BETTY NEELS

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THE GIRL WITH GREEN EYES

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Betty Neels

The Girl With Green Eyes

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Mills & Boon presents the complete Betty Neels collection. Timeless tales of heart-warming romance by one of the world’s best-loved romance authors.How could she make him notice her?Unlike her two sisters, Lucy was happier at home – if only she could find Mr Right to share it with! But when she had almost given up her search for such a man, the eminent paediatrician William Thurloe came into her life.Attractive and dynamic, he was the answer to her dreams. But why would he be interested in her when the glamorous Fiona made it clear she was also available?

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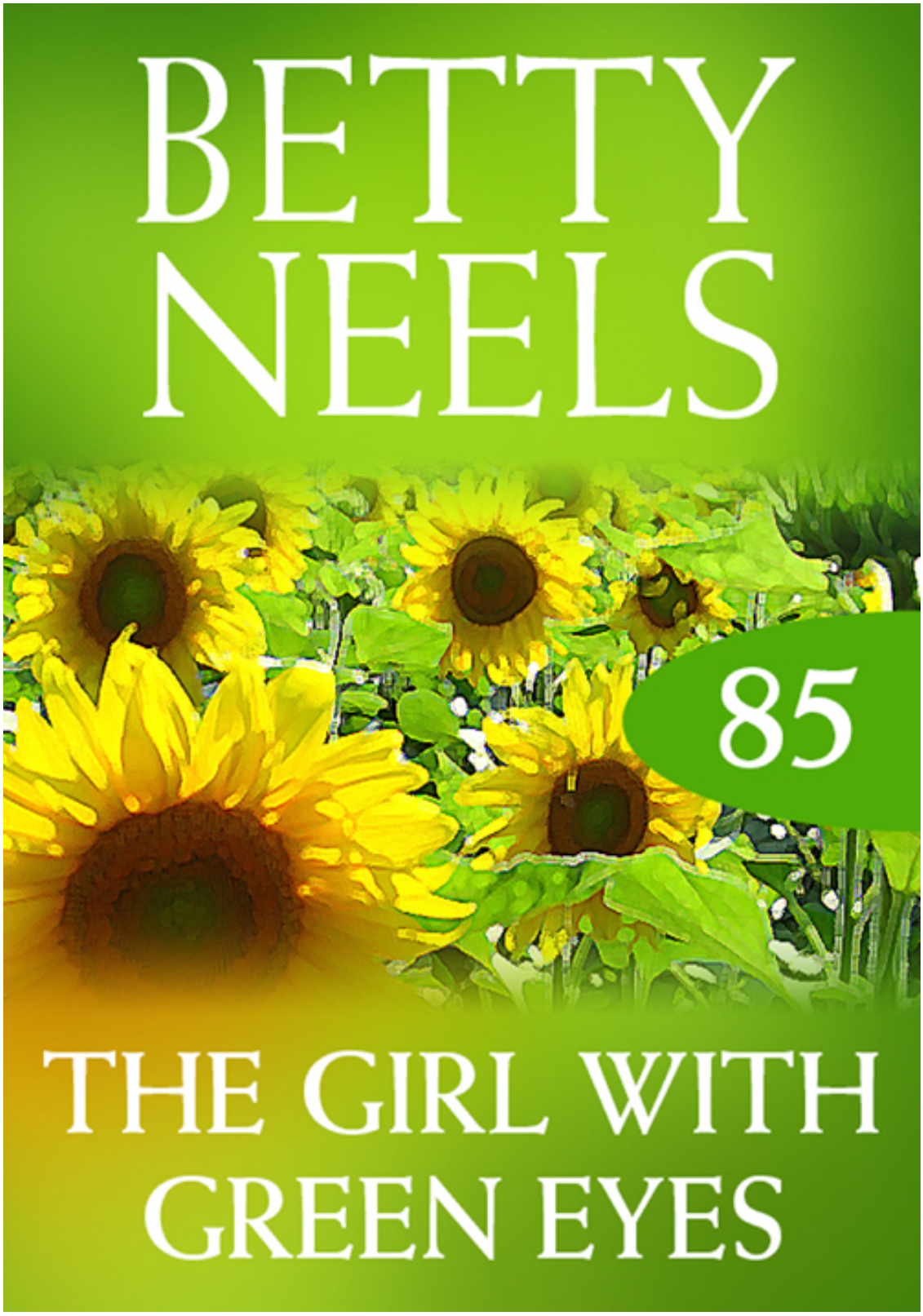

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CHAPTER ONE

THE vast waiting-room, despite the cheerful yellow paint on its Victorian walls, its bright posters and even a picture or two, its small counter for tea and coffee and the playthings all scattered around, was still a depressing place. It was also a noisy one, its benches filled by mothers, babies and toddlers awaiting their turn to be seen by the consultant paediatrician. From time to time a name would be called by a plump middle-aged sister and another small patient with an evidently anxious mother would be borne away while those who were waiting rearranged themselves hopefully.

The dark, wet day of early February was already dwindling into dusk, although it was barely four o'clock. The waiting-room was damp and chilly despite the heating, and as the rows of patients gradually lessened it seemed to become even chillier.

Presently there was only one patient left, a small fair-haired toddler, asleep curled up in the arms of the girl who held her. A pretty girl with a tip-tilted nose, a gentle mouth and large green eyes. Her abundant pale brown hair was scraped back fiercely into a top knot and she looked tired. She watched the two registrars who had been dealing with the less urgent cases come from their offices and walk away, and thought longingly of her tea. If this specialist didn't get a move on, she reflected, the child she was holding would wake and demand hers.

A door opened and the sister came through. 'I'm sorry, dear, that you've had to wait for so long; Dr Thurloe got held up. He'll see you now.'

The girl got up and went past her into the room beyond, hesitating inside the door. The man sitting at the desk glanced up and got to his feet, a large man and tall, with fair hair heavily sprinkled with silver and the kind of good looks to make any woman look at him twice, with a commanding nose, a wide, firm mouth and heavily lidded eyes. He smiled at her now. 'Do sit down—' his voice was slow and deep '—I am so sorry that you've had to wait for such a long time.' He sat down again and picked up the notes and doctor's letter before him; halfway through he glanced up. 'You aren't this little girl's mother?'

She had been waiting and watching him, aware of a peculiar sensation in her insides.

'Me? Oh, no. I work at the orphanage. Miranda's not very easy, but I mostly look after her; she's a darling, but she does get—well, disturbed.'

He nodded and went on reading, and she stared at his downbent head. She had frequently wondered what it would be like to fall in love, but she had never imagined that it would be quite like this—and could one fall in love with someone at first glance? Heroines in romantic novels often did, but a romantic novel was one thing, real life was something quite different, or so she had always thought. He looked up and smiled at her and her heart turned over—perhaps after all real life wasn't all that different from a romantic novel. She smiled with delight and his eyebrows rose and his glance became questioning, but since she said nothing—she was too short of breath to do that—he sat back in his chair. 'Well, now, shall we see what can be done for Miranda, Miss …?'

'Lockitt—Lucy Lockitt.'

His firm mouth quivered. '"Lost her pocket, Kitty Fisher found it …"'

'Everyone says that,' she told him seriously.

'Tiresome for you, but I suppose we all learnt nursery rhymes when we were small.' With an abrupt change of manner he went on, 'If you could put her on to the couch, I'll take a look.'

Lucy laid the still sleeping child down and the doctor came over to the couch and stood looking down at her. 'I wonder why nothing was done when hydrocephalus was first diagnosed. I see in her notes that her skull was abnormally enlarged at birth. You don't happen to know why her notes are so sparse?'

'They've been lost—that is, Matron thinks so. You see, she was abandoned when she was a few weeks old, no one knows who her parents are; they left her with the landlady of the rooms they were

living in. They left some money too, so I suppose she didn't bother to see a doctor—perhaps she didn't know that Miranda wasn't quite normal. A week or two ago the landlady had to go to hospital and Miranda was taken in by neighbours who thought that there was something wrong, so they brought her to the orphanage and Dr Watts arranged for you to see her.'

Dr Thurloe bent over the toddler, who woke then and burst into tears. 'Perhaps you could undress her?' he suggested. 'Would you like Sister or one of the nurses to help you?'

'Strange faces frighten her,' said Lucy matter-of-factly, 'and I can manage, thank you.'

He was very gentle, and when he had made his general examination he said in a quiet voice, 'Take her on your lap, will you? I need to examine her head.'

It took a considerable time and he had to sit very close. A pity, thought Lucy, that for all he cares I could be one of the hospital chairs. It occurred to her then that he was probably married, with children of his own; he wasn't young, but he wasn't old either—just right, in fact. She began to puzzle out ways and means of getting to know something about him, so deeply engrossed that he had to ask her twice if she was a nurse.

'Me? Oh, no. I just go each day from nine in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon. I do odd jobs, feeding the babies and changing them and making up cots—that sort of thing.'

He was running a gentle hand over the distended little skull. 'Was there no nurse to accompany Miranda here?'

'Well, no. You see, it's hard to get trained nurses in an orphanage—it's not very exciting, just routine. There's Matron and a deputy matron and three state enrolled nurses, and then four of us to help.'

The doctor already knew how many children there were; all the same, he asked that too.

'Between forty and fifty,' she replied, then added, 'I've been there for four years.'

He was measuring the small head with callipers, his large, well-tended hands feather-light. 'And you have never wished to train as a nurse?'

'Oh, yes, but it hasn't been possible.'

He said smoothly, 'The training does tie one down for several years. You understand what is wrong with Miranda?'

'Not precisely, only that there is too much fluid inside her skull.'

'It is a fairly rare condition—the several parts of the skull don't unite and the cerebrospinal fluid increases so that the child's head swells. There are sometimes mental symptoms, already apparent in Miranda. I should like her to be admitted here and insert a catheter in a ventricle which will drain off some of the surplus fluid.'

'Where to?'

'Possibly a pleural cavity via the jugular vein with a valve to prevent a flow-back.'

'It won't hurt her?' she asked urgently.

'No. It will need skilled attention when necessary, though.'

He straightened to his full height, towering over her. 'Will you set her to rights? I'll write to Dr Watts and arrange for her to be admitted as soon as possible.'

Lucy, arranging a nappy, just so, said thickly round the safety-pin between her teeth, 'You can cure her?'

'At least we can make life more comfortable for her. Take that pin out of your mouth, it could do a great deal of damage if you swallowed it. What transport do you have?' He glanced at the notes before him. 'Sparrow Street, isn't it? You came by ambulance?'

She shook her head, busy putting reluctant little arms into a woolly jacket. 'Taxi. I'm to get one to take us back.'

'My dear girl, it is now five o'clock and the rush hour, you might have to wait for some time. I'll arrange an ambulance,' he stretched out an arm to the telephone, 'or better still, I'll take you on my way home.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Lucy politely, 'but it wouldn't do at all, you know. For one thing the orphanage is in Willoughby Street and that's even more East End than here, and for another, I'm sure consultants don't make a habit of giving lifts to their patients—though perhaps you do if they're private …'

The doctor sat back in his chair and looked her over. 'I am aware of where the orphanage is and I give lifts to anyone I wish to. You have a poor opinion of consultants … We are, I should suppose, exactly like anyone else.'

'Oh, I'm sure you are,' said Lucy kindly, 'only much cleverer, of course.'

His heavy eyelids lifted, revealing a pair of very blue eyes. 'A debatable point,' he observed. 'And now if you will go to the front entrance I will meet you there in a few minutes.'

He spoke quietly and she did as he asked, because she had to admit to herself that he had that kind of voice and she was tired. Miranda had gone to sleep again, but once she woke she would want her tea and her cot and would fly into a storm of tears; to be driven back to the orphanage would be a relief. She was already late and it would be another half-hour or more before she was home. She sat on a bench facing the door so that she would see the doctor when he came, but he came unnoticed from one of the corridors at the back of the entrance hall. He paused before he reached her and gave her a long look; she was pretty enough to warrant it, and seen in profile her nose had a most appealing tilt … He spoke as he reached her. 'The car's just outside. It will be better if you carry her, I think; it wouldn't do to wake her.'

They crossed the hall and he held the door for her and went ahead to open the door of the dark grey Rolls-Royce outside. She got in carefully and he fastened her safety-belt without disturbing the child, and then got in beside her, drove out of the forecourt and joined the stream of traffic in the street.

Lucy waited until they stopped in a traffic jam. 'You said Sparrow Street, and it is, of course, only the staff and children use the Willoughby Street entrance.'

'I see—and who uses the Sparrow Street door?' He edged the car forward a few yards and turned to look at her.

'Oh, the committee and visiting doctors and the governors—you know, important people.'

'I should have thought that in an orphanage the orphans were the important people.'

'They are. They're awfully well looked after.' She lapsed into silence as the big car slid smoothly ahead and presently stopped in Willoughby Street. The doctor got out and opened her door for her and she got out carefully. 'Thank you very much for the lift, it was kind of you.' She smiled up into his impassive face.

'I'm coming in with you, I want to see the matron. Where do you live?'

'Me? In Chelsea.'

'I pass it on my way home. I'll drop you off.'

'I'll be at least fifteen minutes …'

'So shall I.' They had gone inside and he indicated the row of chairs lined up against the wall of the small reception room. 'Wait here, will you?'

He nodded to the nurse who came to meet them and walked off, leaving Lucy to follow her to the back of the building where the toddlers had their cots and where the sister-in-charge was waiting. It was all of fifteen minutes by the time Lucy had explained everything, handed over the now wakeful Miranda, and said goodnight.

'Thanks for staying on over your time,' Sister said. 'I'll make it up to you some time.' She smiled nicely because Lucy was a good worker and didn't grumble at the unending task of keeping the toddlers clean and fed and happy. We could do with a few more like her, she thought, watching Lucy's slender shape disappearing down the corridor.

There was no sign of the doctor when Lucy got back to the reception-room. Perhaps she had been too long and he had gone without her, and she could hardly blame him for that—he had probably

had a long and tiring day and was just as anxious to get home as she was. All the same, she sat down on one of the hard wooden chairs; there was no one else there, or she could have asked …

He came five minutes later, calm and unhurried, smiling genially, and accompanied by the matron. Lucy got to her feet and, rather to her surprise, was thanked for her afternoon's duties; it was by no means an uncommon thing for her to take children to hospital to be examined, and she was surprised that anyone had found it necessary to thank her. She muttered politely, added a goodnight and followed the doctor out to his car.

'Exactly where do you live?' he enquired of her as he settled himself beside her.

She mentioned a quiet road, one of those leading away from the Embankment, and added, 'It is very kind of you. I hope it's not taking you out of your way?'

'I live in Chiswick. Do you share a flat?' The question was casual.

'Me? No. I live with my parents …'

'Of course, now I remember—is your father an archaeologist, *the* Gregory Lockitt?' And when she murmured that he was, 'I met your parents some time ago at a dinner party. They were just back from the Andes.'

'That's right,' she agreed composedly, 'they travel a good deal.'

'But you prefer your orphanage?' His voice was kindly impersonal.

'Yes.' She didn't add to that, to explain that it was a job she had found for herself and taken on with the good humoured tolerance of her parents. She had been a disappointment to them, she knew that, although they had never actually said so; her elder sister, with a university degree and distinguished good looks, was personal assistant to the director of a City firm, and her younger sister, equally good-looking and chic with it, worked in one of the art galleries—moreover she was engaged to a young executive who was rising through his financial world with the ruthless intention of reaching the top before anyone else. Only Lucy, the middle sister and overshadowed by them both, had failed to be a success. There was no question but that they all loved her with an easygoing tolerance, but there was also no question that she had failed to live up to the family's high standards. She was capable, sensible and practical and not in the least clever, and despite her gentle prettiness she was a shy girl. At twenty-five, she knew that her mother was beginning to despair of her marrying.

Dr Thurloe stopped the car before her home and got out to open her door, and she thanked him again. Pauline and Imogen would have known exactly what to say to make him interested enough to suggest meeting again, but she had no idea; the only thought in her head was that she wasn't likely to see him again, and that almost broke her heart. She stared up into his face, learning it by heart, knowing that she would never forget it, still bemused by the surprise of loving him.

His quiet, 'A pleasure, enjoy your evening, Miss Lockitt,' brought her to her senses again, and she bade him a hasty goodnight and thumped the door knocker. He waited by his car until Alice, the housekeeper, opened the door, and then he got into the car and drove away. Perhaps I should have asked him in, reflected Lucy uneasily as she said hello to Alice.

'And who was that now?' asked Alice. 'Nice car too. Got yourself a young man, love?'

Lucy shook her head. 'Just a lift home. Is everyone in, Alice?'

'In the drawing-room and 'is nibs with them.' She gave Lucy a motherly pat. 'Best go and tidy yerself, love—they're having drinks …'

Lucy went slowly upstairs to her room, showered and got into a wool dress, brushed out her hair and did her face. She knew her mother disliked her wearing the clothes she had worn at the orphanage, even though they were covered by an overall and a plastic apron. She didn't hurry—there would just be time for a drink before dinner, and that meant that she wouldn't have to listen to Cyril, Pauline's fiancé, prosing about stocks and shares for too long. She went slowly downstairs, wondering if her sister really loved him or whether she was merely carried away at the prospect of being the wife of a successful businessman, with a flat in town, a nice little cottage in the country, two cars

and enough money to allow her to dress well and entertain lavishly. In Lucy's opinion, none of these was a good reason for marrying him.

She found them all sitting round the fire in the drawing-room and her mother looked round to say, 'There you are, darling. Have the orphans been trying? You're so late …'

Lucy took the drink her father had handed her and she sat down beside him. 'I took one of them to be seen by a specialist at the City Royal; it took rather a long time.' She didn't say any more, for they weren't interested—although they always asked her about her day, they didn't listen to her reply. And indeed, she admitted to herself, it made dull listening compared with Pauline's witty accounts of the people who had called in to the art gallery, and Imogen's amusing little titbits of news about the important people she met so often. She sipped her sherry and listened to Cyril clearing his throat preparatory to addressing them. He never just talked, she thought; he either gave a potted lecture, or gave them his opinion about some matter with the air of a man who believed that no one else was clever enough to do so. She swallowed her sherry in a gulp and listened to his diatribe about the National Health Service. She didn't hear a word; she was thinking about Dr Thurloe.

Later, as Lucy said goodnight to her mother, that lady observed lightly, 'You were very quiet this evening, darling—quieter than usual. Is this little job of yours too much for you, do you suppose?'

Lucy wondered if her mother had any idea of what her little job entailed, but she didn't say so. 'Oh, no, Mother.' She spoke briskly. 'It's really easy …'

'Oh, good—it doesn't bore you?'

'Not in the least.' How could she ever explain to her mother that the orphans were never boring? Tiresome, infuriating, lovable and exhausting, but never boring. 'I only help around, you know.'

Her mother offered a cheek for a goodnight kiss. 'Well, as long as you're happy, darling. I do wish you could meet some nice man …'

But I have, thought Lucy, and a lot of good it's done me. She said 'Goodnight, Mother dear …'

'Goodnight, Lucy. Don't forget we are all going to the Walters' for dinner tomorrow evening, so don't be late home, and wear something pretty.'

Lucy went to bed and forgot all about the dinner party; she was going over, syllable by syllable, every word which Dr Thurloe had uttered.

She got home in good time the next evening. The day had been busy and she felt the worse for wear, so it was a relief to find that her sisters were in their rooms dressing and her parents were still out. She drank the tea Alice had just made, gobbled a slice of toast and went to her room to get ready for the party.

The Walters were old friends of her parents, recently retired from the diplomatic service, and Lucy and her sisters had known them since they were small girls; the friendship was close enough for frequent invitations to their dinner parties. Lucy burrowed through her wardrobe, deciding what to wear. She had a nice taste in dress, although she wasn't a slavish follower of fashion, and the green dress she finally hauled out was simple in style with a long, full skirt, long, tight sleeves and a round, low neckline. She ran a bath and then lay in it, daydreaming about Dr Thurloe, quite forgetting the time, so that she had to dress in a tearing hurry, brush out her hair and dash on powder and lipstick without much thought to her appearance. Everyone was in the hall waiting for her as she ran downstairs and her mother said tolerantly, 'Darling, you're wearing that green dress again. Surely it's time you had something new?'

'You'd better come with me on your next free day,' said Imogen. 'I know just the shop for you—there was a gorgeous pink suit in the window, just right for you.'

Lucy forbore from saying that she didn't look nice in pink, only if it were very pale pink like almond blossom. 'Sorry if I've kept you all waiting. Pauline, you and Imogen look stunning enough for the lot of us.'

Pauline patted her on the shoulder. 'You could look stunning too,' she pointed out, 'if you took the trouble.'

It was pointless to remind her sister that the orphans didn't mind whether she looked stunning or not. She followed her father out to the car and squashed into the back with her sisters.

The Walters gave rather grand dinner parties; they had many friends and they enjoyed entertaining. The Lockitts found that there were half a dozen guests already there, and Mrs Walter, welcoming them warmly, observed that there were only two more expected. 'That charming Mrs Seymour,' she observed, 'so handsome, and I dare say very lonely now that she is widowed, and I don't know if you've met—' She broke off, smiling towards the door, 'Here he is, anyway. William, how delightful that you could come! I was just saying … perhaps you know Mrs Lockitt?'

Imogen and Pauline had gone to speak to Mr Walter; only Lucy was with her mother. She watched Dr Thurloe, the very epitome of the well-dressed man, walk towards his hostess, her gentle mouth slightly open, her cheeks pinkening with surprise and delight. Here he was again, fallen as it were into her lap, and on his own too, so perhaps he wasn't married or even engaged.

He greeted his hostess, shook hands with Lucy's mother, and when Mrs Walter would have introduced Lucy he forestalled her with a pleasant, 'Oh, but we have already met—during working hours …'

He smiled down at Lucy, who beamed back at him, regretting at the same time that she had worn the green, by no means her prettiest dress. She regretted it even more as the door was opened again and Mrs Seymour swept in. A splendid blonde, exquisitely dressed and possessed of a haughty manner and good looks, she greeted Mrs Walter with a kiss on one cheek, bade Mrs Lockitt a charming good evening, smiled perfunctorily at Lucy, and turned to the doctor. 'William!' she exclaimed. 'I had no idea that you would be here—I had to take a taxi. If I'd known you could have picked me up.' She smiled sweetly and Lucy ground silent teeth. 'But you shall drive me home—you will, won't you?'

'Delighted, Fiona.'

She put a hand on his sleeve and said brightly, 'Oh, there is Tim Wetherby, I must speak to him—you know him, of course …'

It seemed that Dr Thurloe did. The pair of them strolled away and, since Mrs Walter had turned aside to talk to one of the guests, Lucy was left standing by her mother.

Mrs Lockitt gave her an exasperated glance. 'I want to talk to Mr Walter before we go into dinner. Do exert yourself, darling, and go and chat with someone—it is such a pity that you're so shy …'

A remark which made Lucy even more so. But, obedient to her mother's suggestion, she joined a group of people she knew and made the kind of conversation expected of her while managing to keep an eye on the doctor. That he and Fiona Seymour knew each other well was obvious, but Lucy had already decided that Fiona was not at all the kind of girl he should marry—he needed a wife who would listen to him when he got back from his work each day, someone who liked children, someone who understood how tiresome they could be and how lovable and how ill … Lucy nodded her head gently, seeing herself as that wife. She wasn't sure how she was going to set about it, but she would find a way.

'You're not listening to a word I'm saying,' remarked the young man who had been talking for a few minutes. When she apologised, everyone laughed—nicely, because they liked her—and someone said, 'Lucy's thinking about her orphans.' Her job was a mild joke among those she knew and there was no malice in the remark. She smiled at the speaker as they went in to dinner.

She sat between the Walters' rather solemn elder son and a young man attached to one of the foreign embassies, now home on leave, and she dutifully lent an attentive ear first to Joe Walter's explaining rather prosily about computers, and then to her neighbour on the other side, who was anxious to tell her what a splendid time he was having in his far-flung post. With an effort she smiled and nodded and said all the right things, and the doctor, from the other side of the table, thought how restful she was and how very pretty. She looked different, of course, dressed in that green thing and with her hair curling almost to her shoulders. She was sensible too, when it came to handling small

children. He bent a bland listening face towards his dinner companion while he allowed the nucleus of a plan to take shape in his sagacious mind.

People sat around talking after dinner, and beyond a few passing remarks Lucy saw nothing of the doctor. Since she left with her family before he did, she had no chance to see him and Fiona Seymour leave together. She told herself stoutly that it didn't matter one bit, one day she would marry him, only she couldn't leave it too long, for she was twenty-five already. She was immensely cheered by the thought that Mrs Seymour, however well made-up she was, couldn't disguise the fact that she wouldn't see thirty again.

Back home, all of them in the kitchen, drinking hot milk before bed, her mother remarked, 'What a nice man William Thurloe is, so good-looking and clever and not an ounce of conceit in him.'

'We had quite a long chat,' said Imogen complacently.

'But Fiona Seymour has got her talons into him,' said Pauline. She added, 'He must be all of thirty-five—she'd make him a very suitable wife.'

'Why?' asked Lucy quietly.

Both sisters turned to look at her. 'She's what is known as a handsome woman, intelligent and always well dressed,' they chorused kindly, 'and she would look just right sitting opposite him at the dinner table. A splendid hostess …'

'But she can't be a hostess all the time—I mean, what about looking after the children, and seeing that he gets a good meal when he comes home late, and gets enough sleep …?'

Her family stared at her. 'Why, Lucy,' said her mother, 'you sound,' she paused, seeking a word, 'concerned.'

Lucy finished her milk and put the mug in the sink. 'I just think that Fiona Seymour isn't the wife for him. He was the specialist I took Miranda to see yesterday; he likes children and somehow I don't think she does.' She kissed her mother and father, nodded goodnight to her sisters and went up to her room. She had said more than she had intended to say, which had been silly of her. The doctor's future was nothing to her; she would probably meet him from time to time at some mutual friend's house, and he would greet her politely and go and talk to someone else, forgetting her at once.

It was raining dismally when she left home the next morning. The orphanage looked bleaker than ever as she got off her bus, although once inside it became more cheerful with its bright painted walls and colourful curtains. All the same, the morning dragged with its unending round of chores. She was ministering to a vomiting four-year-old when Sister came to find her. 'Matron wants you in the office, Lucy. You'd better go at once.'

Lucy handed over the small child, took off her apron and made her way to the office on the first floor.

Matron was quite young and well liked. 'Sit down, Lucy,' she invited. 'I've a favour to ask of you. Miranda has to go off into hospital in two days' time. Dr Thurloe has asked if you would be allowed to go with her—it's important that she is not too disturbed, and she responds to you. You would have to live at the City Royal for a few days—she would be in a room off the children's ward and you would have a room next to hers. You would be relieved for meals and off-duty, but it might be necessary for you to get up at night if she is very disturbed.' She smiled. 'And we both know what that's like.'

'Yes, of course I'll go, Matron.' Lucy smiled too; she would see Dr Thurloe again after all, and perhaps she would be able to say something witty or clever and get his attention—not just polite attention, but real interest … 'When exactly are we to go?'

'Have a day off tomorrow and report here at eight o'clock on the day after. I believe Dr Thurloe means to insert the tube later in the day, and I must warn you that you may have a difficult night afterwards. It depends on her reactions as to how long she stays there. You'll be free?'

'Oh, yes, Matron—for as long as you want me to be with Miranda.'

'Good, that's settled, then. I won't keep you longer.'

The day had suddenly become perfect; the children were little angels, and the hours sped away in a flurry of tasks which were no longer boring or tiresome. Lucy changed nappies, cleaned up messes, fed protesting toddlers and dreamt of the days ahead, days in which she would become the object of admiration—Dr Thurloe's admiration—because of some skilful act on her part—saving Miranda's life by her quick thinking, rescuing a ward full of children by her bravery in case of fire … a bomb outrage … burst pipes …? It didn't really matter what it was as long as it caused him to notice her and then fall in love with her.

She finished at last and went off duty and home. It was still raining, and as she hurried from the bus-stop the steady downpour brought her to her usual senses. She laughed out loud so that an elderly couple passing looked at her with suspicion. 'No more useless daydreaming,' she told herself briskly. 'You're too old for that anyway, but that doesn't mean that you aren't going to marry him some day.'

It was nice to be home for a day. She pottered around, helping her mother with the flowers, sorting out the sheets of scrawled writing which flowed from her father's pen as he worked at the lengthy task of putting together notes for the book he intended to write. At the end of the day she packed the bag that she would need while she was in hospital, washed her hair, did her nails and inspected her pretty face for the first wrinkles and lines. She couldn't find any.

She and Miranda were fetched from the orphanage by ambulance the next morning, and to everyone's relief the child slept quietly in Lucy's arms. It wasn't until they were in the room where she was to stay that she woke and, sensing something out of the ordinary, began to cry.

Lucy sat down, still in her outdoor things, and set about the task of quieting Miranda. She had just succeeded when Dr Thurloe came in.

His 'Good morning, Lucy,' was quietly spoken and uttered with impersonal courtesy before he began giving the ward sister his instructions, and presently Miranda, still snivelling a bit, was given an injection and carried away to Theatre, leaving Lucy free to unpack her bag in the adjoining room and envelop her nicely curved person in the voluminous overall she had been told that she must wear. Her duties, as far as she could make out, were light enough—certainly no worse than they were at the orphanage. The only difference was that they would extend for a much longer period each day, and quite possibly each night too. A small price to pay for seeing the doctor from time to time, and on his own ground too.

She drank the coffee that one of the nurses brought her; the nurse was a nice girl, but faintly condescending. 'Why don't you train as a nurse?' she asked.

'I'm not clever,' observed Lucy, 'but I like children.' She might have added that she had no need to earn her living, and that her mother and father found it difficult to understand as well as faintly amusing that she should spend her days feeding babies and toddlers and everlastingly clearing up their mess, only it didn't enter her head to do so.

'How long will it take?' she wanted to know, and was treated to a lengthy description of exactly what Dr Thurloe was doing. She didn't understand half of it, but it was nice to talk about him. 'I thought he was a physician,' she ventured.

The nurse gave her an impatient look. 'Well, of course he is, but he does this kind of surgery too. He's a paediatrician—that's a children's doctor.'

Lucy, who had looked all that up in her father's study, already knew that, but she expressed suitable gratitude for being told, and when her companion said importantly that she must return to the ward and continue what sounded like a mountain of tasks, she thanked her for her company and settled herself down to wait. It wouldn't be too long.

Miranda returned ten minutes later, borne in the arms of Theatre Sister and already rousing from the anaesthetic. There was just time for her to be settled in Lucy's arms before she opened her eyes, and then her small mouth was ready to let out an enraged yell.

'Hello, love,' said Lucy in her gentle voice, and Miranda smiled instead.

'Lucy,' she mumbled contentedly, and closed her eyes and her mouth too.

Dr Thurloe, standing silently behind her, nodded his handsome head. He had been right to follow his instinctive wish to have Lucy there; it would make things a good deal easier on the ward, and besides, she looked nice sitting there in that oversized overall. He had a sudden jumble of ridiculous thoughts run through his clever head; nurseries, rice pudding, children shouting and laughing, and small figures pattering to and fro …

He frowned. Fiona had told him laughingly only the other day that he saw enough children without needing any of his own. 'What you need,' she had told him in her charming way, 'is a quiet house to come home to, pleasant evenings with friends, and someone to talk to at the end of the day without any interruptions.' She had made it sound very inviting and, because he had been very tired then, he had more or less agreed with her, but now he realised that that wasn't what he wanted. He wasn't sure what he did want, and anyway, it was hardly the time to worry about it now. He went to bend over his small patient, taking no notice of Lucy, then he gave more instructions to his ward sister and went away.

CHAPTER TWO

THE day seemed very long to Lucy. She was relieved for her meals, but Miranda, now fully awake, became restless towards the evening, and the only way to placate her was for Lucy to take her on her lap and murmur the moppet's favourite nursery rhymes over and over again in her gentle voice. But eventually Miranda slept, and Lucy was able to tuck her into her cot and, with a nurse in her place, go to the canteen for her supper. The nurses there were casually kind, showing her where to get her meal and where she might sit, but beyond a few smiles and hellos she was ignored while they discussed their work on the wards, their boyfriends and their lack of money. She ate her supper quickly and slipped away unnoticed, back to the austere little room where Miranda was. The ward sister was there conning the chart.

Had your supper? Good. Night Sister will be along in about an hour. I think it might be a good idea if you had a bath and got ready for bed while I can spare a nurse to sit here—that will mean that if Miranda wakes up later and is difficult you'll be available. Go to bed once Sister's been—but you do know you may have to get up in the night? I don't think there will be a nurse to spare to attend the child; we're rather busy …'

She nodded and smiled and went away, and Lucy set about getting ready for bed in her own small room, leaving the door open in case Miranda woke and the nurse couldn't placate her.

But the child slept on and Lucy bathed in peace, brushed her hair, got into a dressing-gown and padded back to take the nurse's place.

The nurse yawned. 'She hasn't moved,' she told Lucy. 'She looks like a cherub, doesn't she? If it weren't for that outsized head …' She glanced at her watch. 'I'm off duty, thank heaven; it's been a long day. See you in the morning.'

Lucy sat down. Miranda was sleeping peacefully, and her pulse, which Lucy had been shown how to take and record, was exactly as it should be. Lucy studied the chart and started to read up the notes behind it. The small operation had been written up in red ink in an almost unreadable scrawl and initialled W.T., and she puzzled it out with patience. Dr Thurloe might be an excellent paediatrician, but his writing appeared to be appalling. She smiled, pleased that she knew something about him, and then she sat quietly thinking about him until Night Sister, a small brisk woman, came into the room. She checked the valve, looked at the chart and asked, 'You know what you're looking for, Miss Lockitt? Slow pulse, vomiting, headache—not that Miranda will be able to tell you that … But if you're worried, or even doubtful, ring the bell at once. I'll be back later on, and if I can't come then my junior night sister will. I should go to bed if I were you. Her pulse is steady and she's sleeping, but I depend on you to see to her during the night.'

She went away as quietly as she had come, and Lucy did as she had been told and got into the narrow, cold bed in the adjoining room. She got up again in a few minutes and put on her dressing-gown again, and then tucked her cold feet into its cosy folds and rolled into a tight ball, and dozed off.

It was only a little after an hour later when Miranda's first restless whimpers woke her. She was out of bed in a flash and bending over the cot. Miranda was awake and cross, but her pulse seemed all right. Lucy picked her up carefully and sat down with her on her lap, gave her a drink and began the one-sided conversation which the toddler seemed to enjoy. Miranda stopped grizzling and presently began a conversation of her own, although when Lucy stopped talking her small face creased into infantile rage again, so that Lucy hurried into the Three Bears, growling gently so that Miranda chuckled. 'And Father Bear blew on his porridge to cool it,' said Lucy, and blew, to stop and draw a quick breath because Dr Thurloe had come silently into the room and was watching her. He had someone with him, a pretty, dark girl in sister's uniform, and it was to her that he spoke. 'You see, Marian, how well my plan has worked? With Miss Lucy Lockitt's co-operation we shall have Miranda greatly improved in no time.'

He nodded, smiling faintly at Lucy. 'Has she been very restless?'

'No, only for the last twenty minutes or so. She began to cry, but I think she'll settle down again.' She went red at his look; she had no business telling a specialist something he must already know for himself.

'I'll take a look while I'm here. Can you sit her up a little on your knee?'

He bent over her to examine Miranda and Lucy studied the top of his head; he had a lot of hair, a pleasing mixture of fairness and silver cut short by a master hand.

He straightened up and spoke to the sister. 'I think something to settle her, don't you, Marian?' He glanced at the thin gold watch on his wrist. 'Let's see, it's getting on for eleven o'clock.' He glanced at Lucy. 'A few hours of sleep will do you both good …' He took the chart from the sister's hand and wrote. 'That should see to it.' He walked to the door. 'Go to bed, Miss Lockitt; Sister will see that someone wakes you before Miranda rouses. Goodnight.'

He had gone before she could reply. She waited until the sister came back with an injection and then sat soothing Miranda until she dozed off and she was able to tuck her up in her cot once more. She wasn't very happy about going back to bed, but she was sure that Dr Thurloe wouldn't have suggested it if he hadn't been quite convinced that Miranda would sleep quietly for a few hours. So she got back into bed again and presently fell asleep, to wake very early in the morning and go and take a look at Miranda, who was still sleeping peacefully. Lucy took her pulse and was relieved to find that it was just what it was supposed to be. She was dressed and tied into her ample overall long before a nurse poked her head round the door. 'Oh, good, you're up already. I'll bring you a cup of tea just as soon as I've got the time. If she wakes can you wash her and pot her?'

Lucy nodded. 'Oh, yes. I expect I'll need clean sheets and another nightie.'

'In that cupboard in the corner, and there's a plastic bag where you can put the stuff that needs washing …'

The nurse's head disappeared to be replaced almost at once by the bulk of Dr Thurloe, immaculate and looking as though he had had ten hours' sleep. He was alone this time and his 'good morning' was friendly, so that Lucy regretted that she hadn't bothered to powder her nose or put on lipstick.

'Had a good night? You're up early.'

'So are you,' observed Lucy, and wished she hadn't said it; she must remember that they weren't at a dinner party but in hospital, where he was someone important and she wasn't of any account, especially in the bunchy garment she was wearing. And she felt worse because he didn't answer her, only bent over the cot.

'We'll have a look,' he said with impersonal politeness, and waited expectantly.

Lucy took down the cot side. She said in her sensible way, 'She's wet—I didn't like to change her until I'd seen Sister. Do you mind?'

The look he gave her was amused and kind too. 'I dare say I've dealt with more wet infants than you've had hot dinners. No, I don't mind! I'm glad she's had a good night. I don't intend to give her anything today though, and you may have your work cut out keeping her happy.'

He was halfway through his examination when the junior night sister came in. She said sharply, 'I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know you were here.' And then to Lucy. 'You should have rung the bell, Miss Lockitt.'

'My fault,' said the doctor smoothly, 'I told her not to bother.' Which was kind of him, reflected Lucy, listening to him giving the night sister his instructions. 'And I'll be in some time during the day. I think Miranda will be all right, but we must look out for mental disturbance—there may be a deficiency …'

Lucy couldn't understand everything he was saying, but she presumed it wasn't necessary; she was there to keep Miranda quiet and happy until she was deemed fit to return to the orphanage. She supposed that would be in a couple of days' time and that she would be told in due course. The

doctor strolled to the door with the junior night sister beside him. As he went out of the room, he said over his shoulder, 'Thank you, Miss Lockitt. Be sure and let someone know if you're anxious about anything, never mind how trivial it may seem.'

Lucy watched him go, wishing with her whole heart that she were the junior night sister, not only on good terms with him, but able to understand what he was talking about and give the right answers. Not for the first time she wished fervently that she were clever and not just practical and sensible.

There was no point in dwelling upon that; Miranda was showing signs of waking up, and she fetched clean linen from the cupboard and ran warm water into the deep sink in one corner of the room. She was very grateful when the nurse brought her a cup of tea, for the next half-hour was busy and noisy: Miranda was fretful and screamed her annoyance at the top of her voice. It was nothing new, and Lucy did all that was necessary, talking in her quiet voice all the while. When the ward sister came on duty and poked her head round the door with a 'Can you cope alone?' Lucy said placidly that she was quite all right, thank you, and the head disappeared without another word. She had Miranda tucked up in bed by the time a nurse came with the toddler's breakfast. 'Ring when she's had it,' she advised, 'and someone will relieve you while you go to the canteen.' She grinned widely. 'I bet you're ready for breakfast. Did you get a cup of tea?'

'Yes, thanks. Are you very busy?'

The nurse cast her eyes to heaven. 'You can say that again.' She darted off leaving Lucy to feed Miranda, who, clean and smiling again, was more than pleased to eat her breakfast.

The same nurse came back when Lucy rang the bell. 'Half an hour,' she warned. 'We've got theatre cases this morning, so it's all go. Someone will bring you coffee, though, and you'll get time for your dinner. I don't know about off-duty, I expect that Sister will tell you.'

Lucy went thankfully to the canteen; she was hungry, and besides, it was nice to have a change of scene. She was fond of Miranda and she saw a lot of her at the orphanage, but all the same she could see that her patience and good temper were going to be tried for the next day or two.

There weren't many people in the canteen. She took her tray to a table by a window and ate with her eye on the clock, and then hurried back to find Miranda sobbing and refusing to be comforted. It took a little while to soothe her again, but presently the little girl fell asleep and Lucy was free to walk round the little room and look out of the window. The hospital forecourt was below. She watched Dr Thurloe's car come to a dignified halt in the consultants' car park, and then studied him as he got out and crossed to the hospital entrance. He walked fast, but halfway there he paused and looked up to the window where she stood. There wasn't time to draw back; she stood there while he looked and presently went on his way.

She was in the canteen having her dinner when he came to see Miranda again, and that evening it was his registrar who paid a visit. And in the morning when he came with the ward sister his good morning to Lucy was pleasant but cool, and anything he had to say was said to the sister.

Miranda was to go back to the orphanage the next day; everything was going well and the matron there would know how to deal with any emergency. Miranda was to come to his next out-patients' clinic in two weeks' time. He paused to thank Lucy as he went away. She was watching him go with regret; at the same time her wish to marry him had never been so strong.

She took Miranda back the next day without having seen him again. He was in the hospital; his car was parked in the forecourt. She glimpsed it as she got into the ambulance which was to take them to the orphanage. She consoled herself with the thought that she would be taking Miranda to his clinic in two weeks' time. In the meantime she might be able to think of something to attract his attention. A different hairstyle? Different make-up? A striking outfit? Better still, a few amusing, witty remarks … She occupied her brief ride trying to think of them.

It was early afternoon by the time she had handed over Miranda and reported to Matron, to be told that, since she had had almost no time off in the hospital, she was to go home at once and not return to the orphanage until the day following the next.

'You enjoyed your stay at the City Royal?'

'Yes, thank you. I didn't have anything much to do, just keep Miranda happy and see that she ate her food. She was very good.'

'She slept?'

'Oh, quite a bit. I got up once or twice during the night, but she soon settled.'

'Good. Dr Thurloe seemed to be pleased with the arrangement; it took a good deal of the work off the nurses' shoulders. Miranda seems to need a lot of attention, but he thinks that she will improve fairly rapidly.'

'That's good. What will happen to her, Matron? I mean when she's older and more—more normal?'

'Well, as to that, we must wait and see. But she will always have a home here, you know. Now do go home, you must be tired.'

It was still early afternoon and only Alice was at home when Lucy let herself in. 'A nice cup of tea and a sandwich or two,' said Alice comfortably. 'You look tired, love. Your mother and father are at the Victoria and Albert. Someone there wanted your pa to see some old rocks that someone had sent from Africa—or was it the Andes? One of those foreign places, anyway. They won't be back until after tea. Imogen's working late and Pauline's going out to dinner with her fiancé.' She sniffed. 'You go and change and I'll have a snack for you in ten minutes.'

So Lucy went to her room, unpacked her few things, had a shower, washed her hair and wandered downstairs with her head in a towel and wearing a dressing-gown. Her mother wouldn't have approved, but since the house was empty except for herself and Alice she couldn't see that it mattered. Alice had made a pot of tea and cut a plateful of sandwiches and Lucy sat down at the kitchen table to eat them. Somehow she had missed dinner at the hospital, what with feeding Miranda and getting her ready to go back to the orphanage, and the nurses on the ward being in short supply since they took it in turns to go to the canteen. She lifted the edge of a sandwich and saw with satisfaction that it was generously filled with chopped egg and cress. She wolfed it down delicately, poured tea and invited Alice to have a cup.

'Not me, love,' said Alice. "Ad me lunch not an hour back. You eat that lot and have a nice rest before your mother and father come home.'

Lucy polished off the egg and cress and started on the ham. The kitchen was pleasantly warm and cheerful. It was a semi-basement room, for the house had been built at the turn of the century, a late Victorian gentleman's residence with ornate brickwork and large rooms. It had been Lucy's home for as long as she could remember, and although her mother often expressed a wish for a house in the country nothing ever came of it, for the Chelsea house was convenient for her father's headquarters; he still travelled widely, taking her mother with him, and when they were at home he worked for various museums and he lectured a good deal. Lucy, a sensible girl not given to wanting things she couldn't have, accepted her life cheerfully, aware that she didn't quite fit in with her family and that she was a source of mild disappointment, to her mother at least, even though she was loved. Until now she had been quite prepared to go on working at the orphanage with the hope at the back of her mind that one day she would meet a man who might want to marry her. So far she hadn't met anyone whom she would want to marry—that was, until she'd met Dr Thurloe. An event which incited her to do something about it. She took another sandwich and bit into it. Clothes, she thought, new clothes—she had plenty, but a few more might help—and then she might try and discover mutual friends—the Walters, of course, for a start, and there must be others. Her parents knew any number of people, it would be a process of elimination. But first the new clothes, so that if and when they met again she would be able to compete with Fiona Seymour.

The front door bell, one of a row of old-fashioned bells along the kitchen wall, jangled and Alice put down the plates that she was stacking.

'Postman?' asked Lucy. 'He's late …'

'I'd best go, I suppose,' grumbled Alice, and went out of the kitchen, shutting the door after her as she went up the short flight of stairs to the hall.

Lucy sat back, a second cup of tea in her hand. There was one sandwich left; it was a pity to leave it. She took it off the plate and bit into it. The door behind her opened and she said, 'Was it the postman?' and turned round as she took another bite.

Alice had returned, but not alone. Dr Thurloe was with her, looking completely at home, elegant as always and smiling faintly.

'Gracious heavens!' Lucy spoke rather thickly because of the sandwich. 'Whatever are you doing here?' She put an agitated hand up to the towel. 'I've just washed my hair …'

She frowned heavily, all her plans knocked edgeways; instead of sporting an elegant outfit and a tidy head of hair, here she was looking just about as awful as she possibly could. She turned the frown on Alice and the doctor spoke.

'Don't be annoyed with your housekeeper, I told her that you wouldn't mind. You don't, do you? After all, I've seen you in a dressing-gown at the hospital.' He sounded kind and friendly and the smile held charm.

Lucy smiled back. 'Is it something important? Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Indeed I would.'

Alice gave a small sound which might have been a chuckle and pulled out a chair. 'The kettle's on the boil,' she informed him, 'and I've as nice a bit of Madeira cake as you'll taste anywhere, though I says it that oughtn't, being me own baking.'

'I'm partial to Madeira cake, and what a pleasant kitchen you have.'

He sat down opposite Lucy and eyed the towel. 'Do you know, all the girls I know go to the hairdresser every few days; I can't remember when I last saw a young woman washing her own hair.' He studied Lucy thoughtfully. 'Will it take long to dry?'

'No. It's almost dry now.' She poured him a cup of tea from the fresh pot Alice had put on the table. 'Is it something to do with Miranda? She's not ill …?'

'No, she's doing nicely. I wondered if we might go somewhere this evening and have dinner; I'm sure you would like to know the details of her treatment, and there really was no time at the City Royal to say much.'

He ate some cake and watched her, amused at her hesitation.

'Well,' said Lucy, 'Mother and Father—' She was interrupted by the telephone's ringing, and Alice answered it. She listened for a moment, said, 'Yes, ma'am' twice and then hung up. 'Yer ma and pa,' she told Lucy. 'They're going on to Professor Schinkel's house for dinner.' She added, 'I expect your ma thought you weren't home today.'

The look on Lucy's face made the doctor say quickly, 'Now isn't that providential, you will be free to dine with me, then?' That settled, he took another piece of cake and passed his cup for more tea. 'Your sisters won't mind?'

'They're both out too.'

'Then may I call for you this evening? Half-past seven or thereabouts? Somewhere fairly quiet? Boulestin's, perhaps?'

'That sounds very nice,' said Lucy, 'but only if you can spare the time …'

He looked as though he was going to laugh, but said gravely, 'As far as I know there will be no calls upon me until tomorrow morning at nine o'clock.' He got to his feet. 'Until half-past seven. I look forward to it.'

Alice showed him out and came bustling back. 'There now, what a nice gentleman, to be sure. Take that towel off and I'll dry that hair. What will you wear?' She began to rub vigorously. 'That's a posh restaurant …'

'Those sandals I got from Rayne's and haven't worn—and I'll leave my hair loose …'

'All right as far as it goes, but what about a dress? Sandals and hair aren't enough.'

'That silver-grey satin, you know, the one with the calf-length skirt and the wide lace collar and cuffs.' Lucy's voice, muffled by the towel, sounded pleased. It was a very pretty dress, so simple that it stood out among other more striking dresses, and the colour, she hoped, would make her look the kind of girl a man might like to marry, elegant but demure.

She left a note for her mother on the hall table, collected an enormous cashmere shawl in which to wrap herself, and her little grey handbag, and eased her feet into her new sandals. They were a little tight, but they were exactly right with the dress, and what was a little discomfort compared with that?

The drawing-room looked charming with its soft lighting and the fire blazing. She arranged herself to the very best advantage on a small balloon-backed chair covered in old-rose velvet, and waited for the doorbell.

The doctor was punctual to the minute, and Alice ushered him into the drawing-room, opening the door wide so that he had a splendid view of Lucy, delightfully pretty and at great pains to appear cool.

She got up as he came in, and said in her best hostess voice, 'Oh, hello again. Would you like a drink before we go?'

'Hello, Lucy. How very elegant you look, and so punctual. Almost unheard of and quite refreshing.'

She should have stayed in her room until he had arrived and kept him waiting, she thought crossly.

She said haughtily, 'I have to be punctual at the orphanage, it's a habit.'

'Of course. I booked a table for half-past eight; I thought we might have a drink there first. Shall we go?'

She smiled at him, she couldn't help herself; he looked so large and handsome and so assured. She wondered fleetingly if he ever lost his temper.

Southampton Street wasn't all that far away, but the evening traffic was heavy and slow moving, so it was well past eight o'clock by the time Lucy found herself at a table opposite the doctor. It was a good table too, she noticed, and he was known at the restaurant. Perhaps he took Fiona Seymour there … She wasn't going to waste thought about that; here she was doing exactly what she had dreamed of doing, being alone with the doctor, nicely dressed, looking her best, and hopefully at her best when it came to conversation.

It was a pity that no witty remarks filled her head; indeed, it was regrettably empty. She sipped her sherry and thankfully bowed her head over the menu card. She was hungry and he said encouragingly, 'I dare say you had a very scanty lunch. I know I did. How about the terrine of leeks with prawns for a start, and if you like fish the red mullet is delicious—or roast pigeon?'

'I couldn't eat a pigeon,' said Lucy. 'I feed them on the way to work every morning.' She was reassured by his understanding smile. 'I'd like the red mullet.'

It wasn't until these delicacies had been eaten, followed by a dessert of puff pastry, piled with a hazelnut mousse and topped with caramel, that the doctor switched smoothly from the gentle conversation, calculated to put his companion at her ease, to the more serious subject of Miranda.

'Do you see a great deal of her at the orphanage?' he wanted to know.

'Well, yes—not all the time, of course, but always each morning, bathing her and getting her to walk and that kind of thing.'

He nodded. 'You do realise that she will probably be backward—mentally retarded—but this operation that I have just done should give her a better chance. One would wish to do everything

possible for her—she is such a pretty child, and if only she had been brought to our attention while she was still a baby we could have done so much more.'

'But isn't there any special treatment? She talks a little, you know, and although she's a bit wobbly when she's walking she does try.'

'I'm going to ask you to do all you can to help her, and don't be discouraged when she makes almost no progress. I know you have a busy day and there are other children to look after, but Matron tells me that Miranda responds to you much more willingly than to anyone else there. Once the shunt gets into its stride we should take advantage of that and get her little brain stimulated. If all goes well, she will be able to have therapy in a few months.'

'Do you get many children like her?' Lucy poured their coffee and reflected sadly that the only reason he had asked her out was to make sure that she was going to stay at the orphanage and look after Miranda. Well, he need not have gone to so much trouble, wasting an evening with her when he might have been spending it with the glamorous Fiona. It was quite obvious that she had no effect upon him whatsoever, despite the fashionable grey dress and the new sandals. He probably hadn't even noticed them.

He guided their talk into more general channels, and when Lucy said that she should really go back home since she was on duty in the morning he made no objection, but signed the bill and followed her out of the restaurant without one word of persuasion to remain a little longer—or even go dancing. But that was a good thing, for the sandals were pinching horribly and walking in them, even the short distance across the pavement to the car, was crippling.

'Take them off,' suggested the doctor as he started the car.

'Oh, you don't mind? They're killing me. How did you know?'

'You have quite a fierce frown which, I hasten to add, I am quite sure no one noticed except me.' He gave her a sideways glance. 'They're quite delightful though; indeed, the rest of you looks delightful too, Lucy. Demure and malleable. Are you demure and malleable, I wonder?'

She curled her toes in blissful comfort. 'No, I don't think so; I don't think girls are demure nowadays, are they? Anyway, I'm too old … and I'm not sure what malleable means—I thought it meant squashy.'

He gave a growl of laughter. 'I meant it to mean tender and gentle, and I wasn't aware that age had anything to do with being demure. How old are you?'

'Twenty-five. You're thirty-five, aren't you?'

'We might say that we have reached the ages of discretion.'

They had reached her home and he stopped the car gently, and when she made to get out he put out a restraining hand. 'No, wait.'

He got out and opened her door. 'You'll never cram your feet back into those sandals.' He picked them up and put them into her hand, scooped her out of the seat and carried her to the front door, where he asked her to ring the doorbell.

Alice answered the door, flung it wide to allow him to get inside, and said urgently, 'You're not hurt, love? What's the matter? You've not 'ad too much to drink?'

The doctor set Lucy gently on her feet. 'Her feet,' he explained. 'Her sandals were pinching and, of course, once they were off they wouldn't go on again.'

Alice laughed. 'And there's me wondering what on earth had happened. Your mother and father are in the drawing-room—you go too, sir. I'll bring in a nice tray of coffee and you, Miss Lucy, go and fetch a pair of slippers this minute—what your ma will say I don't know.'

'It could happen to anyone,' remarked the doctor mildly, and gave Alice a nice smile so that she said,

'Oh, well, perhaps it won't be noticed,' and went ahead of them to open the drawing-room door.

Lucy's mother and father were sitting one on each side of the hearth, her father immersed in a sheaf of papers and her mother turning the pages of Harper's. They both looked up as she and the

doctor went in and her father got to his feet. 'There you are, Lucy and Dr Thurloe, how delightful. Come and sit down for half an hour—Lucy, run and ask Alice to bring coffee—'

'She's making it now, Father!' Lucy bent to kiss her mother's cheek and wished she knew how to raise a graceful hand to greet the doctor in the same manner as that lady. 'Delighted to see you, Dr Thurloe. Do sit down. How very kind of you to take Lucy out to dinner.'

'It was Lucy who was kind, Mrs Lockitt,' he replied, and paused, smiling, as Mrs Lockitt caught sight of Lucy's feet.

'Lucy, your shoes? You've never lost them? You aren't hurt?'

'They pinched, Mother, so I took them off.'

'Well, really!' She turned her attention to her guest. 'I have been hoping that we might meet again, you really must dine one evening before we go to Turkey.'

'Kayseri, the ancient Hittite city—there have been some interesting finds lately, and I've been asked to go out there and take a look,' Mr Lockitt joined in. 'We plan to fly out at the end of next week.'

The doctor, much to Lucy's surprise, expressed his delight at the invitation, and Mrs Lockitt said, 'Lucy, dear, run up to my room and get my engagement book, will you? And do get some slippers at the same time.'

Lucy went slowly upstairs. Her parents, whom she loved dearly, were spoiling everything for her; she showed up in a bad light in her own home with no chance to outshine their intellectual talk—she had hardly scintillated over dinner, and since she had entered the drawing-room she had uttered only a few words. She found the book, poked her feet into a pair of frivolous satin mules and went back downstairs. Alice had brought in the coffee and Lucy's father had fetched the brandy; the doctor looked as though he had settled for the rest of the evening, already making knowledgeable replies to her father's observations—apparently he knew all about the iron-smelting activities of the Hittites, and he knew too where they had lived in Asia Minor.

As she handed round the coffee-cups he asked pleasantly, 'And do you not wish to go too, Lucy?'

Her mother answered for her. 'Lucy's a home-bird, aren't you, darling? This nice little job at the orphanage gives her something to do while we're away.' Mrs Lockitt went on, not meaning to be unkind, 'She hasn't had a training for anything. Of course, Imogen is the clever one in the family—she has this super job in the City—and Pauline works in an art gallery, and will marry at the end of this year. They are all such capable girls, and of course we have an excellent housekeeper.'

The doctor murmured politely and presently got up to go, and Mr Lockitt went to the door with him, so that beyond a stiff little speech of thanks Lucy had no chance to speak. There was nothing to say anyway. Her fragile dream, never more than a fantasy, had been blown away; he would think of her, if he ever did, as a dull girl not worth a second thought.

She bade her parents goodnight and went to bed. Surprisingly, just before she slept, she decided that somehow or other she would get to know him better, and eventually, in the teeth of all hazards, marry him.

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