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GOTHIC TALES OF LOVE®



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TERROR AT NELSON WOODS, by Susan Richard.....2

Her new home was magnificent, her mother-in-law welcomed her warmly, though she hadn't expected a bride. Then the "accidents" began, and Michelle wanted to take Tim by the hand, and run . . .

DARK TALISMAN, by Anne-Marie Bretonne34

It was a frightful amulet—a serpent's head, fangs poised to strike. "It will protect you," Selena's uncle had said. But could it save her from the voodoo hell she found in her tropical paradise?

STRANGE ECSTASY, Part II, by Virginia Wells58

Shocked and desperate, Lisa had to find a way to escape her captors. The man she loved, her only hope of help, had betrayed her. Then, she learned the terrifying truth about the "friend" she had trusted!

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Gothic Roundtable

Welcome, Gothic Readers!

Thanks a million! Your response to the first issue of **GOTHIC TALES OF LOVE** was simply great! All your letters are greatly appreciated, and your kind reception means more than we can say. True to our promise to make this space truly a "Roundtable" expressing your comments and questions, here goes:

Mrs. J.L., Atlanta, Georgia, writes, "I just love everything written by Victoria Holt, and certainly enjoyed 'The Legend of the Seventh Virgin' in your first issue. Now, I wonder if you could solve a mystery for me! I've never seen a picture of Victoria Holt, and I've heard not only that this is not her real name, but that *she* is a *he*! Is this true?"

Yes—and no. Victoria Holt is not the real name of this very fine writer. But let us assure you that *she* is a very real lady, who lives in London and spends much time at her country home in—naturally—Cornwall. She prefers to protect her private life by using a pseudonym, and so far, has succeeded admirably—perhaps because she's such an expert at plotting mysteries!

Ms. E.D., Philadelphia, Pa., writes, "What a pleasant surprise to find your new magazine at my newsstand! Though I like the full-length gothics, I found your condensed versions of fine novels a very convenient way to enjoy them when one hasn't much time to read, and you've done a great job of maintaining the full flavor and excitement of the originals. Of course, your attractive low price is appealing in these inflationary times, too. You asked us to request our favorite writers—one of mine is Norah Lofts. Could you tell me something about her, and whether you might be able to feature her work in a future issue?"

We're glad you asked—because one of Norah Lofts' most thrilling stories, "Out of the Dark," is on our schedule for the next issue (watch for it at your newsstand in June).

Unlike Victoria Holt, the attractive Ms. Lofts isn't shy about her identity. She lives and writes in Suffolk, England. Though known primarily for her biographical novels of such subjects as Anne Boleyn ("The Concubine") and Katharine of Aragon ("The King's Pleasure"), she entered the field of suspense writing with a tale of modern witchcraft, "The Little Wax Doll," and finds it very much to her liking. Millions of readers promptly found her books in this vein very much to *their* liking, too.

To those who sent requests for other popular writers, we hope to

bring you all of them, sooner or later, in future issues. Including Barbara Cartland, Marilyn Ross, Monica Heath, Mary Linn Roby, and more. Oh yes—to all who clamored for more of Dorothy Daniels after reading "The Possession of Tracy Corbin"—she'll be with us again, too.

In case you're wondering what your fellow members of our Roundtable are like, we can give you a pretty good idea now. In age, they range from young girls in their teens, to mothers and great-grandmas. And though gothics are usually thought of as "women's books" you'd be amazed at the number of men who read them avidly, too (though they may not always admit it!). But young or old, men or women, all these readers have one thing in common—they're demanding, and discriminating. Any confirmed gothic fan simply won't accept anything second-rate. Stories must be well-plotted and logical, as well as suspenseful. "Please don't give us cheap sex and thrills," one reader warns. "What we want is a really absorbing story, well told. Your first issue was fine—keep up the good work."

We'll do our best! Again, thanks for your encouragement. Happy reading!

The Editors



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YOUR FUTURE

Love, Money, Personal Relationships, Success—Your Horoscope Tells All

April—May, 1975



ARIES (March 21-April 20): Look forward to a broadening in your social life. You will have opportunities over the next few weeks to make contact with a number of people who can help promote your goals. On the job, advancement is in the air. A superior you believe has overlooked you now takes a strong interest in your future. Don't resist his attempts to guide you. You can greatly benefit by his direction.



TAURUS (April 21-May 20): A stale romance dies hard. Seek out the company of others and gradually wean yourself from your old love. Guard against allowing destructive feelings to surface in mid-May. A thoughtless word from you could spoil a budding friendship. Later in the month take advantage of a surge of energy. You'll accomplish in a short time a task you have put off for weeks.



GEMINI (May 21-June 20): Set aside some time for travel before summer. Getting away from it all—even for a day or two—will give you fresh insights, and you will be better equipped to resolve an old but persistent conflict. Friends admire your mellowed outlook and value your judgment highly during this period.



CANCER (June 21-July 22): Someone from the past re-enters your life this Spring. Avoid plunging headlong into intimacy with this individual. You'll find this is one relationship that can not be picked up where it left off. Pay close attention to your health during the final days of May. A nagging minor complaint could turn serious if you refuse to give up damaging habits.



LEO (July 23-August 22): Show loyalty to a loved one now. Your support could help pull him through a crisis. If you are tempted to criticize, think twice. You will gain nothing by undermining the efforts of those close to you to achieve emotional stability. Take care of routine matters on the job and leave the close, detailed work to others.



VIRGO (August 23-September 22): Late April evenings are favorable for romance. If you are married, your spouse is unusually attentive now. Let him know how much his little gestures of affection mean to you. Don't worry too much about debts incurred during the first quarter of the year. A small legacy will see you through until May, when your economic situation begins to ease up.



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— YOUR FUTURE —



LIBRA (September 23-October 22): You'll be plagued with a host of minor ills this Spring if you don't find a way to dispel the pressure stored inside you. Take extreme measures to avoid friction, especially at home. If possible seek escape from everyday concerns, and don't let guilt overtake you. A mini-vacation is something we are all entitled to periodically.



SCORPIO (October 23-November 22): An influential acquaintance pushes you out into the limelight. Bask in it. Recognition is all the more rewarding for having been so slow in coming. You feel encouraged to press even harder to achieve gain. Avoid putting pressure on someone close to you. Hidden resentments could surface and cost you a considerable setback.



SAGITTARIUS (November 23-December 21): The first of the month has you in the doldrums. A period of frenetic activity gives way to fatigue and mild depression. This is not the time to launch new projects, but consider making small changes in your daily routine. During the latter part of April and into May you feel refreshed and receptive to new ideas. Pay special heed to some sound financial advice from a colleague.



CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19): You have been avoiding a long-overdue confrontation with an associate. Don't be afraid to come to grips with what's troubling you. Taking a fair but firm stand now will help you avert future crises. Entertain lavishly and go out of your way to make a shy guest feel at ease. He may reciprocate with a small but important favor.



AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18): This is a fine time to sort out bills and documents. An item you've been searching for turns up unexpectedly. Keep it handy; you'll find it useful before the month is up. Be sure not to place unnecessary strain on your budget. If you are considering a move, delay your decision for a short time. You'll need your present cash reserves to help lighten a friend's burden.



PISCES (February 19-March 20): Force yourself to be a little daring, even flamboyant. Consider a major overhaul of your life style, and once you've made the decision, don't hold back. A more vibrant, spontaneous side of you surfaces. Well-wishers applaud the new you. In love you could outwit a long-time rival and emerge triumphant. This is a happy, creative time for Pisces.

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Terror At Nelson Woods

The mansion was magnificent. Her mother-in-law had welcomed her warmly, though she wasn't expecting a bride. Still, Michelle felt uneasy. The servants were hostile. The girl next door had believed Tim would marry her. Then the terrible "accidents" began to happen — and she realized, with horror, that her new life had turned into a threat of death!

By SUSAN RICHARD

The winter sunlight spilled over the once-elegant Tudor house, now an Adirondack resort for a steady stream of skiers. I stood at our bedroom window—modernized into a vast expanse of Thermopane to take advantage of the magnificent view of mountains, snow and sky—while Tim packed away the contents of the medicine chest in the bathroom.

For four days this had been our honeymoon home. Four perfect days, after a prosaic wedding ceremony at City Hall in New York, with my roommate Carol and her intern fiancé standing up for us.

With a sense of loss I looked away from the outdoors, and focused on the bright, cheery room. The furniture was Colonial maple. The colorful patchwork quilt and oval hooked rug lent a charming warmth. The remains of last night's fire were a deep red glow in the grate:

I didn't want to leave. Panic brushed me as I envisioned walking into the fine old house 80 miles above Quebec City that was home to Tim. Walking in to be presented to his mother—who didn't know I existed.

Why did panic almost inundate me when I considered meeting Tim's mother? Because Tim loved her so deeply? Was I afraid I'd lose in the comparison?

Tim's mother was such an efficient woman. Running the house at Nelson Woods. Managing the paper mill. I operated on a different wavelength. I'd never be the exemplary housekeeper. I adored being a nursery school teacher. The woman executive scene turned me off.

"Hey, look what I found." Tim's blue eyes were mockingly reproachful as he held up the pair of manicure scissors I'd left behind.

"Oh, Tim." I smiled ruefully. "Sorry you married me?" "You're going to be happy at Nelson Woods," Tim promised, suddenly serious. "You won't miss New York."

"I'll be too busy to miss New York." I strived for effervescence. "With the cottage to get into shape"—Tim had told me the guest house hadn't been lived in for years—"and my little nursery group to plan—"

But Tim wasn't hearing me. He was staring into space. A dozen times these last two days I'd talked to Tim without getting through to him.

He's upset about taking me home to his mother, I told myself. Why doesn't he phone Nelson Woods, tell her he's married? It's awful to walk in cold this way!

"Okay, let's get cracking." As swiftly as the wall between us had been erected it came tumbling down. "Let me put our bags into the car—" He was sliding the manicure scissors into the overnight bag. "We'll have breakfast and cut out."

Tim scooped up the two valises. I followed him into the hall, down the narrow, carpeted stairs that led to the main floor. With unexpected hunger I sniffed the aroma of bacon sizzling in a skillet, hot rolls browning in an oven, coffee perking. We heard the clatter of silver and china being set up in the dining room downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs Tim took advantage of its deserted state to brush his mouth lingeringly against mine. I sensed a quiet urgency in him that made my heart pound. He was uptight about bringing me home.

Tim and I were meant to meet. In Paris in July—it sounds like a song. Of course, I was out of my mind to spend all that money on the two-week London-and-Paris tour. But Laura and Pat persuaded me to go with them

in a matter of minutes. Because I was destined to meet Tim.

Kooky, the way I'd come up from the Metro at the St. Michel station and got separated from Pat and Laura. Momentarily panicky at the prospect of getting back on our pension on my own. Walking up the broad Boulevard St. Michel, too upset to be properly charmed by the picturesque sweep of bookstores and sidewalk cafes. And then I'd literally walked into Tim.

Tim's mother was his whole family. His father died when he was 11. He had no sisters or brothers. Both parents had been only children—there were no aunts or uncles such as I have, though mine were scattered too far away to fly in for our brief wedding ceremony. Tim's mother lived alone at Nelson Woods with a domestic staff that had been with the family for years.

"My, you're pensive," Tim joshed when Lillian left.

"I'm scared."

"Of meeting Mother?" He lifted an eyebrow in reproach. "You two will hit it off great. When she sees my beautiful, fair-haired bride, when she sees those gorgeous brown eyes," he teased, "she'll say I've done well. I told you—she's been trying to marry me off for years."

Actually, Tim hadn't been home much these past years. He'd gone to college and graduate school in Montreal—close enough via superhighways to make it home on occasional weekends. Then he'd gone to Paris to study. He hadn't been home at all during the months he'd been in New York.

I wasn't alone, I suddenly realized, in dreading the coming confrontation with Mrs. Nelson. Tim, for all his show of exuberance, was nervous too.

Why didn't Tim call his mother, and tell her that he was bringing me home as his bride? Suddenly, I realized he was as tense and nervous as I . . .

Fortified by the hearty breakfast and two cups of coffee, we started out for Nelson Woods. In the comfort of the metallic gold Volvo, I leaned back and tried to relax. Snow-wrapped mountains on both sides ahead of us reached impossibly into the faintly ominous gray of the sky, which an hour earlier had been golden with sunlight.

"I'm fascinated at moving into French-speaking territory," I bubbled. "I'll have a chance to talk French again."

Tim grinned.

"The French they speak up there isn't like the French your mother taught you," he warned. "You'll find out."

Tim sighed. I saw his hands tighten on the wheel. We had recently discussed the political troubles in Quebec. He was upset that the province had seen violence. Tim was English, the unloved minority in Quebec.

"Tim, I'm not going to rush out to join the F.L.Q.," No, that sounded too flip, I rebuked myself. "What I'm trying to say," I pursued earnestly, "is that I feel a kind of ethnic closeness to the Quebecois." Tim knew my mother had been born 25 miles south of Paris. "It's exciting for me to be among French people."

But in Paris I'd been just another American tourist, to be gouted just like any other American. And my husband and my mother-in-law were English.

"Mother doesn't speak a word of French," Tim warned. "She's made a point of not learning. We've had some occasional problems in the plant the last three or four years," he conceded somberly, "though nothing serious. The real trouble has been in the cities."

His right hand left the wheel to draw me close, my head against his shoulder. For now it was enough to be close to

Tim this way. I wouldn't worry about the meeting with his mother. That was still several hours away.

We hadn't passed a car for miles, I realized all at once as I spied a gleaming red snowmobile skimming over the whiteness of the fields. What a shocking change of pace for a girl brought up in the clatter of mid-Manhattan traffic!

Solicitously, Tim broke the silence between us. "Warm enough?"

"Deliciously. The scenery is breathtaking." Don't let Tim know the unease that's riding over you.

We began to climb again, slowly but definitely. Tim swung off onto a secondary road before we came in to La Malbaie. From his tense grip on the wheel I guessed we were approaching Nelson Woods.

"The side road there, Michelle—" He cleared his throat nervously. "That leads to the village. The plant is situated right at the edge." His mother's—the family's—paper plant. "The next left takes us up to Nelson Woods."

"This acreage along here—on both sides of the road—belongs to the estate," Tim explained. His mother held the estate in trust. Upon her death, Tim would inherit Nelson Woods. Some day, I suddenly realized, we would be wealthy. "The driveway is about a hundred yards ahead."

In the distance now I could see the very large, very tall silhouette of the house.

"Tim, it's enormous." I hadn't realized the house would be so large. I felt small, insignificant. Oddly alarmed.

"The view of the river is magnificent," Tim said. I flinched. He didn't notice. "When I was little, I used to be scared we'd all be blown into the river every time a bad

storm came along." I smiled with a sudden tenderness for the small boy he had been. "There was always a tree or two struck by lightning. Up there the thunder sounds personally vengeful. It was strong fare for a small boy—and an only child at that—to live at Nelson Woods alone with adults."

Tim carefully turned off the ice-coated road into the driveway. The house was completely different from what I had expected. To me a Victorian house was something out of Hawthorne, with rambling, ornately decorated porches surrounding its exterior. Something quaint, demanding indulgence.

There on the hill overlooking the St. Lawrence—I shuddered when I considered the length of the drop from house to river—stood a strangely forbidding mansion. Dark red brick walls broken by patches of stone and half-timber. The hipped, slate roof, with elegant wrought iron gutters, was cut by innumerable Dutch gables and dormers, suggesting endless rooms within.

A tall, lean Irish setter, barking lustily, darted forward through a Tudor arch at the side of the house, toward the rear. The arch formed a small porch. The setter charged toward the car.

"Rusty!" With a broad grin Tim brought the car to a halt, pushed the door wide, stepped cautiously out on to the crunching whiteness. "Hi, Rusty! Hi, boy!"

Cautiously, I put one booted foot, then the other into the snow, closed the car door and walked gingerly around the front to the other side, where Tim roughly with the setter.

"Tim, you didn't tell me you had a dog," I reproached, offering myself to Rusty's ecstatic, slobbering affection.



What a marvelous surprise!" Tim's mother exclaimed. But she had turned pale, and her hands trembled. Why was I so frightened? Why did I want to take Tim by the hand, and run?

"I never thought of it," Tim chuckled. "Rusty's part of Nelson Woods. Mother bought him as a pup five years ago. Hey, fellow, cool it!" he chided because I would have fallen from the impact of a fresh, joyous assault if Tim hadn't caught me.

"Rusty!" A querulous woman's voice called from the doorway on the porch. "What are you carrying on about?"

"That's Dora." Tim slid an arm around my waist as we walked toward her. "She's too near-sighted to recognize me from this distance. She's worried about Rusty—he's trained to attack." I stared at Tim in shock, then warily regarded Rusty. "Up here—isolated the way we are—it's a necessary precaution," Tim explained gently. "Rusty takes commands from anyone regularly a part of the household."

"Mister Tim!" Dora shrieked, her voice a strident blend of astonishment and delight. "Mister Tim!" She was moving with awkward haste toward us. "We weren't expecting you for another week yet!"

Tim closed his arms affectionately around Dora's ample, padded frame, and kissed her briskly.

"Dora, I kept thinking about your cooking," Tim teased. "And I couldn't wait another day."

"Your mother's in the library. Just wait till she sets eyes on you." Dora's eyes moved fleetingly—curiously—to me. I smiled tentatively.

"Don't say a word to Mother," Tim ordered with mock sternness. "I want to surprise her."

"You'll be doing that," Dora assured him drily. With one squat-fingered hand she smoothed the wiry gray hair Tim had disarranged, while the three of us moved to the porch. "Rusty, you're tracking snow all over," she

scolded, more from habit than in anger, when Tim held the door for us to go inside.

"Come along, Michelle." Avoiding Dora's questioning eyes, Tim reached for my hand.

Down the hall I heard a woman's voice. An unexpectedly musical voice with a crisp English accent. It was more strongly English than Tim's accent—or was I just accustomed to Tim's speech?

"I know I must enlarge the plant to keep up with competition," Claire Nelson was saying, "but it makes me sick to be hit with this awful inflation just at this time."

Tim winked at me, moved toward the open door. I was conscious of Dora trailing us with an odd air of anxiety. She kept up a pretense of scolding Rusty, who was nuzzling his head beneath my hand.

"I don't mind," I insisted. "I love dogs."

"Mother—" Tim paused just inside the door. "Look what the snowstorm just blew in."

Over Tim's shoulder I saw a tall, compactly built, remarkably handsome woman rise in astonishment from a black leather chair set before a roaring fire. She strode lithely toward Tim in a smart black pantsuit that was striking by contrast with her snow-white, severely coiffed hair. Despite her fifty-odd years, she was in excellent shape. She was probably very much at home on the ski slopes. Her colorful winter tan suggested this.

In a tapestry-covered chair with its back to the door sat a slim, honey-haired girl who swung around now with an eager smile. She half-rose, then froze in position as her eyes fell on me. Uncertainly, she sank back into her chair.

"Tim!" His mother's voice was rich with delight. "Why didn't you call and say you were on your way home?"

Brimming over with the joy of Tim's arrival, she was oblivious of my presence. "Did you have any trouble getting up the driveway? We had at least eight inches of snow last night."

"It was all cleared. You know David," Tim jibed. He kissed his mother ebulliently, and kept her hand in his as he moved aside slightly to bring me into view.

I caught the quick, startled intake of her breath. The strained glint in her eyes. Still, the smile she shot in my direction was spontaneously welcoming. Good manners reacting automatically.

"Mother, this is Michelle." Tim cleared his throat self-consciously. The atmosphere in the room suddenly became tense. Claire Nelson's smile was forced now.

"How nice to have you here at Nelson Woods, Michelle."

"Mother, Michelle is an early Christmas present for you." He was trying painfully to be casual. "Mother, your new daughter-in-law. My wife."

Tim's mother whitened beneath her tan. The girl in the chair flushed hot with color. Very quickly, however, his mother recovered.

"Tim, what a marvelous surprise!" She moved forward impulsively to kiss me. But her hand at my arm was trembling. "But how dare you deprive us of a wedding at Nelson Woods!" She assumed, correctly, that ours had been a quick, business-like wedding. She smiled reassuringly at me, swung back to face Tim again. "When did this all happen?"

"We were married five days ago in New York. I met Michelle in Paris last summer." Tim was enormously re-

home. I was the outsider.

Dora came in, at last, with the coffee tray, bearing delicate, white bone china cups and saucers, unexpectedly modern, as were the matching coffee pot, creamer and sugar bowl. Yet this contemporary note was not jarring in this oak-beamed, wrought iron chandeliered room. It was an eclectic blend that soothed the senses.

Surreptitiously I watched Tim, willing him to relax. He dearly loved his mother, yet I suspected the strength in her kept him on guard. Oh, how often there must have been a clash of wills between Tim and his mother! Two superbly strong people, with his mother having the advantage of age and relationship.

I sipped the fragrant coffee with my mind traitorously focusing on Diane. Claire had hoped for a match between Diane and Tim. Then Tim brought me home as his new bride. Now I understood why he'd stalled on telling his mother he was married. He was shattering a dream.

"Tim, why don't you show Michelle around the house?" his mother coaxed when we'd finished our coffee. "I'm sure she's eager to see her new home."

"Mother, we'll be moving into the cottage," Tim said self-consciously. "I suppose it'll take a couple of days to clean up—"

"Move into the cottage?" Claire stared at Tim with disbelief. "Darling, that would be absurd. That tiny cottage, when we have this whole big house up here? I'm away all day at the plant—you'll have the whole place to yourselves. Tim, this is your home."

She leaned forward with a rush of warmth to cover my hand with hers. "I wouldn't dream of letting Michelle spend the rest of the winter in that icebox of a house. It

I could tell that Diane had been waiting for Tim, and expected to marry him. And the servants, Dora and David, adored her, and consequently, hated me!

lieved at his mother's reaction.

"And not a word to me," she scolded. "But never mind, I've been telling Tim for two years he ought to get married." She turned toward the quite lovely girl in the chair, who sat there wearing a fixed, uneasy smile. "Diane darling, come here." She beckoned the girl to join us. "This is Diane Winston," Mrs. Nelson introduced her with affection. "Diane, this is Tim's bride—" She hesitated, annoyed with herself because she didn't instantly recall my name.

"Michelle," I supplied. For a moment her eyes went opaque. The Frenchness of my name an irritant? No, don't think that way! Tim's mother was delightful.

"Tim and Diane grew up together," his mother explained. "They were inseparable as children. Diane lives at Winston Acres, the next house."

"Winston Acres is a quarter of a mile down the road." Laughter lighted Tim's eyes. "But up here that's right next door." Despite the blithe tone, he was uncomfortable in Diane's presence. He would have preferred to introduce me to his mother without Diane present. "How've you been, Diane?"

"Fine." She smiled impersonally.

"Diane brought Dora tomatoes and cucumbers from her hothouse," Tim's mother said casually. "Dora absolutely worships Diane, as she does Tim. To Dora they're still her two little ones." Involuntarily I glanced to the door. Dora and Rusty had disappeared from the corridor.

Diane left. Tim, his mother and I settled ourselves before the magnificent floor-to-ceiling fieldstone-faced fireplace, with Rusty cautiously invading the room—tail wagging furiously—to stretch at Tim's feet. Tim had come

isn't properly insulated. The roof leaks. And Dora and David would be terribly hurt if you two moved away from the house. They're both devoted to Tim," Claire said to me. "And now Tim's brought his wife home. Neither of you can do wrong in their eyes." But Dora had looked at me with active dislike.

"Mother, we can manage quite well in the cottage," Tim insisted with quiet stubbornness. "In the late spring I figure we can break ground for a small house of our own. I'm already working on the plans."

"Tim, you can't expect Michelle to spend the winter in that dreadful cottage." She swung to me for support. "Michelle, make Tim understand. It's cold and drafty in the cottage." Her smile was anxious as her eyes searched mine. "You do like the house here, don't you?"

"It's magnificent," I said quickly. How could I say I wanted to take Tim by the hand and run? But this elegant house was tainted with the memory of Diane's anguish when she saw me with Tim. "But it's up to Tim—" I turned to him with an uncertain smile.

"All right, Mother," Tim acquiesced tightly. I hadn't expected capitulation. "We'll stay."

We were served luncheon in what Claire called the family dining room, a large, multi-windowed room in which the sunlight streamed, belying the sub-zero weather outdoors. The heavy, thoroughly English midday meal was served by one of the day help, a young French girl named Cecile. Perhaps Tim over-emphasized his mother's distaste for the French, I decided.

Tim was unusually taciturn over dinner—angry, I

assumed, because he'd been pushed into an acceptance of his mother's decision that we remain here in the main house. Had I let him down in leaving the decision to him? Should I have refused? But how could I begin my life as Claire Nelson's daughter-in-law with that kind of affront?

I tried to help Claire carry the table conversation. I was painfully aware that Claire had inadvertently mentioned Diane three times, and looked stricken because she had. What was this compelling sense of impending disaster that tugged at me? *This urge to grasp Tim by the hand and run.*

"We're going to have to enlarge the plant late in the spring, when the weather's suitable for breaking ground," Claire said seriously over Dora's excellent sherry trifle. "That's nothing that will interest you." She smiled indulgently at Tim. "Just a square old box of an addition, built as cheaply as we can manage in these inflated times."

Tim brightened. "You can build cheaply and still come up with interesting results." We were on his favorite topic. "Wow, what I learned at Spencer and Lynch!" His face glowed as he leaned forward. "I've been already working on the housing development for the plant employees. The new village we talked about last summer."

"We'll have to think a lot about that," Claire hedged. "Money's tight now. This horrible wave of inflation. The need to meet competition if we want to export—"

"Mother, ten years ago you talked about replacing those houses," Tim reminded her with intensity. "They're archaic. Sixty and seventy years old."

"Tim, you've been living for years in cosmopolitan areas," Claire was choosing her words carefully. "You're accustomed to a different scale of living from what the villagers consider normal. They grumble more from habit than dissatisfaction. I'm the detested English employer, stealing from the hard-working French. Making profits from their blood. They forget they earn their living because the plant remains active," she reminded him bitterly, "even in periods when we're losing money. What other jobs could they find up here? But I promise you, Tim," she said briskly, and took a deep breath. Tim was stiff with alertness. "Come late spring I'll let you start with the first section of new houses." She lowered her eyes. "You can do ten a year until the development is finished."

I knew the consternation in Tim. He wanted to build a hundred houses this year! Two hundred next year. A new house for every plant family. Many of the workers, Tim had told me, were second- and third-generation employees. But the younger ones were more impatient than their parents and grandparents. Tim foresaw serious labor problems if his mother did nothing to improve living conditions.

Hand in hand, Tim and I climbed the graceful, heavily carpeted staircase. Tim was disappointed that we were

staying here in the house. So was I. I yearned for the privacy of the small cottage. But for now we must make do.

"My room's right down here," Tim pointed me toward the second door along the corridor. Perhaps it would be in front of the house. Away from the river. *Oh, let it be.*

Tim opened the door, gestured to me to enter.

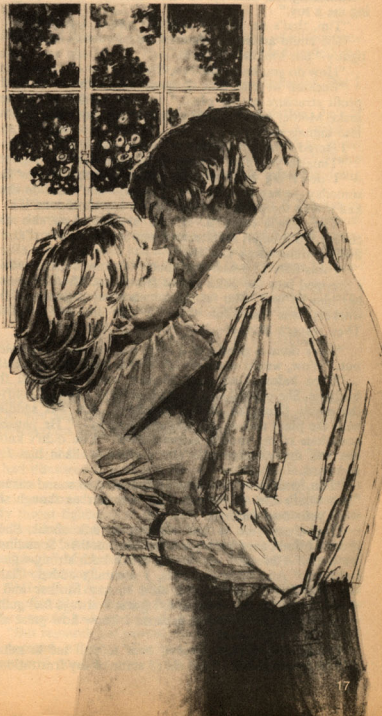
"Tim, it's lovely," I gazed around with admiration. It was not a man's room at all, except that the chest, the dresser and the night table were massive.

The room wore the aura of a sunny Mediterranean villa. It was filled with dark woods, much wrought iron in lamp bases and occasional tables in the sitting area before the marble-faced fireplace. The dark woods were highlighted by the marigold-yellow of the wallpaper, the drapes and the gold of the carpeting.

"Come over here and see the view," Tim urged, gazing out into the early dusk.

I took a deep breath. I knew this morbid fear of water was childish. Yet so many times I awoke from a nightmare in which I was dying in the dark waters of a river. As my mother had died.

"Does it look down on the St. Lawrence?" I inquired unsteadily, my heart pounding.



I dreaded looking out our window, facing a terrible drop into the cold, churning St. Lawrence River. All I wanted was to feel Tim's arms around me, his lips on mine.

"A great view of the river," Tim said with pleasure, and I felt faintly sick.

"It must be a fearful drop." *Look down. Smile.* Tim expects that.

"I told you, there's a stone railing for hundreds of feet along the property," he chided tenderly. "And look over there at the mountains." He dropped an arm around my shoulders. "Isn't that glorious?"

"Oh, yes!" I was eager to move my gaze from the menacing swirl of water below to the snow-capped mountains silhouetted against the darkening sky. How vast, how austere beautiful they were. "I love this room, Tim—" I lifted my face to his.

"I love you," he said quietly.

"Tim, it won't be bad to stay here in the house for a while," I said urgently, feeling the unhappiness in him.

"I wanted to be alone with you," he admitted wryly.

"But I'm accepting a few months here in the big house."

"Then what's wrong, Tim?"

"Call me Claire, as Diane does," Tim's mother urged. I'd learned that she was really his stepmother, but loved him—and Diane—as her own.

"Building ten houses," he said bluntly. "Mother's giving me a toy."

"Tim, that's an awfully expensive toy," I protested.

"She could arrange to finance fifty houses," he insisted tightly. "She has the collateral."

"How do you know she can, Tim?"

"Because at one time I spent a month studying the profit structure at the plant," he said earnestly. "I can't make Mother face facts. She dreads the day when I move into management."

I stared at him in shock.

"Tim, do you plan to take over some day?"

"I don't dig management," Tim said honestly. "But someday—when Mother hits 87 or so—she'll decide she's had it with the plant, and it'll fall on my shoulders."

"Tim, you'll enjoy it." I was astonished at this discovery. I'd thought architecture was his whole life. "You'll find it a tremendous challenge."

"I was only 11 when Dad died," Tim reminisced, while I dropped into the chair across from him. "But I remember him so well. The feeling between my father and the workers was beautiful—even though he was English. They respect Mother—but they don't like her."

"She's done a good job if they respect her," I pointed out. "Wow, would women's lib have a field day up here!"

"Even before Dad died, Mother was involved in the business. She needed that kind of activity. Then, of course, the whole thing fell on her shoulders. She was saddled with the plant and an 11-year-old stepson—" He paused, conscious of my sudden astonishment. "You didn't know she was my stepmother." The disclosure made him feel awkward.

"Tim, you never mentioned it." I tried to sound casual. "But what's the difference? You love her as though she were your own mother."

"I've always felt it was disloyal to talk about. She's great—I don't even remember my own mother. Sometimes we clash." His smile was wry. "We're both strong-willed, stubborn." And compassionate, I mentally added. Claire was upset for Diane. "Dad used to say Mother and I were more alike than he and I. I guess I always feel guilty when I battle with Mother because I know how great she is."

Tim rose to his feet, moved over to pull me to mine. "I'll go in and shower—get rid of some of my frustrations.

But Mother hasn't heard the end about the development. I'm determined to put up at least fifty houses within the next year."

I sat curled up in a club chair before the fire while Tim lingered under a hot shower. The bathroom door was slightly ajar so that he might enjoy, with me, the Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2 in C Minor which I had put on the stereo. Slowly I turned the pages of one of the tooled leather scrapbooks Tim's mother had sent up earlier.

Tim as a toddler. Tim as a small boy. Tim through the years into his teens. Remarkably the same. Yet I turned the pages with an uncomfortable awareness of Diane's constant appearance. Diane with adoration in her eyes for Tim. And I could envision, again, the pain in Diane's eyes when Tim introduced me.

Diane had expected, some day, to marry Tim. She had sat out all the long absences at college and graduate school, the year in Paris, the months in New York, nurtur-

ing the belief that Tim would return to her. Claire had expected that. Even Dora, who adored Diane.

Tim knew. He'd been uncomfortable at Diane's presence when we'd arrived. I'd misinterpreted his discomfort. I thought he'd wanted privacy to introduce me to his mother.

Had there been a commitment on Tim's part? Somehow, I doubted this. But was Tim sorry now about us? Now that he was home? Was he remembering all those years with Diane? Was she to be a silent intruder the rest of our lives?

"Michelle—"

Guiltily, I shut the scrapbook, set it on the coffee table.

"Yes, Tim?" I tried to sound natural.

"Darling, will you lay out a fresh shirt for me? I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Don't rush," I said. Tim unwinds in hot showers. I'd discovered that at the Adirondack lodge.

I chose a shirt, lay it across the bed. I squinted suddenly as something caught my eye. One button was hanging by a thread.

"Tim, I'm going downstairs for a needle and thread. There's a button loose on the shirt."

"Take another."

"I will not," I said. "It'll make me feel wifely sewing on a button for you." The first button, I realized with a flurry of sentiment. "I'll go downstairs to scrounge for a needle and thread."

I could hear Tim's tender laughter in the bathroom as I strode to the door. He was probably accustomed to handing over such tasks to Dora. But he had a wife now to sew on his buttons. To run up curtains and drapes when we moved into our own small house. To prepare his meals and bring up his children.

I hurried out to the stairs, gearing myself mentally to ask Dora—who so plainly resented my presence at Nelson Woods—for needle and thread. What about David, I wondered as I approached the stairs. He was less overtly hostile than Dora, yet I suspected I found small favor in his eyes. But why should I concern myself about the domestic staff, I asked myself defiantly?

Then suddenly, without warning, someone—something—hurtled down the corridor behind me. It was thrusting me down the stairs! I was falling! Falling down that dangerous length—my mind flying apart with shock.

In a frenzy I tried to grasp hold of the bannister to break my fall. And as I did so, my attacker was immediately all over me. Warm. Breathing hotly at my throat. Rusty! The dog trained to attack!

I screamed, my voice shrill with terror. "Tim! Tim!" As I tried to avoid that open mouth with its jagged rows of teeth, my head hit sharply against the bannister. My shoulder simultaneously took an agonizing whack. I could feel myself losing consciousness.

Where was Tim? Why was Rusty attacking me this way? *Who had given him the command?*

"Michelle!" The anxiety in Tim's voice broke through the haze of darkness that imprisoned me. "Michelle—" I struggled to return to consciousness.

"I'm all right, Tim," I whispered painfully, forcing my eyes open. My shoulder was stiff from its collision with a step, my head pounding from its encounter with the wall. "I'm just kind of groggy."

Up above us Claire chastised Rusty, her voice deep with outrage.

"Easy," Tim said with solicitude as I tried to get into a semi-sitting position. "I can't figure out what got into Rusty!" He brushed my cheek with one hand in a gesture of tenderness.

"David! David!" Claire called impatiently. "What on earth is taking him so long?"

"Dora had to go outside to call him," Tim explained. "He went out for logs. Can you hang on to Rusty?"

"Of course I can," Claire said imperiously. "But I'm furious with him. Whatever happened to make him go after Michelle like that?"

"Can't Rusty be leashed until we're sure he understands I belong here?" I asked. I didn't want to deprive Tim of the dog he loved, though inwardly I shuddered at the prospect of another unwary encounter with Rusty. But on our arrival Rusty had greeted me with such exuberant affection. *Someone must have given him the attack command.*

"Michelle, how lovely you look," Claire stood in the doorway, nursing a pre-dinner cup of coffee. She, too, had changed for dinner. How elegant and attractive she looked in that gray pantsuit and pearls.

Suddenly, Rusty, the Irish Setter trained to attack, lunged at my throat.

"Tim! Tim!" I screamed. *Who had given him the command?*

Claire sat down in the black leather lounge chair with a small sigh of satisfaction. Why had I been so fearful of meeting her? She was delightful.

"You're pleased with Roger Edwards, I gather," Tim said casually.

"Roger speaks French as a second language. They respect him for that." A fact which clearly annoyed Claire, who had no taste for speaking French. "Still, Roger has problems from time to time. They can't forget completely that he's English." She smiled wryly. "We're the enemy, you know."

A car pulled up on front. Claire rose to her feet.

We could hear Claire's warm greeting at the door, and their quiet conversation as they walked down the corridor to the library. Discussing business. Next to Tim, the plant was the most important thing in Claire's life.

"You must meet Tim's bride," Claire said with a smile as she walked into the library with Roger. Yet I sensed

that Roger knew, already, about my arrival. Probably, she had called to tell him. "Michelle, this is Roger Edwards."

"Hello, Roger." I immediately liked the tall, slight, fair-haired man with a pleasingly diffident air. He was perhaps three or four years older than Tim. There was a quiet strength about him that was reassuring. He would keep the cool at the plant, if anyone could.

"I hope you enjoy living up here, Michelle." There was an eagerness about him that hinted of loneliness. His social life, I thought sympathetically, could hardly be extensive.

"I'm sure I'll love living here," I said effervescently. Tim was here. That was all I needed.

"There's little unemployment in this village," Tim commented. "You keep the plant running year-round."

"But do they appreciate that?" Claire's eyes glowed with distaste. "We're having trouble at the plant. The workers want to tell me how to run my business."

Involuntarily my eyes swung to Tim. One of the major gripes among the workers, I knew, centered around the ancient company houses in which they lived.

"It's a rapidly changing civilization, Claire," Roger put in cautiously. "Television brings the whole world into their homes." And I remembered the TV antennas which sprouted from even the most modest of houses on our drive up from Quebec City.

Claire turned to Tim.

"Do you know who is the leader of the rebellious faction? Your old friend, Paul Martel. He tried to tell me what I must do within my own plant."

"Paul?" Tim's voice was deep with astonishment. But I saw respect in his eyes.

"Since he has married and become a father, he's a lion," Claire said bitingly. "He even talks of a strike at the plant. If I closed down the plant, they would all go on unemployment. But perhaps that's what they want," Claire said with contempt. "A hundred dollars a week for doing nothing."

"I'll have to drop by and see Paul's family," Tim's eyes were warmly reminiscent. "I was away at school much of the time; but when I was home, Paul and I were inseparable, since we were just toddlers. It was Paul who taught me French," Tim chuckled. "He had to if we were to communicate. Eventually I taught him English."

"I'm going to have so much time on my hands." Care-

lessly, earnestly, I charged headlong into the conversation. "Do you suppose I could start a nursery group for the pre-schoolers among the plant families?"

Why did Claire stare at me with such shock? Tim and I had discussed it in detail. He was enthusiastic.

"I'm a nursery school teacher," I explained. Hadn't Tim mentioned this yet? "I love working with children—" My throat tightened at the look of rejection on her face. "I wouldn't need much in the way of supplies, actually—and just a fair-sized room for a meeting place. Perhaps at the plant." My heart was pounding. Why did Claire seem so disapproving?

"Michelle," she said with constraint, "the plant families are unfamiliar with such institutions as nursery schools. They would look upon such a proposal with suspicion."

"But research has proved the value of nursery schools," I pursued naively. "For the three and four year age groups. I couldn't cope with more than ten, of course,

without help. But if a couple of mothers wanted to come in to work with us, the group could be enlarged. The way the cooperative nursery schools work in New York."

"Michelle, this is not New York," Claire said firmly, and I could hear Tim's voice. *We're both strong-willed. Stubborn.*

"My, you two look healthy," Claire welcomed us with a smile. "Have you been skating?"

"We drove up to the lake." Tim reached to take the jacket I was peeling off. We'd left our skates in the car, optimistically planning another go at skating tomorrow. "Michelle fell in love with it."

"Tim, I've asked the head of the construction firm that's scheduled to put up the addition to be in my office tomorrow around 10. I'd like you to be there."

"Fine," Tim accepted with alacrity.

"And I've been thinking about your nursery group, Michelle," she went on with an undertone of apology. "If you truly feel you want to go on with it, we'll give it a whirl. But don't be too disappointed if the mothers aren't cooperative. This is something quite foreign to them."

"Roger has to drive to Quebec City tomorrow on business—some piece of equipment was delivered that wasn't quite right. You can go in with him, buy whatever supplies you require and charge them. Roger knows where I have accounts—he'll go in and introduce you. Do it up right," she urged with a show of conviviality. "Progress is coming into the village."

"You can buy a pair of those low tables and the children's chairs you'll need at the furniture store," Tim said. He was telling me not to pinch pennies. Claire could af-

broad grin of welcome. "Have a good day?"

"Fabulous," I hurried down the corridor to him. "The store promised to have everything delivered day after tomorrow. Roger talked to them," I laughed. "I don't know what kind of gentle persuasion he used, but it worked. They'd told me a week or ten days for delivery." I felt a delicious surge of warmth because Tim was within finger-touching. I'd missed him at odd moments during the day.

"Diane's here," Tim said casually. I tried not to show my disappointment. I'd looked forward to this small packet of time alone with Tim, before Claire arrived home from the plant. "I've persuaded her to stay for dinner."

"How lovely." I forced a smile as I moved into the library with Tim. Diane sat in a chair before the fireplace.

"I'm over here almost as much as I'm at home, I sometimes think," Diane said softly. "But Claire's such a wonderful person. She makes me feel so welcome." Diane smiled at me, but her eyes were secretive.

Does Diane think there's a chance for her with Tim, despite our marriage? She can't! To Tim she's the sister he never had. Can't she realize that? Why can't all of them here at Nelson Woods realize that? Claire. Dora. David. *I am Tim's wife.*

"Michelle—" Claire strode into the room. "I think I've found suitable space for your nursery group." She crossed the room to sit beside me. "There's a room at the plant that's not in use. It's not very large, but it opens up into another room, so you'll have a suite, actually. And it faces the south, with lots of morning sun pouring in. The plant's the best locale, don't you think, Tim?" She turned to him for confirmation.

I was delighted when I learned that Claire's plant supervisor, Roger Edwards, was in love with Diane, and determined to bring them together.

ford this. No need to shop around for an old table to try to cut down, or to build benches.

"It's going to be fun. Thanks, Claire." I felt faintly self-conscious calling Tim's mother by her given name—yet Diane did this. Involuntarily I frowned. Why did Diane keep infiltrating my thoughts?

I was delighted to speak French with the salesclerk assigned to help me—mindful of Tim's warning that the French I heard here would be difficult from my mother's Paris-learned French. I felt a special warmth in the salesclerk for me as we chattered companionably about my nursery school plans.

We were just winding up our transaction when Roger arrived to cart me off to the art supplies shop in the Upper Town. For luncheon we went to a delightful restaurant on the Rue St. Louis, a few hundred feet from the entrance to the Chateau Frontenac.

"The cuisine is northern Italian at its best," Roger said with satisfaction. "The French pour in here—that shows you how fine the food is."

At Roger's urging, I ordered the duck *à l'orange*, though normally I would have had a salad or fish at this hour. But the duck arrived splendidly crisp and delicious. Roger glowed because I was vocally pleased. The waiter beamed.

Did Diane know Roger was in love with her? Had he ever brought Diane here for luncheon? Had he ever taken her anywhere? With the determination of the newly married, I promised myself to try to bring Roger and Diane together.

"Michelle?" Tim peered out the library door with a

"It's the only practical place." Tim's voice was slightly husky.

"Tim, are you coming down with a cold?" Claire inspected him with solicitude.

"No." He brushed this aside with amusement.

"The workers' houses are situated just beyond the woods that surround the plant." Claire was back with me again. "Except on really bad days—when nobody's going outdoors—it won't be too much of a haul for the children."

"Great!" I was bright with enthusiasm. "I can start cleaning up right away, maybe do some painting." In my mind I was already visualizing the finished room, as I'd been designing it mentally since I'd first discussed the plan with Tim.

By the following morning the roads were in better condition. I had breakfast with Tim, then went out to the garage to pick up the Volvo. I firmly vetoed Tim's going out with me. He still had traces of a slight cold. Claire had made a point at dinner last night of urging him to remain indoors another day.

I'd have to get a Quebec driver's license, I noted mentally as I slid behind the wheel of the car. And realizing this gave me my first sense of belonging.

I drove slowly, enjoying the magnificent scenery. I had to concentrate on the directions Tim had given me because I hadn't bothered to watch the route when I drove to the plant with Tim on Monday.

I reached the plant with no difficulty, parked and tramped through the snow to the entrance, frowning slightly at the thunderous sounds of the equipment in operation inside.



When I came home, there was Diane, in the library with Tim! I wanted to shout at her, and all of them—
“Let him alone! Keep away from us! I am Tim’s wife!”

I opened the door and walked into the sparse reception room. The girl at the desk spoke shaky English, was delighted when I switched to French. She rose with friendly curiosity—realizing, I guessed, that I was Tim’s wife—to take me to Claire’s office.

“A visitor, Mrs. Edwards,” she announced with deference in her heavily accented English.

Claire glanced up from the phone, nodded to the girl, waved me to a chair. Her office was large, austere. Her executive-size desk was worn with years of use. A utilitarian file cabinet sat in a corner behind her. A pair of armchairs flanked her desk. The sagging leather sofa that flanked a wall looked as though it were as old as Tim. The floor was covered with a black-and-white checkered linoleum.

I sat down in one of the armchairs, my eyes immediately settling on the single photograph on Claire’s desk. Eagerly I reached for it. A photo of Tim as a teen-ager.

I listened with respect to Claire’s involved telephone conversation. This was her life: keeping the plant going, making deadlines, coddling the business into solvency. Tim had told me how Claire had single-handedly put the business on its feet after his father died, at a time when everybody expected the plant to go under.

Claire concluded her phone call and turned to me with a brisk smile.

“Would you like some coffee?” An empty cup sat at her elbow.

“Thanks, no.” I was eager to see the rooms Claire was offering for my nursery group.

“Then let me show you around the plant.” Claire

pushed back her chair. “It’s quite an operation,” she said with pride.

I followed her out of her private office and down the narrow aisle that led into the plant. The interior was rough-hewn, with no effort expended to make it esthetically pleasing. Unfinished walls, worn linoleum flooring, bare windows were everywhere.

We stopped several times so that Claire could explain the operation of a machine. I remembered what Tim had told me about her ability to repair the equipment herself in an emergency. She was truly an amazing woman.

“Michelle,” she said, suddenly apologetic, “I keep talking this way and you’re anxious to see your rooms.” And then she was smiling at someone behind me. “Pierre, come here a moment, will you?” Again she directed her attention to me. “I want you to meet Pierre, but first let me direct you. You go right down to the end of this aisle, and make a right. The third door down the corridor is the entrance to your suite. Go in and look around. I’ll be along in 5 minutes.”

“I’ve worked out the production hours,” Pierre said with deference. “With the new equipment rolling we ought to cut about 8 hours from each run.”

“Pierre, this is my daughter-in-law,” Claire introduced us. “Pierre lived in New York for 10 months, several years ago.” Claire chuckled. “Pierre, tell her your reaction to New York.” Again, she was glancing behind me. “Michelle, please excuse me.”

“Of course.” Now I turned to Pierre, who was obviously eager to talk about his 10 months in New York.

“The city was fascinating,” Pierre began. “And terrifying.”

I listened sympathetically to his account of endless mishaps, his final determination to return to his village. All the while I was impatient to see the rooms Claire had set aside for me. I was grateful when an employee called Pierre came to ask him a question.

I hurried down the aisle, made the right turn, counted doorknobs. The third door down, Claire had said. In the back of my mind misgivings were already taking root about the noise level in the plant. Wouldn't this be awfully distracting for the children? Claire was accustomed to the noise after all these years. She wouldn't have thought about it.

I hesitated before the third door, frowning. No, Claire couldn't have meant this one. There was no knob. The door refused to budge. This room must be closed off. Claire must have meant the next door.

I moved along the corridor to the door beyond, turned the knob tentatively. The door opened. I glanced inside cautiously. Nobody here. Yes, this must be the room.

I walked inside, closing the door behind me. I was impressed by the generous dimensions of the room. The door opposite must lead to the other room. I opened the second door, walked into another room, even larger than I had expected. The sun streamed in, I noted with pleasure, as Claire said it did. With paint, some bright pictures on the walls, some colorful drapes at the windows, it would look marvelous.

I inspected the floor. It was in bad shape. But, again, I thought: a coat of paint, some area rugs, and the floor would be fine. In my mind I was already setting up the tables, the chairs. The room was empty now, except for an

My eyes were fastened on Roger as he edged around the perimeter of the room. He was fearful of the extent of the weakness of the floor, but determined to reach me nonetheless. My breathing was labored with the effort to remain calm while Roger inched his way toward me, hugging the wall, where the floor would be stronger.

"Victor, throw me a length of rope." Roger sounded as matter-of-fact as though he were asking for a glass of water. "You'll find it hanging on a hook right outside." He continued to move toward me. Oh, hurry. Hurry! "We'll get out of here, Michelle. Just keep hanging on. You can do it." Could I, I thought with panic?

"What is it?" Claire's voice, faintly irritated, echoed down the hall. "What's going on here?"

I heard the excited chatter as several of those gathered anxiously outside tried to explain to Claire. And then I saw Claire pushing toward the doorway, the others separating to allow her to approach. Even at this distance I could see her pale at the sight of me.

"Here comes the rope, Mr. Edwards—" The worker moved nervously into the room, fearful of the gaping hole in the middle.

"You don't have to come any closer, Victor," Roger said. "Just toss the rope to me."

Oh, hurry, I thought with anguish. How much longer could I hang on? But a fall could mean my death.

With the rope in hand Roger dropped to his haunches. While I clung to the leg of the desk, he tied a circlet of rope around my waist.

"This is insurance, Michelle," he explained quietly, then threw the length of rope still in his hands back to

I was so pleased with the room at the plant Claire had offered me for my nursery. As I walked into it, the floor collapsed, and Roger rushed to save me!

old-fashioned roll-top desk that sat against the far wall.

Impulsively, I walked toward the desk. Claire wouldn't mind if we used it. I could sand it down, refinish it. It would be a beauty. But as I walked toward the desk, with terrifying suddenness I felt the floor giving way beneath me. *What was happening?*

I screamed. Simultaneously my hands reached out frenziedly for something onto which I could hold to stop my fall. I clutched at one sturdy leg of the desk, holding on for my life. But how long before the desk, too, would fall into that abyss below? I was seconds away from death.

"Help!" I tried to scream above the noise. "Somebody, please, help!"

I clung to the leg of the desk, hearing myself cry out for help. My heart pounding. My breathing painful. The cement floor of the cellar was at least 14 feet below me—and lined with heavy machinery. I would be badly injured—or killed—if I lost my grip. But how long before the desk, too, would topple into that gaping hole?

"It came from here!" I heard Roger's voice out in the hall, above the excited French clamor of the workers. "Stand back. The floor in that room is dangerous."

Roger pulled the door open. My hands aching with the effort to hang on to the desk leg, I turned mutely to him. My throat was raw from my agonized efforts to be heard above the din of the machinery.

Roger moved into the room, gesturing to the others for silence.

"Hold on, Michelle," he urged gently. "I'll pull you up. Just hold on—"

"*Mon Dieu!*" A girl's voice rose perilously. "They will both be killed!"

Victor. "Leave plenty of slack," he called out to Victor, then dropped to his knees. His arms reached out to close around my waist. His hands dug into skin with the intensity of his efforts. "Put your arms around my neck," he ordered. "It's all right. I won't let you fall."

Knowing my life depended upon Roger, I released the leg of the desk. My heart was pounding painfully. I closed my arms around his neck, holding tightly. Looking only at him. Knowing I mustn't panic, mustn't throw him off balance.

"That's right," Roger encouraged gently. "Now I'm going to move back to the wall and pull you along with me. Easy, Michelle. Nice and easy—"

I was conscious of my labored breathing, of Roger's, in the stark silence of the room as the others watched while Roger edged backwards on his knees, drawing me along with him. Conscious that, at any moment, the floor beneath us might give way, too.

Slowly we moved, until we were at the wall. Roger grasped at the window sill behind him. Awkwardly he managed to hoist me to my feet, along with himself. We began to make our way around the perimeter of the room. The rope was still around my waist, at Roger's insistence, as a precautionary measure in the event the floor gave way.

"Oh, Michelle!" Claire's voice was unsteady as she welcomed me into the anxious cluster in the corridor. "What a terrible experience for you."

"I'm all right." I forced a smile, struggling to ignore the sick feeling that persisted in the pit of my stomach. "I'd never have made it except for Roger." Instinctively I turned to him. He stood at the door, minutely inspecting



"We suspected this floor was weak," Claire said angrily. "I told Roger to lock it!" "I know I did," Roger insisted, and I believed him. *Somebody* had opened it. Who?

the lock.

"This door was supposed to be locked." Despite the evenness of his voice, his anger was obvious. "I locked it myself."

"We suspected the floor in this room was weak." Claire gazed inside with distaste. "That's why I told Roger to be sure it was kept locked."

"Claire, I don't know who unlocked it," he said with quiet determination, "but I'm going to make every effort to find out."

I sat beside Roger on the front seat of the Volvo and struggled to stay calm. Roger had locked that door, I felt sure. But somebody had unlocked it. Somebody who was confident that every worker in the plant had been alerted to the danger, but was aware that I—a stranger—would know nothing about it. I couldn't believe it was just a weird accident.

"Roger, when was the knob removed from that other door?" I tried to sound casually curious.

"It was there last night," Roger said bluntly. "Because I went into the room to make sure the windows were closed. Some of the workers sneak in there for a smoke sometimes and leave a window open to clear it. Sometimes they forget to shut it."

"Could the knob have fallen off by itself?"

"The possibility exists." But I could see he didn't believe that happened. Logical, tightly controlled Roger Edwards didn't believe it was an accident. "It must be one of those crazy series of small happenings that can add up to tragedy." Roger was trying to convince himself. "The knob on one door fell off. The other door, strangely, was unlocked. Roger sighed unhappily. "But I did lock it, Michelle, I know I did."

At dinner Claire turned on her considerable charm to divert Tim's mind from what had happened at the plant. Claire, I thought with admiration, would have been a huge success in the theater, with her attractiveness, her strong personality, her drive.

Tim, uncharacteristically taciturn, refused to be drawn into the casual table conversation. He was upset about me, I realized, and silently asking himself questions. And coming up, I surmised, with no satisfactory answers.

"I'm going out for a while," Tim said abruptly as we

left the dining room. "I won't be gone long."

I was startled. Where could Tim be going at this hour of the night in a town like this? Just to drive around and think? No, my mind rejected. With a flash of intuition I knew he was going to see Paul Martel. To ask questions.

"Let's have more coffee in the library," Claire suggested. "We'll coax Dora into bringing us some of those petits fours she served at dinner." But her eyes were somber.

"I can never resist Dora's cake," I laughed. But at this moment I was not interested in food.

We settled ourselves before the fire. David brought us a tray. I managed a façade of attentiveness to Claire, but my mind kept chasing after Tim. Claire was in the midst of a story about Tim as a small boy when the phone rang, discordant in the stillness of the library. Claire crossed the room to pick up the receiver.

"Hello." The authority in her voice was a carry-over from her business day. "Wayne!" She sounded shocked. "Where are you?"

I picked up a newspaper and glanced at it casually while Claire carried on a brief, guarded conversation. She appeared irritated by the call. Then she was saying an almost brusque good-by and rejoined me before the fire.

"That was Wayne Seaton," Claire's smile was sardonic, yet beneath her surface cool I sensed she was shaken by the call. "I didn't think he even remembered where I was. My ex-husband," she added in explanation. "I haven't spoken to him since I divorced him twenty years ago. Now he shows up in Montreal, as though it were yesterday. 'I just happened to be in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd call,'" she mimicked. "Over three hundred miles away. That's Wayne." She looked at me. "Do you know I'm Tim's stepmother?"

"Tim mentioned it one day. Entirely by accident. He was upset that he'd even brought it up," I added conscientiously. "As far as Tim is concerned, you're his real mother."

Claire went upstairs early. I waited for Tim to return. I was lonely, since it was my first night at Nelson Woods without him. When David came in to add fresh logs to the fire, he seemed taken aback to see me sitting alone in the library. Again, I felt a secretiveness in David. Not hostility toward me, I felt, reassessing his attitude, Apprehension,

perhaps. Did he know what had happened at the plant? Dora and he must have heard us discussing it.

"Michelle, I'm sorry I left like that," Tim apologized. "I went over to Paul's house." He dropped into the chair opposite me, his face serious.

"I figured you'd gone there."

"I don't think Mother understands how critical the situation is at the plant. Paul said frankly that the men are talking about a strike. Now, when it'll hurt."

"Can't you talk to her, Tim?"

"If she thinks what she's doing is right, nobody can change her mind," Tim said. "At any rate, I promised to sit in—unofficially—with a group of the workers that are meeting with Paul on Friday evening. They respect Roger, but they don't think he wields enough power with Mother to convince her of the necessity of meeting their demands."

"Do you think you can, Tim?" My eyes searched his. I knew the battle of the wills between them. But Claire had a habit of winning.

"I have to give it my very best try," Tim said heavily. "Because I believe a lot of what Paul says is valid. Mother's light years behind. Oh, we're invited to the Martels' for dinner tomorrow night. Paul and Janine are both dying to meet you."

"What are you going to tell your mother?" Claire wouldn't be happy about our going there for dinner.

"I'm going to tell her Paul and his wife invited us," he said flatly. "Paul has been my friend for too many years to allow these hard feelings at the plant to interfere. Mother would like nothing better than to discharge the

an odd sense of loss when he left. Dora, taciturn and disapproving, brought me a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon that rivaled Tim's, then hurried to reply to a light knock at the kitchen door.

"I brought over lettuce, cucumbers and tomatoes," Diane said with conspiratorial conviviality, not yet seeing me at the table. "I know how Claire enjoys a salad these cold months."

"Hi," I called out with a welcoming smile. I must make friends with Diane, I decided.

"Good morning, Michelle." Her smile was strained.

"Come have coffee with me," I coaxed, while Dora banged pots on the range with unnecessary clatter. I was remembering how close Diane had been with Tim through the years. Paul and Diane. "Tim drove over to Malbaie." Diane colored at the mention of Tim's name. "He's checking on prices for lumber or something or other." Why couldn't I bring Diane and Roger together, I thought.

"I'm so excited about my plans to start a nursery group," I rushed on ebulliently. "I went into Quebec City and shopped for a pair of those low tables and the small chairs I'll need, and a few bookcases. They've just arrived. Claire's having an outbuilding adjacent to the plant put into usable condition."

I paused, disconcerted by the sudden look of reserve on Diane's face. "I'm a nursery school teacher," I explained to fill in the stark silence that fell between us. Why was Diane upset because I was starting a nursery group?

"I'm sure you're good at it." Diane forced herself into small talk, her eyes deliberately avoiding a meeting with mine. "Oh, Dora, you spoil me." She focused her attention

Claire accused the French workers, led by Tim's best friend, Paul Martel, of causing trouble at the plant. "I can't believe they'd be violent," Tim said.

small clique of organizers at the plant—including Paul—but she's too bright to take a chance." He sighed. "I'm in a rotten spot, Michelle. My sympathies lie with the workers. My loyalty belongs to Mother."

Dora was still sliding a plate of scrambled eggs bacon before Tim, at the table in the dining area of the kitchen, when I approached. In the woods close by, I could hear the whirr of a chain saw as David cut logs for the fireplace from trees brought down by a recent storm.

Dora glanced up as I approached, a flicker of annoyance in her eyes.

"Good morning," I said with manufactured brightness.

"My, that looks delicious."

"You want the same?" Dora asked with grudging politeness.

"I'd love it." I sat down at the table, leaning forward to fetch a crunch of bacon from Tim's plate.

Cecile came in to Dora for orders. Dora snapped at her. Cecile shot me a philosophical smile and shrugged. She wasn't perturbed by Dora's ill humor.

"Would you like to drive over with me to Malbaie?" Tim asked, and I guessed he felt guilty at not making the suggestion earlier.

"No," I said quickly. "You're on business. I'm going to use the morning to block out concrete plans for the nursery group. Frederic is too young yet, but did I tell you Janine's working up a list of families with children in the right age group?"

"Don't get yourself oversubscribed," he warned jokingly.

Tim ate quickly, refused a second cup of coffee. I felt

on Dora, who was coming toward her with the promised plate of cookies.

"Diane, would you like to help me with the nursery group?" I leaned forward eagerly, pleased with this new thought. Diane had a softness, a gentle way about her that would be so effective with small children. "They're such fun at the preschool age."

I was startled by the look of bitter rejection on Diane's face. I saw her hand tremble as she reached for a cookie. "Thank you, Michelle," she said with an effort at casualness, managing a tiny smile. "But I know I'd be dreadful in that kind of situation." She turned deliberately to Dora, cutting me off. "Dora, I should have parsley by the end of next week. I'll bring you the very first batch."

"That'll be nice," Dora said gently. "Parsley adds such a nice touch to potatoes or a salad." But her eyes, filled with venom, were on me. I couldn't understand what I'd done. I know I can be overly impulsive, unthinkingly undiplomatic—but what had I done wrong in asking Diane to work with the nursery group?

I concentrated on finishing my breakfast while Diane and Dora discussed the progress of Diane's hothouse garden. For some reason I was being pointedly ignored. I was being punished. How absurd! Because I'd invited Diane to help with the nursery group? Was there some caste system that I was violating?

Diane finished her coffee and cookies and left the house with polite good-bys to Dora and me. Dora, her face tight, stood at the kitchen door, watching Diane walk to her car.

"Why are you trying to hurt Miss Diane this way?" Dora swung around to me accusingly when we heard the

car start. "How could you be so unthinking?"

"What are you talking about?" I stared at Dora in incomprehension. "What did I do?"

"Asking her to come in to work with those children!" Dora's face was taut with fury. "Her that can never have a child of her own."

"I didn't know," I stammered. "Dora, I didn't know—" How could I have known?

Dora struggled to remain calm, and I could see that she believed I had not been deliberately cruel after all.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Nelson, for talking that way," Dora apologized stiffly. "I forgot myself for a minute. But I know what it means to that girl, never to be able to have a child of her own." There was a wistfulness in her own eyes because Dora, too, had never had a child. But Tim and Diane were her children—and I had come along to destroy a dream.

After lunch I went upstairs to our room. I sat down at Tim's desk to work on the layout of the playroom, but my mind refused to stay with this task. Traitorously, my thoughts kept darting back to that room at the plant which I'd believed had been assigned to me—where, for an agonizing few minutes, I'd grappled with death.



Impatient with myself, I abandoned the effort to work. The afternoon loomed ahead, uneventful and empty. I'll drive over to visit with Janine, I decided on impulse. Even though we were there for dinner only last night. Instinctively I knew Janine would be pleased to see me again—even this soon. Janine was flatteringly interested in my theories about child-raising. It would be fun to sit down with her to talk for a while.

Frederic was asleep in his room. Janine and I settled down before the fireplace to drink the delicious, strong coffee she'd prepared in anticipation of my arrival. She gave me the list of plant families with children in the preschool range, checking the parents who would be most likely to welcome what I would offer.

Beneath Janine's air of camaraderie, I sensed something was disturbing her. What? I waited, knowing she would confide in me—if she wanted to—when she had built herself up to it.

"Last night, Michelle—" She paused, frowned and I stiffened to attention. "After you left, though it was late considering that the men are in the plant at 7:30 in the morning, Paul went calling at a couple of hootses. He felt he must ask questions. About what happened with you in

the plant." Her eyes were pained. "Michelle, if it was not an accident, then it was planned by someone other than a worker at the plant." Janine leaned toward me. "The men have sworn to Paul that the workers had no part of it. They would not lie to him. I know this."

"I don't believe it was an accident at all." From the glint which came quickly into Janine's eyes, I knew Paul and she, too, believed someone meant me harm. "But if it wasn't someone in the plant, then who was it, Janine? Who wanted me to go into that room and fall to my death?"

"I don't know." Janine's eyes were troubled. "But one of the men told Paul that David—from Nelson Woods—drove over to the plant while you were there. Perhaps he came to bring something to Mrs. Nelson. How can we know?" Janine gestured expressively. "But somehow, Tim must ask about this. The truth must be found out, Michelle—before something terrible happens to you. Don't fail to tell Tim about David. Don't give David another chance to kill you!"

I turned eagerly at the sound of Tim's hand on the doorknob.

"Hi." My smile was almost real when he entered. "You put in a full day."

Dora's eyes were hard, and I could see she was struggling to remain calm. "How can you speak to Miss Diane that way?" she demanded. "She can never have her own child!"

"It was good for me. I listened to a lot of gripes," he said slowly, "and then I sat in with Roger for some briefing on the financial situation. From what Roger says, Mother has everything in good shape, despite her pessimism about profits. Of course," he acknowledged, "Mother doesn't show even Roger all the figures. Remember," he added, "as much as she's pleased with him, Roger has only been with the plant a few months."

"I drove over to visit with Janine." I tried to sound casual, but my voice refused to cooperate.

"Great." Tim didn't notice my nervousness. His mind was still grappling with plant problems. And he was pleased that Janine and I had hit it off so well.

"Janine told me that, after we left—even though it was so late—Paul went over to speak to a couple of men from the plant. The ones who've been calling for a strike. He wanted assurance from them that they—they wouldn't—hadn't resorted to violence."

"Paul meant did they have anything to do with what happened to you at the plant." Tim's face was grim.

"They swore they didn't," I said earnestly. "And Paul believes them." I hesitated. "One of them said he saw David at the plant—at the same time I was there."

Tim frowned, rejecting the implication, a glint of anger in his eyes.

"I don't know what they mean by that. David couldn't have had anything to do with it."

He was remembering the David of his boyhood. The David who had taught him to swim, to fish, to row. "We don't even know, truly, that someone meant to harm you." His eyes were somber now, reflective. "It could have simply been an accident, Michelle." Tim wanted to believe this.

But David was there at the plant. And David *could* have given that attack command to Rusty.

"Let's don't think about it any more tonight." I reached to touch Tim's face. He seemed so upset. Suddenly he pulled me close. I could feel his heart thumping. I knew his anxiety, despite his efforts to appear unapprehensive. "Tim, everything's going to be all right," I whispered. I was willing it to be because I couldn't bear to see Tim unhappy.

"Michelle, I have to go into Quebec City again tomorrow. I don't know why I didn't think to bring up enough drafting supplies to see me through for a few weeks. I know Mother's agreed to only ten houses—but I'm blocking the whole hundred I talked about. *She can afford it*. Even Roger believes that, though he hedged." He held me very close, his face against mine.

"Why don't you drive down to the city with me? We'll have lunch at the Continental. Start off with the caviar on toast," he planned with anticipation. "Have the *coq au grand vin*. Honey, they prepare it superbly. For dessert, Italian *cassata*. A frozen masterpiece."

"Perhaps we could pick up a copy in Quebec City tomorrow," Tim suggested. "What's the title?"

"You'll have to ask for it by the author's name. Wayne Seaton. I didn't bother asking about the title when he phoned." Her eyes were cynical. She would never forget those early years of poverty with her first husband, I thought compassionately. This was the whip that still kept her driving to financial success.

"It's difficult to imagine Wayne a success in any field," Claire continued. "He was always full of big talk, promotions he planned." She frowned, regretting she'd spoken this much about him, I suspected. "Why are you driving into Quebec City tomorrow? Shopping?"

"Drafting supplies," Tim explained. "And some last-minute Christmas shopping."

When Tim and I came downstairs to breakfast, contemplating an early start for Quebec City, we found Claire at the table. Dora was scolding her into drinking hot milk and butter. It was Dora's never-fail remedy for a sore throat.

"Dora, I have a slight case of laryngitis," Claire croaked in irritation. "I've agreed not to go into the plant. Now let me be."

I couldn't go with Tim, I decided guiltily. I'll stay here with Claire and cheer her up. Perhaps this was my chance to break through her reserve. Grow closer to her. I knew Tim was anxious for this.

I waited until Tim started upstairs for our coats to tell him.

"Tim, I think I'll stay home after all," I said, a hand on

I'd stayed home to keep Tim's mother company when she was ill, much as I longed to go with him. I had come to welcome getting away from Nelson Woods . . .

"Oh, Tim, it sounds marvelous!" We would be away from Nelson Woods for a whole day. What a glorious reprieve, I thought.

Tim pulled away slightly as he heard a car coming up the driveway.

"There's Mother. We'd better go downstairs for dinner. I'm famished," he admitted with a grin. "This Canadian air."

"In a minute," I said. "Let me run a brush through my hair." I had a little-girl determination to look my best in Claire's presence because she was always so beautifully groomed, so attractive.

Claire was talking to David in the foyer as we started down the stairs. Automatically I stiffened. Tim's hand reached for mine, and squeezed it gently.

"Who on earth sent me flowers?" Claire was frowning as she opened the florist box that sat on the foyer table. "All the way up here!"

"Suitsors, Mother?" Tim called out teasingly as Claire lifted an armful of long-stemmed red roses from the box. Frowning, Claire handed the roses to David, and reached for the card.

"From my ex-husband," she said tightly while David retreated with the roses. "He sent me a Christmas card eight years ago—that was the last I heard of him. Now he's rented a car and he's driving around Quebec for a few days. I have a feeling he may show up here. He seems to be having some kind of success with a novel he wrote."

"Wayne would only send the best," Claire said drily. "He has a flair for that sort of thing. Though I gather from his phone call," she said, respect echoing in her voice, "that he's having some success with the book."

his arm as we paused in the foyer. "I'd feel so guilty, having fun in Quebec City while your mother is here alone and not feeling well. We'll go in on one day next week."

"Michelle, you're sure you won't mind staying?" His eyes searched mine. He seemed disappointed at our not having today alone, yet pleased that I was making this overture of friendship toward his mother.

"I think I should," I said firmly.

"You know," he said softly, his eyes making love to me, "I'm glad I married you. Come on upstairs with me while I get my coat. Give me the pleasure of your company for these few minutes."

In our room Tim pulled me close.

"Michelle, stay close to the house today." He was anxious for me. Fearful of another attempt on my life.

Downstairs I sought out Claire to ask about a stamp. I found her, changed from robe to pantsuit, in absorbed concentration with Dora in the kitchen over the menu for tomorrow night's dinner. Dr. Cartier, she remembered, was particularly fond of Dora's roast beef. David was in the kitchen, also. Piling logs high in the fireplace.

"Could I borrow a stamp?" I asked with a bright smile.

"I think I can make this morning's pickup if I take this right down to the box."

"Michelle, I thought you were going into Quebec City with Tim," Claire said, surprised to see me.

"I decided to stay home," I said casually. I was self-conscious about verbalizing my reason for remaining. "Tim will just have to bear up alone for the day."

"Oh, he didn't go in alone," Dora said with devious softness, her eyes triumphant as they met mine. "Didn't

you know, Miss Claire?"

"Didn't I know what?" Claire was irritated with this odd by-play.

"Miss Diane came over with some parsley," Dora began. "When you went up to your room to dress. Mr. Tim invited her to drive in with him so she could finish her Christmas shopping. Her car's sitting out in the garage." She nodded in that direction. A secret little smile framed her thin mouth.

"How nice for Tim," I struggled to conceal my surprise. I wasn't annoyed, I told myself. Poor Diane. So painfully lonely. "It's a long drive all alone."

"Dora, go to the den, please, and bring my stamp box from my desk," Claire ordered. I knew she was furious with Dora, despite her even tones. Her eyes gave off sparks of rage, but she turned to me with a conciliatory smile. "Michelle, why don't you take the snowmobile out for a while? It's right outside here. The sun is trying hard to break through. Enjoy an hour or two outdoors. It'll be good for you. It's so easy in this cold to confine yourself indoors."

"I won't be gone that long," I laughed. "An hour at the most." And while I was gone, I guessed, Claire would lace into Dora for maliciously telling me about Diane's going into the city with Tim.

I dressed leisurely, anticipating my small excursion. I'd be back in time to have lunch with Claire, I excused myself, feeling faintly guilty because I wasn't spending the morning with her.

I hurried down the stairs and back to the kitchen—deserted now—and out the rear door to where the bright red snowmobile was parked. There was a heavy scent of snow in the air despite the sun. I slid behind the wheel with a sense of adventure ahead of me.

I moved slowly away from the house into the sweep of open, snow-masked fields to the left. The snow was unmarked except for the occasional tracks of small animals like delicate tracery on an old canvas.

Soon, with a bravado I had not expected of myself, I stepped more firmly on the gas. Feeling a sense of exhilaration as the snowmobile sped over the snow, I enjoyed the rush of sharp, cold wind on my face.

Tim had urged me to stay close to the house, but a short snowmobile ride wouldn't hurt, I thought—until I felt it wobble out of control, and turn over! When I became conscious I realized I might freeze before help came!

Quite suddenly, with a surge of alarm, I realized something was wrong. Why couldn't I keep to my course? Why was the snowmobile wobbling this way? My heart pounded as I heard a peculiar, wrenching sound. *What was happening?*

I removed my foot from the gas. Did I dare use the brake pedal? No, it was dangerous to risk a sudden action! The snowmobile was moving over rough terrain, covered by snow. Why was it tipping? Suddenly I realized the snowmobile was going to turn over!

I heard myself scream, knowing unconsciously that nobody could hear me in this wilderness between the two houses. My scream echoed through the silence as I felt myself hurtling through space.

I hit something hard. I felt a dizzy avalanche of pain. No, I mustn't fall into unconsciousness! Not alone in this vast emptiness. I'll freeze to death!

But blackness was closing in around me like a shroud. . . .



In a fog of hurt I heard, startlingly close, the anxious sounds of a dog barking. A warm wet tongue swept over my face, coaxing me back into consciousness.

"Rusty," I whispered in gratitude, my eyes fluttering wide. Rusty's instincts told him I must be brought back to consciousness before I froze to death in this sub-zero weather. "It's all right. I'll be up in a minute."

Dizzy, fighting a wave of sickness, I pulled myself into a sitting position. I shivered as I saw the overturned snowmobile several feet away. How lucky for me that I had been thrown clear!

Together Rusty and I advanced along the narrow road, my eyes straining for the sight of a car. There was very little traffic along this country road, I realized unhappily. We might have to walk all the way.

But 5 minutes later we spied a jeep in the distance, going in our direction. We halted in our tracks, waiting hopefully. The wind seeming increasingly sharp now. The retreating sun emphasized the coldness of the day.

The jeep pulled to a stop. The driver, a ruddy-faced man in his forties, leaned forward with amiable curiosity.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle.*" I gathered that he found hitchhikers rare in this area.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur.*"

Rapidly, in French, I introduced myself, and asked for a lift to Nelson Woods. As I explained what had happened, his eyebrows shot upward in astonishment and concern.

"*Mademoiselle, you are all right?*" he asked while he gestured for both Rusty and me to join him on the front

"I'll be right back, Michelle. I want to talk to Dr. Cartier again before he takes off."

I started at the light knock at my door.

"Come in."

Cecile, manipulating a tray, came into the room.

"The coffee smells marvelous." I pulled myself into a sitting position with an unexpected eagerness. I suddenly remembered that I had skipped lunch. "I gather Dr. Cartier is still here?" I looked at her with curiosity, not honestly expecting that Cecile knew why Dr. Cartier was still at Nelson Woods.

Cecile was suddenly somber. Her eyes doubtful. Fearful.

"*Mademoiselle, I am not sure I am to tell you this. I heard it quite by accident—*"

I sat up straight, narrowly avoiding overturning my dinner tray. My voice was uneven when I spoke, my throat tight.

"Cecile, please tell me—"

"David towed the snowmobile back to the house," Cecile said slowly. "A little while ago Monsieur Tim and Dr. Cartier went out to have a look at it." She took a deep breath. "They believe the treads on the snowmobile were deliberately slashed. That someone meant for you to die."

Tim seemed exhausted as he sat down at the edge of the bed and reached for my hand.

"We'll need professional help, Michelle," Tim said quietly. "At this point we know nothing. No motive. Nothing—" He gestured helplessly.

"I don't know whether I should tell you this," Cecile confided, "but they believe the snowmobile treads were slashed—somebody wanted you to die!"

seat. ("*Mon Dieu, what a thing to happen!*")

I expected to be dropped off at the entrance to Nelson Woods. But my driver insisted on taking me right up to the front door of the house. He watched solicitously while I climbed down from the jeep, Rusty right at my heels.

"Dora—" Claire's voice called from the library. "Who just drove up?"

"Miss Michelle," Dora said loudly. I was progressing, I thought with a touch of humor. From "Mrs. Nelson" to "Miss Michelle."

"I had some trouble with the snowmobile," I began self-consciously, walking toward Claire, who stood at the library door. "I'm afraid it's smashed up."

"Michelle, what happened?" Her voice deepened with shock. "Are you all right?"

As briefly as possible, I explained, aware of her increasing agitation as she realized what might have happened to me.

"Go right upstairs and get into bed," Claire ordered with a strained calm. "I'm calling Dr. Cartier."

Dr. Cartier gave me a clean bill of health. Bruises but no broken bones. If I felt any pain that indicated anything other than bruises, he'd take x-rays.

Dr. Cartier left me to go downstairs. In a few moments I could hear him talking in low tones with Tim at the head of the stairs. Then Tim was charging into our room, his face etched with anxiety.

"Michelle—"

"I'm all right, darling," I said quickly, happy and relieved that he was home.

Tim turned speculatively toward the door, rose to his feet.

"I'll go into Quebec City on Monday. Talk to a private investigating firm." He squinted in thought. "Let's not say anything about this to Mother until we absolutely have to." He sighed. For a moment I wanted to grab him by the hand and run. "She'll be terribly upset."

"Tim, this is going to be expensive," I hazarded. "Can we afford it?"

Tim sat down beside me again, reached for me.

"You've been watching too many TV mysteries," he chided. "Of course we can afford it, when it's your life that's at stake."

Tim opened the door just as the car drew to a stop before the house. In a moment a tall, lean man stepped out.

"This is Nelson Woods, isn't it?" His voice was mellow and warm, his face both sensitive and intriguing. He was, I imagined, somewhere in his fifties. The voice said he was of English-Canadian birth.

"Yes, it is," Tim said guardedly, very much attuned to danger these days.

"My name is Seaton. Wayne Seaton." He was calculatingly ingratiating, I suspected; but I didn't find this annoying. "Is Mrs. Nelson at home?"

"No, she's at the plant. I'm Tim Nelson. Please come in."

"I'm—I'm an old friend of your mother," Seaton said cautiously, not knowing if Tim was aware of the relationship.

"You were married to Mother before she married my father," Tim said gently. "You're the writer with a book

Tim and I welcomed Wayne Seaton, Claire's former husband, when he arrived unexpectedly, and we liked him immediately. He was a successful writer of mystery stories, too. He was fascinated, and disturbed, by my story. "You two must leave at once!" he said.



on the best-seller list."

He laughed. "I didn't think Claire would mention it." "Come into the library and have a drink to warm up," Tim urged, showing him down the corridor. He liked Wayne Seaton on sight. So did I. "Oh, this is Michelle. My wife."

"Hello, Michelle." There was an air of disarming friendliness in his eyes.

"Tim bought your book when he was down in Quebec

City," I said. "He liked it very much," I added earnestly, and both of them chuckled. "Claire has it now. When she finishes it, I'll have a chance to read it."

"So Claire's still active in the business?" Wayne said, settling himself into a chair by the fireplace. "I've heard about her through mutual acquaintances through the years. Successful, I gather."

"She's amazing," Tim said enthusiastically.

"She was always quite a woman." Wayne's eyes were somber, looking inward. After all these years, I could see he was still in love with Claire.

"But stubborn!" He whistled eloquently, a glint in his eyes. "When Claire made up her mind to do something, nobody had better get in her way."

"Like Tim," I commented lightly. "They're two of a kind." But it often disturbed me that Tim and his mother could generate such covert hostility between them, neither willing to make concessions.

"I suppose I should have phoned before coming out," Wayne apologized. "I'm staying at a motel about 25 miles down the road. It seemed absurd not to see Claire when I was so close. I was driving around, and the next thing I knew I was heading this way."

I took the luscious, red tomato Diane had brought from her hothouse, to eat with my lunch. "Wait!" Tim yelled—and pulled the tomato out of my hand!

"You'll stay for dinner, of course," Tim assumed. "Why don't we call Mother and tell her you're here? Maybe she'll be able to leave the plant early." Tim was diplomatically forewarning Claire of her former husband's presence. But somehow I doubted that this would disturb her.

At Claire's urging, it was suggested that Wayne remain at Nelson Woods for a long weekend. Agreeing readily, he drove back to his motel to pick up his luggage.

"First you'll have a drink," Tim insisted jovially. "To warm you for the trip." I could see Tim was pleased that Wayne was staying.

Claire arrived early from the plant, before Wayne returned with his luggage. She was curious, I sensed, about Wayne's book. She'd been so sure he'd never be a successful author. Claire, like most successful people, had great respect for success. In any field.

Dinner was a grand feast from the outset. Obviously Claire had consulted with Dora about dinner, because this was a gourmet's delight. Wayne was absolutely lyrical about the food.

"Are you working on a new novel?" Tim asked.

"I'm plotting another mystery," Wayne disclosed. "But before I go any further, I've got a problem to solve. There's a poison involved in the plot. It must be something offbeat, difficult to trace."

"We have a neighbor who's a toxicologist," Tim said promptly. "He also runs a local mill, but his heart is in toxicology. He writes regularly for the technical magazines. Why don't we get you together with him? He might be helpful."

"I'll have Hugh and Diane over for dinner Saturday night," Claire offered.

"It isn't the gore that fascinates me," Wayne was unexpectedly serious. "It's the turn of the criminal mind. We never know, actually, what sparks criminal activity. I believe that any of us—under certain circumstances—is quite capable of murder."

"Wayne, that's your fiction writer's mind carrying you away," Claire scoffed. "The percentage of people capable of murder is infinitesimal."

When Claire said good night and left, Tim, ignoring her admonition, sought out Dora and asked her to take a cup of hot milk to his mother.

"She looks marvelous," Wayne said quietly when Tim rejoined us. "But she's terribly tense."

"All the trouble at the plant," I said. "It's all rather new up here, remember."

"Mother has more than the plant to be tense about," Tim said grimly, and I shot a swift, startled glance in his direction.

"What do you mean?" Wayne leaned forward, instantly alert.

As matter-of-factly as he could, Tim told him about the series of near-catastrophes.

"I can't accept them as accidents," Tim admitted. "You have a mystery-oriented mind, Wayne. I thought you might have some ideas about all this."

"I'd get Michelle out of here and turn that investigator loose pronto," Wayne said bluntly. "Pack up tonight and go to a motel."

"Wayne, how dramatic!" I laughed shakily. "Actually, most of what's happened has occurred outside the house."

"How many times do you expect to be lucky, Michelle?" A vein was distended in Wayne's forehead. I was touched by the intensity of his concern for me. "Tim wants to be a husband, not a widower!"

"I'll be with Tim until Clark Grange arrives," I insisted, but I knew Wayne was right in urging me to leave Nelson Woods. "He'll be here Friday morning. Tomorrow we're going skiing right after breakfast. We'll be away from Nelson Woods all day."

Tim and I left the house and got into the Volvo with a spurious sense of adventure. Tim hadn't been to Blue Mountain since his senior year at school in Montreal. While we drove along the sunlit road, he told me several amusing anecdotes about the mountain. But despite my effort to match his air of conviviality, I was haunted by the knowledge that Clark Grange's arrival was going to be delayed for 24 hours. A terrifyingly long time for someone sitting on the edge of a cliff.

For a while we were content with our own ski runs. I was improving, I thought with fresh confidence. It must be from listening to the pointers Tim casually made from time to time. But the cold was getting through to me.

"You're chilly," Tim noticed. "We'll go to the warming hut and have coffee. Dora didn't stint—she gave us a quart thermos."

We brought out the sandwiches, packed thickly, with slices of delicious London broil. Two enormous wedges of still hot mince pie. A tomato packed in aluminum foil, with salt thoughtfully provided. One tomato, because Dora, of course, knew of Tim's allergy.

"Another of Diane's hothouse wonders," I said with relish, unwrapping the richly red, organically grown tomato. Lifting it to my mouth, I planned to eat it apple-fashion.

"Wait!" Tim's voice lashed out at me while he seized my wrist in a vise-like grip. I watched him in amazement as he roughly pulled the tomato out of my hand.

"Tim, what is it?"

"I'm not sure." He was struggling to remain calm. "But we're not taking any chances." He lifted the tomato to his nose, smelling it suspiciously. Then he just kept staring at it.

"Tim, what's wrong with the tomato?"

"Nothing, possibly, but we're not gambling." He turned the tomato around slowly in his hand. "You see those needle pricks? Or what look like needle pricks," he said. "Michelle, poison could have been injected into this

tomato."

"How do we find out?" I was trembling—and not from the cold.

"We're dumping this food," he said bluntly. "We'll drive over to Le Bon Appetit for lunch. And while we're waiting for the food to arrive, I'm phoning Grange's office in Quebec City. They'll know a lab who'll be able to analyze this tomato for us."

"What are you trying to tell me, Tim?" Wayne's voice was slightly impatient.

"Sit down, Wayne. We won't tell Claire just yet, but we'd like your reaction to this. As a professional in the field," he added, with an attempt at humor, as he reached for a bottle in the liquor cabinet. "But wait one moment, will you?" His voice was guarded; his eyes watched the door.

"We opened the bag to take out our lunch," he resumed in a low voice when Cecile disappeared down the corridor. "Michelle was just about to bite into a tomato. I stopped her. There were odd needle pricks at one point."

"That could be an imperfection," Wayne pointed out guardedly. But the atmosphere in the room was supercharged.

"I could swear there was an odor of bitter almonds." Tim's eyes met Wayne's.

"Cyanide," Wayne said quietly. "The instant killer."

Tim nodded. "That was my reaction."

"Where do you get tomatoes this time of year?"

"A friend—Diane Winston—grows them in her hothouse. She brought two over to Dora this morning."

"Where's the other?" Wayne asked.

"Wayne, could Claire have eaten that tomato?"

I saw alarm surge through him, saw him fighting to remain calm. For all his casualness, he'd never completely fallen out of love with Claire, I felt.

"If Claire *had* eaten that tomato, she could never have made it upstairs to her room. I saw a light up there as I drove in."

"Wayne, she was going to have lunch from a tray, in bed." My throat was tight with fear.

"Lunchtime the sunlight was pouring into the house," Wayne reasoned. "Claire turned the lights on at dusk." He managed a smile. "The writer's mind at work again. Now tell me: who is Diane Winston? Isn't she the neigh-

while he split logs for the fireplaces. She hadn't expected any of us down this early. Claire was probably sleeping late.

"Let me prepare breakfast," Wayne suggested with a festive air. "One of my small talents. I often did the cooking when Claire and I were married. She loathed it," he remembered humorously, pulling open the refrigerator and inspecting its contents. "What about eggs Benedict?"

"Great," Tim said, but I shuddered.

"Just tea and toast for me—despite your culinary genius." I laughed because Wayne was making a comic show of disappointment.

Suddenly the phone rang. Instantly the three of us went tense. Tim crossed the room to pick up the receiver.

"Hello—" He cleared his throat nervously, his eyes seeking mine. "Oh, Roger, good morning." He frowned as he listened to what Roger had to say. "Yes, I suppose I could come over." His eyes were apprehensive as they lingered on me. "No, I won't say anything to Mother. I'll be over in about an hour." He hung up, staring quizzically into space.

"Roger was approached by the strike committee. Despite Mother's illness," he said ruefully. "He's anxious to discuss this with me before he takes the whole thing to Mother."

"Claire's not going to like that." Wayne's eyes were speculative. "Do you plan on going into the plant with Claire?" He knew about Tim's architectural plans, about his eagerness to build houses for the workers.

"Eventually I'll go into the plant," Tim hedged. But he was increasingly concerned about the impasse between Claire and the employees, a situation his father would not have permitted to develop. "Michelle, I promised to be over there in an hour."

"Go without me. It'd be ridiculous for me to tag along. I'll be all right here, with Wayne in the house. Have your breakfast and go right over," I urged him.

While Tim turned this over in his mind, the phone rang again. He crossed the room in wide strides, picked up the receiver again.

"Hello." From the set of his jaw as he listened to the voice at the other end of the line, I knew this must be Grange's office. "Yes, we figured it was something like that." There was a downbeat quality in his voice. "Thank you for calling so promptly. We'll expect Mr. Grange in the morning."

While Wayne helped us to sift through the evidence, the call from the lab came through. The tomato had been injected with cyanide—enough to kill me!

bor whose father is the toxicologist?"

"Yes." I found it difficult to accept that Wayne might suspect Diane.

"It isn't impossible to believe that he might have cyanide in his laboratory," Wayne spoke offhandedly, but his words jarred me.

"Diane uses cyanide," I said after an anguished hesitation. "To rid her hothouse of insects."

"What's the relationship between you two?"

"I think Diane expected to marry Tim some day," I admitted. "My arrival must have been a dreadful shock."

"On the other hand," Wayne speculated, "how could she be sure Tim wouldn't eat the tomato?"

"She could be sure." My voice was uneven. "Tim's allergic to tomatoes, as everyone knows."

The kitchen was deserted. Through a rear window we saw Dora, out in the back, talking absorbedly to David

Tim put the phone down. His eyes were unhappy. "The analysis came through. There was sufficient cyanide in the tomato to kill whoever ate it."

I sat in our room, struggling to concentrate on a magazine. I was grateful for the steady click of Wayne's typewriter next door. All I would have to do was to tap lightly on the wall, and he'd come in. Still, I started when the door to the bedroom opened and Cecile walked in, vacuum cleaner in hand.

"Oh, *pardonez-moi*, Mademoiselle." Her eyes widened in apology.

"That's all right, Cecile. Come on in." I smothered a yawn. "Just vacuum around me if you don't mind."

"But I do not wish to disturb you." How serious she was.

"It won't disturb me," I said firmly. "I was trying to read, but it just makes me drowsy."

Suddenly Cecile's eyes were glowing. She smiled shyly.

"I have three older sisters. Before every baby they are sleepy the first few weeks. The oldest, Maria"—she shook her head with broad humor—"she would almost fall asleep right at the dinner table."

I gazed at Cecile in astonishment. *Could I be pregnant?* Oh. I wished this were true! Tim would be so delighted.

"Who is it?" I could hear Dr. Cartier's voice somewhere in the background.

"Tell Dr. Cartier it's Michelle Nelson," I said quickly. My heart was pounding while I waited for her to convey this message.

In seconds his nurse was back on the phone with me. "Dr. Cartier will see you any time you can come in, until 2. That's when he leaves for house calls." The nurse sounded faintly disapproving of this favoritism.

"I'll be right over," I said. What was that click? Somebody on an extension?

In 20 minutes I was sitting across the desk from Dr. Cartier, breathless with anticipation.

"I cannot say for sure for another two weeks. It is then that I can diagnose with certainty." But his eyes twinkled. "However, I would guess that you are pregnant, Michelle. My girls usually know." He leaned forward with a warmth that reached beyond a routine doctor-patient relationship. "I brought Tim into the world. Now I will deliver his child."

Caught up in euphoria I returned to Nelson Woods and went upstairs immediately to the privacy of our room. I found myself waiting impatiently for Tim to return from the plant. With early-pregnancy tiredness I stretched out on the bed, welcoming its comfort. Even while I told my-

self I could hear Wayne typing in the next room. *How could I reach through to him?* Talk to Claire. Keep talking. Outdoors I could hear a car pulling into the garage. Claire hadn't noticed. Perhaps it was Tim. Tim, hurry! Hurry! "What have I done that's wrong?"

"You're French," Claire said with contempt. "You're on the side of the workers. You'll cause trouble. Nobody's going to take away the plant control from me. Not after all the years I've fought to make it successful. I won't let Tim take over."

"Can Tim take over?" Slowly I was being inched backwards. Back toward the open window that looked out over the St. Lawrence. "You're in charge, Claire. Tim's no threat to you."

"I'm the executor of the estate, but everything belongs to Tim. Ever since he was 21. I can manage that old fool, Emerson—but with you behind him, Tim will start to ask questions. That's why you have to die."

"Claire, I won't say anything to Tim," I promised desperately. I was fearfully conscious of the open window behind me. The bitter cold lashed at my back. Aware of the perilous drop into the icy St. Lawrence that Claire planned for me, I was filled with sheer terror.

"We'll go away, Claire. Back to New York."

"You're pregnant, Michelle. Dr. Cartier will confirm this." There was an odd, hypnotic quality in Claire's voice. She kept forcing me backwards. How much longer could I stall?

"They'll think you went to the window to enjoy the view. You had a dizzy spell. You fell. Tim will not have a child. His wife will have died in a tragic accident. For a

Drowsy and happy at the thought of being pregnant, I fell asleep. I woke with a sense of being cold. The window was open. Claire stood there, saying "Get up!"

self I wouldn't fall asleep, my eyes were closing.

I awoke with a disturbing sense of discomfort, of being cold. Suddenly I realized I was not alone in the room. Someone stood beside my bed. Then relief suffused me, because I saw that it was Claire. She was wearing the magenta hostess gown she'd worn last night. One hand rested on the headboard, the other in the slash pocket of her gown.

"You're tired, Michelle," she said quietly.

"Exhausted." I pulled myself up into a sitting position, fighting an impulse to confide in Claire.

"Michelle, why did you go to see Dr. Cartier? Are you pregnant?"

"Yes," I said tremulously, the secret flushed from me. But in a cavern of my mind I wondered how Claire knew I'd been to see Dr. Cartier.

"When I picked up the extension and heard you talking with his office, I suspected that." Claire's voice was unfamiliarly tight. And then, shivering in the chill of the room, I was staring with disbelief at the hand that had emerged from Claire's pocket—holding a gun, *pointed at me*.

"Claire, what are you doing with that?" I stammered. "Get up from the bed," she ordered. "On your feet." Impatience made her voice ugly.

"Claire, what's wrong?" What kind of nightmare was this?

"You are wrong!" she spat out. "Why did Tim marry you? Why didn't he marry Diane as I'd planned? I could manage Tim and Diane."

"I don't understand, Claire." Trembling, I rose to my

feet while he'll grieve. Then he'll marry Diane. I will remain in control." Her voice deepened with triumph. "All these years I've kept the plant running. I improved the business, brought up the level of profits. It should all belong to me as long as I'm alive. Diane will understand that."

"Claire, don't do this," I whispered. And then I knew I must—somehow—stall another few seconds because the door behind Claire was stealthily opening. "Tim will know I didn't fall out the window. I never go near that window, Claire. I'm terrified of the river. That's how my mother died. By drowning."

"Get away from the window!" Wayne's voice crackled through the room. "Claire, drop that gun."

Claire spun around, crying out in rage. "Get away from here, Wayne! Don't spoil it! Not now!"

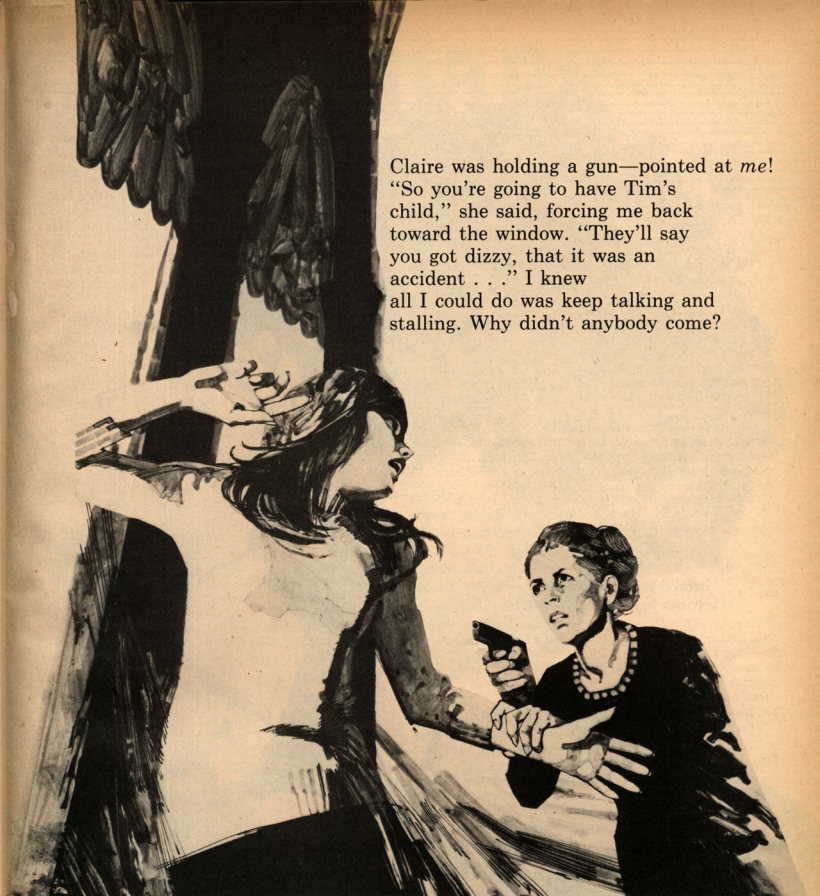
All at once Wayne and Claire were struggling for possession of the gun. Claire, wild-eyed, showed unexpected strength. They were too close to the window. Oh, no! No! I screamed as Claire fell backward, hurtling through the window she'd opened for me.

"Oh, Wayne, Wayne—" I swayed with shock.

"Michelle!" I heard Tim's voice in the corridor just outside. "Michelle—" He burst into the room.

"Take care of Michelle, Tim," Wayne said. His face was ashen, eyes grief-stricken for his ex-wife. "I'll go down to your mother."

I later learned that Cecile, seeing me go up to my room but not knowing I was asleep, had—on impulse—brought me tea. At my door she had paused and had heard Claire threatening me inside. Terrified, she'd gone swiftly to



Claire was holding a gun—pointed at *me*! “So you’re going to have Tim’s child,” she said, forcing me back toward the window. “They’ll say you got dizzy, that it was an accident . . .” I knew all I could do was keep talking and stalling. Why didn’t anybody come?

Wayne, who—knowing Claire’s obsession for power—had suspected her from the beginning.

As I’d believed, Tim had returned from the plant just as Claire entered the room, intent on my death. Coming into the house, he’d bounded up the stairs at Cecile’s frenzied, pantomimed urging.

Tim is taking over the plant. He’ll build those houses. He’s determined, with Roger’s help, to improve conditions for the workers, to restore the kind of relationship his father had with the men.

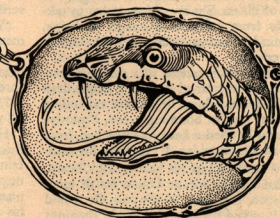
Together we’ll work for better understanding between the minority English and the French in our village. Tim’s child will have French blood. He will be bilingual. This too will be a bond between the community and us.

Often these days Roger and Diane come to dinner at Nelson Woods. The growing closeness between them is a joy to me. Even Hugh Winston approves.

Dora and David grieve for Claire, but both await impatiently the arrival of the new heir to Nelson Woods. Though not as impatiently as Tim and I.



DARK TALISMAN



It was a loathsome thing – a frightful serpent's head made of silver. "It will protect you," Selena's uncle had said. Now, come to claim the plantation that was her inheritance, she wondered: Could anything save her from the primitive passions aroused in her own heart – and the savage beating of the voodoo drums that turned her island paradise into seething hell? And was the strange amulet a blessing – or a curse?

By ANNE-MARIE BRETONNE

□ I wish I could have known, on that warm and orange afternoon in July 1857, all that Miss Carstairs's urgent message to meet in her quarters would lead to. But would I have been able to disobey her summons, or by doing something else, somehow escape that which seemed fated to happen? I doubt it very much. Besides, when one is eighteen, one's head is occupied with today, with studies, with thoughts of the cotillion being planned for next month, with hopes of handsome young men of good family, better connections, and the best expectations.

Miss Carstairs's Academy for Young Ladies had the reputation of being among the finest in Boston, a reputation gained as much by its high fees for tutelage as by its emphasis upon instruction in Greek and Roman antiquity, in declamation, elocution, and other seemingly pursuits for young ladies of quality, one of whom I apparently became by virtue of my enrollment.

Are my feet upon the ground? I think they are. I think they would have to be, since it is from the ground that the funds come to underwrite my education.

From the book DARK TALISMAN by Anne-Marie Bretonne. Copyright © 1975 by Arnold Bergman. Reprinted by permission of Seligmann & Collier.

On the Caribbean island of Santa Teresa is the plantation owned by my uncle, Isaiah Danley, who is the only family I have, since my mother and father were lost in a dreadful tragedy at sea when I was four. I suppose almost my earliest memories center around Uncle Isaiah, who was a tall, tanned, and powerfully built man, his shoulders broad from youthful shipboard toil. How I loved the scratch of his full black sailor's beard against my face! I would see him once in perhaps a year or two, when, as he said, he sailed from Santa Teresa to "oversee my welfare."

I recall I was nearly six years old, living with Miss Lambert, a thin, slight woman, kindhearted enough, but always complaining of illness. She was often given to taking draughts directly from a bottle of cough medicine, which my child's mind found perfectly logical since it invariably made her cough.

One afternoon a hired coach rattled to a stop just outside our window. In what seemed to me a single leap Uncle Isaiah was through our door, filling and expanding the room with his great height, booming voice, explosive laughter. In one motion he shed a heavy canvas bag from his back, swept me to his shoulder. I clutched his muscled neck, nestled my head against his heavy black beard, smelled the smells that always meant Uncle Isaiah loves me: tar, sea-salt, tobacco, bay rum. With scarcely a nod to Miss Lambert, he bundled me into my cloak, then out we dashed into the waiting coach for a turn around the Common and a meal in a real restaurant not far from tall-spired Park Street Church.

When I was about six, Uncle Isaiah brought me a strange gift—an amulet engraved with a hideous snake's head, with wide-open mouth and venomous fangs!

When we got back home Uncle Isaiah made a great show of rummaging through his canvas bag. He stood up with a narrow black case in his hand. He opened it with a flourish. On a puff of black velvet rested a curious oval amulet or medallion fearfully engraved with the head of a serpent, its wide-open mouth showing long, awesome fangs.

"To protect my little princess from snake bite," Uncle Isaiah said, hanging the amulet around my neck by a delicate silver chain. I looked up at him in wide-eyed little girl wonder.

"Even in Boston?" I said.

"Wherever they are they won't harm you now," he said.

I remember clearly Uncle Isaiah's last visit. I was sixteen, and in the four years I'd been at Miss Carstairs's I'd noticed changes for the worse: meat was tough and served less frequently, vegetables tended to be stale. While we still had many more girls than we do now, I would often see Miss Carstairs during studies, staring off into space, her thumb pressed against her teeth.

I'd just returned from a walk. As I drew near Miss Carstairs's door I saw Prudence Towitter leaning against it, listening. She saw me, straightened, held her finger to her lips. She whispered, "Miss Carstairs keeps asking for more money, and he keeps saying, 'No!' Come listen, Selena."

That evening Miss Carstairs outdid herself at supper, I

suppose to impress my uncle. A rack of lamb appeared for the first time in months. At the head of the table Uncle Isaiah presided, carved with precise gusto, ladled gobs of brown gravy over roast potatoes, while our mouths watered as we passed heaped platters along.

A knock sounded at the front door. That busybody, Prudence Towitter, jumped up. "I'll go," she said, then remembered her lessons. "May I be excused?"

Miss Carstairs looked helplessly at my uncle, then nodded, and Prudence was off like a shot.

She returned shortly, her face puzzled. "It's a man for you, Captain Danley."

My uncle paused, the carving knife in mid-air. "Describe him, miss."

"It's a Negro," Prudence said, "dressed like a gentleman. He's got these big earrings."

Uncle Isaiah blanched, his eye twitched, then he gained control of himself. He came over and kissed my forehead.

"Something urgent, little princess. Something I forgot. I'll write you from the plantation."

He kissed me again, thanked Miss Carstairs, then left through the kitchen. I listened as his footfalls sounded fainter and fainter down the hall. Then there came the unmistakable thump of the back door. I sat straight up, puzzled. Why hadn't he gone by the front way to meet his caller?

That was two years ago, and Uncle Isaiah never sent his promised letter.

Miss Carstairs was standing by her desk as I entered the sparsely furnished room. A tall and large-boned woman, her face radiated a tranquility belying our schoolgirl gossip of a lover lost in the late war with Mexico. But whatever her disappointments, she had survived them with composure; she remained a most unfidgety person, usually sure, always uncompromising.

"It was good of you to come so quickly, dear Selena," she said. "Pray be seated." She nodded toward an Empire side chair next to her desk and seated herself when I did, folding her large-knuckled hands in front of her.

"You are probably wondering, dear child, what prompted me to ask you here, *c'est vrai*?"

"*Mais oui, madame*," I said dutifully, trying to hide my growing curiosity.

Miss Carstairs tapped her forefinger on an envelope. "The explanation is here," she said, handing me the envelope. "My poor dear little Selena." It bore a Santa Teresa postmark, was addressed in care of Miss Carstairs in a fine but unfamiliar Spencerian hand, and was dated two weeks ago.

"Esteemed Mlle. Selena Danley," I read, "doubtless you remain in blessed unawareness of the circumstances touching the Plantation Danley, and the personal tragedy regarding your most worthy uncle. Not to put too fine a point on it, my employer, your uncle Isaiah Danley, died three days ago of injuries sustained while recruiting laborers in the back country."

"Our sense of loss at the plantation is acute, but of course, is in no measure the equal of your personal bereavement. My heart goes out to you, dear Mlle. Selena.

"But we live in a world which, while it tolerates sentiment, rewards only practicality. As your uncle's overseer I have naturally assumed the management of the Plantation Danley. I feel this to be in accord with what your uncle would have wished as he always dealt with me in a singularly generous manner. "Your education in America," the letter went on, "may continue unimpeded, as I suspect you might wish, except for a possible interruption about which I suggest you call upon the law firm of Routledge & Cox, on Commercial Street in your city, with whom I have corresponded at the same time this letter is written.

"Concerning your interrupted schooling, I beg to acquaint you with an inheritance law of our republic, which requires the presence on our soil of all persons having claim to any property *within 60 days* of the demise of the former owner, or the property will be forfeited to the republic and sold to the highest bidder.

"Accept, as if from an old and trusted friend who is as deeply grieved as you yourself must be, my most sincere condolences on your loss.

I remain,
Your obedient servant,
Etienne Sangloire."

The letter dropped from my fingers and tears flooded my eyes. My Uncle Isaiah, my anchor, the only family I'd ever known, was gone. Never again would he bring gifts from far places for his little princess or fill her room with boisterous love.

I turned to the man who had just emerged from an inner office. Easily as tall and broad-shouldered as my late Uncle Isaiah, he wore a fitted frock coat skirted to the knees front and back, a vest, and tight bell-bottomed trousers, all of somber broadcloth.

"With a touch of color," I mused, "he'd make quite a dandy." As it was, he appeared most impressive. He came closer, his hand outstretched, and I noted how his curly brown hair and thick side-whiskers made an attractive frame for a wide-browed face. But it was his eyes that were most arresting. They were the darkest of dark brown, and looking into them I found it difficult to turn my own away. Well.

I had to admit that I found my uncle's lawyer, John Routledge, very attractive. But why was he trying to keep me from visiting my property?

"You are Counselor Routledge?" I said. "Your father has favored me with his solicitude for a number of years." Our fingers touched, a tiny shock tingled to my wrist. I was startled. He instantly withdrew his hand. A shy smile began, then faded on his lips.

"The weather, the dryness," he explained in his deep voice. "I am John Routledge, and you have the advantage, Miss . . ."

"Danley. Selena Catherine Danley. My uncle . . ."

"Oh, of course!"

I said, "I take it Mr. Sangloire has corresponded with you, Counselor?"

John Routledge touched a forefinger to his temple, wrinkled his brow. "Sangloire? Oh, the overseer in Santa Teresa! Yes, he has, in great detail. Tell me, Miss Danley," he leaned forward, "what do you know about the island?"

"Nothing. My uncle never spoke about it, and the instances of his visits to Boston were so rare we had too many other things to talk about. I assume you've been there?"

John Routledge settled back in his chair, blew out a cloud of smoke. "Several times, Miss Danley. I've been closely associated with your late uncle's affairs ever since my father's age and health made such journeys imprudent. It's really quite lovely. Warm days, cool nights, absolutely glorious tropical sunsets; it's in the West Indies,



you know. And the blacks—hard-working, charming—but I fear impoverished: Ibos they were, Arada-Dahomeys, Gullahs, Ashantis, Yorubas.”

He paused, his dark brown eyes bored into mine, and again I couldn't look away. “There's another side to Santa Teresa,” he said, “darker, less appealing . . . but that's hardly for a genteel young lady . . .”

“Are there slaves there?” I said. “I'm an abolitionist.”

“No more. They took their cue from Saint Domingue, threw out the French, oh, forty-five years ago, and became a free republic.”

I was fingering the amulet Uncle Isaiah had given me as a child, and on an impulse I withdrew it.

“Have you ever seen anything like this, Counselor?”

I slipped the silver chain over my head; held the oval medallion toward him. He started, then quickly recovered.

“Where did you get that barbaric thing?”

And once more I experienced his eyes on mine and I couldn't turn away. I replaced the amulet. Then he *re-leased* me. That's the only way I can express it. Something went out of his eyes and I was free.

“From Uncle Isaiah,” I said. “I think I was six.”

“It's very old,” he said, “and probably quite valuable to an antiquarian, and I'm certain it has nostalgic significance to you, Miss Danley. But forgive me, I don't think I care to see it again!”

I tried to recall my own feelings on receiving the amulet to compare them with John Routledge's unexpected repugnance; it was, after all, a rather frightful serpent's

We would at one time have four children, at another time three, never fewer than two, because one is the number of loneliness, as I knew surpassing well.

But what does a Caribbean planter do? My entire experience with agriculture consisted in having failed as a little girl to keep one of my governess's lush potted ferns watered so that it withered away. But surely there were books I might read, almanacs I might consult? I foresaw a period of fascinating and rewarding study, a chance to learn, for a change, something I could use!

“Do you intend to go in person to Santa Teresa, Miss Danley?”

I was brought out of my reverie.

“Isn't it one of their laws that I must?” I said.

“Ah, the ever-efficient Mr. Sangloire,” John Routledge said. “I think legal justification might be found for your being represented by your uncle's executor, and luckily I can spare the time.”

“You wish me to remain in Boston.” I made it a flat statement.

“I'm thinking only of your youth and inexperience, Miss Danley. I'm in large measure responsible for your welfare for the next three years.”

“There are attendant dangers, then?” I said.

John Routledge spread his arms apart. “Inconveniences. A hot, dry journey of two or three weeks, depending on the Westerlies, in a confining, ill-smelling merchantman, poorly appointed for a woman of refinement, association with the roughest sorts of seamen . . .”

“How exciting it sounds!” I said.

“Where did you get that barbaric thing?” John asked, when I showed him the amulet. Shaken, he told me, “Your uncle died from a venomous snake bite . . .”

head; but no, I hadn't been frightened, perhaps because it had been given by loving, trusted hands.

“You're in the way of becoming a wealthy young lady,” John Routledge said. “Your uncle left a will. Shall I read it to you?”

He went to what looked like a vastly enlarged spice cabinet against a wall, slid out one of many long black metal boxes, opened a flap on top of the box.

I said, “With all due deference to your calling, why not spare me a thousand wherea's and wherefor's and just tell me?”

He let the flap drop and came back to his desk, laughing. “Delightful! Wherea's and wherefor's! The will allows you to continue your education or not, as you choose. Your uncle was quite specific about not interfering with your plans, Miss Danley. You may marry or not, again as you choose. Any money you may require from time to time will be provided in moderation at the discretion of your uncle's executor, who has the extreme pleasure at this moment of talking to you.

“And upon your majority in let me see—three years, correct?—you will succeed to the sole ownership of Plantation Danley! The rest is a thousand of your wherea's and wherefor's.”

My head was awirl with possibilities. I had never devoted a great deal of time to musing about or planning for my future. Once in a while, observing a fine carriage clatter along the cobbled streets of Boston, I'd imagine myself its occupant, mistress of a handsome Beacon Street mansion, my husband engaged in the China trade.

He regarded me for a moment in silence.

“May I at least arrange passage?” he said hopefully.

“Let me think about it. There is something you might tell me. I remember Uncle Isaiah quite well—he was a big, strong, vital man. What kind of accident did he have?”

The expectant expression left his face, replaced by disappointment. “Isn't the fact of the accident sufficient, Miss Danley?”

I said, “If you are unwilling to tell me, I suppose the explanation must await my arrival.”

John Routledge sighed, folded his hands, stared at them. “Your uncle Isaiah died from the bite of a venomous snake, Miss Danley. It bit him in the throat. Death was almost instantaneous.”

A little before dinner, two days after my visit to the lawyer, Miss Carstairs brought me a note that was just delivered, and stood not far away while I read it:

“Have something important about uncle's death. Must discuss with you. Will send carriage nine o'clock in morning.

Routledge”

Promptly at nine the next morning, I entered an awaiting brougham and found it already occupied by a man with a face like well-tanned leather, whose flattened nose was the only indication he bore of possible Negro ancestry. He wore a seaman's jacket and dungaree trousers.

As I ran, I looked back, and saw my kidnapper gaining! I knew now that someone wanted to keep me from leaving Boston, if he had to kill me!

"Routledge, he meet us later," he said, with an accent I couldn't identify.

I nodded but said nothing, nor did the seaman undertake further conversation. Thus in silence we rode for several miles. After some time, the seaman burrowed into a cloth bag at his feet. He uncorked a small bottle, whereupon the brougham filled instantly with the sharp smell of spirits. "Lord help this poor creature," I thought, "who has to drink so early in the morning!" The temperance lectures I'd attended were right—they couldn't leave the dreadful stuff alone! But instead of drinking, the seaman poured the bottle into a kerchief. Suddenly he thrust the kerchief into my face! I tried to pull away but he grasped my shoulder, pushed the kerchief against my nose and mouth, and I lost consciousness.

I awakened with a headache, lying on a plain straw pallet in a tiny, bare room that smelled of stale beer, dampness, and rot. The warped wooden floor was of pegged construction; in one corner several boards had completely rotted away, exposing a time-darkened, hand-hewn framing underneath. While this provided evidence of colonial origin, it gave me no indication of where I was. The room's dampness suggested nearness to water, but there was no sound or smell of the sea.

Had I been robbed? I dug frantically in my bag, found my few coins intact, and nothing else apparently missing. My amulet! But it hung reassuringly from its chain. The note from Counselor Routledge, then? I remembered dropping it into my bag last night. The note was gone.

Quietly I crept to that corner where the floor was rotted. Below me, through the opening, I could see the burly back of a man seated at a table's edge. As I watched, he raised a bottle to his lips, swigged noisily, replaced it out of my sight. While he must have been the one who brought the food, he was too broad to have been my kidnapper.

Well! Since there seemed nothing I could do immediately I returned cautiously to the pallet and sat on it, hoping the burly man was a confirmed drunkard who wouldn't stop drinking until the bottle was empty. After what seemed a good wait I tiptoed back for another peek, but was disappointed to find him still upright and drinking. I caught sight of the bottle before he set it down, however, and was heartened to note only an ounce or so remained. Why didn't he finish it, and get drunk!

This time I waited longer, until my limbs began to cramp, before edging to the hole. And lo! John Barley-

corn had accomplished his celebrated work, for the man was stretched out on the table, the empty bottle alongside his head!

I ran outside into a crooked little cobbled street bordered by uneven brick sidewalks. A cold, biting wind blew off the Charles River, and my! that wind felt good! I was free at last, but in what part of the city? Around me sullen buildings of faded red brick were crowded, as if seeking warmth; rickety, wooden, two-story houses huddled naked, unpainted for years, with loosened ship-lap sides and oiled-paper windows; on the ground stood puddles of ill-smelling liquid, piles of refuse. A thin, rack-ribbed dog skulked past me.

Then I had it. The North End! The Irish! Out of the frying pan! Not a hundred yards away my kidnapper rocked along in a seaman's gait! We saw each other in the same instant.

"Wait—Routledge coming!" he shouted.

"So's Christmas!" I shouted back. I caught up my skirts and ran. The uneven bricks of the sidewalk cut through the thin soles of my shoes. I rushed headlong, afraid to look behind, afraid not to, and when I threw a backward glance I saw my kidnapper was gaining! On I dashed, breathing hard. "Selena Catherine," I told myself, "if ever you ran before, run now!"



had. And now, I must ask you to trust me—for a little while. And thank you for all you've done—including saving my life for the second time!"

He covered my hand with kisses, held it against his cheek for a moment, and said, "I will trust you, Lisa. I must, because I love you. Rest, now."

He left the room quickly, and I felt a little piqued when I learned that he'd stormed out of the hospital, though I couldn't say I blamed him.

In a few days I was well enough to leave for Zurich, where I was to meet John Allenby—but not before going through an exhausting, and at times harrowing, investigation of my parents' death by the Swiss police. I told them about the missing brooch and earrings, and how the brooch

here. I doubt if it will make you feel any better," he added wryly, "but they've had your friends, the Thornydykes, under surveillance for some time. They were about to close in, but then, you flew the coop, and there went their best witness!"

I groaned. "Oh, what a fool I've been!" Then I felt my heart beating fast as I asked, "But Nicholas Nikonos—how did he get the brooch?"

He shrugged. "He is innocent. He bought it from the Thornydykes for a stiff price, sure that they were reputable dealers. And they were. The people you knew were not the real Lord Cecil and Lady Ellen, but imposters. I have a hunch that the real Thornydykes were buried many years ago."

I shuddered, overcome with

How could I accuse him now? Yet I was certain that Nicholas was involved in the plot to destroy me!

had reappeared as a gift of Nicholas Nihonos. I told them about my father's mysterious last words, "Stop them . . . get the letter." They were baffled. Their thorough search of the wreckage had revealed no jewels or letter. One thing would substantiate my story—finding the brooch in the gorge. They would ask the French police to cooperate by making a search. In the meantime, nothing could be done.

I was relieved to meet John Allenby in Zurich—crisp, dapper and efficient as always. To my surprise, he ushered me to a quiet corner of the hotel dining room, ordered coffee, and asked abruptly, "Miss Lowell, did you know that your father was a secret agent?"

The idea of Daddy, wealthy art dealer and one of the distinguished Lowells of Massachusetts, being a secret agent made me burst out laughing. "Whoever gave you that idea?" I asked.

"Scotland Yard," he replied, and instantly I became as sober as he was. After your call, I thought it wise to seek their advice because of the suspicious nature of his death. To my amazement, they told me that he had volunteered to work with the international police to work with the international police in an effort to break a ring of jewel thieves who have been operating very successfully

remorse because I'd treated Nicholas so badly. Dear Nicholas! I must find him at once!

I rushed upstairs to my suite, determined to call all Europe, if need be. Not far behind me rushed John Allenby, waving papers and gasping, "But you haven't read the will!"

Outside the door, we both stopped cold, at the sound of loud voices inside my suite. Voices I knew well!

There were some words we couldn't understand, then Nicholas' voice, shouting, "You can kill me if you must, but let Lisa go free!"

"Wait. I'll get the police," John whispered, but before he could stop me, I was halfway through the door, shouting, "No! No!"

There was Lady Ellen, disheveled and half-crazed, brandishing a sharp axe! I froze as she turned on me, shrieking, "You couldn't keep out of this! Now you'll die!"

Swiftly, Nicholas moved behind her, pinning her arms and forcing her to drop the axe. Just then, John Allenby arrived with the police, who moved in fast and hustled her away. They'd already caught Lord Cecil, heading for the apartment with a gun!

A search at the villa later turned up the missing earrings, as well as the brooch. Daddy had intended to use them as a lure to trap the Thornydykes, but being rather an amateur

To the Woman Who Would Like to Work...but Can't Leave Home!

Neither Age nor Children
Nor Lack of Higher
Education Need Bar
You from a High-Pay
Career as Bookkeeper
Working in Your Own
Home—Serving
Local Businesses,
Doctors, etc.

**Train AT HOME
IN SPARE TIME!**



If the cost of living is climbing faster than your family paycheck... now is the time to do something about it!

Up to this moment, you probably only wished you could—but knew you couldn't. You've been tied to the house by your own apron strings.

We can set you FREE!

Bookkeeping is one field where women outdo the men. Perhaps it's the "expertise" you gain from handling household expenses—trying to make ends meet. After all, bookkeeping is simply a household budget applied to a business! Vital as it is to business, bookkeeping requires extra time and knowledge most businessmen can't spare. They turn it over to others who are trained to do it better and faster. And, just as the family budget usually ends up with the woman of the house, the company's bookkeeper is most frequently a woman.

With big business you may hire whole staffs of full-time bookkeepers—small businessmen, like the owner of the corner grocery, the gas station, beauty parlor, real estate office, lawyers and doctors often can't afford a full-time bookkeeper. In fact, they don't need one. But, they do have to keep records.

That's where you come in!

Once you get your training, we'll show you how to explain to these business prospects that for a small fee each month, you will devote several hours a week to keeping their records straight.

Look Forward to Income Tax Time!

You can reap a veritable bonanza! Not just from our regular clients, but from every friend and acquaintance who works for a living. We train you to make out Income Tax Returns, as well as to do bookkeeping. What better way can there be to help out the family budget and build an independent income for yourself... without leaving home!

Write... let us show you how easy it is!

Please don't hesitate because you think you haven't studied enough arithmetic, or weren't too good at it. We teach you new ways to develop bookkeeping skills that are easier and more interesting than anything you ever took in school.

What's more, we teach you how to use an automatic electric adding machine as part of your course. It takes all the drudgery, hard work and mistakes out of arithmetic.

You'll use this helpful machine to speed up the thought of your lessons—then, depend on it for many years afterward, when you have a business of your own.

By now, you must admit... there's no harm in tearing out the coupon and sending it in. If you don't you'll never know what you missed, or what it might have meant to you, your family and your future. So, go ahead: **tear it out!**

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by Uncle Isaiah when I was little sprang to mind, of fabled, gold encrusted palaces and far-flung, lazy islands washed by sapphire seas.

I hugged and kissed Miss Carstairs. She smiled, resigned to my going, and pressed a package into my hands. "Lemons," she said. "To prevent scurvy!" I hugged her again. She moved to the gangway.

John Routledge took my hand and held it longer than he might have, looked into my eyes with an expression I couldn't fathom. "God go with you, Miss Danley."

On the evening of the fifth day out of Boston, I lay attempting to sleep, not yet accustomed to my hot, muggy quarters reeking of fish oil, mildew, and stagnant water gurgling through scuppers, nor to all the creaks, groans, scrapes, and knocks as the schooner *La Liberté* strained, thumping and rolling, over the sea.

Suddenly I was wide awake, thinking I heard someone in the passageway outside my cabin.

In the morning I found that my imagination had not played tricks on me. When I pulled the door inward a small object tumbled into my cabin. It was a simple rag doll, intended to be masculine, for it was provided with trousers. A scrap of parchment was wrapped around its middle. This I pulled off. On it was written "Maitre Danley" in a Spencerian hand! And imbedded in the neck, or at least where the head joined the body, were two bone-like things. These, I knew with a sudden weight in my stomach, were snake fangs.

Panic began to rise within me, to which I might easily have succumbed under other circumstances, but I recognized somehow that I must not permit whoever on board wanted to frighten me to learn he had succeeded. To whom could I turn, alone amidst strangers on an unfriendly sea, and to whom appeal? Only to that source I had so frequently called upon in past periods of distress—to myself, and to what I'd been taught.

"O friend," says our worthy Mr. Emerson, "never strike sail to a fear! Come into port greatly, or sail with God the seas."

Which was of some comfort, but took nothing from my fright. Who wished me harm, and why? Gingerly, I removed the fangs from the doll's neck and dropped them into my portmanteau to be investigated later. The doll I brought on deck to Captain Grigeaux.

Suddenly, I thought I heard someone outside my cabin. I found a strange doll, with my name on it, outside the door. In its neck were two snake fangs!

I was unprepared for his reaction. He snatched it from my hands and heaved it over the side!

"Nasty!" he said. "*L'ju-ju, Peaudum!* So! We cast the evil in the sea! Let it frighten the fish!"

He did not see fit to amplify his words or his action, nor did I press him. He did, however, offer to place a night watch at my door. I found this most agreeable, and thanked him profusely. The rest of the voyage I spent in mild apprehension but no manifest danger.

One bright morning, seventeen days out of Boston, I was summoned to the quarterdeck.

"There, young miss!" said Captain Grigeaux. "Land-fall! Santa Teresa, your *île d'estimee!*" He pointed to the horizon. I beheld what seemed a flat, gray rock set in a sparkling, azure sea. Above our ship, gulls wheeled and

shrilled against a cloudless sky, further proof of landfall. Santa Teresa, my island of destiny, indeed! But what kind of destiny?

□ My imagination had pictured to me an island sprouting with palm trees and little else. I think I expected to see outrigger canoes drawn up on sandy beaches, and somewhere deep in the island a volcano ought to have trailed smoke against the sky. I was most pleasantly surprised, therefore, to find Cap Therese—Santa Teresa's capital and major port—quite a lovely little town, vivid with color under the hot noon-day sun.

I crunched along a street paved with crushed shells, searching for a sign somewhere in English, for I placed not too much trust in my school book French. I think in a way I hoped to find posted directions to Plantation Danley!

At this point a black, well-polished surrey drawn by a dun mare drew to a stop nearby. From it stepped a tall, gray-haired, old, white gentleman with a flowing moustache, wearing a heavy, blue, military swallowtail coat, and blue trousers.

With a vigorous voice the old gentleman said, "The mademoiselle is in difficulties?"

Under his stern gaze I felt my French would prove inadequate. "I seem to be lost," I said in English.

"Ah, Anglais!" he shouted, and he smiled for the first time, which made the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes more pronounced.

"But how can this be?" he said in excellent but accented English. "It is only the old who are lost, not so? And who might you be, young lady?"

"I am Selena Catherine Danley, from Boston, sir."

At the mention of my name the old man's smile disappeared, and I had an impression of stiffness, of distance, and of distaste. Coldly, he said, "You are Isaiah Danley's daughter, then?"

"His niece. I scarcely knew him."

Now I was puzzled because all his former friendliness returned, and he seized my hand.

"I am Dr. Paul Gaspard-Desor," he said, pumping my hand energetically. "The citizens of this republic have seen fit to honor me with the position of Minister of

Health, very probably because no younger man was qualified, not so? You will give my wife, Agnes, and me the pleasure of a visit, Miss Danley?

Agnes Gaspard-Desor tapped lightly at the open door.

"We've had a good sleep, haven't we?" she said. "Paul is long gone to his office, but we agree that you must stay with us. We'd like to introduce you to some of our people here—I know of at least three handsome young lads who would turn handsprings to meet you!"

Somehow the idea of three French gentlemen turning handsprings struck my funny bone, but I had the presence to stifle my giggle.

"You're very kind," I said. "I've enjoyed my stay, I truly have, but I really must get along to the plantation. Is there some way?"

Agnes sighed, lifted her shoulders in a gentle shrug. "We plan for all contingencies," she said sadly. "Our carriage is downstairs. You'll go to Deschane Freres, the sugar brokers. I'm sure they will make arrangements."

At the door of their house Agnes took my hand. "You're going to such a lonely, isolated life for one so young," she said. "Isn't there any way I can convince you to stay with us a little longer?"

The woman's kindness and sincerity momentarily saddened me.

"If you wish, I'll come and visit you later," I said.

"I'll pray for you, dear. Write us when you're safely there," she said.

Just then a dusty, four-wheeled, open road wagon swerved to a stop in front of us, throwing a shower of seashell they use here for paving.

From the wagon jumped a tall, slender Negro. He wore a blue swallowtail military coat like Dr. Gaspard-Desor's, but ever so much grander, with festoons of gold braid and huge epaulets. He swept off a three-cornered hat, exposing a head completely bald, and made us a most courtly bow.

"Madame Gaspard-Desor," he said breathlessly, "is your estimable husband, by any chance, at home?"

"Paul's already left for the ministry," Agnes said. "Ah, Lieutenant Carre, let me present a visitor, Mademoiselle Selena Danley, from America."

"Another killing—I need your husband's medical

my hand. "Well, Monsieur Plesy, I am Selena Catherine Danley, and I think I might be your employer!"

Jean-Baptiste dropped my hand and stepped back, his mouth open.

"I'm not going to discharge you," I said hurriedly. "At least not if you can take me to the plantation!"

"But I have no coach nor carriage suitable for the Maitresse," he said. "I have only a simple wagon!"

"Even a donkey cart will do," I said. "When may we leave?"

"We must ride today and all night, Maitresse."

"In which direction?" I said.

"We go north."

He glanced nervously behind him, under the seat. My eyes followed his. On the floor lay a rusty flintlock musket.

We had for some time been passing through country abounding in great, shadowy trees. Jean-Baptiste searched on our right, and our pace slowed as he leaned forward, peering into the pale radiance from our lantern. Now he reined up, pointing to another path that turned off from ours, barely visible.

"Only about a mile to Plantation Labrousier, Maitresse. Good place to spend the night—I have my stepfather there, and M'sieu Hippolyte Labrousier knew my mother."

I balanced police lieutenant Carre's caution to travel only by day against my own need to get to my late

Cap Therese was a lovely town, but in spite of ominous warnings of trouble in the north, I was eager to reach the plantation and claim my inheritance . . .

opinion."

Worry showed on Agnes's face.

"Mademoiselle Danley will be traveling toward the north," she said. "Is there likely to be danger?"

My ears perked up. Both Doctor Gaspard-Desor and that old sea dog, Captain Grigeaux, had mentioned trouble in the north.

Lieutenant Carre gave me a quick, social smile.

"Travel only by day, mad'moiselle." With a precise salute he leaped into his road wagon and galloped off.

I climbed into the black surrey I'd ridden in yesterday,

At length, we reached a series of long, low stucco buildings around which clustered wide pyramids of huge brown hogheads and neat little rows of small casks.

"M'sieu Deschane too busy," the coachman said. "He send this boy, Jean-Baptiste."

I climbed from the surrey, the coachman dropped my baggage from the back, leaped in, slapped the reins, and dashed off without so much as a nod!

Jean-Baptiste, I perceived, was a lad of about my own age, not broad but sinewy, very dark, with a face so handsome I immediately pictured him among the palace guard in the court of Cleopatra!

"I am Jean-Baptiste Plesy of Plantation Danley," he said in French.

While I thought this quite correct but somewhat stiff, I was happy beyond belief to hear the plantation named. Almost I'd begun to doubt its existence! I reached out

uncle's property as soon as possible.

"No, let's go on," I said.

He sighed, flicked the reins, and we resumed our original course. The night was cool, the air filled with a thousand perfumed scents, yet I had some misgivings and an uneasiness beset me as we journeyed—no kindly farmhouse lights twinkled warmly along our way, and all I had for company was Jean-Baptiste, silent again, and the cold, far stars in a dark sky. We traveled about an hour when I heard the drums! I seized Jean-Baptiste's arm.

A few hundred feet ahead of us the path flickered orange from a huge bonfire, the tips of its flames forking and leaping above the brush. I strained my eyes to no avail; whatever action was taking place was concealed by heavy foliage. With Jean-Baptiste's attention not on his driving, the horse's pace had slowed. Now he stopped. A crude cordwood barricade blocked the path. We couldn't go forward, nor was there any way to turn around; my apprehension mounted; and the drums changed beat loudly to *doom, diti-diti doom, diti-diti doom*.

Jean-Baptiste reached behind the seat, hefted the flintlock musket.

"Wait, Maitresse," he whispered. "I clear the road."

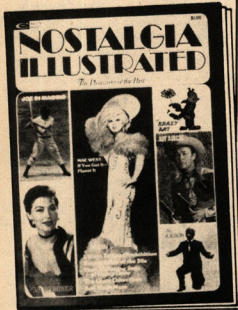
But he made no move to do so.

"And I'm to stay here?" I said. "Alone? Not at all, Monsieur Plesy!"

I started to dismount but Jean-Baptiste's arm restrained me.

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there, holding me tenderly. Once more, he had saved me!

When I regained consciousness, I was in a hospital room, a nurse in starched white hovering over me. A strange reaction penetrated my foggy brain: Why did she look so familiar?

My body ached all over. My arm was bandaged. "W-what happened?" I whispered.

"You're going to be all right," the nurse said, smiling. "A slight concussion, a lot of bruises, and a broken arm we'll have to set when you feel up to it. You were very lucky—you were thrown clear of the truck."

A wave of fear chilled me. "And ... Salvatore?" I managed to gasp.

The nurse smiled broadly now. "Not a scratch! He must lead a charmed life. And the man who ran into you paid for all his vegetables, with enough left over to buy a new truck!"

I sank back on the pillow. Nicholas, again! So—it was he who had rammed us. Accidentally, or ... on purpose?

"He wanted to see you, but the doctor told him to go home and get a good rest. He sends you his best regards."

"Thank you," I said. Dear Salvatore! How glad I was that he wasn't hurt!

"The other gentleman wants to see you, too," the nurse continued, "but first, you'd better see the doctor."

I tried to gather my strength and get my wits about me. I had to tell the doctor my side of the story, before Nicholas and the Thorndykes talked him into making me go back with them!

To my amazement, I walked Dr. Gaspard! Now I knew why the nurse had looked familiar. This was the same clinic where my father had died—and Dr. Gaspard had attended him!

I managed a weak smile. "You must think accidents run in our family," I said.

"Thank heaven this one is not so serious," he said, with a smile. "Now tell me—how do you feel?"

"I feel desperate," I blurted. "Doctor, please help me."

"But my dear young lady, what is the trouble?"

As fast as I could say them, the words came tumbling out—all my fears and suspicions from the time my parents died.

The doctor looked thoughtful, and said nothing. Probably he thought these were merely the demented ravings of a person near hysteria.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I

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"Please, Maitresse, I cannot permit . . ." And he slipped quietly from the seat. I watched anxiously as he passed beyond the dim light of our lantern. The drums had ceased; I could feel the silence pressing in around me, and my heart throbbing in my head. The night, the place, my presence, all seemed to freeze into silent immobility. My fears grew as the silence deepened. Then I heard Jean-Baptiste shout in the distance.

"Maitresse, run, run!"

I shouted back, "What is it? Where are you?"

There followed a noise near me in the brush, scuffling and outcries. Half-naked Negroes brandishing machetes burst from the undergrowth around me. Before I could do anything, strong arms pulled me from the seat! I screamed, kicked, elbowed; I pounded with my fists, I bit, I scratched—then I was seized too tightly to move, and half-dragged, half-pushed toward the bonfire.

My captors now released my arms. I could see neither women nor children around the fire, only men, bare to the waist. We were in the center of what must have been a hastily made clearing. At one edge a thatched hut had been thrown up. I saw Jean-Baptiste gesticulating, arguing with a huge half-naked man in a language strange to my ears, although it hinted of French. From the way in which the huge man kept looking toward me I knew I was the subject of the argument. Seemingly dissatisfied with the answers he got from Jean-Baptiste, the man shuffled toward me, dragging Jean-Baptiste by his arm. This man stood well over six feet tall, extraordinarily muscled, with gigantic shoulders and narrow waist. A frightful scar slanted from just above his left eye across his nose to his right cheek, giving his face a lopsided, evil expression. He stared at me menacingly, and I stared right back, my fear becoming displaced by indignation.

Scarface said something in his unfamiliar tongue to Jean-Baptiste, who translated, his eyes wide with terror.

"The Liberator Julien Daraq wants to know why you spy upon simple country people while they are at worship. Answer in French, Maitresse. He speaks Creole and will understand."

The scarfaced Julien Daraq nodded.

I shouted, "How dare this, this canaille frighten a young girl half to death? I'll tell him nothing!"

As my baggage was loaded in the simple cart, I noticed a musket under the seat. My driver was a Negro boy, no older than I. We didn't dream that we would ride into a voodoo camp filled with terror!

Without warning, Jean-Baptiste whipped out his small knife and lunged at Daraq! Animal-swift, Daraq leaped aside, and Jean-Baptiste's blade ripped across his arm, drawing blood. Someone threw a machete, which Daraq snatched from the air. The two men circled warily. Daraq flicked his machete as if shaking off water; Jean-Baptiste stepped cautiously sideways, his arm out full length, his wrist making small circles with his tiny knife.

I watched, heart in mouth, frightfully aware of the odds against us. Still circling, Jean-Baptiste suddenly bumped an onlooker as if by accident, and as the man went down he leaped over him and pulled the man's machete from its scabbard! Jean-Baptiste managed to switch knife and machete too quickly for me to follow. I knew only that the machete was in his right hand, the little knife in his left, and that a sudden surge of hope rose within me!

Daraq must have enjoyed putting on a show for his followers when Jean-Baptiste had been armed only with his toy; now that the odds were more nearly even his eyes never strayed from Jean-Baptiste, and perspiration broke out on his forehead. Jean-Baptiste's attention was



completely on Daraq, so that when the "Liberator" picked an opportune moment to jerk his head at his followers, six, seven, eight of them jumped poor Jean-Baptiste from behind, and he went down without a chance.

They dragged him up, pulled him over next to me. I smiled my thanks at him, but he cast his gaze to the ground. Daraq jerked his head at a man near the fire, who pulled out a flaming branch and moved toward me with exaggerated slowness, making quick, jabbing feints with his torch. I understood the meaning all too well. But just as the man got near, and I felt pulses of heat on my face, a hunchback limped up to Daraq. The "Liberator" leaned down, the hunchback whispered in his ear, and a malicious grin twisted Daraq's face. With a short, evil laugh, he directed that our hands be bound behind us. Then we were dragged to the edge of the clearing and roughly thrust inside a hut, a mere cone of palm fronds.

Jean-Baptiste shouted, "They blow conch! They see us! Run!"

He leaped to his feet, grasped my hand, jerked me after him.

We had got across the clearing when my foot caught in the brush, and down I went! "Jean-Baptiste!" I shouted.

He whirled, swung back, reached for me, but too late! They were upon us, and three of them to each one of our arms, taking no chances, they dragged us back to the fire, to Daraq, to the waiting cross.

Daraq jerked his head; two men readied the ropes on the arms of the cross. Glaring at me, Daraq came close. He reached one of his enormous hands to my throat. I shrank back, but he grasped me roughly. His fingers touched the chain at my neck. He wrenched out the medallion.

He screamed, "Ayeda! Ayeda-Wedo!" His face con-

The big man reached for my throat, saw my amulet, and screamed, "Ayeda-Wedo!" They ran in terror. "They think you bride of big snake god," Jean-Baptiste said.

The hunchback sidled through the opening. He had us dumped to the ground, where our limbs were bent back and tied to our wrists.

Just before they all left, the hunchback fixed on me a look of pure hatred. "Soon, good lesson for you, white!" he croaked in French. "And black lover can watch!"

After a while the drums stopped, the noise of drunken carousing lessened, and gesticulating shadows ceased to flit across the hut's entrance. When all had been still for a few minutes, and the only sound was that of my beating heart, I planned to get us untied. Then, if our captors were asleep and we were quiet enough . . .

While Daraq and his cohorts excelled at frightening and bullying, when it came to knots they didn't know a bight from a bowline. But Uncle Isaiah did, and I gave thanks for the dozens of hours spent in childhood, while he drilled me in the intricate mysteries of Carrick bend, Turk's Head, cat's-paw, reef knot, his fingers over mine. And in between his visits, I'd had plenty of time to practice. There were obviously no sailors among Daraq's men, for they thought lots of wrapping meant security, and in moments I had freed Jean-Baptiste's hands. It took him longer to free mine, then we released the bonds at our ankles.

I poked my head through the entrance, which faced the clearing. In the flickering orange glow of the bonfire, dozens of sleeping figures lay. Outlined against that fire was a kind of cross, perhaps seven feet tall. Loops of rope hung from its arms. I could guess for whom it was intended, and my heart sank.

To make good our escape we would have to traverse some fifteen yards of ground, exposed to the view of anyone awake, before reaching the sprawl of jungle beyond. I crept from the hut on hands and knees, motioned Jean-Baptiste to follow. The ground was rough with stones and chopped brush, and the going painfully slow, but we had crawled about three yards so far without awakening our captors. We inched forward. The firelight faded, and with quickening hope I beheld the jungle looming up ahead, dark, silent, protective. Another foot. And another . . . Suddenly a blast like a foghorn split the night.

torted in fear. He let go of me, shouted at the rest of the men, and ran!

The conch shell blew two blasts. The men at the cross dropped the ropes; the others dashed, leaped, staggered into the brush, and shortly the only sound remaining was the crackling of the dying fire.

During the whole of my captivity I had retained some semblance of reason, of control. But now that my ordeal seemed ended, I began to shake and tremble with the import of what might have happened! Jean-Baptiste brushed dirt from his musket, examined the flash-pan for powder, then inspected my throat, which ached when I gulped air to calm myself.

"These are brigands, Maitresse—thieves, robbers, outcasts. My people not like this!"

"What does 'Ayeda' mean?" I said, as we made our way to our conveyance.

"I am good Christian, I attend Sunday mass, I know my catechism, I don't believe in that," he said.

"Yes, fine, but what did Daraq mean?"

"Ayeda is powerful *loa*, goddess from Guinea, Maitresse. She is married to Damballa, big snake god. Daraq thinks you will be bride of Damballa-Wedo."

The rutted dirt path we followed for some time had been rising, Jean-Baptiste flicking the reins to encourage our poor, sway-backed horse toward continued effort. Now our pace quickened—we were going downhill. Dawn spilled over the hills around us, touching pinkly the expanse of the valley below, and driving away my forebodings.

Jean-Baptiste turned, smiling at me.

"Welcome, Maitresse," he said. "Welcome to Plantation Danley! Last night you thought 'maybe I never arrive!'"

Over the valley the plantation stretched as far as the eye could see. I observed that much of the land was cleared and cultivated, that other sections still abounded in palms and trees I couldn't identify. As we continued downward, fragments of shouts and singing drifted up to us. The plantation's extent staggered my imagination. It seemed endless, a vast sea of fields, trees, crops. Here and there nestled tiny clusters of huts on brown rectangles of

land, and more huts at the edges of dark green squares.

When Jean-Baptiste finally stopped our trap I was quite unprepared for the edifice which met my view. There loomed a large, rectangular two-storied Georgian manor house, a type sometimes called colonial, back home.

"What can the inside be like?" I thought aloud.

"I have never entered the greathouse, Maitresse," said Jean-Baptiste without the least resentment.

Puzzled, I looked at him.

"The field workers do not do this," he said, "only the servants are permitted." And he shrugged to show his acceptance of custom.

"Well then, am I to announce myself?" I said, a bit put out.

"But no, Maitresse!" Jean-Baptiste flashed his fine, infectious smile. "All night the drums have announced you!"

As if to substantiate his words, a retinue of servants dressed in cotton and muslin finery—yellow, white, red, and pink, with matching and contrasting kerchiefs on their heads—marched upon us, captained by a white man of medium height wearing riding breeches, brilliantly polished brown boots, and a shirt with ruffled cuffs, open at his throat.

"Madamoiselle Selena," this man said in perfect English, flawlessly pronounced, "how good it is to see you! I wrote to you in Boston—I am Etienne Sangloire." And he bowed.

For a reason I couldn't fathom, I had expected Mr. Sangloire to be fat, bald, and paunchy. He was none of these. He had, in fact, a face from a Grecian frieze—a fine, narrow nose with flaring nostrils, large dark eyes, ringlets of glossy black hair tumbling over his forehead, eyebrows almost feminine in delicacy. His age I judged to be under thirty-five. His large eyes lingered upon me, the merest suggestion of a smile on his full, sensual lips.

"I am devastated!" he said. "I had no idea! I imagined you a bony schoolgirl, with your uncle's face—bearded! Who could have thought Isaiah Danley's niece so beautiful a girl!"

I colored, felt my heart beating.

"But you must be famished," he said quickly. "If you will find it agreeable to have the company of so talkative

"Incredible!" he said. "This Daraq once worked on the plantation! He was more interested in stirring up grievances than cutting cane—he even attacked your uncle, but M'sieu Danley grabbed a machete and made his ugly face worse! I fired the man myself. I have heard he has associated himself with other malcontents—and now Jean-Baptiste tells me there was a funeral for a policeman he killed—Madamoiselle Selena, you are very lucky! May I see this talisman you speak of?"

I withdrew my amulet. Sangloire briefly studied the open-mouthed serpent, turned the medallion delicately in his fingers.

"Good," he said lightly, "you are under Damballa's protection—the very chief of the thousand gods of Africa. Be careful what you do, Madamoiselle Selena, I hear Damballa is a most jealous god!" And he wagged a schoolmaster's finger.

I was uncertain how to take this Mr. Sangloire, but I did react to what I considered a mocking, patronizing attitude.

"Blast your dratted *bauteur*!" I said hotly. "And blast your French rationalism! What has it got you but a Reign of Terror, the guillotine, and Waterloo!"

Sangloire sat back in his chair, convulsively laughing until he coughed, while I burned with indignation. Finally, he gained control of himself.

"But you are marvelous, madamoiselle! A spitfire from Boston! Incredible! Now was there not a flag of your colonies, a snake, as I remember, in thirteen segments, with the legend 'Don't tread on me'? Ah, Etienne, you trod, and were bitten!" And again he rocked with laughter.

My cheeks were aflame as I stood up from the breakfast table, and with as much dignity as I could muster, swept out of the room, leaving Sangloire—I hoped in that moment—to choke on his infernal laughter.

So noiseless had been her approach, it was several moments before I became aware of the short, heavy Negress standing behind me, her head wrapped in a yellow kerchief. Her face bore the ravages of an old pox, yet was not without quiet dignity and composure, a face which said to all but the least sensitive who observed it, "I belong to me, to no one else."

"Who could have thought Isaiah's niece so beautiful!" Etienne Sangloire exclaimed. I blushed at the handsome overseer's words, felt my heart pound . . .

a Frenchman at breakfast, I will delight in listening to your adventures."

We breakfasted royally in the kitchen at the rear of the house on eggs, bacon, strong, bitter coffee produced locally, and a cinnamon-sprinkled pudding they call *manioc*, which I recognized happily as tapioca.

I narrated to Sangloire all that had befallen me since the arrival of his letter in Boston. I took particular pains in describing the earringed Negro who'd warned me not to leave.

Sangloire followed my account most attentively, nodded at appropriate intervals, flattered me by saying he'd certainly recognize the man by my description should he ever chance to see him. At my recounting my capture by Julien Daraq, his lively face became even more animated.

"Your chamber is ready, Mistress," she said, in accented English.

She led me up a broad staircase in midhall, each step fitted with two spiral balusters. At the head of the stairs ran another long, dim hallway parallel to the one below, along which we proceeded to the last chamber. We were, I was sure, directly above the kitchen. My heavyset guide paused before opening the door.

"This was Master Danley's room," she said. "Some of his furnishings have been moved to the drawing room. Some of hers remain."

"Master Danley's room?" I said. "I was told your revolution did away with slavery."

"Not everything changes with new laws, Mistress. Not in this place." And her lips tightened resentfully. She opened the door. "If you need something, call me. I am

Clotilde-Marie." She padded off in her silent way.

I scared myself on the edge of the bed, finding that whatever they'd used for bedding was most agreeably soft and yielding. Only then did the implications of Clotilde-Marie's remark strike me. I'd never known my uncle was married. What had become of his wife?

□ Like a princess—alas, no longer little—visiting her realm, I was treated for the next three days to a tour of my uncle's vast holdings by Etienne Sangloire, whose Gallic charm went a great way toward making up for my first impression of the man. His attentiveness and consideration seemed an apology for his earlier behavior, without actually being one, and I will confess that my heart beat faster whenever he casually took my hand while leading me around the plantation, or fixed his large, dark eyes on me, watching my reactions.

Through heavy brush we passed into a small clearing, upon a scene which burned into my consciousness. With arms outstretched and tied to a wooden frame, his back to us, a man was being flogged with a leather flail. Two red stripes already showed on his back. As I watched horror-stricken, a big man doing the beating raised his arm.

"Stop!" I screamed.

Everyone but the victim turned to stare. Then, from the brush at the far rim of the clearing, stepped a wizened little spider of a black man with white, frizzled hair, wearing only cotton pantaloons too small even for him, and someone's discarded frock coat without sleeves,

more beatings on this plantation!"

Filled with cold fury, I pointed my finger at the unfortunate who remained tied to the frame. Two of the bystanders understood, cut his wrists loose, and he instantly fled.

"Mademoiselle, when they do not perform their work . . ." Sangloire began.

"No living creature will be beaten on this property, ever!" I said. "Is that clear, Mr. Sangloire?" He said nothing, but his eyes flashed as he tossed the flail to the ground.

Ton-ton Baze cocked his shriveled little head at me.

"You are the new Danley," he said. "Selena. Of the moon. Do you miss your girls' school in 'Merica, Selena?" He spat in the ground, disappeared into the brush, laughing.

From that day forward I began to notice a subtle change in attitude toward me among the house servants.

Even the mysterious, distant Clotilde-Marie appeared to unbend a bit. Unexpectedly, one night shortly following the incident of the flogging, the heavy woman brought a glass of milk to my chamber just before I retired.

"You did well the other day, Mistress," she said, placing the milk on the candlestand.

"I'd have done as much for anyone," I said. "I can't stand seeing even an animal mistreated." I patted a place beside me on the bed, but Clotilde-Marie wasn't prepared to unbend that much.

"Oh, I don't care what happens to those field niggers,"

"Stop!" I screamed. "No living creature will be beaten on this property. Is that clear, Mr. Sangloire?" His eyes flashed as he tossed the flail away.

much too large, from which his thin arms and frail body showed.

"Ton-ton Baze!" cried the big fellow, plainly frightened. He let drop the flail.

The strange little man spat into the ground.

"You were warned, Antoine," he said in French to the flogger. His voice was surprisingly resonant for a man so small. "The *loa* Ti-Jean-petro of the one leg told you 'do no more beatings for Danley, you like it too much.' I, Ton-ton Baze, myself saw him do this. These others, they saw, too."

The rest of the men nodded, grunted, looked uncomfortable. The big fellow called Antoine actually began to shiver.

"Ton-ton Baze, I don't want to die," he whimpered. "Tell the *loa* I am a good man, please—I will bring to your *caille* a fat suckling pig."

Ton-ton Baze appeared to consider this gravely for a time. "I will ask," he said. He turned contemptuously to Sangloire. "You, Frenchman, aristocrat, Sangloire—you have outlived your master Isaiah! But great Damballa is patient—he waits, he watches!"

"Now you get out!" Sangloire shouted. "I do not want you and your damned *ju-ju* and your *gris-gris* and your chicken blood on this property!"

Sangloire stooped, picked up the flail, made as if to strike him.

"No!" I shouted, suddenly finding my voice. "He's an old man!" I grasped Sangloire's arm. "There will be no

she said, waving her hand violently. "But you stood up to Sangloire!" A new esteem shone in her eyes.

"And that little spider of a man," I said, "that Ton-ton Baze, who is he?"

Fear came upon Clotilde-Marie's pock-marked face; her lips formed an *o*, and she crossed herself. When she spoke again her voice was hushed, and her eyes darted from one side of the room to the other.

"Oh, Mistress, speak respectfully of that man, please! He is *bungan*—how would you say?—priest of the *voodoo*, voodoo—he talks to the *Guinee loa*, and they talk to him. I have seen his power! Do not call that man a spider!"

Clotilde-Marie's sincerity was so obvious, and her fear so genuine, that I pursued the topic no further. But since she seemed more open, more inclined toward friendship than previously, I felt it would do no harm to find out about some of the goings-on in this house before my coming.

"What happened to my uncle's wife?" I said.

Clotilde-Marie had moved to the door. "His wife?" she said.

"Oh, come now. You told me just the other day some of this furniture was *bers*."

For the first time since I'd known her Clotilde-Marie allowed herself to smile, disclosing a gap in her front teeth.

"They stay together in this room," she said with raised eyebrows. "Why should he marry her?"

Well!

I had asked, and now I had been told. I blushed.

"That was many year ago, Mistress," said Clotilde-Marie. "Her name was Odile. She was beautiful—her skin was as light-color as yours—*sang-meele* we say. It is said by some, Odile was the daughter of a mulatto woman from Cap Therese."

"And who was her father, then?"

"They say Ton-ton Baze." She slipped out the door.

□ I woke next morning more rested and refreshed than at any time since I'd left Boston,

Nearing the kitchen door, I heard Sangloire speaking inside, and another voice—familiar, deeper—which caught my breath and made my heart race. Sangloire merely nodded when I opened the door, but John Routledge jumped to his feet, the shy smile I remembered so well on his lips.

"Miss Danley, how good to see you! And more beautiful, if possible, than in Boston!"

Sangloire smiled icily, got to his feet. "With your permission," he said, "I have a plantation to run—sharp eyes are needed more than ever. Mademoiselle, m'sieu?"

He bowed slightly and left us. John's eyes followed him to the door, turned back to me.

"May we speak in private?" he said. I motioned the girl out of the kitchen. "I got a letter from the authorities in Cap Therese right after you'd left," John said. "Some meddling woman put a bug in their ear that your uncle's death wasn't an accident, but deliberate and calculated murder!"

"I'll do what you ask, just you keep Sangloire away from me," she said, throwing up her heavy arms in surrender. "But Ton-ton Baze, he won't come to Plantation Danley, not for all the chickens in the country!"

□ Clotilde-Marie was right.

She had sent Jean-Baptiste and the tall, angular kitchen helper, Sor Antoinette Jarat, to Ton-ton Baze who had kept the chickens, but chased both of them away, refusing to come anywhere near the plantation.

"He says if you want to see him you go to his *caille*," said Jean-Baptiste. "He says you bring bacon. He says you go tonight."

So, early that evening, Jean-Baptiste dropped a slab of bacon in the back of an open-bed spring wagon, I climbed onto the seat alongside him, and we rattled off towards the hills.

I ducked under the small opening, entered the round, palm frond wall of the *caille*.

Ton-ton Baze sat cross-legged on the dirt floor. A small fire in a pit cast leaping shadows over his tiny figure so that he appeared to shrink and swell, grow long then short. He still wore his ridiculously large frock coat, the sleeves missing.

"Odile is dead," he said.

My God! He knew about my school; he knew about my quest!

"How . . . how did you know that?" I said.

"Isaiah Danley"—he spat again—"took this young child Odile, and when he used her all up he sold her as

John Routledge told me, "Your title isn't clear, Selena. Some woman wrote to the authorities, saying that your Uncle Isaiah's death was murder!"

Weakly I said, "Then the plantation isn't mine, is it?"

"We both know it is, Miss Danley. *De facto* it's yours, *de jure* it isn't. You understand those terms?"

Nodding, I said, "Do you recollect the name of the woman who told the officials?"

John touched forefinger to temple, ran it down his heavy brown side-whiskers. Then he spread his hands apart and shook his head. "Something with an 'o,' I think."

"Was it Odile?" I said, recalling the girl Clotilde-Marie had told me about, Ton-ton Baze's daughter.

John shrugged. "It might be," he said. "Odile? Maybe."

After leaving John I sought out Clotilde-Marie.

"This *bungan*, Ton-ton Baze," I said, "does he stay in one place or does he travel around a lot?"

Clotilde-Marie cocked her head.

"His *caille*, where he lives, is in the hills," she said, pointing. "Maybe five, six miles away. He mostly stays there near the *humfo*, how would you say?—the sanctuary. Why you want to know that?"

"Good!" I said. "Five or six miles. Now Clotilde-Marie, this is what I want you to do: round up a half-dozen nice, fat chickens, the fattest you can find, put them in a cage, and get them to Ton-ton Baze! Tell him the chickens are a gift from me because I respect his power and I need his services. Tell him I want to meet him on the plantation—he can choose the place. And I'll pay whatever price he sets."

slave in 'Merica. Then the *loa*, the *mysteres*, they told me she was dead—the *Guede* told me, the lords of the dead: Baron Samedi, Baron Cimetiere, Ramasseur-de-Croix who collects the crosses, they told me, and Guede-loraye, she came to me in a storm and said it was so." He stared at me over the fire, his expression appearing to change with the shadows that grew and shrunk across his face.

"You killed my uncle!" I saw it with an oppressive logic that frightened me.

Ton-ton Baze stared without emotion into my eyes. "I asked great Damballa-Wedo to give me vengeance on this evil man, to give me justice. But great Damballa, he say, 'I will act, Ton-ton Baze, when the time is ready, when the stars are right, when the spirits call for his blood, then I will act.' So I did not do the sacrifice, and I did not make the *gris-gris*."

It took a while for me to absorb this information.

"Then how . . ." I began.

"*Une culev*—you call her *fer-de-lance*, snake she live in cane brake—maybe one day she see Isaiah, then great Damballa, serpent-god, he say, 'Now, my lovely, now, my daughter, strike, the time is now!' Then it is over! Too quick!" He snapped his fingers in my face.

All this talk of death and blood and snakes was most unquieting, yet I believed that the essence of what Ton-ton Baze said—stripped of its mumbo-jumbo—was the truth, unless he was a superb actor. What I found hardest to accept was that my uncle could have behaved so cruelly toward another human being, doing what he

My visit to the voodoo priest, Ton-ton Baze, taught me frightening things. My uncle had ruined his daughter—then sold her into slavery!



had done to Odile. But then, I had seen him only on rare occasions—he had all the rest of the time to live whatever dark and secret life he lived.

I held out my amulet to the *hungan*.

He nodded gravely, his face showing expression only by the flickering shadows. "A-h-h," he said. "That is *garde* I gave to Odile when she was child. It comes from the land where the great stone lions watch the tombs of kings."

"Here," I said, "it's yours!"

And for that instant I didn't want it, not after what my uncle had done to the girl who wore it first. I pictured her naked upon the auction block, rough fingers prodding, lustful eyes greedily devouring her.

Ton-ton Baze stared unblinking into my face. "Why would you do this, Selenaz?"

"Because it's yours—you gave it to her."

He looked from my face to his fire, then back again. "You keep," he said. "Strong *ju-ju*, *wanga* of great power when they wish to kill."

"They?" I said, tremors shooting through my stomach.

"I am not the only *hungan*," he said.

I entered the library through a square archway, surprised to find the windows and shutters open, and John Routledge busy with papers at a leather-covered cabriolet. John pushed his papers aside, casting a knowing glance my way.

"Would you care to hazard a guess where the money came from for Isaiah to buy this place, Miss Danley?"

"Oh I know that," I said. "He was a seaman. He worked up to a captaincy."

"True. Miss Danley. He was also a slave trader."

Then Ton-ton Baze had been right about Odile. She had been used up, as he'd told me, then sold! But what struck me as even worse was the callous way in which my uncle must have got rid of the poor girl, including her in one of his regular shipments like a butcher adding an extra pound of meat to one's order.

"How does all this bear upon his death?" I said. "Or does it?"

"I'm not exactly sure," John said with a sigh. "My training in the law makes me ask *cui bono*?—who benefits? Someone attempting blackmail then killing him when he wouldn't pay—a freed or escaped slave seeking

retribution—someone who worked on the plantation?—I just don't know. It might have been just what we thought it was, an accident."

Sangloire had saddled a chestnut mare for me, a bay for himself. We rode for a while through short, scrubby brush, the sun low in the west.

In a shady glen we stopped, dismounted, and Sangloire led me under a green archway of tall, frilly tree-ferns to a crude wooden bridge—actually just two worn planks—which forded a narrow stream of gently gurgling water. He pointed to a gray stone chimney, all that remained of a house that had burned long ago. Sangloire took me by the arm.

"I wanted to share this lovely place with you, Mademoiselle Selena. Sometimes I come here alone, when my duties permit, just to sit and think about things. They say that sixty years ago the great black liberator, Toussaint L'Ouverture, stopped right here to help recruit the army that drove out my pig-headed countrymen from Saint Domingue!"

But of course! And a few years later Santa Teresa had done the same, at a heavy cost in blood, and proclaimed itself a republic. I remembered Dr. Gaspard-Desor's lecture.

"Many times I ask myself what it is you might be thinking, mademoiselle, when you see me watching you."

"I'm probably hungry," I said, "and thinking about food!"

"No, no, no, your American humor is out of place!"

When I entered the dark hut again, I found Ton-ton Baze's body. He'd been killed by the *deadly fer-de-lance*. Beside him, a doll with snake fangs in it!

Well, I knew *that*.

"Mademoiselle, do you find thirty-three years an intolerable age?"

"It depends upon how well you bear it, M'sieu Sangloire."

"Etienné, she will not listen," he said, shaking his head sadly. "She simply will not listen!"

He stood in front of me, both hands lightly on my shoulders, his large, dark eyes intensely luminous, questioning. Then he drew me to him, and a confusion of emotions passed to course and pound through my being, such as I had never felt before. But a yearning was there, and a wanting, and a need to be held and caressed, and to hear soft, soothing words.

I lifted my face to his, waiting, holding my breath. He kissed me then on the forehead, as one would a child! We separated, lingered a few minutes in the fading light, neither of us speaking.

Somewhere crickets chirped, a frog croaked, the stream bubbled over rounded pebbles.

Then remounting, we rode back toward the manor house, the green-gold gone from the day, replaced by shadows. Sangloire, I realized, remained the embodiment of his family name, and was still running away—the fool, the fool, the lovely, frightened, beautiful, dark-haired fool!

Jean-Baptiste Plesy, his handsome features agitated, found me later in the day, told me breathlessly that

Ton-ton Baze urgently wanted to see me that night—so urgently that I wasn't even to bring gifts! Jean-Baptiste promised to meet me at the stables and drive me to the *caille*.

At the appointed hour I left the manor house. A big, high moon suffused the landscape with soft yellow light, splashing the ground with gilded puddles through the trees, painted leaves, branches, with a pale golden sheen. On my way to the stables I met Etienné Sangloire leading two horses.

"I told Jean-Baptiste I had better take you," he said. "He did not require much convincing."

By the time we arrived at the thatched *caille* I suppose I had exhausted an infinity of conjecture so that my mind, far from collected, was worn to a frazzle.

Sangloire reined his horse but made no move to dismount. "I shall be right here if you need me," he said.

I hesitated just inside the entrance to accustom my eyes to the blackness, for within the *caille* nothing could be seen. My nerves started to prickle at the eerie silence.

Then my shoe struck something softly yielding. I screamed! And screamed again!

"All right, mademoiselle!" I heard outside.

Sangloire rushed through the entrance with a lantern, and at last I saw Ton-ton Baze. He lay on his back on the dirt floor, silent, unmoving, his pitifully thin arms outspread. Sangloire bent over the *hungan's* tiny body, held the lantern close. I saw with horror that Ton-ton Baze's eyes were wide open, that two red welts, like small boils, swelled on his throat. Sangloire put his ear to the *hungan's* chest, held it there, then arose, shaking his head.

"There was no love lost between us, as you know, Mademoiselle Selena. And the world is probably better off—still, it is a bad way to go, bitten by a *fer-de-lance*!"

Against Etienné's strenuous objections, I made him tie Ton-ton Baze's childlike body across the back of my horse, while I rode on his, my arms clutched around his slender waist for all I was worth. I felt it my duty to see that the *hungan* was given a decent burial by his own followers at the plantation, of whom I suspected there were many.

Poor old man! Neither his gods nor his *ju-ju* nor the signs in the blood had saved him from the final evil that had overtaken him in darkness, an evil I alone had seen evidenced in the feeble edge of the light from Etienné's lantern in the *caille*—a small, black doll with two fangs stuck in its throat.

It might have been three o'clock in the morning when I woke up suddenly.

Cold, damp air blew through the open jalousie—I slid from the warmth of my blankets and went to shut it. Thick swirls of fog billowed in off the sea, assumed fancied shapes and forms I left off dwelling upon when their bizarre nature became evident. But I couldn't return to sleep. A thought nagged and tugged at my consciousness like a puppy worrying a bone. Might there not be concealed on Ton-ton Baze's person some clue as to why he wanted to see me?

Without lighting my bedside candle I went quietly to

the armoire, felt around for my heavy wool cloak, draped it over my shoulders, laced my shoes, and tiptoed downstairs to the pantry, where I knew there was a lantern.

"Now Selena," I told myself, "why don't you just grow up and do what you came to do?"

Yet still I delayed; the prospect of fishing around in the pockets of the dead *hungan's* sleeveless coat was not one to fill me with joyous anticipation. The lantern proved more efficient inside the stables than out. The place where I recalled he'd been left was empty. The body was gone!

I had to satisfy myself with another tour of the stable before giving the whole thing up as a lost cause. The fog had lifted to some degree when I left the stables; the lantern no longer dazzled my eyes, and I could just make out the looming bulk of the manor house perhaps two hundred yards ahead. With many a halt and backward glance, and my ears strangely alert, I started toward the house. I had gone about a third of the way when I fancied I heard someone faintly call my name. What's this? I thought. Had John awakened, found me gone? I stopped, looked around. I saw nothing but drifts of wispy fog, and berated myself for falling victim to an overwrought mind. I resumed my course.

Once more I heard my name. Turning toward the source, I witnessed a shape coalesce out of the fog and the blue, pulsing light. I stood stock still, apprehensive yet awe-stricken, unable to move. The shape assumed the ghostly semblance of a man in a flowing robe. It raised an arm and beckoned.

I went to the stable where we'd brought Ton-ton Baze, to search for some clue to the mystery of his death, and my own terror. The body was gone!

"Se-l-e-e-na! I am Isaiah!"

Against all judgment and reason; yes, against my will, I found myself moving slowly toward the beckoning figure. Step by step I drew closer until, lifting my lantern, I could see its face. And it was the face of my Uncle Isaiah! But a face transformed, lined, rutted, gouged by unimaginable agony, by all the pain and the torments of hell! Drained and bloodless, it bore the mark and the pallor of death. Its mouth formed a ghastly parody of a smile; from its tight, cracked lips dripped spittle; its dead eyes fixed me with a filmy stare. I wanted to scream, but couldn't get one past my throat; I wanted to run, but found myself frozen where I stood. Even the blessedness of fainting was denied me. The apparition reached slowly behind its back. And in the instant that I smelled the same sharp-scented spirits I recognized from my abduction in Boston, the spell broke and my lethargy vanished.

With all my strength I hurled my lantern at the creature, then bolted!

"Open the stupid door!" I shouted. "Wake up, for God's sake!"

The creature wasn't fifty yards away when I heard the glorious click of the latch, and the door swung wide. Clotilde-Marie stood there in a nightgown, her face creased from sleep. I threw myself at her, flung my arms around her neck.

"It's coming, it's coming!" I sobbed. "Shut the door!"

"Child, what you do out there?" she said. "Nothing

coming. Look."

She turned me around. And she was right. All that could be seen, from doorway to stables, were thin trails of fog adrift in the early morning breeze.

□ Three days passed without any sign of the police John Routledge had told me he'd sent for.

If the police were not coming I'd have to take action myself; anything was better than interminable waiting, even if it might be only the exploration of another blind alley. I considered who, among the people I knew, might have had reason to do away with Ton-ton Baze. From this there emerged two names.

The first was Etienne Sangloire! That the *hungan* and Etienne hated each other needed no additional corroboration than my remembrance of the flogging incident. And Etienne had admitted to throwing him off the property twice. Yet the idea of Etienne's association in the slaying seemed preposterous even to my newly doubtful frame of mind; his offer of friendship and his subsequent actions bore the stamp of the genuine, and I dismissed him from my private inquiry.

The other person was not as easily cleared. He was the big fellow, Antoine, who'd done the flogging and come wheedling to me for a job as Etienne's assistant.

Then I went to Clotilde-Marie—if she couldn't shed light on the doings of everybody working at the plantation no one could.

"What do you know about Antoine, who used to do the whipping?" I said.

Disgust warped Clotilde-Marie's broad, pock-marked features.

"Antoine Jarat, you mean? I know the man. His sister, Sor Antoinette—you have seen her, Mistress, she is very tall and thin—she works for me, usually in the kitchen. She is all right, maybe a little strange"—Clotilde-Marie touched her temple—"but her brother? I dislike him from the start! He was always with that troublemaker, Julien Daraq, until your uncle Isaiah had big fight and threw him out! Then that *gros cochon* Antoine, he come whining around your uncle like a kicked dog and denounce his friend Daraq, so your uncle let him stay."

My burgeoning pretensions to master detection received a setback later in the morning, but it was a setback that I welcomed with relief. John Routledge led a man into the library, beckoned me to follow. I recognized the tall, bald Negro immediately as Lieutenant Jacques Carre, whom I'd first met briefly as I was leaving the Gaspard-Desor's in Cap Therese. He had warned me not to travel by night.

Supper in the dining room, with its great crystal chandelier causing pale, rainbow prisms to dance over the white lace tablecloth, was not the culinary triumph it might have been. Etienne and John made light conversation, joked about some of the questions repeatedly put to them by Lieutenant Carre and the other police,

Though I had not tasted the wine John and Etienne had made considerable use of, I was becoming light-



"Se-l-e-e-na! I am Isaiah!"
the ghostly figure called.
I forced myself to look at it.
The face was my uncle's—
bloodless, distorted, ghastly!"

cause she is gone! Even now those *gros cochons* that act like police look for her, but she comes to same end as her brother, I think."

"What happened to Antoine Jarat?" I said, remembering I'd wanted to question him.

"They found him while you were sick and feverish, Mistress. You are sure you are feeling better?"

"I'm a bit weak, but I'm all right. What happened?"

"Yesterday they brought back his body. He is beaten to death. That is the way Julien Daraq pays for friendship!"

Not much later John Routledge came quietly into my chamber. When he saw I was awake he broke out into a broad grin.

"Selena! Good God, you gave us a start!"

John leaned close, tears forming in his eyes. He kissed my cheek, then his lips found mine and he kissed me firmly but sweetly, sweetly, and I pulled him close and held him tight—wanting him, needing him, yet afraid of him!

"I love you, Selena! I want you to marry me!"

His lips were close to my ear, his words sent a delectable shiver through me, but gently I pushed him away.

"I want you to tell me that later," I said, "when I'm sure you're not just sorry for me."

When Clotilde-Marie came to begin her long-promised Creole lessons, carrying warm milk and a glass of her furry-tasting medicine, she found me quietly crying.

□ After sundown, Etienne Sangloire, whom I hadn't seen since my fateful supper three nights ago, peered through my half-opened door, then stepped inside, resplendent in fresh clothing he'd obviously put on after work. His white ruffled linen shirt was spotless, his black boots so highly polished they looked wet, his light blue trousers neatly pressed and creased. Even his black hair, normally tumbling in ringlets over his forehead, was carefully combed in place.

"So," he said, "Sleeping Beauty, having survived the malevolence of our bucolic Borgia, returns unto the land of the living!"

There was no question about it, the man had a gift for ruining first impressions!

"Well, aren't you the joyous one over my near demise," I said.

"I have done it again," Etienne said, slapping his forehead. "I hoped to cheer you, and I have made you angry

headed. At the same time a queasiness began in my stomach. This changed quickly to a sharp pain.

I got up unsteadily from the table. "I'm sick—I feel terrible!" I said.

The last thing I remember was John or Etienne shouting, "Get her, quick! She's falling!"

"Mistress, lie back—you must rest!"

Why was Clotilde-Marie trying to stop me? I had reached for the carved pineapple finial on top of my bedpost to save me, when I perceived that I was already saved, miraculously alive and undrowned, and in my bed!

"Child, you stand this plantation on its head for two days!" said Clotilde-Marie.

She tucked a blanket under my chin, ran her hand through my hair in a motherly way.

"M'sieu Routledge is up here every hour asking about you," she said. "And when it isn't him it's Sangloire. He kiss you, Mistress, but you don't know that!"

Two days!

I recollected the supper, the bitterness of my food, my giddiness. "What did I eat?"

Clotilde-Marie took a glass from the candlestand, held it to my lips. It tasted bitter and *furry*.

"No, no, no, drink all of it," she said. "It brought you back."

When I finished the stuff she replaced the glass on the candlestand.

"One time I warned you about apple from manchineel tree—but it wasn't your fault, Mistress. That crazy girl, Sor Antoinette Jarat, she must have poisoned you, be-

"I have wanted you from the moment you came!" Etienne declared passionately. "We must be together!" How could I tell him I loved John Routledge?

instead. I always want to say the right things to you, Selena, and I always say the wrong ones! Why do you think that is?"

"I suspect it's your digestion. But I don't always convey my meaning to you, either," I said, relenting somewhat in the face of his embarrassment. How exactly like him to have kissed me while I was fevered, and to put me in a pet!

"This Carre from Cap Therese—I wish he would make his arrests and get the devil out!" Etienne said. "His squad and their interminable, stupid questions—they ruin my production schedules! I am halfway ready to confess, just so work can get on!"

"Etienne, what are your feelings about the things that are happening?"

"Selena, I think Julien Daraq is stronger now than he has ever been, and I think he means to get back at Plantation Danley for all he imagines your uncle did to him. I want you to go away to the capital until he is brought to justice!"

Lord!—the two of them, Etienne and John, were conspiring to get me away!

"I cannot leave my duties just yet," Etienne said, "but when we cut off to the ground this noxious plant that is growing, then I will come and be with you."

"You'll come and be with me," I repeated flatly.

"You do not understand me?" He threw up his arms. "Sweet, suffering Jesus! I have wanted you from the moment you came! I have never known a girl like you—accomplished, intelligent, beautiful—the combination is devastating! What do you want me to say? That I need you? I do! That I love you? You know I do! Selena, we must be together!"

"This is a period of great trial for me," I said, taking his hand. "I need your strength, your clear mind, and your friendship as never before."

Etienne looked away. "You will not come."

"I can't. It has nothing to do with you. Or your offer."

"Very well, it was *gauche* of me to approach you so bluntly," he said. "But if you will not let me come with you, then go alone to Cap Therese, Selena! I do not like what is brewing out there, I do not think you are safe! And I say this as your overseer, your friend, and as a man who loves you."

Etienne slid back his chair. "Finish your breakfast, Selena." He strode from the kitchen, went down the hall to the front of the house. In a moment he came clumping back.

"We are honored with visitors, Selena," he said. "Hip-



polyte Labroussier comes from his plantation in his grand coach-and-four to impress you, and brings his so-beautiful, so-supercilious daughter, Hermione."

"Show them to the drawing room," I said. "I'll be down in a minute."

I dashed upstairs to dress.

Labroussier *pere* struggled to his feet. He was not above five feet tall, almost as wide, practically bald save for a curlicue of dark hair Napoleonically plastered to his forehead. A heavy gold watch chain bisected his considerable middle. I imagined him the mayor of some sleepy French village, famed for its cheeses! I accepted his pudgy hand.

"Hippolyte Labroussier, mam'selle," he said in French. "I meant to visit you sooner, but the pressure of affairs . . ." He shrugged. "And this is my lovely daughter, Hermione."

Labroussier *fille* got up languidly. She was not over twenty, and strikingly beautiful! Her large, violet eyes, accented by the violet redingote and matching bonnet she wore, looked out beneath absolutely darling dark

brows. Her small mouth was red, pouting, and her nose, turned up beguilingly, was exquisitely formed. She offered her hand, gracefully failing to remove her glove, and it occurred to me her face was as perfect and delicate as a Meissen figurine's, but not as expressive.

"I am charmed, Mademoiselle Labrousier," I said.

The indolence of the hot, late afternoon saw John Routledge back from Cap Therese, bearing with him my old friend, Dr. Paul Gaspard-Desor,

"Selena, I saw the letter," John said, pulling up a chair.

"The letter," I repeated.

"For God's sake, the letter that said Isaiah was murdered! Fine script, good hand, signed 'Odile Froissart,' whoever the devil she is! No post-mark—it was delivered by hand. Naturally, no one recalls who brought it. They wouldn't show it to me the last time."

Odile Froissart? But she would scarcely sign it "Baze." I clamped my mind tight, before another round robin of pointless speculation ensued.

As I passed the library early that evening, John called to me. He left scattered piles of paper on his desk, placed his arms on my shoulders, tried to kiss me, but I ducked.

"Hermione asked after you, Counselor," I said sweetly.

"A-h-h, *that's* where it itches! I knew something was biting you the minute I got back. I knew it! Am I supposed to apologize because she asked after me? I'm not gathering honey from Hermione!"

John cast his eyes heavenward and sighed.

"There was this Persian who said, 'Unto him who un-

derstandeth grace and kindled my curiosity to an uncomfortable degree.

"Oh, Mademoiselle Selena, it was horrible, just horrible!" she said. She betook herself to a chair in a corner into which she collapsed, her face in her hands, and stared vacantly at the floor.

"You were attacked, then?" I said.

"Treacherously set upon by John Daraq's murderous ruffian, mam'selle. The *canailles* waited until a wind arose, then they torched my fields, set afire my house, broke in, slaughtered four of my mulattos, and would have killed my poor daughter and me after forcing me to watch the most bestial—ah, no matter, no matter. But a hastily snatched revolver made them think twice, and we escaped by coach. I shot two, three, I do not know! And of all my people, old Plesy here, was the only one who came with me. A-h-h, my fields!—my house which I built while Hermione's mother lived!—all is gone, rubble, burned to the ground! And my beautiful, lovely guns, Daraq has them, every one!"

In the late afternoon, following a day of much disquietude and perturbation, I was idling about behind the manor house near the slowly flowing stream along whose banks our laundresses were wont to perform their function. The fires were long since out; the oval copper wash tubs stood unused and somehow desolate; no linens draped the banks or fluttered flag-like from lines; and the scene, so noisy with laughing chatter during washday and now so silent, impressed itself, concordant with my feelings, as one of loneliness and despair. Some motion

John tried to kiss me, but I ducked. "Hermione was asking for you, Counselor," I said sweetly. She was beautiful . . . did John really love her?

derstandeth a woman will I grant half my kingdom.' I don't recall him having any takers. Selena, there's absolutely nothing between Hermione and me!"

"But there was, wasn't there?"

"I'll not deny it! But it's been long over. I only see her for old time's sake, and because, by God, it's nice to talk to a woman once in a while who doesn't talk back!"

☐ Rain continued throughout the night. It was hard and driving when I awoke next morning to a tarnished sky and muddy grounds.

Then there was a knock at the front door that sounded as if it could have thrown it from its hinges.

"Assassins!" I heard Clotilde-Marie cry. "Forbear to batter down the walls! I come!"

Another horrendous thump followed. Etienne and I gaped in perplexity at one another. Then heavy footsteps hurried down the hall, and Clotilde-Marie burst into the kitchen.

"The Labrousier menage arrive, more drowned than not!" she said. "The fat one, Hippolyte, looks more ridiculous than ever!"

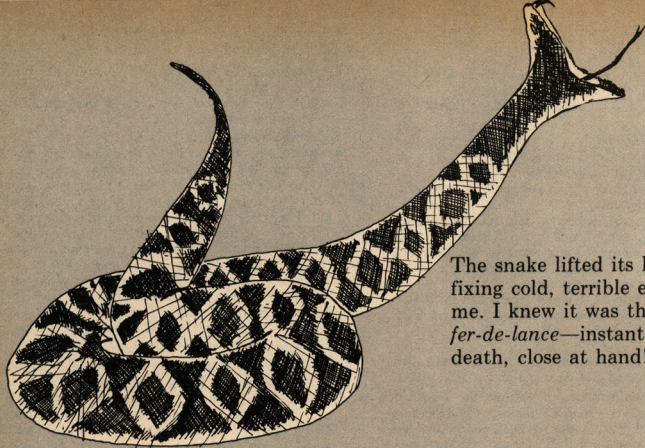
Shortly Labrousier *pere et fille* arrived, followed at a respectful distance by old Plesy, Jean-Baptiste's stepfather. Their clothing was plastered to their backs, dark from drenching; the Labrousiers dripped water and exuded gloom. Hermione managed a wan smile, almost apologetic. She stepped up to me, embraced me, touched her cheek to mine, in a gesture that both surprised me by

drew my attention to the stream. Moving along with the sluggish current, an object bumped against the bank, swung out again, bumped once more, then stopped. Curious, I drew nearer. The object, lengthier than I had at first supposed, began to take shape. Then seized with horror, I perceived it to be the body of a drowned black woman!

Who was she, that had come to this tragic end? Averting my face, I approached, bent down to grasp her limbs, and by dint of great effort pulled her from the stream. One glance at her face was all I permitted myself; one was all I needed. Before me lay my poisoner, Sor Antoinette Jarat!

Abstractedly I went to the tall, satinwood armoire to dress for supper. Clotilde-Marie had always seen to it that fresh linen lay neatly folded on the armoire's bottom shelf, in readiness for daily changes as befitted a sugar baroness, or whatever she considered me. Nor had she been remiss this time; the linen, clean and white, occupied its accustomed place. But on top of that linen a snake was coiled! I started, shrieked, jumped backward.

The snake lifted an angular, lance-tip head a few inches, showing a yellowish throat, while a shiny black forked tongue darted from its mouth. Cold and terrible unblinking eyes looked into mine, and recalling a childhood story of how serpents mesmerize their intended prey, I tore my eyes away and fixed them on its body. Reddish-brown it was, overlaid with faded black cross-



The snake lifted its head, fixing cold, terrible eyes on me. I knew it was the accursed *fer-de-lance*—instant, agonizing death, close at hand!

marks, and at its tail was a kind of bony spike. Never had I seen one like it, but from deep within me I somehow knew what it was: the remorseless, accursed *fer-de-lance*, agent of my uncle's death, and Ton-ton Baze's! This was no *gris-gris* doll like I got aboard the ship, "La Liberte," with fangs in its neck intended to frighten, nor a black candle meant to kill from afar. This was death at close hand, instant, agonizing death encompassed in a body not five feet long!

Once, when I was little, Uncle Isaiah had taken me to Mr. Barnum's circus. I'd watched in wide-eyed fascination a Hindu snake charmer keep a cobra asway to a tune played on a kind of bulbous flute. I'd commented on the man's bravery, and Uncle Isaiah had laughed.

"Look to the instrument's motion, little princess," he'd said. "Sight they have to a fine degree, but they haven't the faculty to hear."

During a halt in the viper's forward progress I cautiously reached behind my neck and pulled the amulet's chain over my head, not taking my eyes for a moment from my relentless pursuer. It had to work! Holding the chain in one hand, I used my other to lower the medallion carefully. Then I slowly started it swinging like a pendulum.

The snake had for the present ceased flowing toward me, and now lifting its lance-shaped head, began swaying it in rhythm with the oscillating object that confronted it, keeping its eyes focused, it seemed to me, ever on the medallion. How long this state of affairs would endure I did not purpose to learn. I balled the amulet and chain in my hand, threw it hard at the *fer-de-lance*! In a motion too fast to follow, the viper struck the amulet in midair; I heard its awful fangs click against metal—but I was at the door, wrenched it open, and in the instant I slammed it behind me I thought I heard mocking laughter echo from my chamber!

I overtook John Routledge on the stairs.

"You'll not sleep in the library, then, Selena?"

"I've thought it over. I guess my chamber is safe enough. And you're right down the hall."

What if they came back tonight?

Waiting until the house grew quiet, I cracked open the door and peeped out. The hanging hall lamp had been dimmed; all within my view was silent; for the first time Etienne wasn't snoozing in a chair in the hallway. I went back to my bed, seized my pillows in a sudden whim and arranged them in the shape of a slumbering body, then covered them with a blanket. I took a second blanket with me as I stole down to the library, feeling quite conspiratorial and as excited as a little girl permitted to sleep for the first time at her friend's house!

And sleep I did, for perhaps three hours. Then I heard a crash upstairs, and the loud reports of gunfire. Three shots came in quick succession; there followed a pause, then two more shots!

"Come back, goddamn you!" I heard.

John's voice!

I rushed upstairs as the Labroussiers and Dr. Gaspard-Desor popped out of their chambers. My door stood open. I dashed into a room thickly swirling with the acrid presence of gunsmoke. John Routledge, bare to his waist, leaned out from the wreckage of the *jalousie*, white smoke still issuing from his revolver.

"God, you were right, Selena! Nothing like a woman's intuition! He came up a pole to your window, the same man I think I sent to Labroussier's a few weeks ago—close-cropped hair, those big earrings—I only had a chance for two shots, and he got clean away! Selena, if you want a scare, look at your bed!"

I did so. Where my head would have lain were three black-singed holes fired by my assailant. Mr. Earrings! He'd followed me from Boston to the plantation.

I had arisen earlier than my usual wont with the object of avoiding John Routledge in the kitchen; fitful, tossing sleep following the attempted assassination had augmented rather than reduced my suspicions, and I had rehearsed a thousand times what John would have termed a purely circumstantial case:

—That he could easily have arranged my kidnapping in Boston until the only available ship should have sailed.

—That the impasse with the Santa Teresan government over transferring the plantation could have been an invention of his own, as could the mysterious 'Odile Froissart'—Froissart, Dr. Gaspard-Desor at length remembered, being the name of a fourteenth century chronicler.

—That John need not have represented anyone other than himself in a scheme to cheat me of my inheritance.

—And finally, that his offer of marriage might have been his way of insuring control of the plantation, should his other plots and devices fail.

With such doubts as these, and in the perturbation of mind that they carried with them, I greatly wished not to see his person, at least not so close upon last night's events. In what manner could I address this man? "Take all, it's yours, but let me live?" For similar reasons, I desired not to confront Etienne Sangloire, either. It was with a sense of relief, then, that I found the kitchen occupied only by old Plesy.

"Julien Daraq is in our fields, mad'moiselle. I hear bad, bad things. Your pardon, mad'moiselle, but this is what I hear—you are to be punished because you caused the killing of the *bungan* Ton-ton Baze and the Jarats, brother and sister!"

brightened my office, and I remarked upon your determination and your spirit. I tell you truly, I was captivated! But later, when I told you all was over between Hermione and me, I spoke more a wish than a fact! When I'm around her I can think of no one else! Now she's alone, through my damnable dereliction, and I ask you to release me from my pledge." John lowered his eyes.

"You must consider your nature, John," I said softly. "You must recall the circumstances under which you declared yourself to me—I was sick, weak, and near death, as dependent, I guess, as Hermione Labrousier. I cannot hold against you that you follow your nature. But why did you wait until now to tell me this?"

He looked up briefly, turned his eyes away again.

"Because, um, because . . ."

"Because we might not have another chance?" I said.

Etienne Sangloire smiled diffidently, lightly squeezed my hand. "I require your authority, Selena, to take charge during this emergency."

"Was that ever in question?" I said. "Why, you have it, then."

He cleared his throat, then spoke up forcefully.

"My friends, attend, please! I wish to obtain your assent to certain measures I propose for your safety. No one is to venture out into the clearing unless he is accompanied by an armed man—that will be myself, M'sieu Routledge, Lieutenant Carre's four policemen, or the twelve men of my crew for whom we have arms."

"Now Selena and Hermione"—he raised his voice—"and you, too, Clotilde-Marie, will receive instruction in

John confessed he loved Hermione. "Why did you wait until now to tell me this?" I asked softly. "Because you're afraid we won't have another chance?"

Under a hot, high, midday sun John Routledge reined up a blown and lathered horse as I watched the preparations for our defense from the shelter of the portico. I would have turned away, but he called to me, and as he came near I saw his face was streaked with dirt and perspiration.

"I am a fool, and worse, a coward, Selena! I should have known better!"

"How a fool, John?"

There was a kind of pleading in his urgency; he not harsh in judging me, he seemed to say.

"Hippolyte suggested we reconnoiter his place. I offered no objections, thought it would prove a lark, in fact! Now he's dead, Selena!"

"Dead? How?"

"That murderous scum fired from the grass—we never even saw them until too late! And I bolted, ran for it, while they hacked his remains to pieces!"

John seated himself in Etienne's chair. I started to rise, but his hand lightly arrested me.

"Selena, wait a minute, please! I *must* speak with you. It isn't easy for me."

I sat back, folded my hands on my lap.

"Three years ago I fell in love with Hermione Labrousier. For a time our love prospered blissfully, but she became moody, irritable, yet withal clinging and most possessive. I began to feel . . . smothered, can you understand?—and I broke it off. And for three years I courted no one else, no one! Then one day your beauty

loading and cleaning the muskets before you retire to night. We have gunpowder, bullets, and if Daraq strikes, I am sure we will give a good account of ourselves."

Daraq's carts stopped at our wagons. Unseen hands dumped their smoking, flaming contents into ours, loosed the oxen, bellowing with fright, to scatter in all directions, and shortly our first line of defense was enveloped in flame. Gunfire erupted from our trenches.

"Fire at men, not smoke!" Etienne shouted. "Never mind the damned wagons!"

I heard someone cry out behind the house. "Sangloire! They're in the stream!"

"Plesy, hold fast up there!" Etienne exclaimed. "*A l'arrière, mes braves!*"

As our men rushed into position they opened fire on the attackers still in midstream. Others slashed with machetes at the men just emerging from the water. Men jumped at each other, thrust glistering blades, hacked, parried, swung great, arcing blows from high overhead. Screams of rage and agony rose above the din of drums and the yells of the *Daraquistes* along the far bank who were firing at our men.

Tales of Indian massacre I'd heard as a child faded to insignificance—this was real, this was now; it was hideous butchery, but the men were magnificent! No wonder that even against the well-armed French their revolution had succeeded!

Both sides took losses; I grew sickened by the sight of

men falling in the mud, yet so compelling is battle, however bloody and close at hand, that I could not turn my unwilling eyes away. Some of our men formed a kind of bucket brigade, tossing discarded weapons from one to another right up to the door; then I, Hermione, and Clotilde-Marie, put into practice what we'd learned last night, and I was kept too busy to think of anything but cleaning, charging, and priming hot-barreled muskets and rifles. No sooner were they readied than they returned to service. John Routledge's revolver, odorless with burned powder and scorched grease, must have passed through my hands at least four times! It was nearing noon when the need for our help slackened. The sounds of firing and the shouts of battle died away. Wearily, I went over to the door, leaned against the jamb.

"If he gets what he wants he'll go away," I said.

"If he gets what he wants?" John said.

"Me," I said.

Both Etienne and John were startled.

"Oh, no!" Etienne said. "Absolutely not! Out of the question!"

Shortly after sundown Daraq's drums began to beat, not in the hills but in our very fields. My journey, then, would not be over-long—or perhaps it would prove the longest I'd ever undertaken.

I visited our wounded, gave them such comfort as I could—there were over seventy left; Dr. Gaspard-Desor, despite heroic effort, had been unable to save twelve. That visit only strengthened my resolve. I then went to

were spilling from the house like ants from a flooded anthill, dashing in all directions but the right one, calling after me. Crouching, I made my way to the end of the trench, where, by the aid of a burned stump of wagon-shaft, I pulled myself out and headed toward the trees, toward my destiny, toward Daraq's throbbing drums—Selena Catherine Danley, eighteen-year-old maniac and fool!

□ They call that drum *Assoto*, or sometimes *Soter*, which, by virtue of its large diameter and great height, is distinguishable from all the lesser drums in a *batterie*. Inspired with its own *loa*, it is itself an object of veneration.

I picked out Julien Daraq sitting cross-legged on the ground, his horribly scarred face in a gruesome parody of a smile, as bottles of *clairin*, a low-grade white rum of the country, passed from hand to hand. Etienne Sangloire, I was certain, would have taken no delight in the accuracy of his estimate of their number; it seemed to me that at least six hundred men jammed the clearing, many of them bruised and wounded, but laughing, shouting, and carousing. How dissimilar had been Ton-ton Baze's *bule-zin*, with its throngs of gentlefolk—men and women—and its overwhelming aspect of devotion tinged with sorrow!

The *Assoto* drum now commenced a slow, deliberate and reverberating beat, which I felt all through my body as well as heard. The smaller drums beat a faster accompaniment. The crowd nearest Daraq parted and grew quiet; a figure marched through them, his outstretched

"Help! Fire!" I shouted. In the confusion, I escaped from the room. "Stop her!" called Etienne, too late. I was on my way to the enemy's camp.

my bedchamber where I lit the oil lamp and turned up the wick until the flame smoked, darkening the chimney. I blew it out, waited until the chimney cooled, then daubed lampblack over my face and hands—I hoped not to pass close inspection, but perhaps in darkness I could get through sentries, ours or theirs. In an agony of doubts and fancies I waited as the house grew silent, making the drums seem louder by comparison. Then, drawing on a dark cloak, I approached my door. The stupid knob held fast! I jiggled it, shook it.

"Go to sleep, Selena," Etienne called from the hall. "I value much your sentiment, but your life more! Good-night!"

I crumpled a bed sheet, tossed it in a corner. After lighting the candle I blew out the lamp, and unscrewing its brass burner from the fount, poured lamp oil on the sheet, which I then set ablaze with the candle.

"Fire!" I shouted, banging on my door. "Help! Fire!"

Steps pounded up the stairs. I readied myself. Etienne burst through the door, snatched blankets from my bed and leaped toward the conflagration. I was through that door in a trice and halfway down the stairs before I heard him call my name! In another instant I gained the kitchen, and scurried out behind the house as lights came on.

"We must stop her!" I heard Etienne shout.

"She's lost her reason, she's suicidal!" John replied.

"No, she is just Selena!" Etienne shouted back.

As they ran out the front of the house with lanterns, I dropped into one of Etienne's trenches. By now servants

arms bearing a cutlass by its handle and the tip of its broad blade. That man was Mr. Earrings of evil memory!

The crowd cheered in a manner that made my blood run cold, waved machetes and rifles overhead. Mr. Earrings gestured them to silence. He matched his words to the slow booming of the great drum.

"Two lives . . . we offer you . . . tonight . . . so that tomorrow . . . victory, and all their lives . . . will be ours!" The crowd shouted approval, fired guns into the air.

In ever-mounting horror, yet fascinated withal, I beheld him pour rum into a basin, set it ablaze at one of the fires, then calmly dip his hands into it and lave his arms with the flaming liquid! Two men came forward, carrying the bound little boy to him. The child, even though apparently drugged, uttered a piteous moan. Mr. Earrings held up a small knife, and offering it to front, rear, and each side—the four corners, the four winds—turned to face the child. The drum-beat quickened. Only then did I find my voice.

"No!" I screamed, and leaped into the clearing!

"Ayeda-Wedo tells her sons they are stupid and misled! They must with their machetes harvest crops, not lives! The soil which feeds their children is fed with blood instead! Shall your children feed on blood?"

"How many died today at Plantation Danley to feed Daraq? They lie beyond the burned wagons and along the banks of a stream, and not one of them cares whether the Danley woman or Julien Daraq sleeps in the great-house tonight! You are stupid and misled. I am Ayeda-

Wedo, bride of Damballa, and I say it."

"Underneath your sweat, your blackness leaves you, Miss Danley!" said Mr. Earrings in perfect English. It was wrong—it didn't fit. Hadn't he spoken to me in Boston in a heavy accent? I knew not what to think.

The giant form of Julien Daraq strode toward us, his muscles rippling, in his hand a machete. Mr. Earrings pulled a pistol from his pantaloons, similar to, but shorter-barreled, than John Routledge's, and leveled it at Daraq. Daraq halted, glaring.

"The plantation is yours to do with what you wish," Mr. Earrings said to him, "but the Danley woman is mine!"

"Danley woman?" Daraq stared wildly at my face. "Her uncle gave me this!" He touched spread fingers to his horrid scar.

"That's very sad indeed," said Mr. Earrings, "but after all my years of planning, the last Danley stands before me, came of her own will at that!" He laughed in a high-pitched, hysterical way.

"Hungan, you tricked me!" cried Daraq. "And you, Danley, you would have died that night, but I saw your *wangan!*"

"Ah, you've met?" said Mr. Earrings. "Then I won't have to introduce you!" He laughed madly.

"I know you mean to kill me," I said, "but before you do, may I be told why?"

"It will give me pleasure to watch your face," said Mr. Earrings. "So. You die because I swore that the Danley name must perish. I loved the girl Odile, who Isaiah ruined and sold to slavery. Four months after we'd met in New Orleans she died of consumption, coughing blood!"

The face of Mr. Earrings twitched. "When, after studying Isaiah's affairs for years and following him," he resumed, "I encountered someone else who wished him dead, to profit from his plantation, his fate was sealed! You should not have escaped the seaman I hired from the ship, *La Liberté*, in Boston, Selena Danley, because at that time the other person only wanted you frightened off. I tried all I'd learned as a *hungan* in New Orleans, although there they call me 'conjure-man.' One night I even impersonated your uncle's *zombi*! Too bad you do not frighten easily!"

The man could not have said that, had he right now known my mind!

"Uncle Isaiah was physically powerful," I said. "How did you overcome him?"

Mr. Earrings laughed wildly. "With a substance used only eleven years ago to produce unconsciousness, called *ether*! And my *fer-de-lance*, from his long box, finished the work! Ton-ton Baze suffered the same fate, because he would have warned you. My charming pet ought to have likewise kissed you the other night, but your incredible luck prevailed! And then you escaped my shots; how, I do not know!"

The towering Julien Daraq had all this time been switching his eyes between me and Mr. Earrings. In cold fascination I watched a vein throb on his neck.

Yet another name I had to hear Mr. Earrings pronounce, although I knew it well. But why had that person pretended to fire at his coadjutor?

"If I'd stayed in Boston," I said, "and failed to assert my claim, the plantation would have gone to John Routledge, wouldn't it?"

"The lawyer," Mr. Earrings laughed. "I could let you

die thinking that, couldn't I? But I am too kind-hearted, and you saved me trouble coming here tonight! No, Selena Danley, the lawyer Routledge would not have acquired your uncle's property. The plantation would have been Emily's, your uncle's one-time lover—she had a document of partnership."

"Emily?" I said. "Who's Emily?"

"Ah, your Boston customs! I should have said Miss Carstairs, your schoolmistress, Emily Carstairs!"

Miss Carstairs! Oh, my God! And I bethought myself of an argument I'd overheard between them once during a visit from my uncle, an argument over money.

"Goodbye, Selena Danley," said Mr. Earrings. "And you, Julien Daraq! You're all animals! Animals!"

The scar across Daraq's face reddened, the vein in his neck throbbled. "I am a man!" he screamed, and threw himself at Mr. Earrings!

The gun exploded, the shot struck Daraq in the side, and down they both went, rolling and scuffling on the ground. The gun fired again, and Mr. Earrings scrambled toward the great, silent *Assoto* drum. Daraq was instantly upon him, swung viciously with his machete, slashed through the drum's rope brace. I saw the huge drum totter.

"Look out!" I screamed.

I covered my eyes. In an agony of breathless time, a thousand pounds of strongly fashioned wood crashed and splintered on the earth! I could not gaze long upon it. The clearing, so shortly filled with roistering, grew silent as the last of the *Daraqistes* fled into the trees. Silent? Not quite.

The two intended child victims had awakened from their drugged sleep, and whimpered. I went over to them and cut through their cords with Mr. Earrings's knife. Wide-eyed, they looked at me, rubbed their bloodless limbs to life, scampered into the night.

I beheld lanterns moving through the brush, and in a moment there came into view forty or fifty blue-coated police bearing prisoners, led by the familiar stringbean figure of Lieutenant Jacques Carre. He'd got through, after all! And typically, too, I mused, not when he'd been needed most with a relief column, but only now, after all was done, leading jailers—a day late, and a dollar short!

"Selena!"

My heart jumped. Etienne Sangloire rushed forward, swept me up into his arms, kissed me not on my forehead, but full on my lips!

Well!

All the dammed-up emotion of weeks surged through me, it tingled down to my toes, and I kissed him back and meant it! We separated, drew apart, fell back again into one another's arms, dropped to the ground, kissing, got up, kissing!

"Your face, Selena!" Etienne said. "You look half-roasted!"

Lord!—the lampblack!

"I'm a regular Roxbury russet, Etienne," I said. "The longer you keep me the better I get!"

"A what?"

"Roxbury russet," I said. "It's a kind of potato!"

"Potato? Sweet, suffering Jesus! Why do we speak of potatoes, you and I?"

"You take me home and butter me right, and I'll show you," I said.



STRANGE ECSTASY

Part II

The truth was terrifying, but Lisa had to face it — she was a victim of the same evil plot that had ended her parents' lives in the flaming wreckage of an auto accident! And Nicholas, the man she loved, was involved! Money couldn't be his reason — was it a primitive passion for her that knew no bounds?

By VIRGINIA WELLS

Lisa Lowell had believed that Lord Cecil and Lady Ellen Thorndyke were kind family friends, who had welcomed her as a guest in their beautiful villa, set high on cliffs overlooking the French Riviera. Then, strange events led her to suspect that, for reasons of their own, they were actually keeping her a prisoner! And a brief escape that led to a meeting with Nicholas Nikonos, a fabulously wealthy shipping magnate, resulted in the devastating realization that, instead of the love he professed for her, he was involved in the evil plot!

Quickly, I stole from the living room, and thankfully reached my bedroom without waking anyone. For a moment, I leaned against the closed door, gasping for breath, trying to cope with this latest blow. Why had the one phone in the villa been disconnected? After all that had

happened that day, I couldn't believe it was an accident.

Instinctively, I locked the door—at the same time realizing, even in my confused state, that it wouldn't do any good because anyone would have access to the keys.

I crawled into bed. If anyone came, I could pretend to be asleep. But exhausted as I was, I knew I mustn't sleep. I must think—fast. My life might depend on it.

How had Nicholas Nikonos come into possession of the priceless emerald brooch my mother had worn when she died, just a few weeks ago, in an auto accident in the Alps? Lord Cecil, who had taken over the investigation since I was in a state of shock, had assured me that nothing had been recovered from the burned wreckage. I knew my mother had worn it, because Dad had taken her on a surprise birthday trip to buy a

pair of earrings he had discovered, that seemed to match it perfectly. The earrings hadn't been traced, either. *Why* had Nicholas given it to me as a casual gift, a token of his remorse (so he said) for having caused me embarrassment when I swam out to his yacht and was mistaken for a whore, brought on board by his decadent friends for a sex orgy?

He had seemed so gentle and kind, so completely sincere when he had come to dinner that evening to make his apologies. And afterward, when we walked in the gardens and he saved me from certain death when the edge of the cliff suddenly crumbled beneath me . . .

I could still feel the warmth and strength of him as he held me close—and my own tingling response when he kissed me, and declared that he loved me. And I had believed that

he could help me escape, and solve the mystery of my parents' death. Until now . . .

How should I react to this dreadful development? Should I confront him, or the Thorndykes, or both? No, it might be too dangerous. When I failed in my attempt to phone my father's lawyer and executor, John Allenby, in London, I was sure that something more sinister than a temporary service breakdown was involved. Especially after the mysterious cave-in of the cliff where I had played safely ever since I was a child . . .

But I couldn't pretend ignorance, either. The Thorndykes knew Nicholas had given me a gift, and they probably knew what it was. Certainly, he did, too.

I knew what I must do—get out of this place. Run. Get my story to the police authorities. But how? The fierce attack dogs guarded the gate.



into his arms and kissing me passionately!

When he released me at last, he said, his voice trembling, "Oh, Lisa—for the first time in so many, many years, you've made me feel that I have found one woman who wasn't more interested in my money than in me!"

My head was in a whirl. His husky voice, his brooding, dark eyes boring into mine were so compelling—but was he sincere? I felt guilty about my deception, but then, he might be deceiving me. One thing was certain—this man had an overwhelming physical magnetism, so strong that I had to admit to myself that it affected me, determined as I was to resist it!

I was thankful to see Lady Ellen coming through the trees, followed by Odette, carrying a lunch tray for me. For a moment I hesitated—had it been poisoned? Hardly, I decided, with a man as prominent as Nicholas on the premises, they wouldn't take a chance. So I ate with relish, seemingly completely absorbed—but at the same time, listening eagerly for any clue that might be dropped in the conversation between Nicholas and Lady Ellen.

"We must see that Lisa becomes

strong and well after all her harrowing experiences," Nicholas was saying, and told Lady Ellen how I had become so weak the previous evening that I had dropped his gift in the gorge.

"What a pity," Lady Ellen said, automatically. I was puzzled. Either she and Nicholas had no idea of the true value and meaning of the emerald brooch, or they were the best actors I had ever seen.

"I came here this morning," Nicholas went on, "hoping that I could persuade Lisa to go with me to Nice this afternoon for a movie and dinner. It might be a pleasant change."

A chance to escape! No matter how evil Nicholas' intentions might be, I would be better off than in this hopeless prison. As I saw it, there was really no other choice. If I stayed at the Thorndykes' villa, I was in constant danger of being killed.

"I'd love to go!" I said quickly. Nicholas beamed. Lady Ellen looked grim, but clearly couldn't defy the powerful Mr. Nikonos.

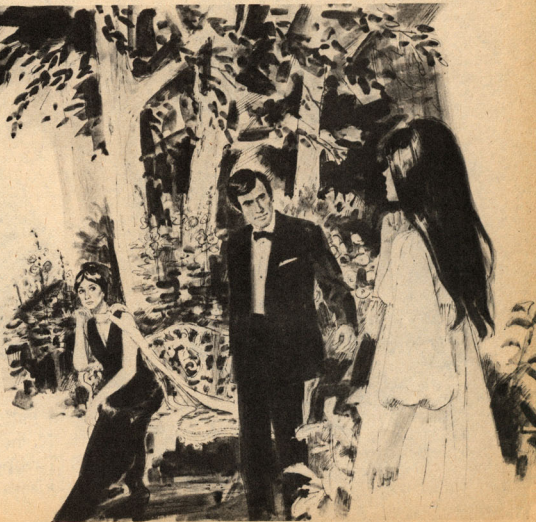
She tried to manage a smile, and even be a bit playful, teasing Nicholas about his reputation as a lady's man, and insisting that he bring me back, no later than eleven.

I rushed upstairs to change. I knew I had only a few minutes before Lady Ellen would find some excuse to follow me. So first, I checked my funds carefully. Hardly any cash—all my money was tied up pending settlement of my father's estate. Then, I remembered what he'd told me when I chided him about buying Mother and I such expensive jewels. "They're better than any other investment, negotiable anywhere . . ."

Feverishly, I searched through my jewel case. I couldn't wear anything too formal, but the cultured pearls with matching earrings would be right. With a pang, I recalled the happy moment when Mother and Dad gave them to me on my sixteenth birthday. How proud I was! The value didn't impress me half so much as the fact that they were my first, really grownup necklace and earrings.

There were other jewels—diamond rings and brooches, a lovely pendant of the finest jade. But I didn't have time to let my thoughts linger on all the other happy occasions when they were given to me. I dressed quickly, stuffing a few smaller, flat pieces in my bra, and the toes of my shoes. The rest I concealed in my handbag in a zipper compartment, with

I was surprised to see Nicholas with Lady Ellen. What were they plotting? I was even more surprised when she agreed to let me go out with him. This could be my way to freedom!



makeup articles on top. Not very good—but the best I could manage. By the time Lady Ellen came upstairs, I was calmly putting finishing touches on my makeup. If she or anyone discovered that my jewel box was empty—well, that was a chance I had to take.

"Lisa, it's my duty to warn you," Lady Ellen began without further ado, "We cannot be responsible for you if you insist on going with this man."

I decided to play it cool, and laughed gaily. "Oh, you mustn't worry so! It's funny—I always thought European girls were so liberated, but it's not like that at all. We American girls have much more freedom, from what I've seen, and I think we know how to handle it. Now, how do you like my dress?" I whirled about in the filmy flowered chiffon, one of my favorites.

"Charming," she murmured, but she wasn't looking at me, but gazing out the window. Then, strangely, she added the words my own mother—and so many others—had used so many times: "Better take a coat."

How stupid of me not to think of

it! And how ironic that this woman, whom I regarded as my mortal enemy, should remind me of it! Of course, if my half-formed plans succeeded, I'd need a warm coat more than anything!

I managed to make a gay exit, grabbing a warm coat and even kissing Lady Ellen lightly on the cheek, telling her not to worry. Then, as fast as my feet could carry me, I rushed off to meet Nicholas.

I found him on the terrace, talking excitedly to Celeste in French. I couldn't catch what they were saying, as I approached, but it had something to do with the cliffs.

"I will see to it this afternoon, Monsieur," Celeste was saying as I joined them. The look he gave me was pure hatred. Why?

"Please, dear God," I prayed in my heart, "let me get past those gates. Give me a chance to live and find the murderers of my parents . . ."

Outwardly, I made an effort to keep up the gay banter I'd begun successfully with Lady Ellen. Inwardly, I sighed with relief as the Rolls, with only Nicholas, the chauffeur and I as occupants, passed through the vicious dogs and the

heavily barred gates that Celeste opened. I was free!

Or was I? No sooner had we driven down the steep, winding road to the town of Villefranche Sur Mer below, than I realized that we were not headed for Nice at all, but in the opposite direction—toward Monaco, and the French-Italian bordertown of Menton.

Don't panic, I kept telling myself. I had to go on with the innocent act, no matter what.

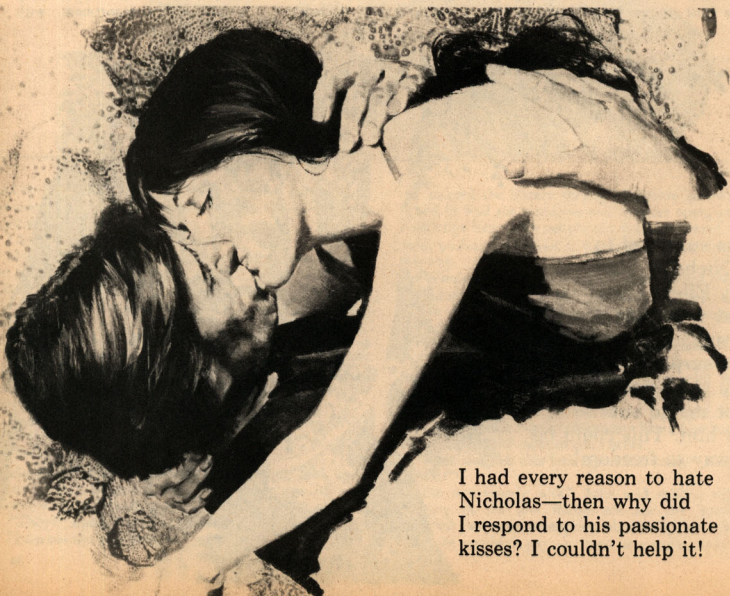
"Where are we going?" I asked, trying to sound as if it were all a great lark. "This isn't the way to Nice!"

Nicholas smiled at me, but now, all the compliments and gaiety, even the fierce passion of his nature seemed to have left him. He looked tired, and drained.

He took my hand gently. "This is all for your good, Lisa," he said enigmatically. "Trust me . . . you will see."

Trust *him*? I was sick of being kept in the dark, sick of all the mysteries. Somehow, I decided, I just had to get myself out of the car and run for it.

A chill ran down my spine when it struck me that we were traveling the



I had every reason to hate Nicholas—then why did I respond to his passionate kisses? I couldn't help it!

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same road toward the Swiss Alps that my parents had taken on that fatal journey. Why?

"Where are you taking me?" I tried to make the question sound casual. I couldn't arouse his suspicions.

"To my sister's home in Gstaad," Nicholas replied promptly, much to my surprise.

He seemed to have thrown off some of his depression, and put on his mask of debonair pleasantries again. "I know summer is no time to visit Gstaad," he laughed. "We should be going there in winter, when we could enjoy her skiing. It's marvelous. But I do want you to meet my family. My sister Melina is all the family I have, and we are very close. I hope you will love her, too..."

"I'm sure I will," I said, eager to please. But Nicholas didn't seem to hear. Once more, he had retreated into his own dark reverie.

Why hadn't he told me, in the first place, that this was his plan? Why had he told me we were going to Nice? It could be that he was afraid to ask me to travel such a distance, but he might also have more sinister motives.

Our chauffeur, separated from us by a thick pane of glass, was driving with speed and expertise up the narrow, winding road that led to the foothills of the Alps.

Now, dusk was beginning to fall, and the small towns along the way were becoming fewer, and farther apart. I drew my coat about me and rested my head on the back seat, pretending to nap. Sooner or later, I reasoned, we would have to stop for dinner. Until then, there was nothing I could do.

I tried to formulate some kind of plan. If I could succeed in my escape from Nicholas, what then?

To go to the police with my story was out of the question. It would be all too easy for the Thorndykes to claim that I was a bit unbalanced due to the tragedy of my parents' death, and take me back into their "protection."

Somehow, I had to get to Zurich. I remembered that my father had a business friend there, a German art dealer of whom he was very fond. He was an old gentleman, Herr Friedrich Von Zandt. Once, when I was very small, he had given me a lovely Swiss music box. With his white hair and beard, I always

thought he looked like Santa Claus.

Years had passed since then—he might be dead. Still, there was a chance. In any case, I had to find the dealer in Zurich who had agreed to sell my father the earrings that matched my mother's brooch.

And now that I was free (almost!) I could finally reach my father's executor, John Allenby, in London.

Lulled by the smooth motion of the Rolls, I relaxed, and for the first time since the accident, felt that everything could be resolved happily, after all.

I woke with a start, to find my head nestled against Nicholas' chest, his arm around me!

"W-where are we?" I gasped. The car had stopped, I could see lights outside.

Nicholas drew me close for an instant, and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "We're outside one of the best restaurants in Switzerland," he said. "Frankly, we've just been sitting here for a little while, because I didn't have the heart to wake you."

"Oh, dear!" I wailed, sitting up quickly and trying to smooth my disheveled hair. "I am sorry!"

"Don't be," Nicholas said. "You look so lovely when you are asleep. It

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was a pleasure to see you like that."

Once more, my heart softened, and for a moment, I was tempted to tell him everything. But as I became fully awake, I steered my mind against him. He had come into possession of my mother's priceless brooch, but had told me nothing. So—he could not be trusted, or truly devoted to me. So—I had to gather my wits and get away from him—now!

The restaurant was typical of many of the best in Europe—not large or flashy, but with delightful ambience and impeccable service. The dining area, where waiters moved quietly and swiftly, shone with fine white linens and gleaming silver. A rich, red brocade covered the walls, and long French doors looked out upon a lovely vista of flowering shrubs and a fountain, lit by several torches.

The garden might be a way out . . . but I'd better not rush it, but try to get my bearings first. And I was

crest. But nearby, there were a few clusters of lights, indicating small farms or villages. The country wasn't completely desolate. If I ran for it, I could find shelter not too far away.

My heart sank when I saw that the garden was surrounded by a very high wall. Another setback—of course, my coat had been checked. Already, the nights were quite cold, and I would need it.

The only way out was to make a break on our way to the car after dinner. Send Nicholas back to find something I thought I'd left. Then—RUN! And—HIDE!

When we finally got through dinner, and were sipping our *espresso*, I realized that all my attempts at bright conversation and my praise of the excellent cuisine of Northern Italy had been in vain.

Nicholas sighed deeply. "I feel that we are not—how shall I say?—*en rapport*, Lisa. There is something troubling you, which you do not feel you can confide in me. Of

At last, we stopped at a Swiss inn for dinner. The country was deserted, but I had to run for my life!

hungry. With so little cash, it might be quite a while before I could eat again.

"Please order for me," I told Nicholas. "I'm sure whatever you choose will be superb. But shouldn't we call the Thorndykes first? They'll be terribly worried when I don't come back on time."

Nicholas rose from the table abruptly. "Yes, of course," he said. "But I will call and make the apologies—after all, it is my fault." After giving our order to the waiter in rapid French, he left.

Quickly, I asked where the ladies' room was. As usual, it was an antiquated conversion from an upstairs boudoir, far from the gleaming porcelain and rows of telephones of its American counterparts.

The only telephone was connected with a small switchboard downstairs. Did I dare use it? I had barely enough money to make a call to John Allenby, and it was doubtful if I could reach him. Besides, I'd have to pay at the desk downstairs, and that might give away my whole scheme!

Though it was quite dark now, there was a bright moon, and looking out at the surrounding countryside, I could see the contours of the forbidding Alps and their snow-capped

course, it was very *gauche* of me to play this trick. My only desire is that you bear with me until we reach my sister's home, where I am sure all our difficulties can be resolved."

He looked so sad that I was overcome with remorse at the thought of my desperate plan. Impulsively, I reached across the table, and put my hand on his. "If it is to be," I said, looking directly into the unfathomable depths of his dark, probing eyes. "Then I am sure it will happen."

While we waited for our coats, I managed to slip off one earring and drop it into my purse.

Outside, the chauffeur had pulled up to the entrance, ready and waiting, and jumped out to open the door.

"Oh, Nicholas," I cried. "I've lost one of my earrings! I must find it. They were a gift from my parents."

"Stay here in the car," he said. "I will have the people make a search. I'm sure it will be found."

"Perhaps it's somewhere in the parking area," I said to the chauffeur, after Nicholas had gone inside. "Let's look. You cover that side, and I'll cover this one."

Dutifully, he began to look over the ground on one side of the parking

area, which was quite well lighted. And I did the same on the other. But as soon as I reached the edge of the lot, I ducked around the corner of the building, and ran into the open field!

It was rough and full of stones, and I was grateful that I had worn a pair of comfortable shoes with low platforms. I was thankful, too, for all the training I'd had on the track and basketball teams in high school and college.

The moon was high and bright now. I had to run for the woods on the other side of the open field, as fast as I could, to escape detection. Just as I reached woods and at last paused for breath, I could hear a commotion at the inn, and saw people running out. Then—dogs barking! They were going to set them on my trail!

Terrified, I plunged blindly through the woods, until suddenly, my foot slipped. I had almost rushed headlong into a mountain stream! And behind me, I could hear the dogs coming closer.

Once more, my New England upbringing—or maybe it was watching TV westerns—came to the rescue. I remembered how the Indians would wade into water to keep pursuing animals from following their scent. Quickly, I took off my shoes, pulled up my dress and coat to form an apron to hold them and my precious bag, and stepped into the stream.

The ice-cold water was shocking, the bottom full of rough stones, but I managed to inch my way along the bank for quite a distance. My heart sank when I heard the dogs, quite close, and Nicholas' voice shouting, "Allons! Vite!"

Now I could see them at the edge of the bank, upstream. All I could do was cringe in the shadows, close to the bank, to stay out of the moonlight. And I had to stand very still, though the icy water was freezing my legs, it seemed, to the bone.

At least, I was relieved to see that the Indian trick worked. The dogs had lost the scent and stood there, barking in utter confusion. Now, I couldn't waste a minute. I clambered out of the stream, slipped on my shoes, and ran. Vaguely, I grasped the fact that I must make my way back toward the fields, for there, near the cultivated land, I might find at least a farmhouse. To go further into the woods would be disastrous, for I might perish of cold, exposure and hunger.

At last, I came out at the edge of a

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there, holding me tenderly. Once more, he had saved me!

When I regained consciousness, I was in a hospital room, a nurse in starched white hovering over me. A strange reaction penetrated my foggy brain: Why did she look so familiar?

My body ached all over. My arm was bandaged. "W-what happened?" I whispered.

"You're going to be all right," the nurse said, smiling. "A slight concussion, a lot of bruises, and a broken arm we'll have to set when you feel up to it. You were very lucky—you were thrown clear of the truck."

A wave of fear chilled me. "And... Salvatore?" I managed to gasp.

The nurse smiled broadly now. "Not a scratch! He must lead a charmed life. And the man who ran into you paid for all his vegetables, with enough left over to buy a new truck!"

I sank back on the pillow. Nicholas, again! So—it was *he* who had rammed us. Accidentally, or... on purpose?

"He wanted to see you, but the doctor told him to go home and get a good rest. He sends you his best regards."

"Thank you," I said. Dear Salvatore! How glad I was that he wasn't hurt!

"The other gentleman wants to see you, too," the nurse continued, "but first, you'd better see the doctor."

I tried to gather my strength and get my wits about me. I had to tell the doctor *my* side of the story, before Nicholas and the Thorndykes talked him into making me go back with them!

To my amazement, I walked Dr. Gaspard! Now I knew why the nurse had looked familiar. This was the same clinic where my father had died—and Dr. Gaspard had attended him!

I managed a weak smile. "You must think accidents run in our family," I said.

"Thank heaven this one is not so serious," he said, with a smile. "Now tell me—how do you feel?"

"I feel desperate," I blurted.

"Doctor, please help me."

"But my dear young lady, what is the trouble?"

As fast as I could say them, the words came tumbling out—all my fears and suspicions from the time my parents died.

The doctor looked thoughtful, and said nothing. Probably he thought these were merely the demented ravings of a person near hysteria.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I

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demand. "Well, please, please, do me one favor. Let me call my father's executor in London right now. They haven't permitted me to contact him. I *must* reach him, and I'm going to—if I have to run out of this place!"

"Now, now, you must be calm," Dr. Gaspard said. "Mr. Nikonos says you ran away before. Was it for the same reason?"

"Yes!"

"Well, then, I see no harm in your making this call, especially since you've had a slight concussion, and excitement is not good for you."

"Then let me call right now!"

The doctor sighed. "Very well." He called the nurse, who brought me a phone on a long extension cord.

When, at last, I reached John Allenby, the doctor turned to leave. "No!" I called. "I want you to talk to him, too!"

It turned out that John had received no word from anyone about the accident! He was completely shocked and angry.

He assured me that he'd fly to meet me just as soon as he could get all the papers in order. In the meantime, he would send money to the hospital to cover my expenses there,

and until he arrived.

"Will you please explain all this to Dr. Gaspard?" I asked sweetly. "And thank you so much."

I couldn't help but feel both amused and triumphant as I watched Dr. Gaspard's expression change from skepticism, to astonishment, to chagrin, while he listened to John Allenby's tirade. When he hung up the phone, he looked completely shaken.

"This is astounding, Miss Lowell," he said. "It appears that your parents' deaths may actually have been homicide! Please believe that I will cooperate with the authorities in any way I can. But first things first—we must take X-rays of your arm and set it. Then you must have complete rest. Oh, by the way, do you wish to have Mr. Nikonos informed of these developments? Of course, I will say nothing without your permission. But he has been most concerned. In fact, he hasn't left here since we brought you in."

Concerned! Sure—but for his own interests. Still, now that I had the upper hand at last, there was no reason for silence. In fact, we might learn something from his reaction.

"Very well," I said. "You may tell

him."

After the ordeal of setting my arm and putting it in a cast, I fell into a deep sleep, and didn't awake until the next morning! When I did, I found my room filled with flowers, and in the midst of them, dozing in a chair, was Nicholas!

He seemed to sense that I was watching him, for he awoke with a start, and rushed to my bedside.

"Oh Lisa," he said, "I had no idea of the terrible ordeal you have been going through. Now that Dr. Gaspard has told me about it, I want to do all I can to help. But why didn't you confide in me? Why did you run away?"

It wasn't just the flowers, or the ring of sincerity in his voice. I had to admit to myself that what drew me to him was the tenderness, the strength I had felt before. I had to admit that I was in love with Nicholas Nikonos! But the practical, New England side of my nature warned me that I should say nothing until the proper investigations were made.

I took his hand in my one good one, and said gently, "Remember when you asked me to trust you? I might have been much better off if I

Lisa . . . Lisa . . . It was Nicholas' voice, bringing me back to consciousness . . . Nicholas, holding me tenderly in his arms . . . Nicholas, who had saved me . . .



had. And now, I must ask you to trust me—for a little while. And thank you for all you've done—including saving my life for the second time!"

He covered my hand with kisses, held it against his cheek for a moment, and said, "I will trust you, Lisa. I must, because I love you. Rest, now."

He left the room quickly, and I felt a little piqued when I learned that he'd stormed out of the hospital, though I couldn't say I blamed him.

In a few days I was well enough to leave for Zurich, where I was to meet John Allenby—but not before going through an exhausting, and at times harrowing, investigation of my parents' death by the Swiss police. I told them about the missing brooch and earrings, and how the brooch

here. I doubt if it will make you feel any better," he added wryly, "but they've had your friends, the Thornydykes, under surveillance for some time. They were about to close in, but then, you flew the coop, and there went their best witness!"

I groaned. "Oh, what a fool I've been!" Then I felt my heart beating fast as I asked, "But Nicholas Nikonos—how did he get the brooch?"

He shrugged. "He is innocent. He bought it from the Thornydykes for a stiff price, sure that they were reputable dealers. And they were. The people you knew were not the real Lord Cecil and Lady Ellen, but imposters. I have a hunch that the real Thornydykes were buried many years ago."

I shuddered, overcome with

How could I accuse him now? Yet I was certain that Nicholas was involved in the plot to destroy me!

had reappeared as a gift of Nicholas Nikonos. I told them about my father's mysterious last words, "Stop them . . . get the letter." They were baffled. Their thorough search of the wreckage had revealed no jewels or letter. One thing would substantiate my story—finding the brooch in the gorge. They would ask the French police to cooperate by making a search. In the meantime, nothing could be done.

I was relieved to meet John Allenby in Zurich—crisp, dapper and efficient as always. To my surprise, he ushered me to a quiet corner of the hotel dining room, ordered coffee, and asked abruptly, "Miss Lowell, did you know that your father was a secret agent?"

The idea of Daddy, wealthy art dealer and one of the distinguished Lowells of Massachusetts, being a secret agent made me burst out laughing. "Whoever gave you that idea?" I asked.

"Scotland Yard," he replied, and instantly I became as sober as he was. After your call, I thought it wise to seek their advice because of the suspicious nature of his death. To my amazement, they told me that he had volunteered to work with the international police to work with the international police in an effort to break a ring of jewel thieves who have been operating very successfully

remorse because I'd treated Nicholas so badly. Dear Nicholas! I must find him at once!

I rushed upstairs to my suite, determined to call all Europe, if need be. Not far behind me rushed John Allenby, waving papers and gasping, "But you haven't read the will!"

Outside the door, we both stopped cold, at the sound of loud voices inside my suite. Voices I knew well!

There were some words we couldn't understand, then Nicholas' voice, shouting, "You can kill me if you must, but let Lisa go free!"

"Wait. I'll get the police," John whispered, but before he could stop me, I was halfway through the door, shouting, "No! No!"

There was Lady Ellen, disheveled and half-crazed, brandishing a sharp axe! I froze as she turned on me, shrieking, "You couldn't keep out of this! Now you'll die!"

Swiftly, Nicholas moved behind her, pinning her arms and forcing her to drop the axe. Just then, John Allenby arrived with the police, who moved in fast and hustled hwe away. They'd already caught Lord Cecil, heading for the apartment with a gun!

A search at the villa later turned up the missing earrings, as well as the brooch. Daddy had intended to use them as a lure to trap the Thornydykes, but being rather an amateur

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"Will you ever forgive me?" I asked, "What is there to forgive?"

Nicholas said—
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on mine
sealed
our love
forever.

secret agent, never dreamed of the dreadful lengths to which they would go.

Suddenly, the hysteria was over, as all the police filed out of the room, leaving John Allenby, Nicholas and with only an admonition that we must keep them advised of our whereabouts, for we would be needed for further questioning.

No sooner had the door closed, than I collapsed in Nicholas' arms. "Oh, darling, darling," I murmured, my head buried against his chest, "how can you ever forgive me?"

Gently, he lifted my face and looked deep into my eyes, wiping my tears away gently with his handkerchief. "What is there to forgive?" he asked, his own voice close to breaking. "The courage that led you to question my motives and defy them so magnificently, when you had every right to do so? The wonder of finding a woman so selfless that a few moments ago, she rushed to save me, when it might have cost her own life?"

He drew me close, and now, with his face against mine, we could feel our tears of joy in our new-found love, flowing and mingling, unashamed.

"Lisa . . ." Nicholas whispered.

"You are the answer to my prayers, the woman I had nearly given up hope of ever finding. Lisa . . . will you marry me?"

It was as if my whole being responded as I cried, "Oh, yes! Yes!" Then our lips met in a long, lingering kiss that, more than any ceremony, sealed our vows of love forever.

At last we broke apart, half-laughing, half-crying—two of the happiest lovers in the world. Nicholas led me to the couch, and insisted that I lie down. "You've had a dreadful time, my darling," he said. "Now, I'll call for tea and brandy to be sent up, and we'll all relax a bit before dinner."

Discreet as always, John Allenby had disappeared into the bedroom, where we could hear him talking on the phone. Now, after a hesitant peek to make sure that no more passionate love scenes were going on, he joined us.

"I've been following this thing up with some calls," he announced in that maddeningly methodical way of his. Just then, the tea and brandy arrived, and he wouldn't say another word until I had been served my tea and he and Nicholas were sipping their brandy, and all of us were munching the tiny sandwiches and cakes, which I had to admit tasted very, very good—especially since none of us had eaten for a long time. But finally, I could contain myself no longer.

"John, please!" I begged. "Tell us what you learned. What I'd like to know, first, is how the Thorndykes got into my suite!"

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"That was easy," John said, pausing to take another sip of brandy. "The minute they realized that you weren't going to come back to the villa with Nicholas, they suspected that you—or both of you—would come back to the scene of the accident to investigate your parents' death. So they drove to the clinic with the idea of claiming that you were still unbalanced from shock and should be returned to their care. But when they got there, they were confronted by this person—" he smiled at Nicholas—"and Dr. Gaspard, both of them now convinced that the Thorndykes were villains—but alas, at that point they had no evidence to hold them. So the Thorndykes drove off triumphantly, and came here, figuring, quite correctly, that when you were released from the hospital you would come here to continue the investigations. They knew your parents always stayed at this hotel. Then, when they found you were registered, they took the suite next-door."

"Oh!" I gasped. "Then they came in from the adjoining terrace!"
John nodded. "Exactly. And

waited there to kill you. They'd decided bullets would be too obvious—that's why Lady Ellen had the axe. They planned to threaten you with it, then cut your wrists to make it look like suicide."

I shuddered, and reached for Nicholas' hand. "B-but, they were going to kill Nicholas," I stammered. "W-weren't they?"

"Yes," John said soberly. "At that point, they had no choice. They realized how much he cared for you, and that, with all his resources, he would never let them go. They didn't know he would come knocking at your door so soon. But when he did, they knew they couldn't back down."

I edged closer to Nicholas, and I think both of us were a bit numb, thinking of the narrow escape we'd had.

"Thank God," John Allen said, with more genuine feeling than I'd thought him capable of, "we got here in time!"

Nicholas smiled. "I have a good idea," he said. "I think we should all leave this place, so filled with terrible memories, as soon as possible. And I can't think of a better place to go

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than my sister's villa at Gstaad. She will be most happy to have you both as her guests."

Impulsively, I took his hand. "Oh, Nicholas," I said, "if I'd only trusted you, and gone with you to your sister's, so much of this terror might have been avoided."

"No, Lisa," he said. "I think, in some strange way, it was meant to be. Because, until the Thorndykes were brought to justice, there would have been barriers of suspicion between us. Now—" he looked deep into my eyes—"there are no barriers at all."

"No," I sighed blissfully, snuggling my head against his chest.

We drove to the villa of Nicholas' sister, Melina, the next morning. It was a dream home, high in the mountains, furnished with every luxury.

I liked Melina instantly. She was, I imagined, a few years older than I, and her face, while not beautiful, as Nicholas' was handsome, was sensitive and expressive.

When she smiled, she seemed to be filled with an inner radiance that lit the whole room—and she smiled, warmly, when Nicholas introduced me as his future wife.

"I am so happy," she said. "I was afraid my brother would never find someone like you."

My heart went out to her. I could sense her own unhappiness, with the same problem that had faced Nicholas—would a man ever love her for herself? I could tell that she had met only fortune-hunters, and was determined, that, somehow, I would help her to find happiness.

We sat in the living room at the villa, Nicholas and I, dutifully listening to John Allenby, who had finally got to read my father's will like a true London barrister, though, while John pored over the papers, we stole quick, delicious little kisses.

At last, he finished, and summed up, seriously, "What this means, Miss Lowell, is that everything belonging to your parents goes to you. There are no other heirs."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Why, what on earth do you mean?" John was clearly upset. He hated anything that wasn't absolutely correct.

"Just what I said," I answered. "Oh, and there's another mistake. Since last weekend, it's not Miss Lowell anymore. It's Mrs. Nicholas Nikonos."

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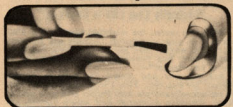
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- "How a man, growing bald, claims he renewed the life of his hair with this secret!"
- "How a woman used it to bring her mate to her, without asking!"
- "How another woman summoned a man to her—out of thin air!"
- "How a man heard the unspoken thoughts of others with this secret!"
- "How a woman saw behind walls and over great distances, with it!"
- "How a man broadcast silent commands that others had to obey!"

Let us now clearly demonstrate to you the scientific basis behind the new wonderworking, miracle of TELECULT POWER!

"How Telecult Power Brings Any Desire Easily And Automatically!"

For many years, Reese P. Dubin dreamed of a way to call upon the invisible forces at work all around us. He spent a lifetime digging and searching for the secret. These investigations brought him knowledge that goes back to the dim recesses of the past.

One day, to his astonishment, he discovered that he could actually broadcast silent commands, which others instantly obeyed. Using the secret he tells you about in this book, he tried it time after time—commanding others to sleep, get up and come to him, take or not take... and act according to his silent wishes! It worked every time!

Working relentlessly from this evidence, Reese P. Dubin succeeded in perfecting a new kind of instrument—called a Tele-Photo Transmitter—that concentrates your thoughts, and sends them like a streaking bullet to their destination!

OTHERS OBEY SILENT COMMANDS! Writing of the success of this method, one user reports the following experience:

"I willed her to pick up and eat a biscuit from a plate in a corner of the room. She did so. I willed her to shake hands with her mother. She rushed to her mother and stroked her hands..."

"I willed her to nod. She stood still and bent her head. I willed her to clap her hands, play a note on the piano, write her name, all of which she did. "No one can escape the power of this method," says Mr. Dubin. "Everybody—high or low, ignorant or wise—all are subject to its spell! And unless the person is told what's being done, he will think the thoughts are his own!"

HEARS THE THOUGHTS OF OTHERS! Experimenting further with the Tele-Photo Transmitter, Reese P. Dubin soon found that he could

"tune in" and HEAR the unspoken thoughts of others. He says, "At first, these hearing impressions startled me, and I took them for actual speech, until I realized that people don't usually say such things aloud! And their lips remained closed."

SEES BEYOND WALLS, AND OVER GREAT DISTANCES! Then he discovered he could pick up actual sights, from behind walls and over great distances! And when he "tuned in" he could see actual living scenes before him—as clear as the picture on a television screen!

MAKES WOMAN APPEAR—SEEMINGLY OUT OF THIN AIR! With mounting excitement, Reese P. Dubin launched one of the most exciting experiments in the history of psychic research. He wanted to see if the Tele-Photo Transmitter could bring him an actual material object! He chose, for this experiment, the seemingly impossible: an actual living person!

He simply focused the Tele-Photo Transmitter, by dialing the object of his desire. In a flash the door burst open, and there—standing before him, as real as life—was his long-lost cousin!

He stared and rubbed his eyes, and looked again! There—smiling, with arms outstretched in greeting—stood living proof of the most astounding discovery of the Century!

Dial Any Treasure!

You'll see how to use the Tele-Photo Transmitter, to summon your desires. This special instrument—your personal dial—has no wires, and no electricity. "Yet," says Mr. Dubin, "it can teleport desires, swiftly from the invisible world!"

When you dial your desire—whether for riches, love, or secret knowledge—you capture its invisible, photoplasmic form, at which point "it starts to materialize!" says Mr. Dubin.

"Telecult Power can work seeming miracles in your life," says Mr. Dubin. "With it, it is possible to achieve—without cost—any desire! You can sit back, relax, and watch this powerful secret go to work!"

"Instantly Your Life Is Changed!"

With this secret, the mightiest force in the Universe is at your command! "Simply ask for anything you want," says Mr. Dubin, "whether it be riches, love, fine possessions, power, friends, or secret knowledge!"

Suppose you had dialed Photo-Form #2 for Jewels, for example. That's what Margaret C. did, in an actual example Mr. Dubin tells you about. Rich, glittering diamonds and jewels literally appeared at her feet: a pair of gold earrings, which she noticed that morning... a surprise gift of a pearl necklace, and matching silver bracelets... a beautiful platinum ring set with emeralds and diamonds, dropped on her front lawn!

"Almost overnight," says Mr. Dubin, "it can start to multiply riches, bring romance and love to you—draw favors, gifts, new friends... or anything else asked for! It isn't necessary for you to understand why. What is important is that it has already worked for many others... men and women in all walks of life... worked every time... and it will work for you, too!"

Brings A Pocket Full Of Money!

You'll see how Jerry D. used this method. He was broke a week before payday. All he did, says Mr. Dubin, was to dial Photo-Form #1. Suddenly he felt a bulge in his pocket. Lo and behold! He took out a roll of money—... fives, tens, twenties... and more! Obviously, it had been placed there—but when? And by whom?

A Brand New Car Comes!

Marty C., a taxi driver, reports that he just dialed Photo-Form #4, sat back, relaxed, and waited for things to happen. In a short time, great excitement filled the house. His wife came hurrying in, saying, "We won it! We won a car and a cash prize! They just delivered it!" He got up and went to the window. There, big and beautiful,

standing in the driveway, was a brand new Cadillac!

Brings Mate Without Asking!

Mrs. Conrad B. reports that she was tired of "pursuing" her husband, as she called it. She wanted him to volunteer to do the things she longed for, take her places, show affection. But he hadn't looked at her in years. He would fall asleep immediately after supper, or watched the ball games, or read the papers. Secretly Mrs. B. decided to try this method. She dialed Photo-Form #9 for Love! Instantly, her husband's attitude changed from boredom to interest and enthusiasm. And from that day forward, he showered her with kindness and affection! It was like a miracle come true!

The Power Of This Method!

There are so many personal experiences which I could recount, stories of healing, wealth, and happiness with this secret, that I find myself wanting to tell all of them at once. Here are just a few...

• **REGAINS HAIR GROWTH:** Walter C. had a shiny bald head with just a fringe of white hair showing around the edges. He tried this method, and soon his hair began to regrow. The new hair came in thick, dark, and lustrous!

• **ROLLS DICE 50 TIMES WITHOUT MISSING ONCE!** You'll see how this secret gave Albert J. the power to roll the dice 50 times, without missing once, and—for the first time in the history of Las Vegas—walk away with \$500,000!

• **DISSOLVES ALL EVIL!** You'll see how this amazing secret revealed to Lawrence M., the people who were trying to make him look silly by work—actually revealed their secret thoughts—made them confess and apologize!

If TELECULT POWER can do all this for others, what riches, what rewards, what amazing results can it also bring to you?

MAIL NO RISK COUPON TODAY!

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Gentlemen: Please rush me a copy of TELECULT POWER by Reese P. Dubin! I understand the book is mine for only \$2.98 complete. I may examine it a full 30 days at your risk or money back.

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"They had to pay me to show a photo of myself 7 days ago... Not now!"



Oct. 21
Before
Weight 128 lbs.
Waist 30 in.

(Photos guaranteed
unretouched)

Oct. 28
**After
7 Days**
Weight 118 lbs.
Waist 25 in.

(Photos guaranteed
unretouched)

"I saw and
felt slimming
results in
only 3 days."

"In only 7 days, I lost 5 inches off my waist and 10 pounds of excess weight."

Janette Coupur tells us... Case #R-005
"I have to look in the mirror to believe it! Those unsightly pounds and inches are gone.... In only 7 days, without rigid dieting or complicated exercises."

Here are the 6 reasons why you, like Janette, can start looking years slimmer... in 14 days... if you start using our '5' Minute Body Shaper Plan right away!

1. It concentrates its slimming action on your fatty areas; waist, hips, upper thighs — that give you an aging look. Because it works most of your muscles gracefully — not body part by body part — the Plan stimulates faster slimming action, to help you start fashioning a more youthful looking figure in 14 days.

2. Simple to use. No disrobing. Attach is to any door knob, stretch out comfortably on the floor. Do one '5' Minute continuous, rhythmic, enjoyable exercise, twice daily, whenever you have the time, even while watching TV.

3. Designed to slim fatty problem areas. Choose from 4 different '5' Minute exercises, each created to help slim down the problem fatty deposit areas of your figure in 14 days.

4. No rigid dieting. We suggest you temporarily eat 20% less until you reach your normal weight, without giving up any of the foods you love — eat Ice Cream, Cakes, Pasta, whatever! (It's all in the guide).

5. Safer and saves time. No more running to gyms for complicated, exhausting workouts that can strain you. This simple '5' Minute Plan, that you do at home, leaves you refreshed.

6. Weighs only 16 ounces. Fits any wallet size case. Stores anywhere. Travels with you so you never have to miss a slimming session. Remember, it's the daily sessions that firm, shape and fashion you a more youthful looking figure.

It's Fun With Results... "5" Minutes And Out.

**THE SECRET WHY IT BEATS
FASTING ALONE, MAKING YOUR FIGURE
LOOK YEARS YOUNGER.**

Fasting programs, when causing weight loss, unlike our plan usually burn off more active tissue (muscles) which can cause your skin to wrinkle. Patent Pending © Copyright Joe Weider, 1974.

muscles to sag and create dragging fatigue. Our Plan increases active tissue growth — through the use of the '5' Minute exercise — while concentrating greater fat loss by (exercise and temporary 20 percent food reduction) making you look years younger as you slim. Within the first '5' minutes you use the exerciser, you start burning off fat, speeding up your metabolism to help burn up stored calories, releasing excess water. Helps curb your appetite without suppressants. Increases energy and well being. It's so simple and enjoyable a Plan to follow, we guarantee you can stay with it remaining slim without regaining those inches and pounds. It can put an end to your "gain-and-loss-cycles."

**USE OUR '5' MINUTE TOTAL BODY SHAPER
PLAN FOR 14 DAYS AND WE GUARANTEE YOU
THESE RESULTS:**
"You Will Lose Inches and Pounds. Improve Your Vitality, Energy, Fitness, Posture, Work Off Body Tensions, Feel and Look Better and Younger — All To Your Satisfaction Within 14 Days — Or Your \$9.95 Will Be Refunded."

EXPERTS AND CUSTOMERS AGREE:
It's the no-nonsense way to shape up fast! Scientific reports and many of our 600,000 customers inform us that sauna wraps, inflated belts,

weighted belts and other "effortless exercisers" are of little or no value in firming, shaping and beautifying your figure. "YOU MUST WORK OFF THE INCHES," experts say. We believe, and results prove, our's is the simplest, safest, most enjoyable Plan to do it.

Here's a sampling of what the customers who have shaped up on our Plan tell us happened to them: "I lost 25 pounds, 5½ inches off my waist in 14 days," G. C. "Lost 32 pounds, 6½ inches off my waist in 21 days," M. F. "I lost 7 pounds and 5½ inches off my waistline in 9 days," L. S.

START SHAPING UP NOW!

It is America's most successful body slimmer and shaper. 600,000 customers have purchased our '5' Minute Plan to slim down fast. Results are proven and notarized. Our guarantee to you is in writing. Experts agree our plan works — and works fast. Now, can you think of any reason for not ordering your '5' Minute Body Shaper Plan and start slimming down today?

Satisfaction Guaranteed!!!

"Use our improved '5' Minute Total Body Shaper Plan for 14 days! See what it can do for you! If it is not what we say it is, simply return it to us, in good condition, for your \$9.95 refund."

Weights 16 ounces.



Joe Weider! Dept. AA/E
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I have a lot of pounds and inches to lose. You promise that I will feel glorious and begin to look slimmer in just 3 days.

☐ I am enclosing \$9.95 plus \$1.00 for shipping and handling.

☐ Check, ☐ Money order, ☐ Cash. (Calif. res. add 6% sales tax.) Please allow 3 to 4 weeks for delivery.

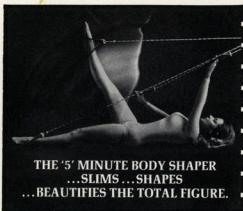
Rush '5' Minute Total Body Shaper and Illustrated Guide — in plain package to...

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City.....

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**THE '5' MINUTE BODY SHAPER
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...BEAUTIFIES THE TOTAL FIGURE.**

IN CANADA: 5 Minute Body Shaper, 2875 Bates Road, Montreal, Quebec.

IN ENGLAND: 5 Minute Body Shaper, Craven House, 99A Park Lane, London W1Y-3TA

IN AUSTRALIA: 5 Minute Body Shaper, Riley McKay Pty. Ltd., P.O. Box 417, Manly, NSW 2095

HERE'S HOW

your lashes
can look thick,
thicker, thickest.

Great-Lash, the protein mascara with the unique Builder-Brush, builds rich, full body onto every tiny lash with just a few quick strokes... so it's easy to put even skimpy lashes in the thick of things. The microscope proves the difference. See your lashes look as thick and luxurious as you've always wanted. Prove to yourself what the microscope shows so clearly.



Left: An eyelash
before Great-Lash.

Right: An eyelash
after Great-Lash.

Actual unretouched microscope
photo 20 times actual size.



Great-Lash
Maybelline
Fine make-up sensibly priced.