

BETTY NEELS



116

THE DAUGHTER
OF THE MANOR

Betty Neels
The Daughter of the Manor
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Аннотация

Mills & Boon presents the complete Betty Neels collection. Timeless tales of heart-warming romance by one of the world's best-loved romance authors. Why did James keep helping her? It was deeply irritating to Leonora Crosby that she was always caught out in awkward moments by the new village doctor, James Galbraith. It shouldn't have mattered—she was engaged to Tony, after all!—but James proved a stalwart support as Leonora did her best to keep her parents' decrepit but much-loved manor house running smoothly. All this made her begin to doubt the wisdom of her engagement. But there was little point in admitting that she loved James, when he showed so little sign of caring for her...

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“And you will lunch with me, Leonora?” Dr. Galbraith asked.

“It is the least I can do to make amends for spoiling your quiet day,” Dr. Galbraith continued. “Besides, you’re badly in need of a wash and brush-up.”

It was hardly a flattering reason for being asked to lunch. Leonora had half a mind to refuse, but curiosity to see his house and find out something about him got the better of her resentment, and then common sense came to the rescue and she laughed. He was offering practical help and she was hungry and, as he had pointed out, badly in need of a good wash.

“Thank you—that would be nice,” she told him coolly.

About the Author

Romance readers around the world were sad to note the passing of BETTY NEELS in June 2001. Her career spanned thirty years, and she continued to write into her ninetieth year. To her millions of fans, Betty epitomized the romance writer, and yet she began writing almost by accident. She had retired from nursing, but her inquiring mind still sought stimulation. Her new career was born when she heard a lady in her local library bemoaning the lack of good romance novels. Betty's first book, *Sister Peters in Amsterdam*, was published in 1969, and she eventually completed 134 books. Her novels offer a reassuring warmth that was very much a part of her own personality. She was a wonderful writer, and she will be greatly missed. Her spirit and genuine talent will live on in all her stories.

The Daughter of the Manor

Betty Neels



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CHAPTER ONE

THE village of Pont Magna, tucked into a fold of the Mendip Hills, was having its share of February weather. Sleet, icy rain, a biting wind and a sharp frost had culminated in lanes and roads like skating rinks, so that the girl making her way to the village trod with care.

She was a tall girl with a pretty face, quantities of dark hair bundled into a woolly cap, her splendid proportions hidden under an elderly tweed coat, and she was wearing stout wellies—suitable wear for the weather but hardly glamorous.

The lane curved ahead of her and she looked up sharply as a car rounded it, so that she didn't see the ridge of frozen earth underfoot, stumbled, lost her footing and sat down with undignified suddenness.

The car slowed, came to a halt and the driver got out, heaved her onto her feet without effort and remarked mildly, 'You should look where you're going.'

'Of course I was looking where I was going.' The girl pulled her cap straight. 'You had no business coming round that corner so quietly...'

She tugged at her coat, frowning as various painful areas about her person made themselves felt.

'Can I give you a lift?'

She sensed his amusement and pointed out coldly, 'You're

going the opposite way.’ She added, ‘You’re a stranger here?’

‘Er-yes.’

Although she waited he had no more to say; he only stood there looking down at her, so she said matter-of-factly, ‘Well, thank you for stopping. Goodbye.’

When he didn’t answer she looked at him and found him smiling. He was good-looking—more than that, handsome—with a splendid nose, a firm mouth and very blue eyes. She found their gaze disconcerting.

‘I’m sorry if I was rude. I was taken by surprise.’

‘Just as I have been,’ he replied.

An apt remark, she reflected as she walked away from him, but somehow it sounded as though he had meant something quite different. When she reached the bend in the lane she looked back. He was still standing there, watching her.

Pont Magna wasn’t a large village; it had a green, a church much too big for it, a main street wherein was the Village Stores and post office, pleasant cottages facing each other, a by-lane or two leading to other cottages and half a dozen larger houses—the vicarage, old Captain Morris’s house at the far end of the street, and several comfortable dwellings belonging to retired couples. A quiet place in quiet countryside, with Wells to the south and Frome to the east and Bath to the north.

Its rural surroundings were dotted by farms and wide fields. Since the village was off a main road tourists seldom found their way there, and at this time of the year the village might just as

well have been a hundred miles from anywhere. It had a cheerful life of its own; people were sociable, titbits of gossip were shared, and, since it was the only place to meet, they were shared in Mrs Pike's shop.

There were several ladies there now, standing with their baskets over their arms, listening to that lady—a stout, cheerful body with a great deal of frizzy grey hair and small, shrewd eyes.

'Took bad, sudden, like!' she exclaimed. 'Well, we all knew he was going to retire, didn't we, and there'd be a new doctor? All arranged, wasn't it? I seen 'im when 'e came to look the place over. 'Andsome too.' She gave a chuckle. 'There'll be a lot of lady patients for 'im, wanting to take a look. Lovely motor car too.'

She beamed round her audience. 'Would never 'ave seen 'im myself if I 'adn't been coming back from Wells and stopped off to get me pills at Dr Fleming's. There 'e was, a great chap. I reckon 'e'll be taking over smartish, like, now Dr Fleming's took bad and gone to 'ospital.'

This interesting bit of news was mulled over while various purchases were made, but finally the last customer went, leaving Mrs Pike to stack tins of baked beans and rearrange packets of biscuits. She turned from this boring job as the door opened.

'Miss Leonora—walked, 'ave you? And it's real nasty underfoot. You could 'ave phoned and Jim could 'ave fetched whatever you wanted up to the house later.'

The girl pulled off her cap and allowed a tangle of curly hair to escape. 'Morning, Mrs Pike. I felt like a walk even though it's

bestly weather. Mother wants one or two things—an excuse to get out...’

I’m not surprised, thought Mrs Pike; poor young lady stuck up there in that great gloomy house with her mum and dad, and that young man of hers hardly ever there. She ought to be out dancing.

She said out loud, ‘Let me have your list, miss, and I’ll put it together. Try one of them apples while you’re waiting. Let’s hope this weather gives over so’s we can get out and about. That Mr Beamish of yours coming for the weekend, is ’e?’

‘Well, I shouldn’t think so unless the roads get better.’ The girl twiddled the solitaire diamond on her finger and just for a moment looked unhappy. But only for a moment. ‘I dare say we shall have a glorious spring...’

Mrs Pike, weighing cheese, glanced up. ‘Getting wed then?’ she wanted to know.

Leonora smiled. Mrs Pike was the village gossip but she wasn’t malicious, and although she passed on any titbits she might have gleaned she never embellished them. She was a nice old thing and Leonora had known her for almost all of her life.

‘We haven’t decided, Mrs Pike.’

‘I like a nice Easter wedding meself,’ said Mrs Pike. ‘Married on Easter Monday, we were—lovely day it was too.’ She gave a chuckle. ‘Poor as church mice we were too. Not that that matters.’

It would matter to Tony, reflected Leonora; he was something in the City, making money and intent on making still more. To

Leonora, who had been brought up surrounded by valuable but shabby things in an old house rapidly falling into disrepair, and who was in the habit of counting every penny twice, this seemed both clever and rather daunting, for it seemed to take up so much of Tony's life. Even on his rare visits to her home he brought a briefcase with him and was constantly interrupted by his phone.

She had protested mildly from time to time and he had told her not to fuss, that he needed to keep in touch with the markets. 'I'll be a millionaire—a multimillionaire,' he told her. 'You should be grateful, darling—think of all the lovely clothes you'll be able to buy.'

Looking down at her tweed skirt and wellies, she supposed that her lack of pretty clothes sometimes irked him and she wondered what he saw in her to love enough to want to marry her. The family name, perhaps—they had no hereditary title but the name was old and respected—and there was still the house and the land around it. Her father would never part with either.

It was a thought which scared her but which she quickly dismissed as nonsense. Tony loved her, she wore his ring, they would marry and set up house together. It was a bit vague at present but she hoped they wouldn't have to live in London; he had a flat there which she had never seen but which he assured her he would give up when they married. And he had told her that when they were married he would put her home back on its original footing.

When she had protested that her father might not allow that,

he had explained patiently that he would be one of the family and surely her father would permit him to see to it that the house and land were kept as their home should be. 'After all,' he had pointed out to her, 'it will eventually be the home of our son—your parents' grandson...'

She had never mentioned that to either her mother or her father. How like Tony, she thought lovingly—so generous and caring, ready to spend his money on restoring her home...

Mrs Pike's voice interrupted her thoughts. 'Pink salmon or the red, Miss Leonora?'

'Oh, the pink, Mrs Pike—fishcakes, you know.'

Mrs Pike nodded. 'Very tasty they are too.' Like the rest of the village she knew how hard up the Crosby family were. There never had been much money and Sir William had lost almost all of what had been left in some City financial disaster. A crying shame, but what a good thing that Miss Leonora's young man had plenty of money.

She put the groceries into a carrier bag and watched Leonora make her way down the icy street. She had pushed her hair back under her cap and really, from the back, she looked like a tramp. Only when you could see her face, thought Mrs Pike, did you know she wasn't anything of the sort.

Leonora went into the house through one of the side doors. There were several of these; the house, its oldest part very old indeed, had been added to in more prosperous times and, although from the front it presented a solid Georgian facade

with imposing doors and large windows, round the back, where succeeding generations had added a room here, a passage there, a flight of unnecessary stairs, windows of all shapes and sizes, there were additional doors through which these various places could be reached.

The door Leonora entered led through to a gloomy, rather damp passage to the kitchen—a vast room housing a dresser of gigantic proportions, a scrubbed table capable of seating a dozen persons, an assortment of cupboards, and rows of shelves carrying pots and pans. There was a dog snoozing before the Aga stove but he got up, shook himself and came to meet her as she put her bag on the table.

She bent to fondle him, assuring him that no doubt the butcher's van would be round and there would be a bone for him. 'And as soon as it's a bit warmer we'll go for a real walk,' she promised him. He was an old dog, a Labrador, and a quick walk in the small park at the back of the house was all that he could manage in bad weather.

The door on the other side of the kitchen opened and a short, stout woman came in, followed by a tabby cat, and Leonora turned to smile at her.

'It's beastly out, Nanny. I'll take Wilkins into the garden for a quick run.' She glanced at the clock. 'I'll see to lunch when I get back.'

Nanny nodded. She had a nice cosy face, pink-cheeked and wrinkled, and grey hair in a tidy bun. 'I'll finish upstairs. I've

taken in the coffee—it's hot on the Aga when you get in.'

Wilkins didn't much care for the weather but he trotted obediently down one of the paths to where a door in the brick wall opened onto the park—quite a modest park with a small stream running along its boundary and clumps of trees here and there. They went as far as the stream and then turned thankfully for home.

The house was a hotchpotch of uneven roofs and unmatched windows at the back but it had a certain charm, even in winter months. Of course many of its rooms were shut up now, but Leonora conceded that if you didn't look too closely at peeled paint and cracks it was quite imposing. She loved it, every crack and broken tile, every damp wall and creaking floorboard.

Back in the kitchen once more, Wilkins, paws wiped and his elderly person towelled warm, subsided before the Aga again, and Leonora hung her coat on a hook near the door, exchanged her wellies for a pair of scuffed slippers and set about getting lunch—soup, already simmering on the stove, a cheese soufflé and cheese and biscuits.

Carrying a tray of china and silver to the dining room, she shivered as she went along the passage from the kitchen. It would be sensible to have their meals in the kitchen, but her mother and father wouldn't hear of it even though the dining room was as cold as the passage, if not colder.

'Mustn't lower our standards,' her father had said when she had suggested it. So presently they sat down to lunch at an elegantly

laid table, supping soup which had already been cooling by the time it got to the dining room. As for the soufflé, Leonora ran from the oven to the table, remembering to slow down at the dining-room door, and set it gently on the table for her mother to serve, thankful that it hadn't sunk in its dish.

'Delicious,' pronounced Lady Crosby. 'You are such a good cook, darling.' She sighed faintly, remembering the days when there had been a cook in the kitchen and a manservant to wait at table. What a blessing it was that Leonora was so splendid at organising the household and keeping things running smoothly.

Lady Crosby, a charming and sweet-tempered woman who managed to avoid doing anything as long as there was someone else to do it, reflected comfortably that her daughter would make a good wife for Tony—such a good man, who had already hinted that once they were married he would see to it that there would be someone to take Leonora's place in the house. She was a lucky girl.

She glanced at her daughter and frowned; it was unfortunate, but Leonora was looking shabby.

'Haven't you got anything else to wear other than that skirt and sweater, dear?' she asked.

'Well, Mother, it's awful outside—no weather to dress up. Besides, I promised Nanny I'd help her with the kitchen cupboards this afternoon.'

Her father looked up. 'Why can't that woman who comes up from the village see to them?'

Leonora forbore from telling him that Mrs Pinch hadn't been coming for a month or more. Her wages had been a constant if small drain on the household purse, and when her husband had broken an arm at work she had decided to give up her charring and Leonora had seen the chance to save a pound or two by working a bit harder herself.

She said now, 'Well, Father, I like to go through the stores myself once in a while.' A remark which dispelled any faint doubts her parents might have had.

'Do wear gloves, dear,' observed her mother. 'Remember it's the Willoughbys' dinner party this evening—your hands, you know!'

The Willoughbys lived just outside the village in a small Georgian house in beautiful grounds, and since they had plenty of money it was beautifully maintained. They were elderly, good-natured and hospitable and Leonora enjoyed going there.

The cupboards dealt with, she got tea with Nanny and carried the tray through to the drawing room. Even on a cold winter's day it looked beautiful, with its tall windows, plaster ceiling and vast fireplace in which burned a log fire that was quite inadequate to warm the room. The furniture was beautiful too, polished lovingly, the shabby upholstery brushed and repaired.

Her mother was playing patience and her father was sitting at a table by the window, writing. She set the tray down on a small table near her mother's chair and went to put more logs on the fire.

‘I thought we might give a small dinner party quite soon,’ observed Lady Crosby. ‘We owe several, don’t we? You might start planning a menu, darling.’

‘How many?’ asked Leonora, humouring her parent, wondering where the money was to come from. Dinner parties cost money. They could pawn the silver, she supposed with an inward chuckle; on the other hand she could make an enormous cottage pie and offer it to their guests...

‘Oh, eight, I think, don’t you? No, it would have to be seven or nine, wouldn’t it? We can’t have odd numbers.’

Lady Crosby sipped her tea. ‘What shall you wear this evening?’

‘Oh, the blue...’

‘Very nice, dear, such a pretty colour; I have always liked that dress.’

So did I, reflected Leonora, when I first had it several years ago.

Getting into it later that evening, she decided that she hated it. Indeed, it was no longer the height of fashion, but it was well cut and fitted her splendid shape exactly where it should. She added the gold chain she had had for her twenty-first birthday, slipped Tony’s ring on her finger and took a last dissatisfied look at her person, wrapped herself in a velvet coat she had worn to her twenty-first-birthday dance, and went downstairs to join her parents.

Sir William was impatiently stomping up and down the hall.

‘Your mother has no idea of time,’ he complained. ‘Go and hurry her up, will you, Leonora? I’ll get the car round.’

Lady Crosby was fluttering around her bedroom looking for things—her evening bag, the special hanky which went with it, her earrings...

Leonora found the bag and the hanky, assured her mother that she was wearing the earrings and urged her down to the hall and out into the cold dark evening, while Nanny went to open the car door.

The car, an elderly Daimler which Sir William had sworn that he would never part with despite the drain on his income, was at the entrance; Leonora bundled her mother into the front seat and got into the back, where she whiled away the brief journey thinking up suitable topics of conversation to get her through dinner. She would know everyone there, of course, but it was as well to be prepared....

The Willoughbys welcomed them warmly for they had known each other for a long time. Leonora glanced round her as they went into the drawing room, seeing familiar faces, smiling and exchanging greetings; there was the vicar and his wife, old Colonel Howes and his daughter, the Merediths from the next village whose land adjoined her father’s, Dr Fleming, looking ill, and his wife and, standing with them, the man in the car who had witnessed her undignified tumble.

‘You haven’t met our new doctor, have you, dear?’ asked Mrs Willoughby, and saved Leonora the necessity of answering by

adding, 'James Galbraith.' Mrs Willoughby smiled at him. 'This is Leonora Crosby—she lives at the Big House—you must come and meet her parents.'

Leonora offered a hand. Her 'How do you do?' was uttered with just the right amount of pleasant interest, but it had chilly undertones.

His hand was large and cool and firm and she felt compelled to look at him. Very handsome, she conceded—rather sleepy blue eyes and very fair hair, a splendid nose and a rather thin mouth. He was tall too, which was nice, she reflected; so often she found herself looking down on people from her five feet ten inches. Now she had to look up, quite a long way too!

'Six foot four?' she wondered out loud.

The Flemings had turned away to speak to someone else. Dr Galbraith's mouth quivered faintly. 'Five, actually. Are you feeling sore?'

She said austere, 'I hardly think that is a question I need to answer, Dr Galbraith.'

She had gone rather pink and glanced around her, on the point of making an excuse to go and talk to the vicar. She was stopped by his saying, 'I speak in my professional capacity, Miss Crosby; presumably you will be one of my patients.'

'I am never ill,' said Leonora, unknowingly tempting fate.

Mrs Willoughby had joined them again. 'Getting to know each other?' she wanted to know. 'That's nice—take Leonora in to dinner, will you, James?' She tapped his sleeve. 'You don't mind

if I call you James? Though if ever I need your skill I'll be sure to call you Doctor.'

Leonora had been sipping her sherry; now she put the glass down. 'I really must circulate, and Nora Howes is dying to come and talk to you.'

He looked amused. 'Oh? How do you know that?'

'Woman's intuition.' She gave him a brief smile and crossed the room and he watched her go, thinking that a splendid creature such as she deserved a better dress.

She had been right about Nora Howes, who laid a hand on his sleeve, threw her head back and gave him an arch look. Older than Leonora, he supposed, as thin as a washboard and wearing a rather too elaborate dress for a dinner party in the country. But he could be charming when he liked and Nora relinquished him reluctantly as they went in to dinner, and he turned with relief to Leonora as the soup was served. Not a girl he could get interested in, he reflected—far too matter-of-fact and outspoken—but at least she didn't simper.

It was a round table so conversation, after a time, became more or less general. He had Mrs Fleming on his other side, a quiet middle-aged woman, a good deal younger than her husband and anxious about him.

'I didn't want him to come,' she confided quietly, 'but he insisted. 'He's not well; he's going into hospital tomorrow.'

He said gently, 'You mustn't worry too much, Mrs Fleming. If he leads a quiet life for the next few months and keeps to his

treatment he'll get a great deal better.'

She smiled at him. 'If anyone else had said that I should have supposed them to be pulling the wool over my eyes, but because it's you I believe what you've told me.'

'Thank you. I wish all patients were as trusting. Don't hesitate to call me if you're worried.'

'I won't. It's so nice that you're going to live at Buntings—such a lovely old house and it's been empty far too long.'

She turned to speak to her neighbour and presently everyone went back to the drawing room to drink coffee and gossip. It might be a small village but there was always something happening.

The party broke up shortly before eleven o'clock and since it was cold outside no one lingered to talk once they'd left the house. Sir William unlocked his car door and glanced at the Rolls-Royce parked beside him.

Who's the lucky owner? he wondered, and saw Dr Fleming getting in.

'Good Lord, Bill, have you come into a fortune?' he called.

'No, no, James owns it. Rather nice, isn't it?' He disappeared inside and Sir William got behind his wheel and backed the car. 'Lucky young devil,' he said to no one in particular. 'Come up on the pools, has he?'

Leonora made some vague reply. She was thinking about Tony. She hadn't seen him for a week or so; perhaps he would come at the weekend. She hoped so; she felt strangely unsettled

and just seeing him would reassure her—she wasn't sure why she wanted to be reassured, but that didn't matter; Tony would set her world to rights again.

He did come, driving up on Saturday afternoon in his Porsche, and if his kiss and hug were lacking the fervour of a man in love she didn't notice because she was glad to see him.

He went indoors with her to meet her parents and make himself agreeable and then they went for a walk. He took her arm and talked and she listened happily to his plans. They would marry—he was a bit vague as to exactly when—and he would set about restoring her father's house. 'There's a chap I know who knows exactly what needs to be done. It'll be a showplace by the time it's finished. We can have friends down for the weekend...'

Leonora raised a puzzled face. 'But Tony, we shan't be living here; Mother and Father wouldn't much like a great many people coming to stay—even for a weekend.'

He said rather too quickly, 'Oh, I'm thinking of special occasions—Christmas and birthdays and so on; it's usual for families to get together at such times.' He smiled at her. 'Tell me, what's been happening since I was last here?'

'Nothing much. The Willoughbys' dinner party, and—I almost forgot—the new doctor to take over from Dr Fleming—he had a heart attack—not a severe one but he's got to retire.'

'Someone decent, I hope. Local chap?'

'Well, no, I don't think so. I don't know where he comes from. He's bought Buntings—that nice old house at the other end of

the village.’

‘Has he, indeed? Must have cost him a pretty penny. Married?’

‘I’ve no idea. Very likely, I should think. Most GPs are, aren’t they?’

Tony began to talk about himself then—the wheeling and dealing he had done, the money he had made, the important men of the business world he had met. Leonora listened and thought how lucky she was to be going to marry such a clever man.

They went to church the following morning and she stood beside Tony in the family pew, guiltily aware that she was glad the new doctor was there too and could see her handsome fiancé.

Dr Galbraith was handsome too, and his height and size added to that, but he was... She pondered for a moment. Perhaps it was the way he dressed, in elegant, beautifully tailored clothes, sober ties and, she had no doubt, handmade shoes—whereas Tony was very much the young man about town with his waistcoats and brightly coloured ties and striped shirts. She took a peep across the aisle and encountered the doctor’s eyes, and blushed as though she had spoken her thoughts out loud and he had heard her.

She looked away hastily and listened to the Colonel reading the lesson, with a look of rapt attention, not hearing a word, and she took care not to look at the doctor again.

It was impossible to avoid him at the end of the service; he was standing in the church porch with the Flemings, talking to the vicar, and there was no help for it but to introduce Tony to him.

‘The new GP,’ observed Tony. ‘I don’t suppose there’s much work for you around here. Wouldn’t mind your job—peace and quiet in the country and all that. You fellows don’t know when you’re lucky. I’m in the City myself...’

The doctor said drily, ‘Indeed? One of the unlucky ones? You must be glad to spend the weekend in this peaceful spot.’

Tony laughed. ‘Not even a weekend—I must go back after lunch, try and catch up with the work, you know.’

‘Ah, well, it’s a pleasant run up to town. I dare say we shall meet again when next you’re here.’ The doctor smiled pleasantly and turned away to talk to the vicar’s wife, who had joined them, and presently when he and the Flemings left the little group he did no more than nod affably at Leonora, who gave him a decidedly chilly smile.

‘A bit of a stiff neck, isn’t he?’ asked Tony as they walked back to the house. He gave his rather loud laugh. ‘I don’t need to have qualms about the two of you!’

‘If that’s a joke,’ said Leonora, ‘I don’t think it’s funny. And why do you have to go back after lunch?’

‘Darling—’ he was at his most cajoling ‘—I simply must. There’s no let-up, you know, not in my world—the business world. Keeping one step ahead is vital...’

‘Vital for what?’

‘Making money, of course. Don’t bother your pretty head; just leave it to me.’

‘Will it always be like this? I mean, after we’re married? Will

you be dashing off at all hours of the day, and do we need a lot of money? Don't you earn enough for us to get married soon?"

He gave her a quick kiss. "What a little worrier you are. I am that old-fashioned thing—comfortably off. We could marry tomorrow and live pleasantly, but I don't want to be just comfortably off; I want to be rich, darling—a flat in town, decently furnished, money to go abroad when we want to, all the clothes you want to buy, dinner parties, the theatre. I want you to have the best of everything."

"Tony, I don't mind about any of that. I'm not a town girl; at least, I don't think I am. I like living in the country and I don't care if we haven't much money. After all, I'm used to that." She added thoughtfully, "Perhaps you've fallen in love with the wrong girl..."

He flung an arm around her. "Darling, what nonsense. The moment I set eyes on you when we met at the Willoughbys I knew you were what I was looking for."

Which was quite true—she was a very pretty girl, had been ready to fall in love, and was an only child, with no large family to complicate matters. She lived in a lovely old house with plenty of land, which would be worth a fortune once he could get his hands on it.

He would have to go slowly, of course, and naturally he couldn't do anything to make Leonora unhappy. Her parents would be just as happy in a smaller house, somewhere close by, and he and Leonora could live in the big house. It would

be a splendid focal point for meeting influential men and their wives—men who would give him a helping hand up the financial ladder.

Decently dressed, Leonora would prove an asset; she had lovely manners and a delightful voice. A bit outspoken at times and a good deal more intelligent than he had expected, but he was sure that he could persuade her to his way of thinking.

It was a couple of days later when Leonora met the doctor again. The icy weather had become quite mild and it rained from a dull sky. Sir William had caught cold and sat morosely by the fire, while his wife fussed around him and Nanny offered hot drinks and aspirin, which left Leonora looking after the household and doing the shopping, for, much as she loved her father, she could see that two females hovering over him was just about as much as he could stand. So she made the beds and hoovered and did most of the cooking and now they were running out of groceries.

In a mackintosh even older than the tweed coat, a hat, shapeless with age, rammed down onto her head, she picked up her basket, announced that she was going to the village and, accompanied by Wilkins, set out.

‘At least we won’t skid on ice,’ she observed to Wilkins, who was plodding along beside her. ‘Though we are going to get very wet.’

Mrs Pike’s shop was empty, which was a good thing for she allowed Wilkins to come in out of the rain, offering a sheet of

newspaper which he was to sit on while Leonora took out her list.

A visit to Mrs Pike's was a leisurely affair unless she had a great many customers; she chatted while she collected bacon, cheese, the loaf the baker left each day, the marmalade Sir William preferred, tea and coffee, sugar and flour. Not that there was much to gossip about: Mrs Hick's new baby, the Kemp's youngest boy with a broken arm—'What do you expect from boys, anyway?' asked Mrs Pike—and Farmer Jenkins making a bit of trouble about his milk quota. 'Whatever that is, Miss Leonora; I'm sure I don't know what the world's coming to!'

This was one of Mrs Pike's frequent observations and the preliminary to a lengthy monologue of a gloomy nature, so it was a relief when two more customers came in together and Leonora was able to gather up her shopping and start for home.

It was still raining. Dr Galbraith, driving out of the village, saw Leonora's bedraggled figure ahead of him, marching along briskly, Wilkins beside her. He passed them and then pulled in to the side of the road, opened the door and said, 'Get in—I'm going past your place. Your dog can sit at the back.'

'Good morning, Doctor,' said Leonora pointedly. 'Please don't bother. We are both very wet; we shall spoil your car.'

He didn't answer but got out of the car and walked round to where she stood. 'Get in,' he said pleasantly, and opened the door for Wilkins, who was only too glad to get out of the rain.

'Oh, well, all right,' said Leonora ungraciously, and slid into the front of the car. 'I have warned you that we are both very wet.'

‘Indeed you have, and now I’m wet as well.’ He glanced at her. ‘A waste of time, Leonora...’

‘What’s a waste of time?’

‘Trying to get the better of me.’ He was driving now and turned to smile at her. ‘How are your mother and father?’

‘They’re very well—no, that’s not quite true. Father’s got a very bad cold; he’s a shocking patient when he’s not well and Mother gets worried.’

‘In that case, perhaps it might be as well if I took a look at him. An antibiotic might get him back on his feet—colds can drag on at this time of year.’

‘Yes, but aren’t you on your rounds or something?’

‘No.’ He swept the car through the gates and up the neglected drive to the front door and got out to go round the bonnet and open her door and then free Wilkins.

‘Do come in,’ said Leonora, all at once minding her manners, ‘and take off your coat. I’ll fetch Mother.’ She turned round as Nanny came down the staircase.

‘Oh, good, here’s Nanny. This is Dr Galbraith, our new doctor; he’s kindly come to see Father.’

Nanny eyed the doctor. ‘And that’s a mercy. How do you do, Doctor? And a fine, well-set-up young man you are, to be sure. Give me the coat; I’ll dry it out while Miss Leonora takes you to see the master.’

She turned her attention to Leonora then. ‘And you too, Miss Leonora—off with that coat and that old hat and I’ll give Wilkins

a good rub down. There'll be coffee when you come down.'

Dismissed, the pair of them went upstairs to find her father sitting in a chair by a brisk fire with his wife bending over him. She looked up as they went in and gave a relieved sigh. 'Dr Galbraith, I was wondering if I should ask you to call. You met Leonora...'

'Yes, Lady Crosby, and it seemed sensible to take a look at Sir William, since I was passing.' He went to look at his patient and Leonora discovered that he was no longer a man who persisted in annoying her but an impersonal doctor with his head stuffed full of knowledge, and to be trusted. His quiet voice and his, 'Well, sir, may I take a look at you?' was reassuring.

CHAPTER TWO

SIR WILLIAM coughed, blew his nose, coughed again and spoke.

‘Nothing much wrong—just this infernal cold—cough keeps me awake, makes me tired.’

Leonora helped him off with his dressing gown and followed her mother to the door. She paused to ask, ‘Do you need me to stay?’

She was surprised when the doctor said, ‘Please,’ in an absent-minded voice as he bent over his patient.

She stood by the window and glanced out at the rain-sodden landscape, listening to the doctor’s quiet voice and her father’s querulous answers. He wasn’t well; perhaps they should have called the doctor sooner, she thought worriedly.

She loved her parents and got on well with them; indeed, she had been perfectly happy to stay home with them. Before her father had lost his money, there had been plans afoot to send her to friends in Italy, suggestions that she might train for a career, have a flat in town—the world had been her oyster.

She hadn’t regretted the loss of any of these, although she sometimes longed for new clothes, a visit to the theatre, evenings out at some famous restaurant. The longings weren’t deep enough to make her unhappy, and now that she and Tony were to marry it seemed to her that she would have the best of both worlds

—living with Tony, sharing his social life, and coming home whenever she wanted to.

Dr Galbraith's voice disturbed her thoughts. 'If you would help your father with his dressing gown?'

He didn't look up as he wrote out a prescription. 'If you could get this made up? It's an antibiotic. And a couple of days in bed. Flu can hang around for a long time if it isn't treated promptly.'

He handed her the prescription and closed his bag. 'I'll call again in a day or so, but if you're bothered about anything don't hesitate to call me.'

'Hope I haven't given it to my wife,' observed Sir William.

'As I said, let me know if you are worried about anything.' He glanced at Leonora. 'Forewarned is forearmed.'

'Obliged to you for coming,' said Sir William. 'I'm sure there'll be coffee downstairs for you. Busy, are you?'

The doctor, who had been up all night with a premature baby, replied that no, he wasn't unduly so.

'Probably a good deal easier than a city practice,' said Sir William, blithely unaware that the doctor's practice extended for miles in every direction. Some of the outlying farms were well off the main roads, and the lanes leading to them were, as often as not, churned into muddy ruts.

Downstairs Lady Crosby was waiting for them in the drawing room, looking anxious.

'Fetch the coffee, Leonora; Nanny has it ready. Come and sit down, Doctor, and tell me if Sir William is ill or if it's just a

bad cold.’

‘Flu, Lady Crosby. He will need to keep to his bed for a few days and take the antibiotic I have prescribed. He should be perfectly all right within a week, provided he keeps warm and quiet; he isn’t as young as he was.’

He smiled at her and she smiled back. ‘Sixty-one—I’m a good deal younger.’ Lady Crosby, who had been a very pretty girl, wasn’t averse to a little admiration and her smile invited it.

She was disappointed and a little put out; she had been spoilt and pampered for most of her life, only during the last difficult years she had had to forgo the comforts and luxuries she had taken for granted. She loved her husband and daughter, but took their care and attention as her right. The expected compliment from the doctor wasn’t forthcoming. All he said was, ‘I’m going to Bath; perhaps your daughter might come with me and get the prescription I have written up for Sir William. I shall be returning within the hour and will give her a lift back.’

Leonora, coming in with the coffee, heard the last part of this and said, in her matter-of-fact way, ‘Oh, there is no need for that. I can take the car—I might hold you up.’

‘Nonsense, dear,’ said her mother. ‘Why take the car when you can get a lift? Dr Galbraith is coming back to the village. You’ll probably have time to pop into that wool shop and see if you can match my embroidery silks...’

She poured the coffee. ‘Have you taken a tray up to your father, dear? I dare say he would like a hot drink.’ She smiled

charmingly at the doctor. 'We shall take the greatest care of him, Doctor.'

He glanced from mother to daughter; Leonora had inherited her mother's good looks on a more generous scale; he fancied she had inherited her father's forthright and strong-willed nature. It was no life for a girl such as she—living with elderly parents and, he suspected, bearing the burden of the household management in the down-at-heel, still beautiful house. Still, he remembered, she was engaged; presumably she would marry shortly. Not that he had liked the man.

Leonora, wrapped up against the weather, got into the car presently. He was glad to see that she had found a decent hat and her gloves and handbag were beyond reproach. Not that he cared in the least about her appearance, but with her striking looks she deserved the right clothes.

Glancing at her profile, he set himself out to be pleasant and had the satisfaction of seeing her relax. Gradually he led the conversation round to more personal matters, putting a quiet question here and there so casually that she answered freely, unaware that she was talking about things that she had kept tucked away at the back of her head because neither her mother nor her father would want to hear about them, and nor would Tony: small niggling doubts, little worries, plans she had little hope of putting into effect.

They were on the outskirts of Bath when she said abruptly, 'I'm sorry, I must be boring you. I expect you get enough moaning

from your patients.’

‘No, no, talking never bores me, unless it is the kind of chat you encounter at parties. I’m going to park at the Royal National Hospital. There are several chemists in Milsom Street; fetch the prescription and come back to the car. There’s a quiet restaurant by the abbey—I hope you’ll take pity on me and have lunch.’ When she opened her mouth to refuse he said, ‘No, don’t say that you have to go home at once; you would be too late for lunch anyway, and I promise you I’ll get you home within the next hour or so.’ He smiled suddenly. ‘I have an afternoon surgery...’

‘Well, that would be nice; thank you. I don’t like to be away from home for very long because of Father...’

He had stopped the car by the hospital and got out to open her door. ‘I’ll be fifteen minutes. If I’m longer than that, go and wait in the entrance hall...’

He watched her walk away. She was just as nice to look at from the back as from the front. He smiled a little as he went into the hospital.

When she got back he was there, waiting for her. ‘We’ll leave the car here; it’s only a few minutes’ walk. You know Bath well?’

The restaurant was small, quiet, and the food was excellent. Leonora, savouring a perfectly grilled sole, thought she must remember to tell Tony about it; it was a long time since they had been out together for a meal—he was happy to stay at home with her, he always told her, and she spent hours in the kitchen conjuring up a meal he would like from as little of the

housekeeping money as possible.

She wished that he were sitting opposite her now instead of Dr Galbraith and despised herself for the mean thought. After all, he had no reason to give her lunch and she had to admit he was a pleasant companion. All the same, she had the sneaking feeling that behind that bland face there was a man she wouldn't care to cross swords with.

They talked as they ate, exchanging views on Bath, Pont Magna and its inhabitants, and the various houses in it.

'I used to go to Buntings when I was a little girl,' Leonora told him. 'It's a lovely old house. Are you happy there?'

'Yes. It is the kind of place where you feel instantly at home. I expect you feel that about your own home?'

'Oh, yes. It's badly in need of repairs, though. Some rich American wanted to buy it last year, but Father wouldn't hear of it. His family have lived in it for a very long time. It would break his heart to leave.'

'I can understand that. It is a delightful house. Rather large to look after, though.'

'Yes, but quite a few rooms are shut and Nanny and I can manage the rest.'

She frowned and he said smoothly, 'Nannies are marvellous, aren't they? Shall we go? I must get you back before someone wonders where you are.'

Less than an hour later he stopped the car at her home, got out to open her door and waited until she had gone inside. He had

beautiful manners, she thought, and hoped that she had thanked him with sufficient warmth.

Her mother was in the drawing room. 'There you are, dear. Have you got those pills for your father? He's rather peevish so I came down here to have a little rest—I find looking after someone ill so very tiring. We'll have tea soon, shall we? Perhaps Nanny could make a few scones.'

Leonora said, 'Yes, Mother,' and went to look for Nanny.

In the kitchen Nanny asked, 'Have you had some lunch, Miss Leonora? There's plenty of that corned beef—'

'Dr Galbraith gave me lunch, Nanny—a rather splendid one too. Mother wants tea a bit earlier—and scones? I'll come and make them, but first I must go and see about Father.'

Sir William, back in his bed, was glad to see her.

'I've got your pills and you can start them straight away,' she told him cheerfully. 'And how about a cup of tea and some of that thin bread and butter Nanny cuts so beautifully?'

She sat down on the side of the bed. 'I don't suppose you feel like sausages for supper. How about scrambled eggs and creamed potato and jelly for pudding?'

'That sounds good.' Her father smiled at her. 'We shall be lost without you when you marry, my dear.' He paused to cough. 'You are quite sure, aren't you? Tony is a successful young man—he'll want to live in London.'

She shook her head. 'Not all the time—he was talking about coming down here whenever we could. He loves this house, you

know.’

Her father said drily, ‘It is a gold-mine for anyone with enough money to put it in order. As it is, it’s mouldering away. At least it will be yours one day, Leonora.’

‘Not for years, Father.’ She got up and fetched a glass of water and watched him while he swallowed his pill. ‘Every four hours,’ she warned him. ‘Now I’m going to get your tea.’

She dropped a kiss on his head and went down to the kitchen, where, since Nanny was making the scones, she got her father’s tea-tray ready and presently bore it upstairs.

Back in the drawing room with her mother, she drew a chair closer to the fire. ‘I must say that Dr Galbraith seems to be a very pleasant man. Charming manners, too. We must invite him to dinner one evening, Leonora—remind me to make a list of guests. We must think of something delicious to give them.’

Leonora said, ‘Yes, Mother,’ and bit into a scone. ‘I dare say Father will enjoy that once he’s feeling better.’

Her mother said vaguely, ‘Oh, yes, of course, dear. What did you have for lunch? So kind of the doctor to give you a meal.’

When Leonora had told her she added, ‘Ah, yes, I know the restaurant you mention. The food there is good but expensive. I dare say that, being a single man, he can afford such places. I’m surprised that he isn’t married, but I expect he is merely waiting until he is settled in at Buntings. A doctor, especially one with a country practice, needs a wife.’

Leonora murmured an agreement, and wondered why he

should need one more than a GP with a town practice.

‘He would have done very well for you,’ went on Lady Crosby, ‘but of course you’ve already got a fiancé in Tony. Most suitable and such a charming man.’

Leonora thought about Tony. He was charming and fun to be with. He teased her a good deal, told her that she was old-fashioned and strait-laced. ‘I’ll forgive you that,’ he had told her, laughing. ‘You’ll change once I get you up to town.’

She had pointed out that she didn’t want to change. ‘I wouldn’t be me,’ she’d told him, aware that she had irritated him. The next moment, however, he had been laughing again; perhaps she had mistaken the look on his face. They would be happy together, she felt sure; she looked at the diamond on her finger and told herself how happy she was at that very moment just thinking about him.

That night she dreamt of Dr Galbraith, and the dream persisted in staying in her head all next day. She did her best to dispel it by writing a long letter to Tony.

Her father was feeling a little better, although he was still coughing a good deal and looked tired. She wondered uneasily what would be done if the antibiotic didn’t do its good work; Dr Galbraith hadn’t said that he would call again...

He came the next morning and, since she was upstairs with the Hoover, it was her mother who opened the door to him.

‘Dr Galbraith—how kind of you to call again. Just in time for coffee. I’ll get Leonora or Nanny to bring it to the drawing room.’ She smiled her charming smile. ‘I do hate having it by myself...’

Any opinion the doctor might have had about this remark he kept to himself.

‘I called to see Sir William and, much though I would enjoy a cup of coffee, I can’t spare the time—I have quite a few visits to make this morning.’ He smiled in his turn. ‘If I might go up?’

‘Oh, dear, we could have had a nice little chat. Do you want me to come up with you? Leonora is hoovering the bedrooms; I’m sure she’ll see to anything you may want.’

The Hoover was making a good deal of noise; he had time to study Leonora’s back view before she turned round. She was wearing a sensible pinny and had tied her hair in a bright scarf; the Hoover, being past its prime, tended to raise almost as much dust as it sucked up.

She switched it off when she saw him, wished him a good morning and said, ‘You want to see Father? He had quite a good night but he’s chesty...’

She whipped off the pinny and also the scarf and led him into her father’s room.

The doctor pronounced himself satisfied with his patient but added that he would need to remain in bed for several days yet. ‘Get up for an hour or so, if you wish,’ he said, ‘but stay in this room. I’ll come and see you again in a couple of days or so.’

Going downstairs with Leonora, he observed, ‘Your father is by no means out of the woods. He has escaped pneumonia by a whisker and anything other than rest and a warm room, plenty to drink and plenty of sleep is liable to trigger off a more serious

condition. He'll do well if he stays where he is—don't let him get out of bed for much more than an hour or so.'

He sounded just like the family doctor, thought Leonora waspishly, but then that was exactly what he was. Did he need to be quite so impersonal, though? After all, they had had lunch together...

Her mother came into the hall as they reached it and he bade her a pleasant goodbye, added a few reassuring words about Sir William's condition, smiled briefly at Leonora and drove away, leaving her feeling vaguely unsettled.

Tony came at the weekend, breezing into the house, explaining that he had torn himself away from his work to take them by surprise.

'You look as though you need a bit of cheering up,' he told Leonora, who certainly didn't look her best after four days of coping with her irascible parent. 'How is Sir William? Not too bad, I hope?'

'He is better, but he has a bad chest; he's getting up today for a few hours but he mustn't go outside until his cough has cleared up.'

'Where is that delightful mother of yours?'

'She went to Colonel Howes' for coffee.' Leonora hesitated. 'Tony, would you mind awfully if I left you for a bit? I'll get some coffee for you and there are the morning papers in the drawing room. I haven't quite finished the bedrooms and I must make a bed for you. You are staying?'

‘Well, of course, if it’s too much bother...’ He contrived to look hurt and she said quickly, ‘No, no, of course it’s not, and I shan’t be long.’

‘I’ll go and have a chat with your father,’ suggested Tony, getting out of the chair into which he had flung himself.

‘No— Oh, dear, I keep saying no, don’t I? He is shaving and getting dressed. We’ll both be down presently. I’ll just fetch the coffee. Did you have a good trip here?’

He said sulkily, ‘Not bad. It’s the deuce of a long way from town, though.’

I ought to be so pleased to see him, reflected Leonora, putting china on a tray and listening to Nanny’s opinion of those who came for the weekend uninvited, but he might have phoned first. ‘I’ll have to go to the butcher’s and get some chops.’ She interrupted Nanny’s indignant flow. ‘Have we plenty of eggs?’ she asked.

‘No. We have not. Mr Beamish will have bacon for his breakfast and one or two of those mushrooms Mrs Fleming sent over. The cake’s almost finished too.’

‘Oh, I’ll make another one, Nanny—there’ll be time before lunch...’

‘There’s the doorbell,’ said Nanny in a voice which suggested that she was much too busy to answer it. So Leonora opened the door, to find Dr Galbraith towering over her. She stared up into his calm face and felt a ridiculous urge to burst into tears. She didn’t say anything and presently he said placidly, ‘I’ve come to

see your father.’

‘Yes, but—yes, of course. Do come in...’

‘You were doing something urgent. If I’m interrupting do go and finish.’ He looked her over slowly. ‘You look put upon. What’s the matter?’

As Tony came into the hall, the doctor said, ‘Ah, yes, of course,’ in a very quiet voice, and added a much louder, ‘Good morning.’

‘Ah, the local GP. Good morning to you. Come to check on the invalid, have you?’

‘Yes.’ Dr Galbraith turned towards Leonora. ‘Shall we go up?’

‘I’ll come along too—the old chap’s always glad to see me.’

The doctor was saved the necessity of answering as Nanny came into the hall with the coffee-tray.

‘I’m putting your coffee in the drawing room, Mr Beamish; you’ll need to drink it while it’s hot.’

Tony, although he didn’t like her, did as he was told, mentally promising himself that once he was married to Leonora one of the first of his acts would be to get rid of Nanny.

Going up the staircase, the doctor noted that Leonora looked less than her best; her hair was tied back and hung in something of a tangle down her back, and she was without make-up, not that that mattered for she had clear skin and a mouth which didn’t need lipstick; moreover, she was wearing an elderly skirt and a sweater with the sleeves rolled up. But none of this really detracted from her undoubted good looks.

‘Is Lady Crosby at home?’ he asked casually.

‘No, I’m sorry, but she’s having coffee with the Howeses—you’ve met the Colonel and his daughter...’

He had dined with them on the previous evening but he didn’t say so.

‘Don’t you care for visiting?’ he wanted to know.

‘Me? Oh, yes, it’s nice meeting people. But today—well, the weekend, you know, and then I didn’t know Tony was coming so there’s a bit more to do.’

They had reached her father’s door and the doctor didn’t answer.

Her father was sitting in his dressing gown, looking out of the window. He turned as they went in, saying, ‘Leonora? Is that my coffee? It’s past ten o’clock.’

He saw the doctor then. ‘Good morning. You see how much better I am. I shall get dressed presently and go downstairs for lunch.’

‘Why not?’ The doctor sat down beside him. ‘Such a delightful view from this window even at this time of the year. How is the cough?’

‘Better—much better—and I’ve taken those pills you left for me. Leonora sees to that, don’t you, my dear?’

Leonora said, ‘Yes, Father,’ and admired the back of the doctor’s head.

‘A splendid nurse,’ her father went on. ‘We are indeed lucky to have a daughter who takes such good care of us both.’

‘You will miss her when she marries,’ observed the doctor, taking his patient’s pulse.

‘Yes, yes, of course, although Tony has a great liking for this house; I’m sure they will visit us as often as possible.’

The doctor didn’t hurry but tapped Sir William’s chest, listened to his heart, asked a number of leisurely questions and finally pronounced himself satisfied. ‘Stay indoors for another day or so,’ he advised, ‘and when you do go out wrap up warm.’

Tony came out of the drawing room as they reached the hall.

‘Well, what’s the verdict? I’m not surprised that Sir William has been ill—this house may look a thing of beauty but it’s riddled with damp. Needs money spent on it. More sense if he found something smaller and modern.’

Leonora gave him a surprised look. ‘Tony, you know as well as I do that Father and Mother will never move. Why should we? We’re happy here—it’s our home.’

He took her arm. ‘Darling, of course it is. Come and have some coffee.’ He nodded at Dr Galbraith. ‘Nice to meet you,’ he observed.

Leonora frowned. Tony was being rude. ‘Thank you for coming, Doctor. I’ll keep an eye on Father. You won’t need to come again?’

‘I think not, but do give me a ring if that cough doesn’t clear up within the next week or ten days.’ He shook hands, ignored Tony and went out to his car, got in and drove away.

‘You were rude,’ said Leonora, leading the way to the drawing

room.

‘Sorry, darling. I can’t stand the fellow, looking down that long nose of his. Thinks he knows everything—I’ve met his sort before.’

‘He’s a good doctor,’ said Leonora, ‘and everyone likes him—except you.’

‘Let’s not argue about him. I’ve come to spend the weekend with you, so let’s enjoy ourselves. Heaven knows, it’s hard enough to get away.’

Tony had sat down again. ‘How about getting into something pretty and we’ll go out to lunch?’

‘Tony, I’d love to, but I can’t. When you got here I was making beds—and when I’ve done that I must get lunch and see about making a cake and getting something made for this evening. Father has to have his coffee and his lunch, and Mother will be back presently. They like their tea at half past four and dinner has to be cooked...’

‘For heaven’s sake, Leonora...can’t Nanny deal with all that?’

‘No, she can’t. The kitchen has to be cleaned, food has to be prepared, she has to answer the door and Father’s bell if I’m busy and one of us will have to go to the village and do some extra shopping.’

‘Well, I thought I would be welcome,’ said Tony sulkily, ‘but it seems I’d better leave as quickly as possible!’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Leonora briskly. ‘You know how glad I am to see you, but what’s the use of pretending that I can sit here,

nicely dressed and made up, when it's simply not possible? We could go for a walk in the afternoon.'

She saw his irritable frown. 'I'm sorry, Tony...'

'Let's hope that next time I manage to get here you'll be looking more like my fiancée and not the home help.' He laughed as he spoke and she laughed with him, hiding her hurt. He was delightful and charming, she told herself, and she loved him, and she reminded herself that he worked very hard and had little time to enjoy his leisure.

All the same the beds had still to be made. It was fortunate that her mother returned, delighted at the sight of Tony, grumbling prettily at the awful coffee she had had to drink at Colonel Howes'. 'Darling,' she begged Leonora, 'do make me a cup—you make such good coffee.'

She settled down in her chair and turned to Tony. 'Now, tell me all the latest gossip...'

Her father wasn't best pleased to learn that Tony had come for the weekend. He loved his daughter dearly, was aware that she was missing the kind of life a girl of her age should be enjoying but was not sure what to do about it. When Tony had swept her off her feet and he had seen the happiness in her face, he had been glad for her sake, although he had had to bury the vague dislike he had for him. If Leonora loved him and he would make her happy, then that was more important than his own feelings. Tony, after all, was a successful young man, able to give Leonora the comforts and small luxuries which he, her father, had been

unable to afford.

He expressed a pleasure he didn't feel and told her he would be down to lunch and she whisked herself away to finish the beds and tidy first the rooms and then herself. There wasn't time to change into something more eye-catching than the sweater and skirt but at least she could do something to her face and hair.

Going downstairs a little later, she could hear her mother and Tony laughing and talking in the drawing room, which gave her the chance to go to the kitchen and see what Nanny had found for lunch.

Cheese omelettes, they decided, and there was a tin of mushroom and garlic soup which they could eke out with some chicken stock. Melba toast and a salad.

'We'll worry about dinner presently,' promised Leonora. 'I'll do the table in a minute and after lunch I'll go down to the village. It had better be a joint, I suppose—five of us—roast this evening, cold tomorrow.'

That would make a hole in the housekeeping, she reflected, going to sit in the drawing room and listen to Tony being amusing about his life in London.

A good-looking man, she reflected lovingly, and such fun to be with. She hoped that once they were married she would make him happy—live his kind of life, like his friends, enjoy the dinner parties and theatres and social occasions which he had assured her were so very important to his work.

Presently she slipped away to see to lunch and give Nanny

a hand, half hoping that he would go with her. But he merely smiled and waved a hand.

‘Don’t be too long, darling; I miss you.’

Perhaps it was as well that he had stayed talking to her mother and father, she decided, beating eggs, making a salad, laying the table...

After lunch she told him that she was going to the village. He frowned for a moment then smiled. ‘A chance for us to talk,’ he told her. ‘Not paying visits, I hope.’

‘No, no, just some shopping. It’ll give you an appetite for tea.’

They met the vicar in the village street and she left them talking while she bought the meat. They were still talking when she joined them again.

Tony put an arm around her shoulders. ‘Do we know when we want to get married, darling?’ he asked. ‘It all depends, actually, but it won’t be long now. A June wedding, perhaps. That is, if the bride agrees to that.’

The vicar looked pleased. ‘We haven’t had a wedding for some time,’ he observed, ‘and June is a delightful month in which to be married.’

‘A nice old man,’ said Tony as they started back home. ‘Very keen to see us married, isn’t he?’

‘Did you mean that—June—you said...?’

He took her free hand in his. ‘Why not, darling? It will be a bit of a rush—but I suppose we could get the place tidied up by then.’

‘What place?’

He stopped and turned to look at her. ‘Leonora, surely you can see for yourself that that great house is too much for your father and mother? Suppose we move them out to something smaller? There’s a nice little property a couple of miles away on the road to Bath. I’ll have the house completely refurbished and it’ll be a marvellous headquarters for me—us. Weekends for clients and friends. We’ll have a flat in town, of course, but it’s an easy run. I might even give you a car of your own so that you can go to and fro whenever you want.’

Leonora stared at him. ‘You don’t mean any of that, do you? I mean, turning Mother and Father out of their home? It’s been in the family for almost two hundred years; Father would die; it’s—it’s his blood. Mother has all her friends here and she loves the house too—she came here when she married Father. It’s a joke, isn’t it?’

He put his arm round her shoulders. ‘Darling, it’s not a joke, it’s common sense—can’t you see that? Your father isn’t exactly in the best of health, is he? Supposing he were to die—what would your mother do? Try and run this place on her own? She hasn’t the faintest idea how to do it...’

‘You forget me.’ Leonora had twisted away from him. ‘It’s my home too and I won’t leave it. And Father’s almost well again—you heard what Dr Galbraith said—’

‘A country GP?’ Tony sounded derisive. ‘He’ll say whatever he thinks his patients want to hear.’

‘That isn’t true. What an abominable thing to say.’ She began to walk on and he caught up with her and took her arm.

‘Darling, I’m sorry if I’ve made you cross. All right, I won’t say another word about your parents leaving home, but you must know that your father is in financial difficulties, and what will happen if they foreclose the mortgage?’

That brought her up short. ‘Mortgage? I didn’t know...’

‘How do you suppose he’s been able to stay here for so long?’

‘How did you know?’

‘I make it my business to know these things. Besides, I am concerned for you, Leonora.’

‘Oh.’ She felt guilty then for suspecting him. Suspecting him of what? she wondered. ‘I’m sorry, Tony. Don’t let’s talk about it any more. Father will get things sorted out once he is feeling quite well. Do please believe me when I say that nothing on earth will make Father or Mother move from the house, and that goes for me too!’

He caught her arm again. ‘Darling, you’re going to marry me, remember?’ He laughed a gentle laugh which made her smile and then laugh with him.

They went on their way and just as they reached the open gates to the house Dr Galbraith drove past. He raised a hand in salute, wondering why the sight of Leonora apparently so happy in Tony’s company should disturb him.

Probably because I don’t like the fellow, he decided, and forgot about them.

The weekend went too quickly for Leonora. Of course, having Tony there made a lot of extra work; he had admitted soon after they'd met that he was quite useless around the house and since there was no need for him to do anything for himself at his flat—a service flat where he could get his meals and a cleaner came each day—he made no effort to help. Not that Leonora expected him to make his bed or wash up, but it would have been nice if he hadn't given Nanny his shoes to clean and expected his trousers pressed—or even if he'd carried a tray out to the kitchen...

It would be better when they were married, reflected Leonora; she was sure that he would be only too willing to help out when necessary once he realised that help was needed.

He went back very early on Monday morning, which meant that Leonora got up and cooked his breakfast first. It also meant that he used up almost all the hot water from the boiler and woke everyone up.

'I'll be down again just as soon as I can spare the time,' he told Leonora. 'And when I come do be ready for me, darling, and we'll have an evening out. Bath, perhaps? A decent meal and we could dance after.'

She agreed happily, ignoring the bit about the decent meal. Sunday lunch had been excellent, she had thought—roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, baked potatoes, vegetables from the garden and an apple tart for pudding. That was surely a decent meal? She kissed him goodbye and begged him to phone when he had time. 'Or write.'

‘Write? My dear girl, when do I ever have time to write letters?’ He squeezed her arm and gave her a charming smile. ‘Be good.’

She gravely said, ‘Yes, Tony,’ and he laughed as he got into the car.

‘Not much chance of being anything else, is there?’ he shouted at her as he started the engine.

He would have to go carefully, he decided as he drove; no more mention of moving her mother and father out of the house. Perhaps it might be a good idea to wait until they were married. He had no doubt at all that he could persuade her to do anything he asked of her once she was his wife.

A few weeks of comfortable living, new clothes, new faces, meals out—once she had a taste of all the things a girl wanted in the way of a carefree life she would come round to his way of thinking. The more he saw of the house, the more he intended to have it...

Leonora, happily unaware of his schemes, went indoors, placated her parents with very early morning tea, soothed a grumpy Nanny and went up to the attics to see if the rain had come in during the night. It had.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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