now she smiled faintly. "Sorry to have seemed so silly and helpless."

"You're never silly."

"Thanks. Is that one of your infrequent compliments, Mark?"

As they stood in the dimly lighted hall, Mark fought the urge to take her in his arms again. "Let's discuss that later," he suggested. "There are certain things I must do now. Are you all right?"

She nodded.

He watched her enter a room at the end of the hall and a little later heard her voice as she talked to her father. In less than fifteen minutes, Joe Pepper appeared.

"Gone, is she?" he asked briskly.

"She died very quietly half an hour ago."

"Lucky you were here with Gen."

"I was glad to be here." Mark explained briefly the condition of Miss Hetty's heart and his own belief that she had only a short time to live when he examined her upon his first call.

"We all have to go," said Joe Pepper with a cheerfulness which enraged Mark, as he saw his shrewd eyes wander through the house as though already appraising its belongings. "She was mighty fond of Gen. Always said she'd leave everything she had to her—and believe me, it's a considerable inheritance. The old girl was mighty clever about investments."

Mark left with his original distaste for Pepper heightened by this conversation. How could he have a daughter like the girl who had clung to him in that quiet bedroom? What would be his reaction if he knew of the appeal that girl had for him, in spite of his denials?

She was rich now. Wealthy in her own right, if her father's calculations had foundation.

Mark did not attend the elaborate funeral. He heard from Joe Hadley that Jeff Harrison had been Miss Hetty's lawyer. Gossip ran high in all quarters about the amount of Miss Hetty's fortune. And from Dave Gordon, Mark learned that Pepper was jubilant over the fact that his daughter had inherited everything.

Mark sent no flowers to Miss Hetty, but he visited the town florist and bought a bunch of tight yellow rosebuds which he sent to Genevieve Pepper. He debated just what to write on the card and finally signed his own name plus a scribbled "for a brave girl."

He received a note of thanks several days later written in a square schoolgirl hand. Just a formal thanks, but at the

bottom of the page Mark read "over," and on the back of the note Genevieve had written: "You promised to call me—remember?"

For several days he had wanted to make a trip to the farm and express to Adam Hagen his misgivings about the man whose foot he had treated the week before. Upon several occasions he had caught sight of him in town. Why did he remain here? Mark wondered. Now he debated whether Genevieve would be bored if he asked her to ride out to the farm with him. Considering her comments about his hill practice, she might refuse. But to Mark's great surprise, she was pleased and immediately accepted.

A night or two later he picked her up. "Thanks for asking

me, Mark," she said simply.

Just remember that she's a rich girl, Mark cautioned himself as they left the town behind and headed for the hills. Secretly he had an uneasy feeling that this might prove a dangerous experiment. Tonight the girl beside him aroused his sympathy, for he knew that she missed Miss Hetty. Sympathy might prove upsetting to the rigid control he had vowed he'd maintain.

13

Bur Genevieve made no attempt to trap Mark that summer evening as they left the town behind and drove deep into the hills. She knew every road and suggested that they leave the highway and take a narrow road which wound higher and higher until at last, far in the distance, they could see the

river. It was past sunset but the afterglow still lingered as Mark stopped the car and for a moment they sat silently intent upon the view spread out below.

"Eventually this road leads to the ferry," Genevieve told Mark. "It's an old road seldom used but I like to ride horseback along this road."

"That must be the ferry crossing." Mark indicated a small object moving across the shining path of the river.

"The ferry is seldom used, but it still runs."

They left the river road and wound back to the highway, and as they rode Mark told Genevieve about his attachment for the Hagens. He hoped to make her understand his feeling for these people who were simple but loyal friends. Somehow he refused to believe that Genevieve was as self-centered and snobbish as she seemed.

"But you'll never succeed with friends like that, Mark," Genevieve said earnestly, her dark eyes sober. "You can't change the world you live in, you know. It's a hard and brutal world. It's a world which depends upon contacts, and when you try to go against the opinion of all the other doctors in Ridgeway, you ruin your chance to win the approval of my friends."

"Who are they?" Mark asked bluntly. "A group who have no mind of their own but depend upon what the crowd decides. If I can heal a man's illness, must I be condemned because a man in a sweaty shirt sits in my waiting room beside him?"

Genevieve shrugged. "You're hopeless, Mark, and it's such a pity. We could do so much together."

"But you are with me only if I follow your crowd," said Mark stiffly.

"I have a lot of money. Enough to buy the best in new equipment. To build a modern office for you."

"No, thank you."

"Are you refusing me or the office?"

"Both."

"I've never been turned down before."

"Then put this down as a brand-new experience."

"You really mean it?" Her eyes were stormy now.

"I mean it." But Mark weakened as he turned and saw the anger darken her eyes. "Look," he pleaded, and stopped the car as he turned into the Hagens' lane. "Have an open mind about these people, Gen."

It was the first time he had used her name familiarly. Now, as on every other time he had touched her slim hand, his own trembled. He remembered that they had not a single thing in common. Not one common ground of meeting. Just a violent attraction which only disturbed him. Probably the attraction of opposites. With Dinah Farley, he felt at ease. She shared his ideas and understood his profession. While this girl infuriated him with her obstinate determination to change him into some glamour boy in white. She had a storybook idea of a doctor and not the down-to-earth intelligence a doctor should seek in a woman.

The fact that he could even dream of a girl like Genevieve

Pepper appalled Mark.

"I have no right to ask you to understand," he said bitterly. "Frankly, I shouldn't have asked you to come with me tonight."

"Why did you?" she asked in a low voice.

"Because I'm a fool." Mark smiled.

She shook her head. "I'm going to try to understand you, Mark. You may have to be patient with me. I'm spoiled and selfish and opinionated and narrow-minded, as you very well know."

Mark laughed. She had given a touch of lightness to a

conversation which had bordered too closely on the serious for his liking. "Let's begin with the Hagens," he suggested, and started the car and drove on toward the low farmhouse.

Adam Hagen came out to meet him. "Mary isn't here," he said, casting an embarrassed glance at Genevieve. And yet, thought Mark half-amused, even Adam could not resist her. She wore white tonight. Her slender arms were bare except for the half-dozen jingling barcelets, her hair black and shiny. Frivolous shoes tripped across the dusty farmyard and then paused as Genevieve discovered a horse at the barnyard fence tossing its mane. "Yours?" she asked eagerly.

"He's mine now," said Hagen proudly. "Broke his leg on a race across the river and I got him for fifty dollars. Good as

new now."

"What a darling." She crossed swiftly to the fence and reached up both slim arms and put them about the horse's neck; the horse bent his head and nuzzled her cheek.

The two men stood at a little distance and watched them. "Nothing prettier than a handsome girl and a handsome horse," Adam observed as he pointed to the two beside the fence.

"You wouldn't sell him, I suppose?" Genevieve joined them.

"Ain't aimin' to sell nor race him. Just like him. He's as free as air here. We call him Thunderbolt. That wasn't the name he went by in Kentucky, but he's like a bolt of lightning."

Hagen invited them into the house, but Mark suggested that they sit down on the porch steps. He spread a handker-chief to protect Genevieve's white linen skirt.

She sat silent now, her chin in her palms, her eyes dreamy as the two men talked.

Mark told Adam why he had come. He expressed his fear that the man who had worked on the farm was still in town

for some particular reason. He told Hagen how he had seen him in the neighborhood of Dinah's cottage. "You remember he showed some interest in her boy, Danny?"

"Now I remember that he was mighty curious about that

boy after you left the farm. Can't understand it."

"Nor can I. But at any rate, I wanted to warn you that the man hasn't left this part of the state, and if he should be seen loitering about this hill country, call me."

"I shall," Hagen promised.

They sat and talked for a while about the horse farms in Kentucky and the great races which Genevieve had always attended, and it was late when Mark announced that they must go. They drove away, leaving Adam Hagen standing in the middle of the farmyard.

"Maybe I'm wrong," said Genevieve thoughtfully. She had wrapped a cashmere sweater about her shoulders and assured Mark that she did not feel the chill of the wispy fog which began to rise now in the valleys.

"Wrong about Adam?" He turned toward her.

"Wrong about many things," she said soberly. "There's no place in your life for a girl like me, Mark. I'm beginning to understand."

She echoed Mark's own opinion, but perversely it annoyed Mark that she did. "There's nothing wrong with a girl like you but lack of understanding," he said after a moment.

"Have you thought that through?"

"Meaning it would be possible for you to change?" He found his hand stealing across to touch her hand and close upon it.

"I could try," she said simply.

Mark withdrew his hand.

Genevieve laughed. "You see," she said softly, "you are afraid."

Mark drove along for a while without speaking, struggling with himself and aware that no argument could make it possible for the girl beside him to develop the understanding a doctor needed in a wife.

Dinah might qualify, for Dinah was a nurse with a nurse's deep respect for the obligations which made a doctor's time never his own. But Dinah was married, and moreover his affection for Dinah could never be as strong as his desire to take the girl beside him in his arms tonight.

Mark fought against it. He directed the conversation to the Hagens and finally told Genevieve of his anxiety because of the odd conduct of the man Hagen had employed for a short time. Genevieve listened with an interest that surprised him. "Is the man lame?" she asked.

She added a description which told Mark that she too had seen the man he mentioned. But finally she retured to their former conversation. "Just why are you so obstinate in your opinions?" she demanded. "Why are you so sure you are right, Mark?"

"Because I want to be something more than a mere medicine man," said Mark briefly. "My people—the few who claim me as their family doctor—depend upon me for more than mere diagnosis and prescriptions. My grandfather taught me what a doctor could be to his patients. People like the Hagens can't afford a specialist for each family ailment. On my last trip I treated a foot their help had injured and at the same time checked Mary's condition. She expects a baby in the fall. Hagen couldn't afford a high-powered obstretician—maybe he would hesitate to call one . . . With me, it's different. He considers me a friend, someone personally interested in himself and in his family."

"But the money. How can they afford to pay you?"

"Sometimes they pay better than your social set who have

the reputation of being slow at paying fees. That explains why a specialist often has to charge exorbitant fees for his services. Consider several you know. Who pays for all that window dressing?"

She laughed. "You almost convince me, Mark. Maybe I want to break down that cherished indifference of yours. Maybe someday I'll succeed."

14

Possbly Genevieve might have succeeded if something had not happened the following day which drove all thoughts of Genevieve Pepper from Mark's mind. He had not seen Dinah for several days. Once or twice Danny appeared and stared wistfully toward the office, but when Mark called he disappeared quickly within the house. On the day following the trip to the Hagens', Mark worked late. There had been a polio scare in the adjoining county and two cases in Ridgeway. The hill people were opposed to consulting a doctor unless really panic-stricken, but when two of their number developed polio Mark had a rush of countryfolk to his office.

In practically every case the symptoms gave no indication of polio, but Mark became acquainted with a number who told him that Adam Hagen had recommended him. They proceeded to bring in others with various ailments which they wished Mark to treat.

However, in one thing Genevieve was right. Several smartly dressed town patients who had called Mark before looked askance at the roughly clad men and poorly dressed children

who occupied his office chairs and did not hesitate to comment. This might end his chance for a lucrative practice, thought Mark ruefully, but the narrowness of the viewpoint only strengthened his own determination to be of help to everyone and make no discrimination because a man or woman was ignorant of the social amenities.

Let them go to Merton, he thought crossly. He'll offer them

On this particular evening, Mark was nearly exhausted when he turned off his office lights. He reached in his pocket for a last cigarette, discovered he had none, and was about to walk across to the hotel for some when he heard a hurried step on the porch and an instant later his doorbell pealed.

To Mark's astonishment, Dinah stood outside.

"Mark, let me come inside quickly," she said in a low tone. Completely baffled, Mark drew her inside and closed the door. "What's happened?" he asked. Even by the dim light in the hallway he could see that she was pale and frightened.

"I didn't intend to tell you-" she began.

"We'll talk in here." Mark led her down the two steps into the office, then back to the small rear room where there was no chance that anyone would see them. "It's time you told me the reason for all this mystery. Danny kept indoors like a prisoner; you, yourself, avoiding me whenever I come in sight. We were friends. Good friends. Neighbors. What has come between us, Dinah?"

"Forgive me," she pleaded.

"Sit down." Mark brought forward a chair and dragged another close. "Now, what's this all about? Something which concerns your husband, I judge?" She nodded. "Is he ill?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

"He's going to break jail."

"How do you know?"

"A man he knew in Chicago told me. He was released a month ago . . . He's in town now waiting for Eddie."

"I believe I know him," said Mark thoughtfully.

"How could you?"

"Strangers are scarce in Ridgeway," he said. "Just try to be calm and tell me what started all this."

"Eddie tried to break jail before," she said in a low, broken tone. "His first sentence was light, but he has been a bad prisoner from the beginning. This man—I think his name is Kendall—knew Eddie in Chicago. They were mixed up in several crimes together there. Just minor offenses in the beginning. Then they got in real trouble and Eddie was caught in a shooting when a policeman was wounded. Kendall escaped. Somehow—by some prison grapevine—he has been in touch with Eddie and now he declares Eddie will try to join him here. Do you understand why I'm frightened?"

"I see why you should report this to the authorities before anything serious happens," said Mark sternly. "Then Danny would know"

would know.

"Danny must not know," she said stubbornly. "If his father should come here—"

Mark began to understand. "You want to prevent Danny from meeting him?"

"He's met Kendall, though he was Landon, then."

"Through my stupidity."

"How could you know, Mark?"

"I should have known about this from the beginning."

"I didn't want to burden you with my troubles."

"Why shouldn't you burden me?"

"Because . . ." Her voice faltered. Her eyes could not meet his and in that moment Mark knew that no matter what separated them, Dinah held a place in his heart no other girl

could fill. To know that someone needed you—depended upon you—was a stronger bond than mere physical desire. Something in those blue eyes appealed to the best that was in him. Mark knew he might rebel against Dinah's stubbornness, her obstinate loyalty to a husband who was a scoundrel, but deep in his heart he admired her gallantry. It made him heart-sick to realize that she was trapped by circumstances, and tonight he couldn't resist the impulse to say what was in his heart.

"There's a good reason why you should have come to me immediately," Mark told her quietly. "I believe that you know the reason—and have since the first evening when we sat here together in the moonlight. Like myself, you have tried to pretend and evade. It is nothing to cause shame to either of us. We are no longer children, you and I, to deny our emotions."

"It's all wrong-"

He looked deep into her troubled eyes. "Let me share your trouble, won't you?"

"After a moment, she nodded.

They sat then, with Dinah's small firm hand clasped in Mark's as they discussed the best way to handle the present situation. They talked quite sanely about the danger of being together. Mark said ruefully, "I couldn't afford to marry any girl right now, Dinah. We're still young . . . We can hope that there is some happy solution to our future."

She tried to smile, but the tears were close. "I came here to ask you to make some plan for Danny," she said finally, "instead of worrying you about me. I couldn't endure it if he suffered disgrace, Mark."

Probably it would be better if he knew the truth," Mark repeated what he had said before. But he could not persuade Dinah to share his opinion. Ed Farley was her boy's father.

He was her husband. She possessed an almost unreasonable loyalty to the man, even now when he read in her eyes what he wished to see there.

"Maybe it's the Irish in me," Dinah said half-sadly.

"Maybe it's the Irish in you that makes me love you," said Mark simply.

She bit her lip. "Don't say that, Mark."

"I've said it now."

"Let's talk about Danny."

They came to the decision that Danny must be sent away until any threat of her husband's return was over. Mark would try to discover the whereabouts of the man who had made the contact with him. He had a feeling that Genevieve Pepper might be able to help him. Mark told Dinah of his conversation with Genevieve on the drive to the farm.

"Which suggested this to me," he told her suddenly. "Why not ask the Hagens to take Danny for a week or two—until the threat of the unpleasantness is over? Danny will be wild at the prospect of a visit to the farm and never suspect that there is any unusual reason for sending him away. The Hagens would be willing, I'm certain."

And so that plan was put into action. Mark walked home with Dinah and he himself told Danny that he thought it possible that he might have a vacation soon at the Hagen farm.

Danny went into a frenzy of ambushing imaginary Indians back of the porch chairs. "Who will take care of Mother?" he demanded.

Mark smiled, "I shall,"

He had plenty to think about when he returned to his office that night. Just as he unlocked the door, he saw a man draw back into the shrubbery in the back yard. Mark swore

softly as he raced through the garden but the man had ducked swiftly out of sight and was gone.

Mark walked halfway to the cottage to warn Dinah and then decided he would only arouse her fears and it was unlikely the man would return tonight. By morning, he would set plans in motion to get Danny out of town.

15

MARK called Adam Hagen the following morning, after a night spent in revolving plans on how to warn the authorities of Ed Farley's intentions without breaking his promise to Dinah. He had come to no conclusion when he talked to Hagen. He gave no explanation other than that Dinah wished Danny to have a holiday and had asked him if he thought it would inconvenience the Hagens to have the boy spend a week or two there.

Hagen said that he and Mary would be delighted. That Danny could help amuse their four-year-old who was constantly underfoot, and Mark suggested that he drive out after office hours that evening and bring Danny with him.

He made a swift investigation of the garden and decided that the man he had seen the night before had used the hole in the hedge to approach the Farley cottage. He kept a sharp lookout from his office windows that morning, but guessed that no one would attempt to prowl about in the daytime. Between office hours Mark visited the cottage, appraised Dinah of the plan and begged her not to worry.

Dinah had told him that she had a chance to be on a case for two weeks. Danny's absence would give her the opportun-

ity to accept it. She declared it was a great relief to know the boy was safe.

"He couldn't be in a better place," Mark assured her.

He saw her leave early in the afternoon, keeping his promise to keep a watchful eye on the cottage. He went over and collected Danny and his belongings before he went to the hotel for dinner, and after an early meal they drove out to the farm.

Mark could not stay as he was due back at the office. He seized the opportunity to give Hagen the general situation and cautioned him to notify him at once if he saw any sign of his former helper about the place.

"I'll set the dog on him if he comes around here," said Adam grimly. "He should be reported and locked up, but I

suppose we must wait and see what happens."

"I have a plan of my own," said Mark. "We've no proof yet that Kendal—if that is his name—means any harm. Her husband may have no intention of misconduct. But I'm taking no chances."

In spite of his glee at the prospect of a holiday, Danny showed signs of being upset when Mark started to leave him.

"Who'll take care of me?" he whimpered.

"Mrs. Hagen will."

"When will I see Mother?"

"I'll bring her out to see you soon."

"How soon?"

Mark would have to drive fast to reach town before seven-thirty and so was a bit annoyed with Danny's unreasonableness. "Be a good boy and mind Mrs. Hagen. I'll see you soon." With this, he got into his car and drove away with an uneasy feeling that the plan which had held such promise in the morning presented complications if Danny should be unhappy.

He did not see Dinah for several days. No one appeared in the vicinity of the cottage that day or the following.

Mark called the farm each day to receive the report that Danny had forgotten his first reluctance and was happy and gaining weight. He and Mary Hagen's four-year-old were together constantly. Adam had taken them with him on several trips across the river. The man who had taken Kendall's place on the farm was teaching Danny to swim.

On a hurried visit to the farm to take Danny clean clothes, Mark told the boy that his mother would be off duty the following Sunday and they would drive out and spend the day with him.

"Oh Boy!" Danny whooped and jumped up and down. "Just wait until she sees all the things I have learned to do, Doctor Mark. I can milk a cow—I can't get much milk but that's because my hands aren't big like Seth's. I can almost swim that far—" He stretched out his two hands and grinned.

Mark picked him up and swung him around. He loved the boy. His heart ached as he thought of Danny's heritage. It would be a constant anxiety for Dinah until Danny reached manhood, always fearing that he might inherit his father's outlook upon life.

All this made him very gentle with Danny. It made his love for the boy's mother take a deeper hold upon Mark's heart. Odd that these two should have walked into his life upon that first evening of his arrival in Ridgeway, when he had made a stern vow not to burden himself with the problems of others.

Now Dinah and her trouble were a part of his life. His future happiness seemed built upon a situation so hopeless that he could see no answer to it. Could there be one? Mark puzzled as he drove swiftly through the summer twilight.

He called Dinah and reported that Danny was well and happy and expected to see her soon. He repeated the list of

Danny's accomplishments. "I told you not to worry," he reminded her.

"Thanks for everything, Mark," she said simply. "Have you seen that man about since we talked together?"

"Not a sign," Mark replied promptly.

He did not tell her that he had met Genevieve Pepper after a golf game with Hadley and had seized the opportunity to question her about Ed Farley.

They had sat on the club porch together. Genevieve looked unhappy, but she brightened when Hadley joined them. Hoping that he was not breaking his promise to Dinah, Mark told of the unprepossessing character who had hurt his foot at the Hagens' and later had been brought to his office for treatment. "I have a feeling that I've seen him loitering about my garden," Mark stated. "Possibly just imagination, but at any rate I wondered just what protection one might have in Ridgeway?"

Hadley chuckled. He lounged back in a porch chair, his straw-colored hair damp and rumpled, his keen gray eyes curious. "You tell a good story, Mark, but I doubt if that's all of it."

"What more could there be?" Genevieve demanded.

"Mark has a lively interest in the occupants of that cottage behind him," said Hadley. "Maybe the man was interested in the Farleys."

"What connection could there be between a patient who came to my office with a bad leg and the house behind me?"

"That's what puzzles me." Hadley drained his glass and moved it about in circles on the table top. "There's something serious behind this sudden interest in a stranger with an injured foot. What is it, Mark?"

Mark hesitated. "I can't tell you the whole story," he ac-

knowledged. "But Gen mentioned that she had seen this character. Remember?"

She nodded. She wore yellow today, a sleeveless blouse and a linen skirt. A simple outfit, but it became her. However, everything became her. She was too beautiful to need extravagant clothes to supplement her good looks. Hadley liked her, Mark suspected. He was a reserved, wary fellow and would never stick his neck out and risk being snubbed, but Mark saw his eyes soften as he glanced at Genevieve from time to time. He's much more her type than I am, thought Mark as he watched them. Smart and ambitious and able to match wits with her any day.

After a pause, while she sat looking thoughtful and a bit anxious, Genevieve said, "I did see the man you mentioned several times when I drove outside town. But not lately. Probably he has gone away. But why he should have an interest in you or Ed Farley's family I have no idea. For it is the Farley family that has aroused your concern, isn't it, Mark?"

Mark could not deny it. "They're my neighbors," he declared, but his face flushed.

Genevieve smiled. "I can get nowhere with Mark." She turned to Hadley. "I think the reason is a pair of blue Irish eyes."

"Mrs. Farley has a husband," stammered Mark.

"That character," said Joe. "I've heard about him. The town's bad boy who is serving a term in the state penitentiary for shooting a policeman. Isn't that the story?"

"I tried to elope with him once," said Genevieve flippantly. "I thought it smart to date him because he had a bad reputation."

"I take it you didn't go through with it?" Hadley laughed.
"I was sixteen and he was nineteen. Just a couple of wild

kids. We only got as far as the next town before Father caught up with us. After that, I was sent East to school."

Hadley remarked that in spite of the fact that this was his afternoon off, he must run—he had a child in the hospital who was very ill. Mark asked Genevieve if he could give her a lift, but she told him she had her own car. They stood on the porch steps together and watched Hadley drive away. "Nice guy," said Mark.

Genevieve frowned. "Trying to make me switch interest, Mark?"

"Look," said Mark, "I like you a lot and you know it."

"Sure. Enough to kiss me once. Really kiss me. After that, you put up your guard; you haven't risked a second kiss." Her tone was impudent, but there was a hurt expression in her dark eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Mark honestly.
"That I'm not the girl for you?"

"I've explained that I'm in no position to think seriously about any girl, Gen."

"You have a mighty serious interest in one."

Mark laughed. "Forget it."

She scuffed a foot in a thick-soled shoe on the smooth porch floor. "You wouldn't like to take me out to the farm again, would you?"

"I'd be glad to take you."

"Why not Sunday?"

"I'll let you know."

She laughed. "I drove by there the other day—I often take the drive which leads by the farm—and I saw a little redhead playing in the farmyard. Could that be the Farley youngster?"

Mark was halfway down the steps, but he turned back and led her to a corner of the porch. "Look," he said

earnestly. "Please don't mention that you saw the boy at the Hagens', will you?"

"Why not?"

"I have a reason."

"Can't you trust me?"

"I may have to." And Mark told her just what Dinah had told him that evening when she came to him in great alarm. "She's terrified for fear something may happen to Danny."

Genevieve frowned. "I doubt if Ed Farley takes any in-

terest in either his wife or his child."

"I don't know the angle," Mark said. "But I was the one who suggested that Dinah allow the Hagens to keep Danny and I'm more or less responsible for his safety." He told her of the man who had worked at the farm and his interest in the child on the day when they visited the farm together. "Is there any way I can make a check and discover whether this man is really Kendall?" he asked.

"I'll see what I can do," said Genevieve briefly. "Jeff has been eager to make up. I'll suggest a date and question him. It will be difficult to convince Jeff that I'm afraid of anything or anyone, but he's in touch with the police in the county and the state through political connections and we might set something up to discover this man's present whereabouts. If there's any foundation to your story, this man and Farley have a plan to do some job together. Ed would stop at nothing to get free and get some money. I suppose his wife fears that he may contact her for protection in case of trouble and frighten her boy?"

"That's probably the situation," Mark agreed.

"At least I have found one way to keep in touch with you, Mark." Genevieve smiled but her eyes were wistful.

Mark could find no words to say in reply. He left her standing on the club steps and walked away. 16

DINAH was unable to leave her patient on Sunday and Mark drove out to the farm alone, quite aware that it might be difficult to reconcile Danny to his mother's absence.

He was right. Danny raced down the lane to meet him and his first question was, "Where's Mother? You promised to bring her today, remember?"

Mark explained as well as he could that Dinah was unable to come because she was on a case.

"But I want to see her." Danny's face lengthened and no arguments which Mark could offer satisfied him. He moped throughout dinner and burst into tears when Mark refused to take him back to town with him.

"But there's no one at your house," Mark insisted impatiently. "It isn't like you to act the baby, Danny. A boy who can shoot Indians and hold up a stagecoach shouldn't cry."

But Danny was stubborn in his determination to leave and when Mark drove away he could hear Danny sobbing bitterly and insisting that he would come home and see his mother soon.

"Keep an eye on him," Mark warned Mary Hagen.

She laughed. "Children get homesick. He'll be quite all right after you leave."

"We'll come after him in the middle of the week." Mark looked worried.

"After all, he's only five years old," Mary reminded him. But Danny seemed older, thought Mark as he drove swiftly

back to town. He was uneasy about just what he would tell Dinah. She would worry if he said that Danny wanted to come home and was unreconciled to staying longer at the Hagens'. In the end, he made no mention of Danny's homesickness to her but did plan that they would drive out in a day or two and pick up Danny.

"He's quite all right?" Dinah asked anxiously.

Mark gave an evasive answer. He thought that she looked thinner. She had been on a difficult case and told him that she had seen Joe Hadley several times, as he was called in to check up one of her patients' children. "He seems interested in Genevieve Pepper," she told Mark.

He was glad to discuss something other than Danny's visit to the Hagens' and agreed that Joe seemed interested.

"You too, Mark?" she asked lightly.

They were standing outside the home of her patient in the dusk, and Mark said irritably, "If you weren't on duty, I might demonstrate just who the girl is I want. She hasn't black eyes and she's the most gallant girl I know—and . . ."

Dinah reached up and touched his lips lightly with her fingers. "Please don't, Mark. You make me feel wretched. Find some nice girl who will deserve all this. I don't. You

know I can't accept it . . ."

"Things are bound to change," said Mark stubbornly. "If there's any fairness in the world, it's wrong that you should feel bound by a pledge to a man who is a scoundrel. You aren't being fair to yourself or to Danny—" He broke off and said penitently, "I'm sorry," while Dinah turned and left him without a word.

Probably I've wrecked my chance to be friends with her now, thought Mark gloomily and, absorbed in his own problem, quite forgot to fret about Danny and his homesickness.

Dinah thought she would be off her case on Wednesday

and they had planned to drive out to the farm that evening. On Monday evening Genevieve drove up just as Mark's office hours ended and Mark went out to the car.

"Get in," she said briefly. "I've found out a little about that character you mentioned. And don't look as though I might try to abduct you. Mark, I've just about decided that a girl should look for a man who shares her feeling and not one who takes fright the instant she smiles at him."

"I deserve that," said Mark as he closed the car door. "I

apologize and I don't take fright as you put it-"

"Another interest," she said bluntly. "Don't tell me. I know. Well, about this man...he's been seen again in this vicinity. I tried to call you last evening but no one answered."

"I heard about that. The accident on the highway, wasn't

it?"

Mark nodded. "Teen-agers playing chase up and down those hills north of town. Fortunately none was seriously injured. Broken legs and arms and a girl with a badly scarred face."

Genevieve drove through the town as he talked and turned off the main road, "This is where I saw the man the first time," she told Mark

He frowned. "The back road that leads to the ferry?"

"It also leads to the Hagen farm. We took this the time you drove out and took me with you."

"That's right. But this is a deserted part of the county."

"I know. I talked to Jeff. Jeff may not be the most likable person in the world, but he's keen on cleaning up any untidy spots around here. There's one a mile or two beyond here which has a bad reputation. Our man might have been heading for there."

"Let's hope so." Mark stretched out his long legs and stared

straight ahead across the hills. Far in the distance was a spot of light.

"That it?" he asked curiously.

"That's it. You can circle back through a narrow winding road to the highway just a half mile beyond the Hagen farm."

They drove on without speaking for a while. Then Mark said, "What did Jeff Harrison know? Is this man Kendall?"

"Jeff checked that. But there is no proof that this man is the same person. Farley is safe in prison. Nothing is known of any attempt to break jail. In fact, Farley has been on his good behavior recently."

"How long is his sentence?"

"Ten years, I believe. He's served two but his bad record has lost him the chance of having his sentence shortened." She turned to Mark and smiled. "Why did you have to fall in love with that girl, Mark? It's so stupid of you."

"I realize that," said Mark ruefully, "but what can I do

about it now?"

"Try to persuade her to get a divorce."

"She doesn't believe in it."

Genevieve shrugged. "Then get yourself another girl. You'll find plenty ready and willing."

"And not look too far?"

She shook her head. "Count me out. I've decided I want a man who considers me the only one in the world. When I find such a man, I'll consider marriage."

"I might make a suggestion," said Mark.

He turned to regard her and was surprised to see the color rise in her cheeks. "Joe Hadley, I suppose. Is he your candidate?"

"You could do worse."

"I know," she said soberly. "But we didn't take this drive

to discuess candidates for my affection, Mark. That night spot I mentioned is just ahead." She slowed the car and pointed to a crudely constructed log building by the side of the road a few yards distant. "I thought you might go in and ask if a man answering our man's description had been there," she suggested. "They sell beer and soft drinks. Want to try?"

She parked the car in a sweep of gravel beside the building and Mark left her and went inside. He found it to be the usual roadside drinking spot. Noisy and dimly lighted and smelling of stale beer. A man in a dirty white apron lounged behind the bar and eyed Mark curiously as he entered.

"What will you have, mister?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Mark curtly. "I'm looking for a man . . ." He described the man who had worked on the Hagen farm. "Do you know him?"

"Got a lame foot?"

Mark nodded.

"Ain't seen him lately. He used to come here before he got hurt. Used our telephone. Buck," he shouted, and a skinny little man in a chef's cap popped his head through a door behind him. "Remember that guy who hurt his foot at that farm over yonder... seen him around here lately?"

The little man wiped his hands on his apron and his small eyes viewed Mark with interest. "You know him?"

"I want to find him. I have my own reasons."

"Been mixed up in something?"

"I dressed his foot. I'm a doctor."

"He was in here about noon for a beer." With this, the man cast a last shifty glance at Mark and started to leave.

The bartender brightened: "Hey . . . I remember now. He had a kid with him, didn't he? A little shaver with red hair—"

But before he could finish Mark had reached over and seized the bartender by the apron tail.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"I said—" He stopped suddenly. "Why do you want to know? What business is it of yours?" His small eyes narrowed.

"I'll show you whether its my business," Mark began, and then dropped his hold on the bartender and sprang after the small man in the chef's cap. There was something in his cunning eyes which made Mark believe that he knew more than he had told.

17

"What shall I do now?" Mark asked Genevieve after he had rejoined her in the car and had told her what he had learned.

"You could learn nothing beyond that?"

"Nothing but the fact that he visited this place hours ago. And that it must be Danny who was with him."

"We can soon check that with the Hagens," said Genevieve firmly. "The farm is just over the hills a few miles. Let's go."

She drove through a twisting narrow road and soon the Hagens' farm lay spread out below them in the fading sunlight.

"How can I tell Dinah?" asked Mark gloomily.

"Don't tell her anything until we find Danny. He can't be far away and certainly no one will harm him."

"Then why did he take him?"

"I judge Danny went willingly. Promises have a great influence with a child. You've said that he wanted to come

home. Possibly the man persuaded him to go with the promise that he would take him there."

They found the Hagens in a panic. They had called Mark repeatedly at his office. They were unwilling to arouse Dinah's fears, so had made no effort to call her. They told Mark that Danny had been left alone only a short time while Mary took her child in for his afternoon nap.

"I tried to persuade Danny to come with me but he said he wanted to stay outside and play," said Mary. "I saw him wandering down the lane but thought nothing of it. Adam wasn't in sight. What has happened to him?" She began to cry.

"Possibly nothing," Mark said. "He had some secret childish desire to go home. I blame myself for not being more apprehensive when this man showed an interest in Danny. And I didn't take Danny's homesickness seriously."

"But why should he leave with a stranger?" asked Genevieve, who sat in the car while the others talked soberly together. "Mark, why not go back to town and see if he did take Danny home? He might not be the bad character we imagine and simply listened to the boy's pleadings."

"That's a cheerful view to take," said Mark ruefully, but he climbed back into the car while the Hagens promised to keep a sharp lookout for the man Dinah suspected might be Kendall.

"Will you tell Dinah now?" asked Genevieve soberly.

"I'll try to find Danny first."

"Anyone could hide in the hills for days, Mark."

"But why bother with the boy?" Mark demanded impatiently. "He must have some definite purpose . . . What is it?"

Genevieve was silent. It wasn't hard to follow her thoughts. Children were dragged into the woods and never found until weeks later. But Mark had no fear that anything like this had

happened to Danny. In some way this man had a plan which involved the child. But what? And why?

"Don't go," Mark begged as they reached his office.

"I want to see Jeff," Genevieve said thoughtfully. "Jeff's smart. He'll know what to do. Whatever I learn, I'll come back here after office hours and check with you, Mark."

"I'm going to see whether anyone has returned to the cottage," stated Mark.

He watched her drive away. It was a great temptation to call Dinah. But what could she do but be wild with grief and anxiety?

Mark found his waiting room filled with patients and was only able to excuse himself long enough to dash out the rear door and check the cottage. It was dark and there was no sign of anyone about. The doors were locked. He listened and heard no sound of movement inside. He was positive no one was there.

Mark was in no mood for listening to the story of a dozen ailments that evening. It was ten when he dismissed the last patient and went to stand outside and watch anxiously for Genevieve. He ran out to the curb when her yellow car came in sight. "Any news?" he asked eagerly.

She nodded. She left the car and followed him into the office. "The man is Kendall, Mark. And while I was talking with Jeff, the news came into the police department that a man answering Ed Farley's description escaped from state prison this afternoon. The state police are alerted. There's a possibility he'll head in this direction to meet this man, Kendall. There's nothing more we can do, Mark."

"Only tell Dinah," said Mark grimly. "But first I intend to cover every inch of these hills on foot until I find Danny and bring him back to her. Her whole happiness depends upon that boy."

"And your whole happiness depends upon her," said Genevieve. She sank down on the porch step in the same spot where Mark had sat with Dinah on that first evening of his arrival. "I wish I could find someone to love me as you love her."

"You will, Gen." Mark dropped down beside her and covered her hands with his. "You'll find someone who needs you. That's the real test. That's the basis of this love business. A mutual need."

They were silent for a moment and then Mark suggested that she come inside and call Harrison and see if there had been any further information since she left him. "It's pretty decent of Harrison to bother," said Mark.

"Jeff never over looks duty," said Genevieve with a halfsmile. "Besides, he's doing this for me, remember?"

Genevieve was unable to get Jeff on the telephone in Mark's back office. She was about to return the receiver to the hook when she gave a little exclamation and turning, Mark was startled to see two figures enter the door which led to his reception room.

He recognized the man who grinned—an evil, knowing grin as he lounged in the doorway. Danny beside him flourished a gun. "Look," he cried. "Look, Doctor Mark—this is a real one. It's just like mine but it will really shoot . . ."

"Drop that, Danny," said Mark, and took a forward step,

but the man said:

"Better be careful. That gun's loaded and he knows how to use it. We been playing cops and robbers for the past few hours, ain't we, Danny?"

His eyes moved beyond Mark to the girl. "We want you and your car," he said bluntly. "Keep them covered, kid. Just like I showed you."

Danny giggled. "Don't move," he said in a shrill treble.

"He's not fooling, Mark," said Genevieve in a low tone. "Play along with him."

"That's the right spirit," said the man easily. "We got to pick up this kid's dad... Right, Danny?"

"Right." Danny flourished the gun.

"But we need a car and a driver. That's where the girl comes in. As for you, Doc—into this closet on the double. We've no time to lose."

He made a quick move which Mark side-stepped, but Danny came between them and rather than hurt the boy Mark retreated. The man seized him with a vicelike grip, thrust him into the closet and locked the door.

Mark's beating on the door resulted in nothing.

He heard bits of the conversation which followed. That Genevieve must drive them toward the hills where he judged they were to contact Ed Farley. The boy was to be the man's protection. Mark swore as he realized that the door behind which he stood was old and sturdy, not easily broken like a modern door.

He grew frantic as he heard steps retreating, then a car door slammed. He heard the car dying away, then silence.

Genevieve and Danny were gone with this man who was desperate and would not hesitate to harm them.

How long before he could hope to break out and follow? Mark was wild with anxiety as the minutes ran into hours.

18

GENEVIEVE PEPPER had no choice but to obey when the man whom she now knew to be Kendall ordered her to drive him

away quickly. He fairly pushed her into her car, put Danny between them and, with one last wary glance up and down the quiet street, told her to head for the highway.

Surely they would meet state police any minute, was Genevieve's thought as she drove swiftly through the town. But they met no one who noticed them. A mile or so beyond the town limits Kendall told her to turn, and she found herself upon the same road which she and Mark had taken that afternoon.

"Keep on going," he said sharply as she hesitated. "You said we would find my father," said Danny.

"We will," he stated briefly. "Shut up now and let me have that gun."

"You gave it to me," Danny persisted, clinging to the re-

The man took away the gun and gave Danny a rough push. "Keep still, will you?"

Danny whimpered and moved closer to Genevieve's shoul-

She thought of a dozen plans and instantly discarded them. Finally she said coldly, "Have we any particular destination?"

"We're heading for the river. There's a ferry farther along this road. Very few use it, so I've learned. Just keep going and don't ask questions."

The moon came up huge and golden; it shone across the fields and mirrored tiny streams they crossed as they left the valley and began to climb. It must be after midnight. Genevieve glanced at her watch. Yes, it was. Suddenly they saw a light ahead and the man said curtly, "Slow down. This is the place."

"Is this where I'll see my father?" piped Danny.

The man did not answer him. He ordered Genevieve to drive slowly past the same building which she and Mark had

visited that afternoon. There was no sign of life now, although a few lights shone through the windows.

"Blow your horn-twice," Kendall ordered.

After a moment Genevieve obeyed. She disliked the way the man held the gun pointed toward Danny. She guessed that his purpose in bringing the child was to prevent her from becoming stubborn. She revolved in her mind ways to get rid of him but none were worth attempting.

The man grew nervous. In her rear-view mirror Genevieve imagined that she saw lights glow behind them in the hills. The state cops? she wondered.

"Drive on," he said angrily. "Straight ahead to the ferry. It runs all night and we have to make it on the double now."

Something had gone wrong, she thought. He was surly, and a terrified Danny began to sob.

"If you make a move to turn back, I'll fix this whining kid," the man threatened. "Drive faster."

It seemed only minutes then until the river appeared below them and the road descended in sharp hairpin turns to the ferry landing. Even as they approached, Genevieve could see the ferryboat dark against the moonlit water as it came toward them.

"I'm warning you . . . not a word. Get me across and you can do what you please. I'll be safe then."

Genevieve doubted this.

"Drive straight on the ferry. Let me off on the other side. Then beat it."

Genevieve nodded and drove the car onto the ferryboat, which was docked now ready to make the return trip. The man who ran it viewed them curiously. A girl and a child and this unpleasant-looking man must seem an odd combination to anyone. The ferry engine started with a roar, water swirled, and they were moving. A surge of fear washed

over Genevieve as she saw the man turn and shake the boy.

"Where am I?" asked Danny in bewilderment.

"Hush." She held his small hand tightly. "Just keep quiet, Danny."

She was determined not to show her fear. Her only hope was that before they reached the opposite shore Mark might have found some way to escape and give the state police the alarm. That would be her one chance, for she had a feeling that the man might vent his anger upon either herself or Danny at any moment.

She was not wrong in this supposition. Halfway across the river, he turned and said curtly, "Get outside and right near the car as though you were interested in the view ahead." He shook the sleeping Danny, who awoke and whimpered.

"What then?" Genevieve demanded angrily. The noise of the engine almost drowned her voice and she repeated her question, but the man made no answer as he reached across her and opened the door and pushed her toward it as he moved into the driver's seat.

She had no choice but to clutch the child's hand tightly as she stepped down onto the rocking ferry. There were no side rails. The platform upon which the car stood was only a few feet above water level. Danny clung to her and said in a quivering voice, "I'm scared."

So am I, thought Genevieve angrily. Just what was the man's purpose?

She soon knew. Two thirds of the way across the river he leaned from the car and gave her a push. She tried to keep her balance, but staggered, still with the child's hand tightly gripped in her own. She tried to shout but had no hope that she could be heard. An instant later she was overboard, with Danny's scream lost in the roar of the ferry engine.

Had the ferryman noticed their absence? Would he when

the car landed? Unlikely, was her gloomy thought as she made a desperate clutch at Danny's shoulders disappearing in the water. She was an excellent swimmer. Under normal circumstances, she could swim the distance to the shore quite easily. But could she, hampered by a frightened and panic-stricken child?

Genevieve's clothes clung to her and impeded her movements as she reached for Danny, "Hang on," she cried.

Danny's eyes were big and terrified, but although his voice quavered he promised bravely, "I'll try."

The ferry was far away now. Just a wake of shimmering ripples. The moon glistened on the smooth top of the convertible.

Could she cover that distance? Would help come in time? It must, she thought grimly. Mark will never forgive me if I don't save Danny.

19

As Mark heard the receding footsteps, the slam of the door, the sound of a car growing fainter and fainter, his heart sank. He doubted if anyone could hear him even though he shouted. The best he could do was to make a try, he decided, but all his efforts were of no avail. He simply exhausted himself and lost breath in a space which was suffocatingly small. After what seemed hours of waiting, Mark realized that in a closet as narrow and stifling-hot as this, he might easily be overcome and faint.

The thought enraged him. He felt so futile standing

cramped and sweltering in this confining place while anything might happen to Genevieve and Danny.

Then suddenly he heard the screen door open. Quick steps approached the room beyond which he stood as Mark pounded vigorously on the locked door and a male voice said, "What the devil? Where are you?"

Mark repeated the pounding. The key turned in the lock and he confronted an astonished Jeff Harrison.

"What are you doing here?" Jeff's thin face was bewildered. Mark hurriedly repeated what had happened.

"Where's Gen now?"

Mark shook his head. "I don't know."

Jeff Harrison's eyes were hard and angry, and his first reaction was a string of abuses. "Why did you drag Gen into this mess?" he demanded. "What reason did you have to involve a girl with a bunch of criminals?"

"I had no idea this would happen." Mark defended himself. "How could I? But while we stand here trying to fasten the blame on someone, anything may happen to Genevieve and the boy."

They debated just what to do. Jeff called the police and outlined briefly what had happened. He suggested that they start off immediately and it was Jeff whose hunch led them to take the same road which Mark and Genevieve had taken that afternoon.

They went in Jeff's car. He gave Mark a significant glance as he opened the glove compartment and indicated the gun which lay there. "I'm taking no chances of a surprise," he said grimly. "This Kendall is a smart character. It was his idea that Farley should try to make a break. He has something lined up for them to work out together probably. He used this locale as a rendezvous with the idea that Farley's wife would protect them if they had trouble. Farley made the

break but was still at large when I left the office. I've been in touch with the state cops all afternoon. Ever since Gen told me that they had picked up Farley's boy. A man who will trick a child is not to be trusted. I don't like it, Merryman." His thin face tightened.

"Neither do I," said Mark. But in spite of his fear for Genevieve and Danny, he was startled to find that Jeff Harrison was quite a different person from the lazy-appearing man he seemed. Mark realized that Jeff had a keen, alert mind. He displayed almost a sixth sense as he made first one plan and then another and finally decided that they head straight for the night spot not far from the ferry.

"I had a tip-off that Kendall was acquainted there," he explained. He drove fast but carefully as they followed a dirt road which he said would take them to the night spot more quickly than the route Mark had followed earlier. He stopped to inquire at several cabins along the way whether a man and a boy had been seen in that vicinity. He swore softly as he was successful. A colored boy said he had seen a yellow car traveling south several hours earlier on the hill road.

"It was heading for the ferry, sir," the boy told Jeff.

They drove on for several miles before they reached the night spot. It was after midnight now and the place was dark and looked deserted.

"We'll knock them up," said Jeff briefly. He left Mark in the car and pounded on the closed door of the building. No one answered.

"Aren't we wasting time?" asked Mark anxiously as he left the car and joined Jeff.

Jeff shook his head. "We can't risk missing them now and the only way to be sure is to find their contact. I'm sure he's here."

"Possibly he's the man in the chef's cap Genevieve and I

saw this afternoon," Mark suggested. "He acted suspiciously."

But no amount of knocking brought a response and finally they drove away debating whether to turn back or follow on to the river.

"Why should they go to the ferry?" Mark asked.

"Better chance of a getaway across on the other side. Wild country. Plenty of cover. But if we're wrong—" Jeff shrugged. "We can't afford to waste time."

Just as they were about to turn back onto the road a glow of light appeared behind them and a few minutes later a state police car drew up close by. "Any news?" asked Jeff anxiously.

The officer shook his head. "Not about the girl and the child. But we think they've taken Farley just outside Ridgeway. Probably he tried to make it home hoping his wife would protect him."

Unhappily, Mark thought of Dinah. Did she know?

His heart ached for her. Almost he forgot his fear for Genevieve as his thoughts ran back to Dinah and the agony she must feel if she had learned of Danny's danger.

"Let's go," said Jeff suddenly, and put the car in motion. "The general belief is that Kendall has headed for the river. He came from that hill country across the river and will know his way around there when he reaches it. The police have been alerted but they can't move in close for fear he'll attack the girl or the child."

"You love her, don't you?" said Mark abruptly.

"Gen? Of course. I've always loved her. Ever since she was a crazy kid in school."

"And you understand her," said Mark slowly.

"Sure. Just discover that?"

Mark nodded.

"She always comes back. That is, she always has before."

He shot Mark a questioning glance. "What about you? Are you in love with her?"

"No," said Mark honestly.

It was an odd time to exchange confidences. Riding through the summer night now, with fear uppermost in the mind of each, they discussed the girl whom Jeff Harrison loved and who had almost swept Mark off his feet with her charm and beauty. Both knew that the fate of a small boy depended upon that girl's self-control and nerve. It would be her task to outwit a clever criminal. It would rest with her whether or not Dinah's happiness was destroyed.

All this raced through Mark's mind as they drove swiftly toward the ferry. In a few short miles he learned the depth of Jeff Harrison's feelings for a girl whom he had thought,

after a brief acquaintance, frivolous and shallow.

"Gen has fallen in love a dozen times," said Jeff Harrison. "That doesn't mean a thing to me. She returns my ring and when I know she's ready I ask her to wear it again." He gave Mark a quick sidewise glance. "But when she puts my wedding ring upon her finger there'll be an end to all that. Maybe you don't understand what I mean."

"Maybe I do," said Mark soberly. There was no doubt in his own mind that, although it might be years before the way was clear for him to tell Dinah of his love, she was the only girl for him. He would wait patiently.

"There it is," said Jeff. He stopped the car on a hill and below them Mark saw the river shining in the moonlight.

"And there's the ferryboat close to shore," said Mark. But his hopes fell, for the scene before them was peaceful, with nothing to distrub its tranquillity. Nothing to indicate anything unusual. Then suddenly Jeff caught his arm. "Listen," he said tensely. Shots rang out in the distance. A siren's whine sounded quite close by.

"Look," Jeff's voice lost its calm control, his fingers clutched Mark's arm tighter, "there near the ferry. See those men . . ."

He started the car with a roar and drove recklessly down the winding road which led to the river. And Mark felt his own heart race with excitement and fear, for the little knot of men, plainly discernible now, were bending over someone on the riverbank.

Could it be Genevieve? Danny?

20

JEFF drove the car down the twisting road with utter disregard for their safety. At the time Mark knew no apprehension. His whole interest was centered on the scene below. There in the moonlight the group of men drew apart, and he saw a figure move. A girl.

"It's Genevieve," he told Jeff, who drove straight toward the group, brought the car to an abrupt stop, and was out

of the car and bending over the figure on the ground.

"Gen," said Jeff sharply, "are you all right?"
She nodded.

carried her toward his car.

Her black hair stuck in duck tails to her pale cheeks, her lips were pale and her eyes dark circles, but she smiled and reached up and caught Jeff's thin, freckled hand in hers. "I'm all right," she assured him. Jeff lifted her in his arms and

"I'll take her back," he said over his shoulder to the state police who started to protest.

"There's an ambulance on the way," one said.

"What about the child?" Mark broke in anxiously.

"We sent him back to the hospital. Nothing seriously wrong," he added, as Mark looked startled. "Shock and chill and fright. He's a plucky youngster, believe me."

"Coming with me?" asked Jeff impatiently.

He had wrapped a blanket about the girl. She was too exhausted to talk but lay in the car with her dark eyes closed.

"You sure you're all right?" Jeff repeated anxiously.

"I'm all right," she persisted. "But I wouldn't care to repeat the experience."

They would have to wait until later to hear her story, thought Mark. They would have to learn from others what had happened. But he could guess that in some miraculous way she had saved herself and the boy from drowning in the river. Presently she seemed to doze. Sometimes she sighed and moaned and it was a relief to Mark, and also to Jeff, when they saw the light of the town and drove swiftly through it to the hospital. The Memorial was a blaze of lights. An interne and two nurses met them.

They discovered nothing wrong with Genevieve but exhaustion. After she was quiet, the nurse in attendance told Mark that Dinah was with Danny and that the child was none the worse for his experience. "But what an escape," she said gravely.

Mark himself was bone-tired as he left the hospital and stood outside watching the first streaks of dawn break low in the eastern sky.

Presently, Jeff Harrison joined him for a cigarette. "I'm staying on until I'm sure Gen's resting quietly," he said briefly. "Right now she's restless. She been under a terific strain."

"I have certain interests here myself," Mark confessed, and suddenly, as they stood together, he poured out his own anxiety. Jeff listened gravely as Mark told of his love for

Dinah, who felt that her first obligation was to a man unworthy of her loyalty.

"Sometimes women are like that," said Jeff thoughtfully, and then he grinned. "I've had no experience with the type myself. Gen is a born flirt. Every new man she meets is a prospective victim and she can't resist trying her skill upon him. Sorry... I meant nothing personal."

Mark smiled. "She gave me some bad moments," he acknowledged. "But something you said tonight impressed me mightily. The basis of all true love is understanding and need. You understand Genevieve. She needs you . . . That's why she comes back to you and always will. But my own case seems quite hopeless."

Jeff tossed aside his cigarette and turned to re-enter the hospital. "Don't be too sure. I heard just a moment ago that Ed Farley was killed in that skirmish before they closed in on him. The haven't told his wife yet . . . Maybe you should be the one to break the news to her, Mark."

Mark shook his head. Dinah had enough to worry her tonight without the shocking news that the father of her child had been killed. He started to walk away, planning to return later and see Danny, when a nurse came to the doorway and called him:

"Doctor Merryman, you're wanted in Room Ten."

Mark's heart was thumping loudly as he walked swiftly along the corridor. Number Ten. He paused. Now, if ever, he must know the right thing to say . . . He must convince Dinah that the past was behind her and ahead was the promise of a new future for them and for Danny.

He opened the door softly. Thin morning light penetrated the blinds at the broad windows. Danny lay sleeping quietly, his mother's hand in his. Dinah turned as Mark entered and for an instant neither spoke.

Then Mark strode quickly toward her and bent and kissed her cheek. "He's all right?" he asked gently.

She nodded. Then she carefully put Danny's hand away from her and rose and stood regarding Mark with a glance that made his heart beat stormily.

"Mark," she said, "you know?"

"About Farley?"

The tears shone in her blue eyes. "Poor Eddie," she said brokenly.

I must wait, thought Mark miserably, although the temptation to take her in his arms was almost unbearable.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly.

"For me?" Her voice was low and controlled.

He nodded.

The light in her eyes seemed to fade. "Is Genevieve all right now?"

He puzzled for a moment. "Genevieve?"

"She was wonderful. She saved Danny's life." she said hurriedly. Dinah told him what she had learned about the rescue: How the ferryman was puzzled when the car drove off the ferry and he realized there was only one person in the yellow convertible. How he had thought there was something peculiar, and then was shocked as he caught a glimpse of the girl and child struggling in the water. At the same time a boat struck out from shore. The state men watching for Kendall had seen the two fall overboard.

"Genevieve Pepper saved Danny," Dinah repeated. "I owe her a debt I can never hope to repay."

Suddenly he guessed what she thought. That he, too, must see in Genevieve something so unusual that he must fall in love with her.

"I admire Gen," he said flatly. "That's all."

Her glance wavered. "Danny and I will go away soon," she said uncertainly. "We owe you a lot Mark . . . "

He laughed. "Look," he said, and crossed the room and pushed up the shutters. "The sun's coming out, big and bright and shining. See it? Well, things are going to be like that for us too, Dinah. Bright and shining. Don't shrink away, please. I'll respect what has happened to you, although right now I want to kiss you and tell you that all your worries are behind you. I can wait. I've learned tonight that you can't rush love—it often comes slowly. Do you understand, darling?"

He waited, uncertain of her reaction.

Dinah said quietly, "Sometimes words are unnecessary, Mark. Sometimes they lose all importance. I feel like that tonight. I have no words to express my gratitude that Danny was saved. But there's something else that makes me grateful—the promise of a future for both of us."

Suddenly she looked him straight in the eyes. "Do you know what I mean, Mark?"

And Mark knew that there was a time indeed when words were unnecessary. He took her in his arms and, looking deep into Dinah's blue Irish eyes, read what he wanted to know there.

"Hey," said a shrill voice behind them.

Mark stared. Danny was sitting straight up in bed with a puzzled look on his freekled face. "I never did find my father," he observed in a fretful tone.

Mark laughed as he pulled Dinah down on Danny's bed beside him. "You're wrong, young man," he said earnestly. "You're looking at your father right now."

Danny looked incredulous. "You-my father!"

"I shall be someday."

"Is it true?" Danny demanded of his mother.

Dinah nodded.

"Oh boy!" Danny lay back and stared thoughtfully at the hospital ceiling. "Maybe I can be a doctor just like you."

"It's possible," said Mark, his hand tightening on Dinah's.

There was a sharp tap on the door and a little nurse stuck in her capped head as she said doubtfully, "There's a call for you, Doctor Merryman. Shall I say . . ."

"Tell them I'll be along in a few minutes."

Later as Mark left the room, he thought of the day when he had sat outside the hospital and hoped for just such a call. It was on that same day that he met Dinah, he remembered.

A doctor was wise to marry a girl who understood his problems, Mark thought as he strode swiftly down the corridor. But only a lucky doctor was fortunate enough to find one like his Dinah.