NGAIO MARSH

OVERTURE TO DEATH

'Admirably mysterious.'
DAILY MAIL

Ngaio Marsh

Overture to Death

«HarperCollins»

Marsh N.

Overture to Death / N. Marsh — «HarperCollins»,

A classic Ngaio Marsh novel in which she more than lives up to her reputation as a crime writer of intelligence and style.It was planned as an act of charity: a new piano for the parish hall, an amusing play to finance the gift.But its execution was doomed when Miss Campanula sat down to play. A chord was struck, a shot rang out and Miss Campanula was dead.A case of sinister infatuation for the brilliant Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn.

© Marsh N.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

NGAIO MARSH 6
COPYRIGHT 7
DEDICATION 8
CONTENTS 9
CAST OF CHARACTERS 10
CHAPTER 1 The Meet at Pen Cuckoo 11
II 15
III 17
CHAPTER 2 Six Parts and Seven Actors 20
II 23
CHAPTER 3 They Choose a Play 26
II 28
III 30
IV 31
CHAPTER 4 Cue for Music 33
II 35
III 37
CHAPTER 5 Above Cloudyfold 38
II 41
III 42
CHAPTER 6 Rehearsal 45
II 47
III 48
CHAPTER 7 Vignettes 51
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 52

NGAIO MARSH
Overture to Death

HARPER

COPYRIGHT

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd. 1 London Bridge Street London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk
Published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2009
Overture to Death first published in Great Britain by Geoffrey Bles 1939
Ngaio Marsh asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of these works
Copyright © Ngaio Marsh Ltd 1939
All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins ebooks
HarperCollins*Publishers* has made every reasonable effort to ensure that any picture content and written content in this ebook has been included or removed in accordance with the contractual and technological constraints in operation at the time of publication
Source ISBN: 9780006512585
Ebook Edition © SEPTEMBER 2009 ISBN: 9780007344468
Version: 2016-09-12

DEDICATION

For the Sunday Morning Party:
G. M. LESTER
DUNDAS AND CECIL WALKER
NORMAN AND MILES STACPOOLE BATCHELOR
& My Father

CONTENTS

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Cast of Characters
1 The Meet at Pen Cuckoo
2 Six Parts and Seven Actors
3 They Choose a Play
4 Cue for Music
5 Above Cloudyfold
6 Rehearsal
7 Vignettes
8 Catastrophe
9 CID
10 According to Templett
11 According to Roper
12 Further Vignettes
13 Sunday Morning
14 According to the Jernighams
15 Alleyn Goes to Church
16 The Top Lane Incident
17 Confession from a Priest
18 Mysterious Lady
19 Statement from Templett
20 According to Miss Wright
21 According to Mr Saul Tranter
22 Letter to Troy
23 Frightened Lady
24 The Peculiarity of Miss P.
25 Final Vignettes
26 Miss Prentice feels the Draught
27 Case Ends
Keep Reading
About the Author
Also by the Author
About the Publisher

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jocelyn Jernigham	*Of Pen Cuckoo*
Henry Jernigham	*His son*
Eleanor Prentice	*His cousin*
Taylor	*His butler*
Walter Copeland, B.A. OXON.	*Rector of Winton St Giles*
Dinah Copeland	*His daughter*
Idris Campanula	*Of the Red House, Chipping*
Dr William Templett	*Of Chippingwood*
Selia Ross	*Of Duck Cottage, Cloudyfold*
Superintendent Blandish	*Of the Great Chipping Constabulary*
Sergeant Roper	*Of the Great Chipping Constabulary*
Mrs Biggins	
Georgie Biggins	*Her son*
Gibson	*Miss Campanula's Chauffeur*
Gladys Wright	*Of the Y.P.F.C.*
Saul Tranter	*Poacher*
Chief Detective-Inspector	*Of the Criminal*
Alleyn	*Investigation Department*
Detective-Inspector Fox	*His assistant*
Detective-Sergeant Bailey	*His finger print expert*
Detective-Sergeant Thompson	*His camera expert*
Nigel Bathgate	*Journalist, his Watson*

CHAPTER 1 *The Meet at Pen Cuckoo*

Jocelyn Jernigham was a good name. The seventh Jocelyn thought so as he stood at his study window and looked down the vale of Pen Cuckoo toward that precise spot where the spire of Salisbury Cathedral could be seen through field-glasses on a clear day.

'Here I stand,' he said without turning his head, 'and here my forebears have stood, generation after generation, and looked over their own tilth and tillage. Seven Jocelyn Jernighams.'

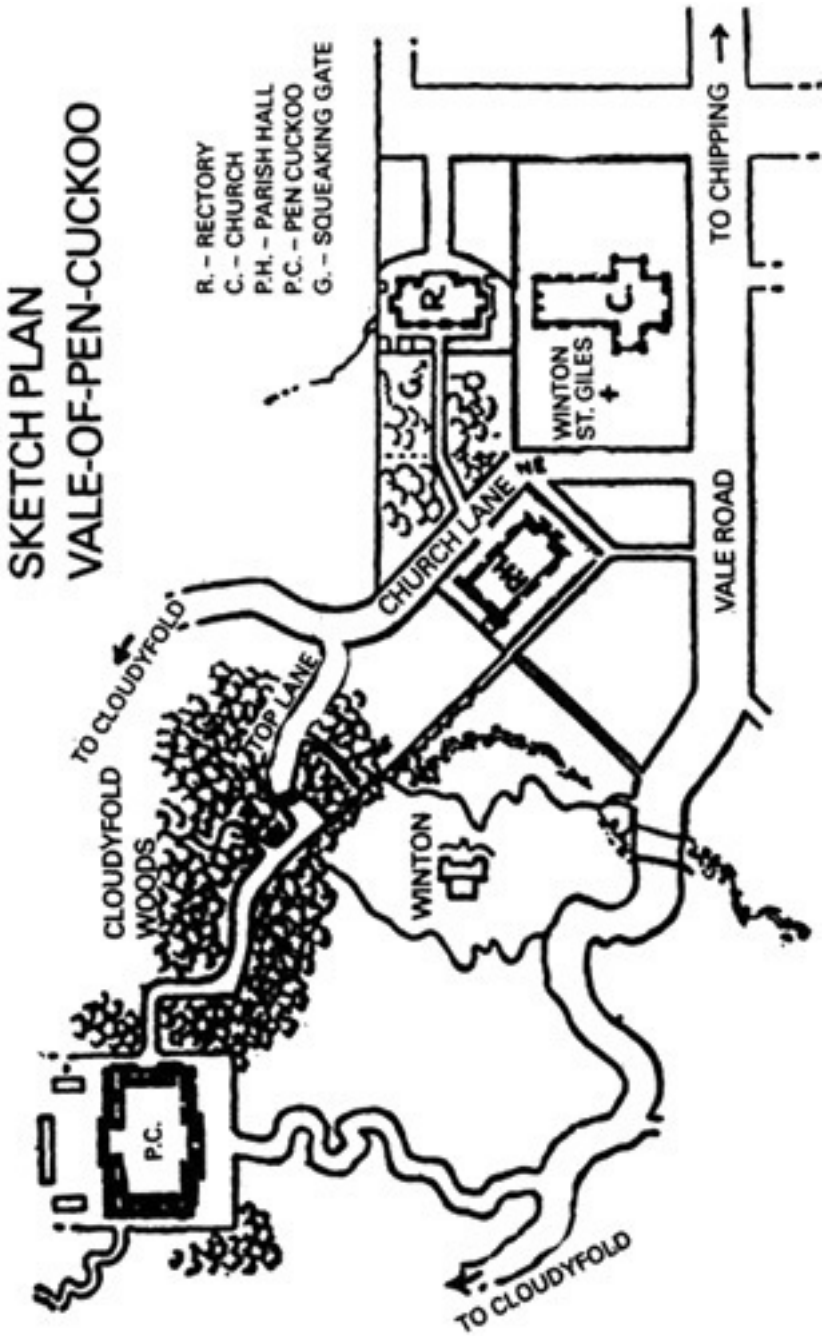
'I'm never quite sure,' said his son Henry Jocelyn, 'what tilth and tillage are. What precisely, Father, is tilth?'

'There's no feeling for that sort of thing,' said Jocelyn, angrily, 'among the present generation. Cheap sneers and clever talk that mean nothing.'

'But I assure you I like words to mean something. That is why I ask you to define a tilth. And you say, "the present generation." You mean my generation, don't you? But I'm twenty-three. There is a newer generation than mine. If I marry Dinah –'

'You quibble deliberately in order to lead our conversation back to this absurd suggestion. If I had known –'

Henry uttered an impatient noise and moved away from the fireplace. He joined his father in the window and he too looked down into the darkling vale of Pen Cuckoo. He saw an austere landscape, adamant beneath drifts of winter mist. The naked trees slept soundly, the fields were dumb with cold; the few stone cottages, with their comfortable signals of blue smoke, were the only waking things in all the valley.



‘I too love Pen Cuckoo,’ said Henry, and he added, with that tinge of irony which Jocelyn, who did not understand it, found so irritating: ‘I have all the pride of prospective ownership. But I refuse to be bully-ragged by Pen Cuckoo. I refuse to play the part of a Victorian young gentleman with a touch of Cophetua thrown in. I refuse to allow this conversation to run along the lines of ancient lineage. The proud father and self-willed heir stuff simply doesn’t fit. We are not discussing a possible misalliance. Dinah is not a blushing maid of inferior station. She is part of the country, rooted equally with us. If we are going to talk about her in country terms, I can strike a suitable attitude and say there have been Copelands at the rectory for as many generations as there have been Jernighams at Pen Cuckoo.’

‘You are both much too young –’ began Jocelyn.

‘No, really, sir, that won’t do. What you mean is that Dinah is too poor. If it had been somebody smarter and richer, you and my dear cousin Eleanor wouldn’t have talked about youth. Don’t let’s pretend.’

‘And don’t you talk to me like a damned sententious young puppy, Henry, because I won’t have it.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Henry, ‘I know I’m being tiresome.’

‘You’re being extremely tiresome. Very well, I’ll speak as plainly as you like. Pen Cuckoo means more to me and should mean more to you, than anything else in life. You know as well as I do that we’re damned hard up. There are all sorts of things that should be done to the place. Those cottages up at Cloudyfold! Winton! Rumbold tells me that Winton’ll leak like a basket if we don’t fix up the roof. The point is –’

‘I can’t afford to make a poor marriage?’

‘If you choose to put it like that.’

‘How else can one put it?’

‘Very well, then.’

‘Well, since we must speak in terms of hard cash, which I assure you I don’t enjoy, Dinah won’t always be the poor parson’s one ewe lamb.’

‘What d’you mean?’ asked Jocelyn, uneasily, but with a certain air of pricking up his ears.

‘I thought everyone knew Miss Campanula has left all her filthy lucre, or most of it, to the rector. Don’t pretend, Father; you must have heard that piece of gossip. The cook and housemaid witnessed the will and the housemaid overheard Miss C. bawling about it to her lawyer. Dinah doesn’t want the money and nor do I – much – but that’s what’ll happen to it eventually.’

‘Servant’s gossip,’ muttered the squire. ‘Most distasteful. Anyway, it may not – she may change her mind. It’s *now* we’re so damned hard-up.’

‘Let me find a job of work,’ Henry said.

‘Your job of work is here.’

‘What! with a perfectly good agent who looks upon me as a sort of impediment in his agricultural speech?’

‘Nonsense!’

‘Look here, Father,’ said Henry gently, ‘how much of this has been inspired by Eleanor?’

‘Eleanor is as anxious as I am that you shouldn’t make a bloody fool of yourself. If your mother had been alive –’

‘No, no,’ cried Henry, ‘let us not put ideas into the minds of the dead. That is so grossly unfair. Let’s recognize Eleanor’s hand in this. Eleanor has been too clever by half. I didn’t mean to tell you about Dinah until I was sure that she loved me. I am not sure. The scene, which Eleanor so conveniently overheard yesterday at the rectory, was purely tentative.’ He broke off, turned away from his father, and pressed his cheek against the window pane.

‘It is intolerable,’ said Henry, ‘that Eleanor should have spoilt the memory of my first – my first approach to Dinah. To stand in the hall, as she must have done, and to listen! To come clucking back to you like a vulgar hen, agog with her news! As if Dinah was a housemaid with a follower. No, it’s too much!’

‘You’ve never been fair to Eleanor. She’s done her best to take your mother’s place.’

‘For God’s sake,’ said Henry violently, ‘don’t use that detestable phrase! Cousin Eleanor has never taken my mother’s place. She is an ageing spinster cousin of the worst type. It was not particularly kind of her to come to Pen Cuckoo. Indeed, it was her golden opportunity. She left the Cromwell Road for the glories of “county.” It was the great moment of her life. She’s a vulgarian.’

‘On her mother’s side,’ said Jocelyn, ‘she’s a Jernigham.’

‘Oh, my dear father!’ said Henry, and burst out laughing.

Jocelyn glared at his son, turned purple in the face, and began to stammer.

‘You may laugh, but Eleanor – Eleanor – in bringing this information – unavoidably overheard – no question of eavesdropping – only doing what she believed to be her duty.’

‘I’m sure she told you that.’

‘She did and I agreed with her. I am most strongly opposed to this affair with Dinah, and I am most relieved to hear that so far it is, as you put it, purely tentative.’

‘If Dinah loves me,’ said Henry, setting the Jernigham jaw, ‘I shall marry her. And that’s flat. If Eleanor wasn’t here to jog at your pride, Father, you would at least try to see my side. But Eleanor won’t let you. She dramatizes herself as the first lady of the district. The squiress. The chatelaine of Pen Cuckoo. She sees Dinah as a sort of rival. What’s more, I believe she’s genuinely jealous of Dinah. It’s the jealousy of a woman of her age and disposition, a jealousy rooted in sex.’

‘Disgusting balderdash!’ said Jocelyn, angrily, but he looked uncomfortable.

‘No!’ cried Henry. ‘No, it’s not. I’m not talking highbrow pornography. You must have seen what Eleanor is. She’s an avid woman. She was in love with you until she found it was a hopeless proposition. Now she and her girl friend the Campanula are rivals for the rector. Dinah says all old maids always fall in love with her father. Everybody sees it. It’s a recognized phenomenon with women of Eleanor’s and Idris Campanula’s type. Have you heard her on the subject of Dr Templett and Selia Ross? She’s nosed out a scandal there. The next thing that happens will be Eleanor feeling it her duty to warn poor Mrs Templett that her husband is too fond of the widow. That is, if Idris Campanula doesn’t get in first. Women like Eleanor and Miss Campanula are pathological. Dinah says –’

‘Do you and Dinah discuss my cousin’s attachment, which I don’t admit, for the rector? If you do, I consider it shows an extraordinary lack of manners and taste.’

‘Dinah and I,’ said Henry, ‘discuss everything.’

‘And this is modern love-making!’

‘Don’t let’s start abusing each other’s generations, Father. We’ve never done that. You’ve been so extraordinarily understanding in so many ways. It’s Eleanor!’ said Henry. ‘It’s Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor who is to blame for this!’

The door at the far end of the room was opened and against the lamplit hall beyond appeared a woman’s figure.

‘Did I hear you call me, Henry?’ asked a quiet voice.

II

Miss Eleanor Prentice came into the room. She reached out a thin hand and switched on the lights.

'It's past five o'clock,' said Miss Prentice. 'Almost time for our little meeting. I asked them all for half-past five.'

She walked with small mimbling steps towards the cherrywood table which, Henry noticed, had been moved from the wall into the centre of the study. Miss Prentice began to place pencils and sheets of paper at intervals round the table. As she did this she produced, from between her thin closed lips, a deary flat humming which irritated Henry almost beyond endurance. More to stop this noise than because he wanted to know the answer, Henry asked:

'What meeting, Cousin Eleanor?'

'Have you forgotten, dear? The entertainment committee. The rector and Dinah, Dr Templett, Idris Campanula, and ourselves. We are counting on you. And on Dinah, of course.'

She uttered this last phrase with additional sweetness. Henry thought, 'She knows we've been talking about Dinah.' As she fiddled with her pieces of paper Henry watched her with that peculiar intensity that people sometimes lavish on a particularly loathed individual.

Eleanor Prentice was a thin, colourless woman of perhaps forty-nine years. She disseminated the odour of sanctity to an extent that Henry found intolerable. Her perpetual half-smile suggested that she was of a gentle and sweet disposition. This faint smile caused many people to overlook the strength of her face, and that was a mistake, for its strength was considerable. Miss Prentice was indeed a Jernigham. Henry suddenly thought that it was rather hard on Jocelyn that both his cousin and his son should look so much more like the family portraits than he did. Henry and Eleanor had each got the nose and jaw proper to the family. The squire had inherited his mother's round chin and indeterminate nose. Miss Prentice's prominent grey eyes stared coldly upon the world through rimless pince-nez. The squire's blue eyes, even when inspired by his frequent twists of ineffectual temper, looked vulnerable and slightly surprised. Henry, still watching her, thought it strange that he himself should resemble this woman whom he disliked so cordially. Without a taste in common, with violently opposed views on almost all ethical issues, and with a profound mutual distrust, they yet shared a certain hard determination which each recognized in the other. In Henry this quality was tempered by courtesy and by a generous mind. She was merely polite and long-suffering. It was typical of her that although she had evidently overheard Henry's angry reiteration of her name, she accepted his silence and did not ask again why he had called her. Probably, he thought, because she had stood outside the door listening. She now began to pull forward the chairs.

'I think we must give the rector your arm-chair, Jocelyn,' she said. 'Henry, dear, would you mind? It's rather heavy.'

Henry and Jocelyn helped her with the chair and, at her instruction, threw more logs of wood on the fire. These arrangements completed, Miss Prentice settled herself at the table.

'I think your study is almost my favourite corner of Pen Cuckoo, Jocelyn,' she said brightly.

The squire muttered something, and Henry said, 'But you are very fond of every corner of the house, aren't you, Cousin Eleanor?'

'Yes,' she said softly. 'Ever since my childhood days when I used to spend my holidays here (you remember, Jocelyn?) I've loved the dear old home.'

'Estate agents,' Henry said, 'have cast a permanent opprobrium on the word "home." It has come to mean nothing. It is a pity that when I marry, Cousin Eleanor, I shall not be able to take my wife to Winton. I can't afford to mend the roof, you know.'

Jocelyn cleared his throat, darted an angry glance at his son, and returned to the window.

'Winton is the dower-house, of course,' murmured Miss Prentice.

‘As you already know,’ Henry continued, ‘I have begun to pay my addresses to Dinah Copeland. From what you overheard at the rectory do you think it likely that she will accept me?’

He saw her eyes narrow but she smiled a little more widely, showing her prominent and unlovely teeth. ‘She’s like a French caricature of an English spinster,’ thought Henry.

‘I’m quite sure, dear,’ said Miss Prentice, ‘that you do not think I willingly overheard your little talk with Dinah. Far from it. It was very distressing when I caught the few words that –’

‘That you repeated to Father? I’m sure you were.’

‘I thought it my duty to speak to your father, Henry.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I think, dear, that you two young people are in need of a little wise guidance.’

‘Do you like Dinah?’ asked Henry abruptly.

‘She has many excellent qualities, I am sure,’ said Miss Prentice.

‘I asked you if you liked her, Cousin Eleanor.’

‘I like her for those qualities. I am afraid, dear, that I think it better not to go any further just at the moment.’

‘I agree,’ said Jocelyn from the window. ‘Henry, I won’t have any more of this. These people will be here in a moment. There’s the rectory car, now, coming round Cloudyfold bend. There’ll be here in five minutes. You’d better tell us what it’s all about, Eleanor.’

Miss Prentice seated herself at the foot of the table. ‘It’s the YPFC,’ she said. ‘We badly want funds and the rector suggested that perhaps we might get up a little play. You remember, Jocelyn. It was the night we dined there.’

‘I remember something about it,’ said the squire.

‘Just among ourselves,’ continued Miss Prentice, ‘I know you’ve always loved acting, Jocelyn, and you’re so good at it. So natural. Do you remember *Ici on Parle Français* in the old days? I’ve talked it all over with the rector and he agrees it’s a splendid idea. Dr Templett is *very* good at theatricals, especially in funny parts, and dear Idris Campanula, of course, is all enthusiasm.’

‘Good Lord!’ ejaculated Henry and his father together.

‘What on earth is *she* going to do in the play?’ asked Jocelyn.

‘Now, Jocelyn, we mustn’t be uncharitable,’ said Miss Prentice, with a cold glint of satisfaction in her eye. ‘I dare say poor Idris would make quite a success of a small part.’

‘I’m too old,’ said Jocelyn.

‘What nonsense, dear. Of course you’re not. We’ll find something that suits you.’

‘I’m damned if I’ll make love to the Campanula,’ said the squire ungallantly. Eleanor assumed her usual expression for the reception of bad language, but it was coloured by that glint of complacency.

‘Please, Jocelyn,’ she said.

‘What’s Dinah going to do?’ asked Henry.

‘Well, as dear Dinah is almost a professional –’

‘She *is* a professional,’ said Henry.

‘Such a pity, yes,’ said Miss Prentice.

‘Why?’

‘I’m old-fashioned enough to think that the stage is not a very nice profession for a gentlewoman, Henry. But of course Dinah must act in our little piece. If she isn’t too grand for such humble efforts.’

Henry opened his mouth and shut it again. The squire said, ‘Here they are.’

There was the sound of a car pulling up on the gravel drive outside, and two cheerful toots on an out-of-date klaxon.

‘I’ll go and bring them in,’ offered Henry.

III

Henry went out through the hall. When he opened the great front door the upland air laid its cold hand on his face. He smelt frost, dank earth, and dead leaves. The light from the house showed him three figures climbing out of a small car. The rector, his daughter Dinah, and a tall woman in a shapeless fur coat – Idris Campanula. Henry produced the right welcoming noises and ushered them into the house. Taylor, the butler, appeared, and laid expert hands on the rector's shabby overcoat. Henry, his eyes on Dinah, dealt with Miss Campanula's furs. The hall rang with Miss Campanula's conversation. She was a large arrogant spinster with a firm bust, a high-coloured complexion, coarse grey hair, and enormous bony hands. Her clothes were hideous but expensive, for Miss Campanula was extremely wealthy. She was supposed to be Eleanor Prentice's great friend. Their alliance was based on mutual antipathies and interests. Each adored scandal and each cloaked her passion in a mantle of conscious rectitude. Neither trusted the other an inch, but there was no doubt that they enjoyed each other's company. In conversation their technique varied widely. Eleanor never relinquished her air of charity and when she struck, the blow always fell obliquely. But Idris was one of those women who pride themselves on their outspokenness. Repeatedly did she announce that she was a downright sort of person. She was particularly fond of saying that she called a spade a spade, and in her more daring moments would add that her cousin, General Campanula, had once told her that she went further than that and called it a 'B shovel.' She cultivated an air of bluff forthrightness that should have deceived nobody, but actually passed as true currency among the simpler of her acquaintances. The truth was that she reserved to her self the right of broad speech, but would have been livid with rage if anybody had replied in kind.

The rector, a widower whose classic handsomeness made him the prey of such women, was, so Dinah had told Henry, secretly terrified of both these ladies who loomed so large in parochial affairs. Eleanor Prentice had a sort of coy bedside manner with the rector. She spoke to him in a dove-smooth voice and frequently uttered little musical laughs. Idris Campanula was bluff and proprietary, called him 'my dear man' and watched him with an intensity that made him blink, and aroused in his daughter a conflicting fury of disgust and compassion.

Henry laid aside the fur coat and hurried to Dinah. He had known Dinah all his life, but while he was at Oxford and later, when he did a course with a volunteer air-reserve unit, he had seen little of her. When he returned to Pen Cuckoo, Dinah had finished her dramatic course, and had managed to get into the tail end of a small repertory company where she remained for six weeks. The small repertory company then fell to pieces and Dinah returned home, an actress. Three weeks ago he had met her unexpectedly on the hills above Cloudyfold, and with that encounter came love. He had felt as if he saw her for the first time. The bewildered rapture of discovery was still upon him. To meet her gaze, to speak to her, to stand near her, launched him upon a flood of bliss. His sleep was tinged with the colour of his love and when he woke he found her already waiting in his thoughts. 'She is my whole desire,' he said to himself. And, because he was not quite certain that she loved him in return, he had been afraid to declare himself until yesterday, in the shabby, charming old drawing-room at the rectory, when Dinah had looked so transparently into his eyes that he began to speak of love. And then, through the open door, he had seen Eleanor, a still figure, in the dark hall beyond. Dinah saw Eleanor a moment later and, without a word to Henry, went out and welcomed her. Henry himself had rushed out of the rectory and driven home to Pen Cuckoo in a white rage. He had not spoken to Dinah since then, and now he looked anxiously at her. Her wide eyes smiled at him.

'Dinah?'

'Henry?'

'When can I see you?'

'You see me now,' said Dinah.

‘Alone. Please?’

‘I don’t know. Is anything wrong?’

‘Eleanor.’

‘Oh, Lord!’ said Dinah.

‘I must talk to you. Above Cloudyfold where we met that morning? Tomorrow, before breakfast. Dinah, will you?’

‘All right,’ said Dinah. ‘If I can.’

Idris Campanula’s conversation flowed in upon their consciousness. Henry was suddenly aware that she had asked him some sort of question.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he began. ‘I’m afraid I –’

‘Now, Henry,’ she interrupted, ‘where are we to go? You’re forgetting your duties, gossiping there with Dinah.’ And she laughed her loud rocketing bray.

‘The study, please,’ said Henry. ‘Will you lead the way?’

She marched into the study, shook hands with Jocelyn and exchanged pecks with Eleanor Prentice.

‘Where’s Dr Templett?’ she asked.

‘He hasn’t arrived yet,’ answered Miss Prentice. ‘We must always make allowances for our medical men, mustn’t we?’

‘He’s up beyond Cloudyfold,’ said the rector. ‘Old Mrs Thrinne is much worse. The third Cain boy has managed to run a nail through his big toe. I met Templett in the village and he told me. He said I was to ask you not to wait.’

‘Beyond Cloudyfold?’ asked Miss Prentice sweetly. Henry saw her exchange a glance with Miss Campanula.

‘Mrs Ross doesn’t have tea till five,’ said Miss Campanula, ‘which *I* consider a silly ostentation. We certainly will *not* wait for Dr Templett. Ha!’

‘Templett didn’t say anything about going to Mrs Ross’s,’ said the rector, innocently, ‘though to be sure it is on his way.’

‘My dear good man,’ said Miss Campanula, ‘if you weren’t a saint – however! I only hope he doesn’t try and get her into our play.’

‘Idris dear,’ said Miss Prentice. ‘May I?’

She collected their attention and then said very quietly:

‘I think we are all agreed, aren’t we, that this little experiment is to be just among ourselves? I have got several little plays here for five and six people and I fancy Dinah has found some too.’

‘Six,’ said Miss Campanula very firmly. ‘Five characters won’t do, Eleanor. We’ve three ladies and three men. And if the rector –’

‘No,’ said the rector, ‘I shall not appear. If there’s any help I can give behind the scenes, I shall be only too delighted, but I really don’t want to appear.’

‘Three ladies and three men, then,’ said Miss Campanula. ‘Six.’

‘Certainly no more,’ said Miss Prentice.

‘Well,’ said the squire, ‘if Mrs Ross is very good at acting, and I must say she’s an uncommonly attractive little thing –’

‘No, Jocelyn,’ said Miss Prentice.

‘She is very attractive,’ said Henry.

‘She’s got a good figure,’ said Dinah. ‘Has she had any experience?’

‘My dear child,’ said Miss Campanula loudly, ‘she’s as common as dirt and we certainly don’t want her. I may say that I myself have seen Eleanor’s plays and I fully approve of *Simple Susan*. There are six characters: three men and three ladies. There is no change of scene, and the theme is suitable.’

‘It’s rather old,’ said Dinah dubiously.

‘My dear child,’ repeated Miss Campanula, ‘if you think we’re going to do one of your modern questionable problem-plays you’re very greatly mistaken.’

‘I think some of the modern pieces are really *not* quite suitable,’ agreed Miss Prentice gently.

Henry and Dinah smiled.

‘And as for Miss Selia Ross,’ said Miss Campanula, ‘I believe in calling a spade a spade and I have no hesitation in saying I think we’ll be doing a Christian service to poor Mrs Templett, who we all know is too much an invalid to look after herself, if we give Dr Templett something to think about besides –’

‘Come,’ said the rector desperately, ‘aren’t we jumping our fences before we meet them? We haven’t appointed a chairman yet and so far nobody has suggested that Mrs Ross be asked to take part.’

‘They’d better not,’ said Miss Campanula.

The door was thrown open by Taylor, who announced:

‘Mrs Ross and Dr Templett, sir.’

‘What!’ exclaimed the squire involuntarily.

An extremely well-dressed woman and a short rubicund man walked into the room.

‘Hullo! Hullo!’ shouted Dr Templett. ‘I’ve brought Mrs Ross along by sheer force. She’s a perfectly magnificent actress and I tell her she’s got to come off her high horse and show us all how to set about it. I know you’ll be delighted.’

CHAPTER 2 *Six Parts and Seven Actors*

It was Henry who rescued the situation when it was on the verge of becoming a scene. Neither Miss Campanula nor Miss Prentice made the slightest attempt at cordiality. The squire uttered incoherent noises, shouted 'What!' and broke out into uncomfortable social laughter. Dinah greeted Mrs Ross with nervous civility. The rector blinked and followed his daughter's example. But on Henry the presence of Dinah acted like a particularly strong stimulant and filled him with a vague desire to be nice to the entire population of the world. He shook Mrs Ross warmly by the hand, complimented Dr Templett on his side, and suggested, with a beaming smile, that they should at once elect a chairman and decide on a play.

The squire, Dinah, and the rector confusedly supported Henry. Miss Campanula gave a ringing sniff. Miss Prentice, smiling a little more widely than usual, said:

'I'm afraid we are short of one chair. We expected to be only seven. Henry dear, you will have to get one from the dining-room. I'm so sorry to bother you.'

'I'll share Dinah's chair,' said Henry happily.

'Please don't get one for me,' said Mrs Ross. 'Billy can perch on my arm.'

She settled herself composedly in a chair on the rector's left and Dr Templett at once sat on the arm. Miss Prentice had already made sure of her place on the rector's right hand and Miss Campanula, defeated, uttered a short laugh and marched to the far end of the table.

'I don't know whether this is where I am bidden, Eleanor,' she said, 'but the meeting seems to be delightfully informal, so this is where I shall sit. Ha!'

Henry, his father, and Dinah took the remaining chairs.

From the old chandelier a strong light was cast down on the eight faces round the table; on the squire, pink with embarrassment; on Miss Prentice, smiling; on Miss Campanula, like an angry mare, breathing hard through her nostrils; on Henry's dark Jernigham features; on Dinah's crisp and vivid beauty; on the rector's coin-sharp priestliness and on Dr Templett's hearty undistinguished normality. It shone on Selia Ross. She was a straw-coloured woman of perhaps thirty-eight. She was not beautiful but she was exquisitely neat. Her hair curved back from her forehead in pale waves. The thick white skin of her face was beautifully made-up and her clothes were admirable. There was a kind of sharpness about her so that she nearly looked haggard. Her eyes were pale and you would have guessed that the lashes were white when left to themselves. Almost every human being bears some sort of resemblance to an animal and Mrs Ross was a little like a ferret. But for all that she had a quality that arrested the attention of many woman and most men. She had a trick of widening her eyes, and looking slant ways. Though she gave the impression of fineness she was in reality so determined that any sensibilities she possessed were held in the vice of her will. She was a coarse-grained woman but she seemed fragile. Her manner was gay and good natured, but though she went out of her way to do kindnesses, her tongue was quietly malicious. It was clear to all women who met her that her chief interest was men. Dinah watched her now and could not help admiring the cool assurance with which she met her frigid reception. It was impossible to guess whether Mrs Ross was determined not to show her hurts or was merely so insensitive that she felt none. 'She *has* got a cheek,' thought Dinah. She looked at Henry and saw her own thoughts reflected in his face. Henry's rather startlingly fierce eyes were fixed on Mrs Ross and in them Dinah read both awareness and appraisal. He turned his head, met Dinah's glance, and at once his expression changed into one of such vivid tenderness that her heart turned over. She was drowned in a wave of emotion and was brought back to the world by the sound of Miss Prentice's voice.

'– to elect a chairman for our little meeting. I should like to propose the rector.'

'Second that,' said Miss Campanula, in her deepest voice.

‘There you are, Copeland,’ said the squire, ‘everybody says “Aye” and away we go.’ He laughed loudly and cast a terrified glance at his cousin.

The rector looked amiably round the table. With the exception of Henry, of all the company he seemed the least embarrassed by the arrival of Mrs Ross. If Mr Copeland had been given a round gentle face with unremarkable features and kind shortsighted eyes it would have been a perfect expression of his temperament. But ironical nature had made him magnificently with a head so beautiful that to most observers it seemed that his character must also be on a grand scale. With that head he might have gone far and become an important dignitary of the church, but he was unambitious and sincere, and he loved Pen Cuckoo. He was quite content to live at the rectory as his forebears had lived, to deal with parish affairs, to give what spiritual and bodily comfort he could to his people, and to fend off the advances of Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice. He knew very well that both these ladies bitterly resented the presence of Mrs Ross, and that he was in for one of those hideously boring situations when he felt exactly as if he was holding down with his thumb the cork of a bottle filled with seething ginger-pop.

He said, ‘Thank you very much. I don’t feel that my duties as chairman will be very heavy as we have only met to settle the date and nature of this entertainment, and when that is decided all I shall have to do is to hand everything over to the kind people who take part. Perhaps I should explain a little about the object we have in mind. The Young People’s Friendly Circle, which has done such splendid work in Pen Cuckoo and the neighbouring parishes, is badly in need of funds. Miss Prentice as president and Miss Campanula as secretary, will tell you all about that. What we want more than anything else is a new piano. The present instrument was given by your father, wasn’t it, squire?’

‘Yes,’ said Jocelyn. ‘I remember quite well. It was when I was about twelve. It wasn’t new then. I can imagine it’s pretty well a dead horse.’

‘We had a tuner up from Great Chipping,’ said Miss Campanula, ‘and he says he can’t do anything more with it. I blame the scouts. Ever since the eldest Cain boy was made scout master they have gone from bad to worse. He’s got no idea of discipline, that young man. On Saturday I found Georgie Biggins trampling up and down the keyboard in his boots and whanging the wires inside with the end of his pole. “If I were your scout-master,” I said, “I’d give you a beating that you’d not forget in a twelvemonth.” His reply was grossly impertinent. I told the eldest Cain that if he couldn’t control his boys himself he’d better hand them over to someone who could.’

‘Dear me, yes,’ said the rector hurriedly. ‘Young barbarians they are sometimes. Well now, the piano is of course not the sole property of the YPFC. It was a gift to the parish. But I have suggested that, as they use it a great deal, perhaps it would be well to devote whatever funds result from this entertainment to a piano fund, rather than to a general YPFC fund. I don’t know what you all think about this.’

‘How much would a new piano cost?’ asked Dr Templett.

‘There’s a very good instrument at Preece’s in Great Chipping,’ said the rector. ‘The price is £50.’

‘We can’t hope to make that at our show, can we?’ asked Dinah.

‘I tell you what,’ said the squire. ‘I’ll make up the difference. The piano seems to be a Pen Cuckoo affair.’

There was a general gratified murmur.

‘Damned good of you squire,’ said Dr Templett. ‘Very generous.’

‘Very good indeed,’ agreed the rector.

Miss Prentice, without moving, seemed to preen herself. Henry saw Miss Campanula look at her friend and was startled by the singularly venomous glint in her eye. He thought, ‘She’s jealous of Eleanor taking reflected glory from Father’s offer.’ And suddenly he was appalled by the thought of these two ageing women united in so profound a dissonance.

‘Perhaps,’ said the rector, ‘we had better have a formal motion.’

They had a formal motion. The rector hurried them on. A date was fixed three weeks ahead for the performance in the parish hall. Miss Prentice who seemed to have become a secretary by virtue of her seat on the rector's right hand, made quantities of notes. And all the time each of these eight people knew very well that they merely moved in a circle round the true matter of their meeting. What Miss Prentice called 'the nature of our little entertainment' had yet to be determined. Every now and then someone would steal a covert glance at the small pile of modern plays in front of Dinah and the larger pile of elderly French's acting editions in front of Miss Prentice. And while they discussed prices of admission, and dates, through each of their minds raced their secret thoughts.

II

The rector thought, 'I cannot believe it of Templett. A medical man with an invalid wife! Besides, there's his professional position. But what persuaded him to bring her here? He must have known how they would talk. I wish Miss Campanula wouldn't look at me like that. She wants to see me alone again. I wish I'd never said confession was recognized by the church, but how could I not? I wish she wouldn't confess. I wish that I didn't get the impression that she and Miss Prentice merely use the confessional as a means of informing against each other. Six parts and seven people. Oh, dear!'

The squire thought, 'Eleanor's quite right, I was good in *Ici on Parle Française*. Funny how some people take to the stage naturally. Now, if Dinah and Henry try to suggest one of those modern things, as likely as not there will be nothing that suits me. What I'd like is one of those charming not-so-young men in a Marie Tempest comedy. Mrs Ross could play the Marie Tempest part. Eleanor and old Idris wouldn't have that at any price. I wonder if it's true that they don't really kiss on the stage because of the grease paint. Still, at rehearsals … I wonder if it's true about Templett and Mrs Ross. I'm as young as ever I was. What the devil am I going to do about Henry and Dinah Copeland? Dinah's a pretty girl. Hard, though. Modern. If only the Copelands were a bit better off it wouldn't matter. I suppose they'll talk about me, both of them. Henry will say something clever. Blast and damn Eleanor! Why the devil couldn't she hold her tongue, and then I shouldn't have had to deal with it. Six parts and seven people. Why shouldn't she be in it, After all? I suppose Templett would want the charming not-so-young part and they'd turn me into some bloody comic old dodderer.'

Eleanor Prentice thought, 'If I take care and manage this well it will look as if it's Idris who is making all the trouble and he will think her uncharitable. Six parts and seven people. Idris is determined to stop that Ross woman at all costs. I can see one of Idris's tantrums coming. That's all to the good. I shall be forty-nine next month. Idris is more than forty-nine. Dinah should work in the parish. I wonder what goes on among actors and actresses. Dressing and undressing behind the scenes and travelling about together. If I could find out that Dinah had – If I married, Jocelyn would make me an allowance. To see that woman look at Templett like that and he at her! Dinah and Henry! I can't bear it. I can't endure it. Never show you're hurt. I want to look at him, but I mustn't. Henry might be watching. Henry knows. A parish priest should be married. His head is like an angel's head. No. Not an angel's. A Greek God. Prostrate before Thy throne to lie and gaze and gaze on thee. Oh, God, let him love me!'

Henry thought, 'Tomorrow morning if it's fine I shall meet Dinah above Cloudyfold and tell her that I love her. Why shouldn't Templett have his Selia Ross in the play? Six parts and seven people to the devil! Let's find a new play. I'm in love for the first time. I've crossed the border into a strange country and never again will there be a moment quite like this. Tomorrow morning, if it's fine, Dinah and I will be up on Cloudyfold.'

Dinah thought, 'Tomorrow morning, if it's fine, Henry will be waiting for me above Cloudyfold and I think he will tell me he loves me. There will be nobody in the whole wide world but Henry and me.'

Templett thought, 'I'll have to be careful. I suppose I was a fool to suggest her coming, but after she said she was so keen on acting it seemed the only thing to do. If those two starved spinsters get their teeth into us it'll be all up with the practice. I wish to God I was made differently. I wish to God my wife wasn't what she is. Perhaps it'd be all the same if she wasn't. Selia's got me. It's like an infection. I'm eaten up with it.'

Selia Ross thought, 'So far so good. I've got here. I can manage the squire easily enough, but he's got his eye on me already. The boy's in love with the girl, but he's a man and I think he'll be generous. He's no fool, though, and I rather fancy he's summed me up. Attractive, with those light grey eyes and black lashes. It might be amusing to take him from her. I doubt if I could. He's past the

age when they fall for women a good deal older than themselves. I feel equal to the whole of them. It was fun coming in with Billy and seeing those two frost-bitten old virgins with their eyes popping out of their heads. They know I'm too much for them with my good common streak of hard sense and determination. They're both trying to see if Billy's arm is touching my shoulders. The Campanula is staring quite openly and the Poor Relation's looking out of the corner of her eyes. I'll lean back a little. There! Now have a good look. It's a bore about Billy's professional reputation and having to be so careful. I want like hell to show them he's all mine. I've never felt like this about any other man, never. It's as if we'd engulfed each other. I suppose it's love. I won't have him in their bogus school-room play without me. He might have a love scene with the girl. I couldn't stand that. Seven people and six parts. Now, then!'

And Idris Campanula thought, 'If I could in decency lay my hands on that straw-coloured wanton I'd shake the very life out of her. The infamous brazen effrontery! To force her way into Pen Cuckoo, without an invitation, under the protection of that man! I always suspected Dr Templett of that sort of thing. If Eleanor had the gumption of a rabbit she'd have forbidden them the house. Sitting on the arm of her chair! A fine excuse! He's practically got his arm round her. I'll look straight at them and let her see what I think of her. There! She's smiling. She knows, and she doesn't care. It amounts to lying in open sin with him. The rector *can't* let it pass. It's an open insult to me, making me sit at the same table with them. Every hand against me. I've no friends. They only want my money. Eleanor's as bad as the rest. She's tried to poison the rector's mind against me. She's jealous of me. The play was *my* idea and now she's talking as if it was hers. The rector must be warned. I'll ask him to hear my confession on Friday. I'll confess the unkind thoughts I've had of Eleanor Prentice and before he can stop me I'll tell him what they were and then perhaps he'll begin to see through Eleanor. Then I'll say I've been uncharitable about Mrs Ross and Dr Templett. I'll say I'm an outspoken woman and believe in looking facts in the face. He *must* prefer me to Eleanor. I ought to have married. With my ability and my money and my brains I'd make a success of it. I'd do the Rectory up and get rid of that impertinent old maid. Dinah could go back to the stage as soon as she liked, or if Eleanor's gossip is true, she could marry Henry Jernigham. Eleanor wouldn't care much for that. She'll fight tooth and nail before she sees another chatelaine at Pen Cuckoo. I'll back Eleanor up as far as Dr Templett and his common little light-of-love are concerned, but if she tries to come between me and Walter Copeland she'll regret it. Now then, I'll speak.'

And bringing her large, ugly hand down sharply on the table she said:

'May I have a word?'

'Please do,' said Mr Copeland nervously.

'As secretary,' began Miss Campanula loudly, 'I have discussed this matter with the YPFC members individually. They plan an entertainment of their own later on in the year and they are *most* anxious that this little affair should be arranged *entirely* by ourselves. Just five or six, they said, of the people who are really interested in the Circle. They mentioned you, of course, rector, and the squire, as patron, and you, Eleanor, naturally, as president. They said they hoped Dinah would not feel that our humble efforts were beneath her dignity and that she would grace our little performance. And you, Henry, they particularly mentioned you.'

'Thank you,' said Henry solemnly. Miss Campanula darted a suspicious glance at him and went on:

'They seem to think they'd like to see me making an exhibition of myself with all the rest of you. Of course, I don't pretend to histrionic talent –'

'Of *course* you must have a part, Idris,' said Miss Prentice. 'We depend upon you.'

'Thank you, Eleanor,' said Miss Campanula; and between the two ladies there flashed the signal of an alliance.

'That makes five, doesn't it?' asked Miss Prentice sweetly.

'Five,' said Miss Campanula.

'Six, with Dr Templett,' said Henry.

'We should be very glad to have Dr Templett,' rejoined Miss Prentice, with so cunningly balanced an inflection that her rejection of Mrs Ross was implicit in every syllable.

'Well, a GP's an awkward sort of fellow when it comes to rehearsals,' said Dr Templett. 'Never know when an urgent case may crop up. Still, if you don't mind risking it I'd like to take part.'

'We'll certainly risk it,' said the rector. There was a murmur of assent followed by a deadly little silence. The rector drew in his breath, looked at his daughter who gave him a heartening nod, and said:

'Now, before we go any further with the number of performers, I think we should decide on the form of the entertainment. If it is going to be a play, so much will depend upon the piece chosen. Has anybody any suggestion?'

'I move,' said Miss Campanula, 'that we do a play, and I suggest *Simple Susan* as a suitable piece.'

'I should like to second that,' said Miss Prentice.

'What sort of play is it?' asked Dr Templett. 'I haven't heard of it. Is it new?'

'It's a contemporary of *East Lynne* and *The Silver King* I should think,' said Dinah.

Henry and Dr Templett laughed. Miss Campanula thrust out her bosom, turned scarlet in the face, and said:

'In my humble opinion, Dinah, it is none the worse for that.'

'It's so amusing,' said Miss Prentice. 'You remember it, Jocelyn, don't you? There's that little bit where Lord Sylvester pretends to be his own tailor and proposes to Lady Maude, thinking she's her own lady's maid. Such an original notion and so ludicrous.'

'It has thrown generations of audiences into convulsions,' agreed Henry.

'Henry,' said the squire.

'Sorry, Father. But honestly, as a dramatic device –'

'*Simple Susan*,' said Miss Campanula hotly, 'may be old-fashioned in the sense that it contains no disgusting innuendos. It does not depend on vulgarity for its fun, and that's more than can be said for most of your modern comedies.'

'How far does Lord Sylvester go –' began Dinah.

'Dinah!' said the rector quietly.

'All right, Daddy. Sorry. I only –'

'How old is Lord Sylvester?' interrupted the squire suddenly.

'Oh, about forty-five or fifty,' murmured Miss Prentice.

'Why not do *The Private Secretary*?' inquired Henry.

'I never thought *The Private Secretary* was a very nice play,' said Miss Prentice. 'I expect I'm prejudiced.' And she gave the rector a reverent smile.

'I agree,' said Miss Campanula. 'I always thought it in the worst of taste. I may be old fashioned but I don't like jokes about the cloth.'

'I don't think *The Private Secretary* ever did us much harm,' said the rector mildly. 'But aren't we wandering from the point? Miss Campanula has moved that we do a play called *Simple Susan*. Miss Prentice has seconded her. Has anybody else a suggestion to make?'

'Yes,' said Selia Ross, 'I have.'

CHAPTER 3 *They Choose a Play*

If Mrs Ross had taken a ticking bomb from her handbag and placed it on the table, the effect could have been scarcely more devastating. What she did produce was a small green book. Seven pairs of eyes followed the movements of her thin scarlet-tipped hands. Seven pairs of eyes fastened, as if mesmerized, on the black letters of the book cover. Mrs Ross folded her hands over the book and addressed the meeting.

'I do hope you'll all forgive me for making my suggestion,' she said, 'but it's the result of a rather odd coincidence. I'd no idea of your meeting until Dr Templett called in this afternoon, but I happened to be reading this play and when he appeared the first thing I said was, "Some time or other we simply *must* do this thing," Didn't I, Billy? I mean, it's absolutely marvellous. All the time I was reading it I kept thinking how perfect it would be for some of you to do it in aid of one of the local charities. There are two parts in it that would be simply ideal for Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula. The Duchess and her sister. The scene they have with General Talbot is one of the best in the play. It simply couldn't be funnier and you'd be magnificent as the General, Mr Jernigham.'

She paused composedly and looked sideways at the squire. Nobody spoke, though Miss Campanula wetted her lips. Selia Ross waited for a moment, smiling frankly, and then she said:

'Of course, I didn't realize you had already chosen a play. Naturally I wouldn't have dreamt of coming if I had known. It's all this man's fault.' She gave Dr Templett a sort of a comradely jog with her elbow. 'He bullied me into it. I ought to have apologized and crept away at once, but I just couldn't resist telling you about my discovery.' She opened her eyes a little wider and turned them on the rector. 'Perhaps if I left it with you, Mr Copeland, the committee might just like to glance at it before they quite decide. *Please* don't think I want a part in it or anything frightful like that. It's just that it *is* so good and I'd be delighted to lend it.'

'That's very kind of you,' said the rector.

'It's not a bit kind. I'm being thoroughly selfish. I just long to see you all doing it and I'm secretly hoping you won't be able to resist it. It's so difficult to find modern plays that aren't offensive,' continued Mrs Ross, with an air of great frankness, 'but this really is charming.'

'But what is the play?' asked Henry, who had been craning his neck in a useless attempt to read the title.

'*Shop Windows*, by Jacob Hunt.'

'Good Lord!' ejaculated Dinah. 'Of course! I never thought of it. It's the very thing.'

'Have you read it?' asked Mrs Ross, with a friendly glance at her.

'I saw the London production,' said Dinah. 'You're quite right, it would be grand. But what about the royalties? Hunt charges the earth for amateur rights, and anyway he'd probably refuse them to us.'

'I was coming to that,' said Mrs Ross. 'If you should decide to do it I'd like to stand the royalties if you'd let me.'

There was another silence, broken by the rector.

'Now, that's very generous indeed,' he said.

'No, honestly it's not. I've told you I'm longing to see it done.'

'How many characters are there?' asked the squire suddenly.

'Let me see, I think there are six.' She opened the play and counted prettily on her fingers.

'Five, six – no, there seem to be seven! Stupid of me.'

'Ha!' said Miss Campanula.

'But I'm sure you could find a seventh. What about the Moorton people?'

'What about you?' asked Dr Templett.

'No, no!' said Mrs Ross quickly. 'I don't come into the picture. Don't be silly.'

‘It’s a damn’ good play,’ said Henry. ‘I saw the London show too, Dinah. D’you think we could do it?’

‘I don’t see why not. The situations would carry it through. The three character parts are really the stars.’

‘Which are they?’ demanded the squire.

‘The General and the Duchess and her sister,’ said Mrs Ross.

‘They don’t come on till the second act,’ continued Dinah, ‘but from then on they carry the show.’

‘May I have a look at it?’ asked the squire.

Mrs Ross opened the book and passed it across to him.

‘Do read the opening of the act,’ she said, ‘and then go on to page forty-eight.’

‘May I speak?’ demanded Miss Campanula loudly.

‘Please!’ said the rector hurriedly. ‘Please do. Ah – order!’

II

Miss Campanula gripped the edge of the table with her large hands and spoke at some length. She said that she didn't know how everybody else was feeling but that she herself was somewhat bewildered. She was surprised to learn that such eminent authorities as Dinah and Henry and Mrs Ross considered poor Pen Cuckoo capable of producing a modern play that met with their approval. She thought that perhaps this clever play might be a little too clever for poor Pen Cuckoo and the Young People's Friendly Circle. She asked the meeting if it did not think it would make a great mistake if it was over-ambitious. 'I must confess,' she said, with an angry laugh, 'that I had a much simpler plan in mind. I did not propose to fly as high as West End successes and I don't mind saying I think we would be in a fair way to making fools of ourselves. And that's that.'

'But, Miss Campanula,' objected Dinah, 'it's such a mistake to think that because the cast is not very experienced it will be better in a bad play than in a good one.'

'I'm sorry you think *Simple Susan* a bad play, Dinah,' said Miss Prentice sweetly.

'Well I think it's very dated and I'm afraid I think it's rather silly,' said Dinah doggedly.

Miss Prentice gave a silvery laugh in which Miss Campanula joined.

'I agree with Dinah,' said Henry quickly.

'Suppose we all read both plays,' suggested the rector.

'I have read *Shop Windows*,' said Dr Templett. 'I must say I don't see how we could do better.'

'We seem to be at a disadvantage, Eleanor,' said Miss Campanula unpleasantly, and Miss Prentice laughed again. So, astonishingly, did the squire. He broke out in a loud choking snort. They all turned to look at him. Tears coursed each other down his cheeks and he dabbed at them absentmindedly with the back of his hand. His shoulders quivered, his brows were raised in an ecstasy of merriment, and his cheeks were purple. He was lost in the second act of Mrs Ross's play.

'Oh! Lord!' he said, 'this is funny.'

'Jocelyn!' cried Miss Prentice.

'Eh?' said the squire, and he turned a page, read half-a-dozen lines, laid the book on the table and gave himself up to paroxysms of unbridled laughter.

'Jocelyn!' repeated Miss Prentice. 'Really!'

'What?' gasped the squire. 'Eh? All right, I'm quite willing. Damn' good! When do we begin?'

'Hi!' said Henry. 'Steady, Father! The meeting hasn't decided on the play.'

'Well, we'd better decide on this,' said the squire, and he leant towards Selia Ross. 'When he starts telling her he's got the garter,' he said, 'and she thinks he's talking about the other affair! And then when she says she won't take no for an answer. Oh, Lord!'

'It's heavenly, isn't it?' agreed Mrs Ross, and she and Henry and Dinah suddenly burst out laughing at the recollection of this scene, and for a minute or two they all reminded each other of the exquisite facetiæ in the second act of *Shop Windows*. The rector listened with a nervous smile; Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula with tightly-set lips. At last the squire looked round the table with brimming eyes and asked what they were all waiting for.

'I'll move we do *Shop Windows*,' he said. 'That in order?'

'I'll second it,' said Dr Templett.

'No doubt I am in error,' said Miss Campanula, 'but I was under the impression that my poor suggestion was before the meeting, seconded by Miss Prentice.'

The rector was obliged to put this motion to the meeting.

'It is moved by Miss Campanula,' he said unhappily, 'and seconded by Miss Prentice, that *Simple Susan* be the play chosen for the production. Those in favour –'

'Aye,' said Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice.

'And the contrary?'

'No,' said the rest of the meeting with perfect good humour.

'Thank you,' said Miss Campanula. '*Thank you*. Now we know where we are.'

'You wait till you start learning your parts in this thing,' said Jocelyn cheerfully, 'and you won't know whether you're on your head or your heels. There's an awful lot of us three, isn't there?' he continued, turning the pages. 'I suppose Eleanor will do the Duchess and Miss Campanula will be the other one – Mrs Thing or whoever she is! Gertrude! That the idea?'

'That was my idea,' said Mrs Ross.

'If I may be allowed to speak,' said Miss Campanula, 'I should like to say that it is just within the bounds of possibility that it may not be ours.'

'Perhaps, Jernigham,' said the rector, 'you had better put your motion.'

But of course the squire's motion was carried. Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice did not open their lips. Their thoughts were alike in confusion and intensity. Both seethed under the insult done to *Simple Susan*, each longed to rise and, with a few well-chosen words, withdraw from the meeting. Each was checked by a sensible reluctance to cut off her nose to spite her face. It was obvious that *Shop Windows* would be performed whether they stayed in or flounced out. Unless all the others were barefaced liars, it seemed that there were two outstandingly good parts ready for them to snap up. They hung off and on, ruffled their plumage, and secretly examined each other's face.

III

Meanwhile with the enthusiasm that all Jernighams brought to a new project Jocelyn and his son began to cast the play. Almost a century ago there had been what Eleanor, when cornered called an 'incident' in the family history. The Mrs Jernigham of that time was a plain silly woman and barren into the bargain. Her Jocelyn, the fourth of that name, had lived openly with a very beautiful and accomplished actress and had succeeded in getting the world to pretend that his son by her was his lawful scion, and had jockeyed his wife into bringing the boy up as her own. By this piece of effrontery he brought to Pen Cuckoo a dram of mummery, and ever since those days most of the Jernighams had had a passion for theatricals. It was as if the lovely actress had touched up the family portraits with a stick of rouge. Jocelyn and Henry had both played in the OUDS. They both had the trick of moving about a stage as if they grew out of the boards, and they both instinctively bridged that colossal gap between the stage and the front row of the stalls. Jocelyn thought himself a better actor than he was, but Henry did not realize how good he might be. Even Miss Prentice, a Jernigham, as the squire had pointed out, on her mother's side, had not escaped that dram of player's blood. Although she knew nothing about theatre, mistrusted and disliked the very notion of the stage as a career for gentle people, and had no sort of judgement for the merit of a play, yet in amateur theatricals she was surprisingly composed and perfectly audible, and she loved acting. She knew now that Idris Campanula expected her to refuse to take part in *Shop Windows*, and more than half her inclination was so to refuse. 'What,' she thought. 'To have my own play put aside for something chosen by that woman! To have to look on while they parcel out the parts!' But even as she pondered on the words with which she would offer her resignation, she pictured Lady Appleby of Moorton Grange accepting the part that Jocelyn said was so good. And what was more, the rector would think Eleanor herself uncharitable. That decided her. She waited for a pause in the chatter round Jocelyn, and then she turned to the rector.

'May I say just one little word?' she asked.

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Mr Copeland. 'Please, everybody. Order!'

'It's only this,' said Miss Prentice, avoiding the eye of Miss Campanula. 'I do hope nobody will think I am going to be disappointed or hurt about my little play. I expect it *is* rather out-of-date, and I am only too pleased to think that you have found one that is more suitable. If there is anything I can do to help, I shall be only too glad. Of course.'

She received, and revelled in, the rector's beaming smile, and met Idris Campanula's glare with a smile of her own. Then she saw Selia Ross watching her out of the corners of her eyes and suddenly she knew that Selia Ross understood her.

'That's perfectly splendid,' exclaimed Mr Copeland. 'I think it is no more than we expected of Miss Prentice's generosity, but we are none the less grateful.' And he added confusedly, 'A very graceful gesture.'

Miss Prentice preened and Miss Campanula glowered. The others, vaguely, aware that something was expected of them, made small appreciative noises.

'Now, how about casting the play?' said Dr Templett.

IV

There was no doubt that the play had been well chosen. With the exception of one character, it practically cast itself. The squire was to play the General; Miss Prentice, the Duchess; Miss Campanula, of whom everybody felt extremely frightened, was cast for Mrs Arbuthnot, a good character part. Miss Campanula, when offered this part, replied ambiguously:

'Who knows?' she looked darkly. 'Obviously, it is not for me to say.'

'But you will do it, Idris?' murmured Miss Prentice.

'I have but one comment,' rejoined Miss Campanula. 'Wait and see.' She laughed shortly, and the rector, in a hurry, wrote her name down opposite the part. Dinah and Henry were given the two young lovers, and Dr Templett said he would undertake the French Ambassador. He began to read some of the lines in violently broken English. There remained the part of Hélène, a mysterious lady who had lost her memory and who turned up in the middle of the first act at a country house-party.

'Obviously, Selia,' said Dr Templett, 'you must be Hélène.'

'No, *no*,' said Mrs Ross, 'that isn't a bit what I meant. Now do be quiet, Billy, or they'll think I came here with an ulterior motive.'

With the possible exception of the squire, that was precisely what they all did think, but not even Miss Campanula had the courage to say so. Having accepted Mrs Ross's play they could do nothing but offer her the part, which as far as lines went, was not a long one. Perhaps only Dinah realized quite how good Hélène was. Mrs Ross protested and demurred.

'If you are quite sure you want me,' she said, and looked sideways at the squire. Jocelyn, who had glanced through the play and found that the General had a love scene with Hélène, said heartily that they wanted her very much indeed. Henry and Dinah, conscious of their own love-scenes, agreed, and the rector formally asked Mrs Ross if she would take the part. She accepted with the prettiest air in the world. Miss Prentice managed to maintain her gentle smile and Miss Campanula's behaviour merely became a degree more darkly ominous. The rector put on his glasses and read his notes.

'To sum up,' he said loudly. 'We propose to do this play in the Parish Hall on Saturday 27th. Three weeks from tonight. The proceeds are to be devoted to the piano-fund and the balance of the sum needed will be made up most generously by Mr Jocelyn Jernigham. The Committee and members of the YPFC will organize the sale of tickets and will make themselves responsible for the – what is the correct expression, Dinah?'

'The front of the house, Daddy.'

'For the front of the house, yes. Do you think we can leave these affairs to your young folks, Miss Campanula? I know you can answer for them.'

'My dear man,' said Miss Campanula, 'I can't answer for the behaviour of thirty village louts and maidens, but they usually do what I tell them to. Ha!'

Everybody laughed sycophantically.

'My *friend*,' added Miss Campanula, with a ghastly smile, 'my *friend* Miss Prentice is president. No doubt, if they pay no attention to me, they will do anything in the world for her.'

'Dear Idris!' murmured Miss Prentice.

'Who's going to produce the play?' asked Henry. 'I think Dinah ought. She's a professional.'

'Hear, hear!' said Dr Templett, Selia Ross and the squire. Miss Prentice added rather a tepid little, 'Of course, yes.' Miss Campanula said nothing. Dinah grinned shyly and looked into her lap. She was elected producer. Dinah had not passed the early stages of theatrical experience when the tyro lards his conversation with professional phrases. She accepted her honours with an air of great seriousness and called her first rehearsal for Tuesday night, November 9th.

‘I’ll get all your sides typed by then,’ she explained. ‘I’m sure Gladys Wright will do them, because she’s learning and wants experience. I’ll give her a proper part so that she gets the cues right. We’ll have a reading and if there’s time I’ll set positions for the first act.’

‘Dear me,’ said Miss Prentice, ‘sounds very alarming. I’m afraid, Dinah dear, that you will find us all very amateurish.’

‘Oh, no!’ cried Dinah gaily. ‘I know it’s going to be marvellous.’ She looked uncertainly at her father and added, ‘I should like to say, thank you all very much for asking me to produce. I do hope I’ll manage it all right.’

‘Well, you know a dashed sight more about it than any of us,’ said Selia Ross bluntly.

But somehow Dinah didn’t quite want Mrs Ross so frankly on her side. She was aware in herself of a strong antagonism to Mrs Ross and this discovery surprised and confused her, because she believed herself to be a rebel. As a rebel, she should have applauded Selia Ross. To Dinah, Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula were the hated symbols of all that was mean, stupid, and antediluvian. Selia Ross had deliberately given battle to these two ladies and had won the first round. Why, then, could Dinah not welcome her as an ally after her own heart? She supposed it was because, in her own heart, she mistrusted and disliked Mrs Ross. This feeling was entirely instinctive and it upset and bewildered her. It was as if some dictator in her blood refused an allegiance that she should have welcomed. She could not reply with the correct comradely smile. She felt her face turning pink with embarrassment and she said hurriedly:

‘What about music? We’ll want an overture and an entr’acte.’

And with those words Dinah unconsciously rang up the curtain on a theme that was to engulf Pen Cuckoo and turn *Shop Windows* from polite comedy into outlandish, shameless melodrama.

CHAPTER 4 *Cue for Music*

As soon as Dinah had spoken those fatal words everybody round the table in the study at Pen Cuckoo thought of 'Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C sharp Minor,' and with the exception of Miss Campanula, everybody's heart sank into his or her boots. For the Prelude was Miss Campanula's speciality. In Pen Cuckoo she had the sole rights in this composition. She played it at all church concerts, she played it on her own piano after her own dinner parties, and, unless her hostess was particularly courageous, she played it after other people's dinner parties, too. Whenever there was any question of music sounding at Pen Cuckoo, Miss Campanula offered her services, and the three pretentious chords would boom out once again: 'Pom, *Pom*, POM.' And then down would go Miss Campanula's foot on the left pedal and the next passage would follow in a series of woolly but determined jerks. She even played it as a voluntary when Mr Withers, the organist, went on his holidays and Miss Campanula took his place. She had had her photograph taken, seated at the instrument, with the Prelude on the rack. Each of her friends had received a copy at Christmas. The rector's was framed, and he had not known quite what to do with it. Until three years ago when Eleanor Prentice had come to live at Pen Cuckoo, Idris Campanula and her Prelude had had it all their own way. But Miss Prentice also belonged to a generation when girls learnt the pianoforte from their governesses, and she, too, liked to be expected to perform. Her *pièce de résistance* was Ethelbert Nevin's 'Venetian Suite', which she rendered with muffled insecurity, the chords of the accompaniment never quite synchronizing with the saccharine notes of the melody. Between the two ladies the battle had raged at parish entertainments, Sunday School services, and private parties. They only united in deploring the radio and in falsely pretending that music was a bond between them.

So that when Dinah in her flurry asked, 'What about music?' Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice both became alert.

Miss Prentice said, 'Yes, of course. Now, couldn't we manage that amongst ourselves somehow? It's *so* much pleasanter, isn't it, if we keep to our own small circle?'

'I'm afraid my poor wits are rather confused,' began Miss Campanula. 'Everything seems to have been decided out of hand. You must correct me if I'm wrong, but it appears that several of the characters in this delightful comedy – by the way, is it a comedy?'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'Thank you. It appears that some of the characters do not appear until somewhere in the second act. I don't know which of the characters, naturally, as I have not yet looked between the covers.'

With hasty mumbled apologies they handed the play to Miss Campanula. She said:

'Oh thank you. Don't let me be selfish. I'm a patient body.'

When Idris Campanula alluded to herself jocularly as a 'body' it usually meant that she was in a temper. They all said, 'No, no! Please have it.' She drew her pince-nez out from her bosom by a patent extension and slung them across her nose. She opened the play and amidst dead silence she began to inspect it. First she read the cast of characters. She checked each one with a large bony forefinger, and paused to look round the table until she found the person who had been cast for it. Her expression, which was forbidding, did not change. She then applied herself to the first page of the dialogue. Still everybody waited. The silence was broken only by the sound of Miss Campanula turning a page. Henry began to feel desperate. It seemed almost as if they would continue to sit dumbly round the table until Miss Campanula reached the end of the play. He gave Dinah a cigarette and lit one himself. Miss Campanula raised her eyes and watched them until the match was blown out, and then returned to her reading. She had reached the fourth page of the first act. Mrs Ross looked up at Dr Templett who had bent his head and whispered. Again Miss Campanula raised her eyes and stared at the offenders. The squire cleared his throat and said:

'Read the middle bit of Act II. Page forty-eight, it begins. Funniest thing I've come across for ages. It'll make you laugh like anything.'

Miss Campanula did not reply, but she turned to Act II. Dinah, Henry, Dr Templett, and Jocelyn waited with anxious smiles for her to give some evidence of amusement, but her lips remained firmly pursed, her brows raised, and her eyes fishy. Presently she looked up.

'I've reached the end of the scene,' she said. 'Was that the funny one?'

'Don't you think it's funny?' asked the squire.

'My object was to find out if there was anybody free to play the entr'acte,' said Miss Campanula coldly. 'I gather that there is. I *gather* that the Arbuthnot individual does not make her first appearance until halfway through the second act.'

'Didn't somebody say that Miss Arbuthnot and the Duchess appeared together?' asked Miss Prentice to the accompaniment, every one felt, of the 'Venetian Suite'.

'Possibly,' said Miss Campanula. 'Do I understand that I am expected to take this Mrs Arbuthnot upon myself?'

'If you will,' rejoined the rector. 'And we hope very much indeed that you will.'

'I wanted to be quite clear. I dare say I'm making a great to-do about nothing but I'm a person that likes to know where she is. Now I *gather*, and you must correct me if I'm wrong, that if I do this part there is no just cause or impediment,' and here Miss Campanula threw a jocular glance at the rector, 'why I should not take a little more upon myself and seat myself at the instrument. You *may* have other plans. You *may* wish to hire Mr Joe Hopkins and his friends from Great Chipping, though on a Saturday night I gather they are rather more undependable and tipsy than usual. *If* you have other plans then no more need be said. If not, I place myself at the committee's disposal.'

'Well, that seems a most excellent offer,' the poor rector began. 'If Miss Campanula –'

'May I?' interrupted Miss Prentice sweetly. 'May I say that I think it very kind indeed of dear Idris to offer herself, but may I add that I do also think we are a little too inclined to take advantage of her generosity. She will have all the young folk to manage and she has a large part to learn. I do feel that we should be a little selfish if we also expected her to play for us on that dreadful old piano. Now, as the new instrument is to be in part, as my cousin says, a Pen Cuckoo affair, I think the very least I can do is to offer to relieve poor Idris of this unwelcome task. If you think my little efforts will pass muster I shall be very pleased to play the overture and entr'acte.'

'Very thoughtful of you, Eleanor, but I am quite capable –'

'Of course you are, Idris, but at the same time –'

They both stopped short. The antagonism that had sprung up between them was so obvious and so disproportionate that the others were aghast. The rector abruptly brought his palm down on the table and then, as if ashamed of a gesture that betrayed his thoughts, clasped his hands together and looked straight before him.

He said, 'I think this matter can be decided later.'

The two women glanced quickly at him and were silent.

'That is all, I believe,' said Mr Copeland. 'Thank you, everybody.'

II

The meeting broke up. Henry went to Dinah who had moved over to the fire.

'Ructions!' he said under his breath.

'Awful!' agreed Dinah. 'You'd hardly believe it possible, would you?'

They smiled secretly and when the others crowded about Dinah, asking if they could have their parts before Monday, what sort of clothes would be needed and whether she thought they would be all right, neither she nor Henry minded very much. It did not matter to them that they were unable to speak to each other, for their thoughts went forward to the morning, and their hearts trembled with happiness. They were isolated by their youth, two scatheless figures. It would have seemed impossible to them that their love for each other could hold reflection, however faint, of the emotions that drew Dr Templett to Selia Ross, or those two ageing women to the rector. They would not have believed that there was a reverse side to love, or that the twin-opposites of love lay dormant in their own hearts. Nor were they to guess that never again, as long as they lived, would they know the rapturous expectancy that now possessed them.

Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula carefully avoided each other, Miss Prentice had seized her opportunity and had cornered Mr Copeland. She could be heard offering flowers from the Pen Cuckoo greenhouses for a special service next Sunday. Miss Campanula had tackled Jocelyn about some enormity committed on her property by the local fox-hounds. Dr Templett, a keen follower of hounds, was lugged into the controversy. Mrs Ross was therefore left alone. She stood a little to one side, completely relaxed, her head slanted, a half-smile on her lips. The squire looked over Idris Campanula's shoulder, and caught that half-smile.

'Can't have that sort of thing,' he said vaguely. 'I'll have a word with Appleby. Will you forgive me? I just want –'

He escaped thankfully and joined Mrs Ross. She welcomed him with an air that flattered him. Her eyes brightened and her smile was intimate. It was years since any woman had smiled in that way at Jocelyn, and he responded with Edwardian gallantry. His hand went to his moustache and his eyes brightened.

'You know, you're a very alarming person,' said Jocelyn.

'Now what precisely do you mean by that?' asked Mrs Ross.

He was delighted. This was the way a conversation with a pretty woman ought to start. Forgotten phrases returned to his lips, waggishly nonsensical phrases that one uttered with just the right air of significance. One laughed a good deal and let her know one noticed how damned well-turned-out she was.

'I see that we have a most important scene together,' said Jocelyn, 'and I shall insist on a private rehearsal.'

'I don't know that I shall agree to that,' said Selia Ross.

'Oh, come now, it's perfectly safe.'

'Why?'

'Because you are to be the very charming lady who has lost her memory. Ha, ha, ha! Damn' convenient, what!' shouted Jocelyn, wondering if this remark was as daring as it sounded. Mrs Ross laughed very heartily and the squire glanced in a gratified manner round the room, and encountered the astonished gaze of his son.

'This'll show Henry,' thought Jocelyn. 'These modern pups don't know how to flirt with an attractive woman.' But there was an unmistakably sardonic glint in Henry's eye, and the squire, slightly shaken, turned back to Mrs Ross. She still looked roguishly expectant and he thought, 'Anyway, if Henry's noticed *her*, he'll know I'm doing pretty well.' And then Dr Templett managed to escape Miss Campanula and joined them.

‘Well, Selia,’ he said, ‘if you’re ready I think I’d better take you home.’

‘Doesn’t like me talking to her!’ thought the squire in triumph. ‘The little man’s jealous.’

When Mrs Ross silently gave him her hand, he deliberately squeezed it.

‘*Au revoir*,’ he said. ‘This is your first visit to Pen Cuckoo, isn’t it? Don’t let it be the last.’

‘I shouldn’t be here at all,’ she answered. ‘There have been no official calls, you know.’

Jocelyn made a slightly silly gesture and bowed.

‘We’ll waive all that sort of nonsense,’ he said. ‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Mrs Ross turned to say good-bye to Eleanor Prentice.

‘I have just told your cousin,’ she said, ‘that I’ve no business here. We haven’t exchanged calls, have we?’

If Miss Prentice was at all taken aback, she did not show it. She gave her musical laugh and said, ‘I’m afraid I am very remiss about these things.’

‘Miss Campanula hasn’t called on me either,’ said Mrs Ross. ‘You must come together. Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye, everybody,’ said Mrs Ross.

‘I’ll see you to your car,’ said the squire. ‘Henry!’

Henry hastened to the door. Jocelyn escorted Mrs Ross out of the room and, as Dr Templett followed them, the rector shouted after them:

‘Just a minute, Templett. About the youngest Cain.’

‘Oh, yes. Silly little fool! Look here, rector –’

‘I’ll come out with you,’ said the rector.

Henry followed and shut the door behind them.

‘Well!’ said Miss Campanula. ‘Well!’

‘*Isn’t it?*’ said Miss Prentice. ‘*Isn’t it?*’

III

Dinah, left alone with them, knew that the battle of the music was postponed in order that the two ladies might unite in the abuse of Mrs Ross. That it was postponed and not abandoned was evident in their manner, which reminded Dinah of stewed fruit on the turn. Its sweetness was impregnated by acidity.

'Of course, Eleanor,' said Miss Campanula, 'I can't for the life of me see why you didn't show her the door. I should have refused to receive her. I should!'

'I was simply dumbfounded,' said Miss Prentice. 'When Taylor announced them, I really couldn't believe my senses. I am deeply disappointed in Dr Templett.'

'Disappointed! The greatest piece of brazen effrontery I have ever encountered. He shan't have my lumbago! I can promise him that.'

'I really should have thought he'd have known better,' continued Miss Prentice. 'It isn't as if we don't know who he is. He should be a gentleman. I always thought he took up medicine as a *vocation*. After all, there have been Templetts at Chippingwood for –'

'For as long as there have been Jernighams at Pen Cuckoo,' said Miss Campanula. 'But of course, you wouldn't know that.'

This was an oblique hit. It reminded Miss Prentice that she was a new-comer and not, strictly speaking, a Jernigham of Pen Cuckoo. Miss Campanula followed it up by saying, 'I suppose in your position you could do nothing but receive her; but I must say I was astonished that you leapt at her play as you did.'

'I did not leap, Idris,' said Miss Prentice. 'I hope I took the dignified course. It was obvious that everybody but you and me was in favour of her play.'

'Well, it's a jolly good play,' said Dinah.

'So we have been told,' said Miss Campanula. 'Repeatedly.'

'I was helpless,' continued Miss Prentice. 'What could I do? One can do nothing against sheer common persistence. Of course she has triumphed.'

'She's gone off now, taking every man in the room with her,' said Miss Campanula. 'Ha!'

'Ah, well,' added Miss Prentice, 'I suppose it's always the case when one deals with people who are *not quite*. Did you hear what she said about our not calling?'

'I was within an ace of telling her that I understood she received men only.'

'But, Miss Campanula,' said Dinah, 'we don't know there's anything more than friendship between them, do we? And even if there is, it's their business.'

'Dinah, *dear*!' said Miss Prentice.

'As a priest's daughter, Dinah –' began Miss Campanula.

'As a priest's daughter,' said Dinah, 'I've got a sort of idea charity is supposed to be a virtue. And, anyway, I think when you talk about a person's family it's better not to call him a priest. It sounds so scandalous, somehow.'

There was dead silence. At last Miss Campanula rose to her feet.

'I fancy my car is waiting for me, Eleanor,' she said. 'So I shall make my adieux. I am afraid we are neither of us intelligent enough to appreciate modern humour. Good-night.'

'Aren't we driving you home?' asked Dinah.

'Thank you, Dinah, no. I ordered my car for six, and it is already half-past. Good-night.'

CHAPTER 5 *Above Cloudyfold*

The next morning was fine. Henry woke up at six and looked out of his window at a clear, cold sky with paling stars. In another hour it would begin to get light. Henry wide awake, his mind sharp with anticipation, leapt back into bed and sat with the blankets caught between his chin and his knees, hugging himself. A fine winter's dawn with a light frost and then the thin, pale sunlight. Down in the stables they would soon be moving about with lanthorns to the sound of clanking pails, shrill whistling, and boots on cobblestone. Hounds met up at Moorton Park today, and Jocelyn's two mounts would be taken over by his groom to wait for his arrival by car. Henry spared a moment to regret his own decision to give up hunting. He had loved it so much: the sound, the smell, the sight of the hunt. It had all seemed so perfectly splendid until one day, quite suddenly as if a new pair of eyes had been put into his head, he had seen a mob of well-fed expensive people, with red faces, astraddle shiny quadrupeds, all whooping ceremoniously after a very small creature which later on was torn to pieces while the lucky ones sat on their horses and looked on, well satisfied. To his violent annoyance, he had found that he could not rid himself of this unlovely picture and, as it made him feel slightly sick, he had given up everything but drag-hunting. Jocelyn had been greatly upset and had instantly accused Henry of pacifism. Henry had just left off being a pacifist, however, and assured his father that if England was invaded he would strike a shrewd blow before he would see Cousin Eleanor raped by a foreign mercenary. Hugging his knees, he chuckled at the memory of Jocelyn's face. Then he gave himself four minutes to revise the conversation he had planned to have with Dinah. He found that the thought of Dinah sent his heart pounding, just as it used to pound in the old days before he took his first fence. 'I suppose I'm hunting again,' he thought, and this primitive idea gave him a curiously exalted sensation. He jumped out of bed, bathed, shaved and dressed by lamplight, then he stole downstairs out into the dawn.

It's a fine thing to be abroad on Dorset hills on a clear winter's dawn. Henry went round the west wing of Pen Cuckoo. The gravel crunched under his shoes and the dim box-borders smelt in a garden that was oddly remote. Familiar things seemed mysterious as if the experience of the night had made strangers of them. The field was rimmed with silver, the spinney on the far side was a company of naked trees locked in a deep sleep from which the sound of footsteps among the dead leaves and twigs could not awaken them. The hillside smelt of cold earth and frosty stones. As Henry climbed steeply upwards, it was as if he left the night behind him down in Pen Cuckoo. On Cloudyfold, the dim shapes took on some resolute form and became rocks, bushes and posts, expectant of the day. The clamour of faraway cock-crows rose vaguely from the valley like the overlapping echoes of dreams, and with this sound came the human smell of woodsmoke.

Henry reached the top of Cloudyfold and looked down the vale of Pen Cuckoo. His breath a small cold mist in front of his face, his fingers were cold and his eyes watered, but he felt like a god as he surveyed his own little world. Half-way down, and almost sheer beneath him, was the house he had left. He looked down into the chimney-tops, already wreathed in thin drifts of blue. The servants were up and about. Farther down, and still drenched in shadow, were the roofs of Winton. Henry wondered if they really leaked badly and if he and Dinah could ever afford to repair them. Beyond Winton his father's land spread out into low hills and came to an end at Selwood Brook. Here, half-screened by trees, he could see the stone façade of Chippingwood which Dr Templett had inherited from his elder brother who had died in the Great War. And separated from Chippingwood by the hamlet of Chipping was Miss Campanula's Georgian mansion, on the skirts of the village but not of it. Farther away, and only just visible over the downlands that separated it from the Vale, was Great Chipping, the largest town in that part of Dorset. Half-way up the slope, below Winton and Pen Cuckoo, was the church, Winton St Giles, with the rectory hidden behind it. Dinah would strike straight through their home copse and come up the ridge of Cloudyfold. If she came! Please God

make it happen, said Henry's thoughts as they used to do when he was a little boy. He crossed the brow of the hill. Below him, on the far side, was Moorton Park Road and Cloudyfold village, and there, tucked into a bend in the road, Duck Cottage, with its scarlet door and window frames, newly done up by Mrs Ross. Henry wondered why Selia Ross had decided to live in a place like Cloudyfold. She seemed to him so thoroughly urban. For a minute or two he thought of her, still snugly asleep in her renovated cottage, dreaming perhaps of Dr Templett. Farther away over the brow of the hill was the Cains' farm, where Dr Templett must drive to minister to the youngest Cain's big toe.

'They're all down there,' thought Henry, 'tucked up in their warm houses, fast asleep; and none of them knows I'm up here in the cold dawn waiting for Dinah Copeland.'

He felt a faint warmth on the back of his neck. The stivered grass was washed with colour, and before him his attenuated shadow appeared. He turned to the east and saw the sun. Quite near at hand he heard his name called, and there, coming over the brow of Cloudyfold, was Dinah, dressed in blue with a scarlet handkerchief round her neck.

Henry could make no answering call. His voice stuck in his throat. He raised his arm, and the shadow before him set a long blue pointer over the grass. Dinah made an answering gesture. Because he could not stand dumbly and smile until she came up with him, he lit a cigarette, making a long business of it, his hands cupped over his face. He could hear her footsteps on the frozen hill, and his own heart thumped with them. When he looked up she was beside him.

'Good-morning,' said Henry.

'I've no breath left,' said Dinah; 'but good-morning to you, Henry. Your cigarette smells like heaven.'

He gave her one.

'It's grand up here,' said Dinah. 'I'm glad I came. You wouldn't believe you could be hot, would you? But I am. My hands and face are icy and the rest of me's like a hot-cross bun.'

'I'm glad you came, too,' said Henry. There was a short silence. Henry set the Jernigham jaw, fixed his gaze on Miss Campanula's chimneys, and said, 'Do you feel at all shy?'

'Yes,' said Dinah. 'If I start talking I shall go on and on talking, rather badly. That's a sure sign I'm shy.'

'It takes me differently. I can hardly speak. I expect I'm turning purple, and my top lip seems to be twitching.'

'It'll go off in a minute,' said Dinah. 'Henry, what would you do if you suddenly knew you had dominion over all you survey? That sounds Biblical. I mean, suppose you could alter the minds – and that means the destinies – of all the people living down there – what would you do?'

'Put it into Cousin Eleanor's heart to be a missionary in Polynesia.'

'Or into Miss Campanula's to start a nudist circle in Chipping.'

'Or my father might go surrealist.'

'No, but honestly, what would you do?' Dinah insisted.

'I don't know. I suppose I would try and simplify them. People seem to me to be much too busy and complicated.'

'Make them kinder?'

'Well, that might do it, certainly.'

'It would do it. If Miss Campanula and your Cousin Eleanor left off being jealous of each other, and if Dr Templett was sorrier for his wife, and if Mrs Ross minded more about upsetting other people's apple-carts, we wouldn't have any more scenes like the one last night.'

'Perhaps not,' Henry agreed. 'But you wouldn't stop them falling in love, if you can call whatever they feel for each other, falling in love. I'm in love with you, as I suppose you know. It makes me feel all noble minded and generous and kind; but, just the same, if I had a harem of invalid wives, they wouldn't stop me telling you I loved you, Dinah. Dinah, I love you so desperately.'

'Do you, Henry?'

‘You’d never believe how desperately. This is all wrong. I’d thought out the way I’d tell you. First we were to have a nice conversation and then, when we’d got to the right place, I was going to tell you.’

‘All elegant like?’

‘Yes. But it’s too much for me.’

‘It’s too much for me, too,’ said Dinah.

They faced each other, two solitary figures. All their lives they were to remember this moment, and yet they did not see each other’s face very clearly, for their sight was blurred by the agitation in their hearts.

‘Oh, Dinah,’ said Henry. ‘Darling, darling Dinah, I do love you so much.’

He reached out his hand blindly and touched her arm. It was a curious tentative gesture. Dinah cried out: ‘Henry, my dear.’

She raised his hand to her cold cheek.

‘Oh, God!’ said Henry, and pulled her into his arms.

Jocelyn’s groom, hacking quietly along the road to Cloudyfold, looked up and saw two figures locked together against the winter sky.

II

‘We must come back to earth,’ said Dinah. ‘There’s the church clock. It must be eight.’

‘I’ll kiss you eight times to wind up the spell,’ said Henry. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, the tips of her ears, and he kissed her twice on the mouth.

‘There!’ he muttered. ‘The spell’s wound up.’

‘Don’t!’ cried Dinah.

‘What, my darling?’

‘Don’t quote from Macbeth. It couldn’t be more unlucky!’

‘Who says so?’

‘In the theatre everybody says so.’

‘I cock a snook at them! We’re not in the theatre: we’re on top of the world.’

‘All the same, I’m crossing my thumbs.’

‘When shall we be married?’

‘Married?’ Dinah caught her breath, and Henry’s pure happiness was threaded with a sort of wonder when he saw that she was no longer lost in bliss.

‘What is it?’ he said. ‘What has happened? Does it frighten you to think of our marriage?’

‘It’s only that we *have* come back to earth,’ Dinah said sombrely. ‘I don’t know when we’ll be married. You see, something pretty difficult has happened.’

‘Good Lord, darling, what are you going to falter in my ear? Not a family curse, or dozens of blood relations stark ravers in lunatic asylums?’

‘Not quite. It’s your Cousin Eleanor.’

‘Eleanor!’ cried Henry. ‘She scarcely exists.’

‘Wait till you hear. I’ve got to tell you now. I’ll tell you as we go down.’

‘Say first that you’re as happy as I am.’

‘I couldn’t be happier.’

‘I love you, Dinah.’

‘I love you, Henry.’

‘The world is ours,’ said Henry. ‘Let us go down and take it.’

III

They followed the shoulder of the hill by a path that led down to the rectory garden. Dinah went in front, and their conversation led to repeated halts.

'I'm afraid,' Dinah began, 'that I don't much care for your Cousin Eleanor.'

'You astonish me, darling,' said Henry. 'For myself, I regard her as a prize bitch.'

'That's all right, then. I couldn't mention this before you'd declared yourself, because it's all about us.'

'You mean the day before yesterday when she lurked outside your drawing-room door? Dinah, if she hadn't been there, what would you have done?'

This led to a prolonged halt.

'The thing is,' said Dinah presently, 'she must have told your father.'

'So she did.'

'He's spoken to you?'

'He has.'

'Oh, Henry!'

'That sounds as if you were setting a quotation. Yes, we had a grand interview. "What is this I hear, sir, of your attentions to Miss Dinah Copeland?" "Forgive me, sir, but I refuse to answer you." "Do you defy me, Henry?" "With all respect, sir, I do!" "That sort of thing."'

'He doesn't want it?'

'Eleanor has told him he doesn't, blast her goggling eyes!'

'Why? Because I'm the poor parson's daughter, or because I'm on the stage, or just because he hates the sight of me?'

'I don't think he hates the sight of you.'

'I suppose he wants you to marry a proud heiress.'

'I suppose he does. It doesn't matter a tuppenny button, my sweet Dinah, what he thinks.'

'But it does. You haven't heard. Miss Prentice came to see Daddy last night.'

Henry stopped dead and stared at her.

'She said – she said –'

'Go on.'

'She told him we were meeting, and that you were keeping it from your father, but he'd found out and was terribly upset and felt we'd both been very underhand and – oh, she must have been absolutely foul! She must have sort of hinted that we were –' Dinah boggled at this and fell silent.

'That we were living in roaring sin?' Henry suggested.

'Yes.'

'My God, the minds of these women! Surely the rector didn't pay any attention.'

'She's so loathsomely plausible. Do you remember the autumn day, weeks ago, soon after I came back, when you drove me to Moorton Bridge and we picnicked and didn't come back till the evening?'

'Every second of it.'

'She'd found out about that. There was no reason why the whole world shouldn't know, but I hadn't told Daddy about it. It had been such a glowing, marvellous day that I didn't want to talk about it.'

'Me, too.'

'Well, now, you see, it looks all fishy and dubious, and Daddy feels I have been behaving in an underhand manner. When Miss Prentice had gone he took me into his study. He was wearing his beretta, a sure sign that he's feeling his responsibilities. He spoke more in sorrow than in anger, which is always rather toxic, and worst of it is, he really was upset. He got more and more feudal and

said we'd always been – I forget what – almost fiefs or vassals of this-man's-man of the Jernighams, and had never done anything disloyal, and here I was behaving like a housemaid having clandestine assignations with you. On and on and on; and Henry, my darling, my dear darling, ridiculous though it sounds, I began to feel shabby and common.'

'He didn't believe –?'

'No, of course he didn't believe that. But all the same, you know he's frightfully muddled about sex.'

'They all are,' said Henry, with youthful gloom. 'And with Eleanor and Idris hurling their inhibitions in his teeth –'

'I know. Well, anyway, the upshot was, he forbade me to see you alone. I said I wouldn't promise. It was the first really deadly row we've ever had. I fancy he prayed about it for hours after I'd gone to bed. It's very vexing to lie in bed knowing that somebody in the room below is praying away like mad about you. And, you see, I adore the man. At one moment I thought I would say my own prayers, but the only thing I could think of was the old Commination Service. You know: "Cursed is he that smiteth his neighbour secretly. Amen."'

'One for Eleanor,' said Henry appreciatively.

'That's what I thought, but I didn't say it. But what I've been trying to come to is this: I can't bear to upset Daddy permanently, and I'm afraid that's just what would happen. No, please wait, Henry. You see, I'm only nineteen, and he can forbid the banns – and, what's more, he'd do it.'

'But why?' said Henry. 'Why? Why? Why?'

'Because he thinks that we shouldn't oppose your father and because, secretly, he's got a social inferiority complex. He's a snob, poor sweet. He thinks if he smiled on us it would look as if he was all agog to make a grand match for me, and was going behind the squire's back to do it.'

'Absolutely drivelling bilge!'

'I know, but that's how it goes. It's just one of those things. And it's all due to Miss Prentice. Honestly, Henry I think she's positively evil. *Why* should she mind about us?'

'Jealousy,' said Henry. 'She's starved and twisted and a bit dotty. I dare say it's physiological as well as psychological. I imagine she thinks you'll sort of dethrone her when you're my wife. And, as likely, as not, she's jealous of your father's affection for you.'

They shook their heads wisely.

'Daddy's terrified of her,' said Dinah. '*and* of Miss Campanula. They *will* ask him to hear their confessions, and when they go away he's a perfect wreck.'

'I'm not surprised, if they tell the truth. I expect what they really do is to try to inform against the rest of the district. Listen to me, Dinah. I refuse to have our love for each other messed up by Eleanor. You're mine. I'll tell your father I've asked you to marry me, and I'll tell mine. I'll *make* them see reason: and if Eleanor comes creeping in – my God, I'll, I'll, I'll –'

'Henry,' said Dinah, 'how magnificent!'

Henry grinned.

'It'd be more magnificent,' he said, 'if she wasn't just an unhappy, warped, middle-aged spinster.'

'It must be awful to be like that,' agreed Dinah. 'I hope it never happens to me.'

'You!'

There was another halt.

'Henry,' said Dinah suddenly. 'Let's ask them to call an armistice until after the play.'

'But we must see each other like this. Alone.'

'I shall die if we can't; but all the same I feel, somehow, if we said we'd wait until then, that Daddy might sort of begin to understand. Weil meet at rehearsals, and we won't pretend we're not in love, but I'll promise him I won't meet you alone. It'll be – it'll be kind of dignified. Henry, *do* you see?'

‘I suppose so,’ said Henry unwillingly.

‘It’d stop those hateful old women talking.’

‘My dear, nothing would stop them talking.’

‘Please, darling Henry.’

‘Oh, Dinah.’

‘Please.’

‘All right. It’s insufferable, though, that Eleanor should be able to spoil a really miraculous thing like Us.’

‘Insufferable.’

‘She’s so completely insignificant.’

Dinah shook her head.

‘All the same,’ she said, ‘she’s a bad enemy. She creeps and creeps, and she’s simply brimful of poison. She’ll drop some of it into our cup of happiness if she can.’

‘Not if I know it,’ said Henry.

CHAPTER 6 *Rehearsal*

The rehearsals were not going too well. For all Dinah's efforts, she hadn't been able to get very much concerted work out of her company. For one thing, with the exception of Selia Ross and Henry, they would *not* learn their lines. Dr Templett even took a sort of pride in it. He was forever talking about his experiences in amateur productions when he was a medical student.

'I never knew what I was going to say,' he said cheerfully. 'I'm capable of saying almost anything. It was always all right on the night. A bit of cheek goes a long way. One can bluff it out with a gag or two. The great thing is not to be nervous.'

He himself was not at all nervous. He uttered such lines of the French Ambassador's as he remembered, in a high-pitched voice, made a great many grimaces, waved his hands in a foreign manner, and was never still for an instant.

'I leave it to the spur of the moment,' he told them. 'It's wonderful what a difference it makes when you're all made-up, with funny clothes on. I never know where I ought to be. You can't do it in cold blood.'

'But, Dr Templett, you've got to,' Dinah lamented. 'How can we get the timing right or the positions, if at one rehearsal you're on the prompt and at the next on the o.p.?'

'Don't you worry,' said Dr Templett. 'We'll be all right. Eet vill be – 'ow you say? – so, so charmante.'

Off-stage he continually spoke his lamentable broken English, and when he dried up, as he did incessantly, he interpolated his: "ow you say?'

'If I forget,' he said to the rector, who was prompting, 'I'll just walk over to your side and say, "'ow you say?" like that, and then you'll know.'

Selia Ross and he had an irritating trick of turning up late for rehearsals. Apparently the youngest Cain's big toe still needed Dr Templett's attention, and he explained that he picked up Mrs Ross and brought her to rehearsal on his way back from Cloudyfold. They would walk in with singularly complacent smiles, half an hour late, while Dinah was reading both their parts and trying to play her own. Sometimes she got her father to read their bits, but the rector intoned them so carefully and slowly that everybody else was thrown into a state of deadly confusion.

Miss Campanula, in a different way, was equally troublesome. She refused to give up her typewritten part. She carried it about with her and read each of her speeches in an undertone during the preceding dialogue, so that whenever she was on the stage the others spoke through a distressing mutter. When her cue came she seldom failed to say, 'Oh. Now it's me,' before she began. She would often rattle off her lines without any inflexion, and apparently without the slightest regard for their meaning. She was forever telling Dinah that she was open to correction, but she received all suggestions in huffy grandeur, and they made not the smallest difference to her performance. Worse than all these peculiarities were Miss Campanula's attempts at characterization. She made all sorts of clumsy and ineffective movements over which she herself seemed to have little control. She continually shifted her weight from one large foot to the other, rather in the manner of a penguin. She wandered about the stage and she made embarrassing grimaces. In addition to all this she had developed a frightful cold in her nose, and rehearsals were made hideous by her catarrhal difficulties.

Jocelyn was the type of amateur performer who learns his lines from the prompter. Unlike Miss Campanula, he did not hold his part in his hand. Indeed, he had lost it irrevocably immediately after the first rehearsal. He said that it did not matter, as he had already memorized his lines. This was a lie. He merely had the vague idea of their sense. His performance reminded Dinah of divine service, as he was obliged to repeat all his lines, like responses, after the rector. However, in spite of this defect, the squire had an instinctive sense of theatre. He did not fidget or gesticulate. With Dr Templett tearing about the stage like a wasp, this was particularly refreshing.

Miss Prentice did not know her part either, but she was a cunning bluffer. She had a long scene in which she held a newspaper open in her hands. Dinah discovered that Miss Prentice had pinned several of her sides to *The Times*. Others were left in handy places about the stage. When, in spite of these manoeuvres, she dried up, Miss Prentice stared in a gently reproachful manner at the person who spoke after her, so that everybody thought it was her *vis-à-vis* who was at fault.

Mrs Ross had learnt her part. Her clear, hard voice had plenty of edge. Once there, she worked, tried to follow Dinah's suggestions, and was very good-humoured and obliging. If ever anything was wanted, Mrs Ross would get it. She brought down to the Parish Hall her cushions, her cocktail glasses and her bridge table. Dinah found herself depending more and more on Mrs Ross for 'hand props' and odds and ends of furniture. But, for all that, she did not like Mrs Ross, whose peals of laughter at all Dr Templett's regrettable antics were extremely irritating. The determined rudeness with which Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula met all Mrs Ross's advances forced Dinah into making friendly gestures which she continually regretted. She saw, with something like horror, that her father had innocently succumbed to Mrs Ross's charm, and to her sudden interest in his church. This, more than anything else she did, inflamed Miss Campanula and Eleanor Prentice against Selia Ross. Dinah felt that her rehearsals were shot through and through with a mass of ugly suppressions. To complete her discomfort, the squire's attitude towards Mrs Ross, being ripe with Edwardian naughtiness, obviously irritated Henry and the two ladies almost to breaking point.

Henry had learnt his part and shaped well. He and Dinah were the only members of the cast who gave any evidence of team work. The others scarcely even so much as looked at each other, and treated their speeches as if they were a string of interrupted recitations.

II

The battle of the music had raged for three weeks. Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula, together and alternately, had pretended to altruistic motives, and accused each other of selfishness, sulked, denied all desire to perform on the piano, given up their parts, relented, and offered their services anew. In the end Dinah, with her father's moral support behind her, seized upon a moment when Miss Campanula had said she'd no wish to play on an instrument with five dumb notes in the treble and six in the bass.

'All right, Miss Campanula,' said Dinah, 'we'll have it like that. Miss Prentice has kindly volunteered, and I shall appoint her as pianist. As you've got the additional responsibility of the YPFC girls in the front of the house, it really does seem the best idea.'

After that Miss Campanula was barely civil to anybody but the rector and the squire.

Five days before the performance, Eleanor Prentice developed a condition which Miss Campanula called 'a Place' on the index finger of the left hand. Everybody noticed it. Miss Campanula did not fail to point out that it would probably be much worse on the night of the performance.

'You'd better take care of that Place on your finger Eleanor,' she said. 'It's gathering, and to me it looks very nasty. Your blood must be out of order.'

Miss Prentice denied this with an air of martyrdom, but there was no doubt that the Place grew increasingly ugly. Three days before the performance it was hidden by an obviously professional bandage, and everybody knew that she had consulted Dr Templett. A rumour sprang up that Miss Campanula had begun to practise her Prelude every morning after breakfast.

Dinah had a private conversation with Dr Templett.

'What about Miss Prentice's finger? Will she be able to play the piano?'

'I've told her she'd better give up all idea of it,' he said. 'There's a good deal of inflammation, and it's very painful. It'll hurt like the devil if she attempts to use it, and it's not at all advisable that she should.'

'What did she say?'

Dr Templett grinned.

'She said she wouldn't disappoint her audience, and that she could rearrange the fingering of her piece. It's the "Venetian Suite", as usual, of course?'

'It is,' said Dinah grimly, '"Dawn" and "On the Canal" for the overture, and the "Nocturne" for the entr'acte. She'll never give way.'

'Selia says she wouldn't mind betting old Idris has put poison in her girl friend's gloves like the Borgias,' said Dr Templett, and added: 'Good Lord, I oughtn't to have repeated that! It's the sort of thing that's quoted against you in a place like this.'

'I won't repeat it,' said Dinah.

She asked Miss Prentice if she would rather not appear at the piano.

'How thoughtful of you, Dinah, my dear,' rejoined Miss Prentice, with her holiest smile. 'But I shall do my little best. You may depend upon me.'

'But, Miss Prentice, your finger!'

'Ever so much better,' said Eleanor in a voice that somehow suggested that there was something slightly improper in mentioning her finger.

'They are waiting to print the programmes. Your name –'

'Please don't worry, dear. My name may appear in safety. Shall we just not say any more about it, but consider it settled?'

'Very well,' said Dinah uneasily. 'It's very heroic of you.'

'Silly child!' said Eleanor playfully.

III

And now, on Thursday, November the 25th, two nights before the performance, Dinah stood beside the paraffin heater in the aisle of the parish hall, and with dismay in her heart prepared to watch the opening scenes in which she herself did not appear. There was to be no music at the dress rehearsal.

'Just to give my silly old finger time to get *quite* well,' said Miss Prentice.

But Henry had told Dinah that both he and his father had seen Eleanor turn so white after knocking her finger against a chair that they thought she was going to faint.

'You won't stop her,' said Henry. 'If she has to play the bass with her feet, she'll do it.'

Dinah gloomily agreed.

She had made them up for the dress rehearsal and had attempted to create a professional atmosphere in a building that reeked of parochial endeavour. Even now her father's unmistakably clerical voice could be heard beyond the green serge curtain, crying obediently:

'Beginners, please.'

In front of Dinah, six privileged Friendly Young Girls, who were to sell programmes and act as ushers at the performance, sat in a giggling row to watch the dress rehearsal. Dr Templett and Henry were their chief interest. Dr Templett was aware of this and repeatedly looked round the curtain. He had insisted on making himself up, and looked as if he had pressed his face against a gridiron and then garnished his chin with the hearth-brush. Just as Dinah was about to bring up the curtain, his head again bobbed round the corner.

'Vy do you, 'ow you say, gargle so mooch?' he asked the helpers. A renewed paroxysm broke out.

'Dr Templett!' shouted Dinah. 'Clear stage, *please*.'

'Ten thousand pardons, Mademoiselle,' said Dr Templett. 'I vaneesh.' He made a comic face and disappeared.

'All ready behind, Daddy?' shouted Dinah.

'I think so,' said the rector's voice doubtfully.

'Positions, everybody. House lights, please.' Dinah was obliged to execute this last order herself, as the house lights switch was in the auditorium. She turned it off and the six onlookers yelped maddeningly.

'Ssh, please! Curtain!'

'Just a minute,' said the rector dimly.

The curtain rose in a series of uneven jerks, and the squire, who should have been at the telephone, was discovered gesticulating violently to someone in the wings. He started, glared into the house, and finally took up his position.

'Where's that telephone bell?' demanded Dinah.

'Oh, dear!' said the rector's voice dismally. He could be heard scuffling about in the prompt-corner and presently an unmistakable bicycle bell pealed. But Jocelyn had already lifted the receiver and, although the bell, which was supposed to summon him to the telephone, continued to ring off-stage, he embarked firmly on his opening lines:

'Hallo! Hallo! Well, who is it?'

The dress rehearsal had begun.

Actors say that a good dress rehearsal means a bad performance. Dinah hoped desperately that the reverse would prove true. Everything seemed to go wrong. She suspected that there were terrific rows in the dressing-rooms, but as she herself had no change to make, she stayed in front whenever she was not actually on the stage. Before the entrance of the two ladies in the second act, Henry came down and joined her.

'Frightful, isn't it?' he asked.

'It's the end,' said Dinah.

'My poor darling, it's pretty bad luck for you. Perhaps it'll pull through tomorrow.'

'I don't see how – Dr Templett!' roared Dinah. 'What are you doing? You ought to be up by the fireplace. Go back, please.'

Miss Prentice suddenly walked straight across the stage, in front of Jocelyn, Selia Ross and Dr Templett, and out at the opposite door.

'*Miss Prentice!*'

But she had gone, and could be heard in angry conversation with Georgie Biggins, the call-boy, and Miss Campanula.

'You're a very naughty little boy, and I shall ask the rector to forbid you to attend the performance.'

'You deserve a sound whipping,' said Miss Campanula's voice. 'And if I had my way –'

The squire and Dr Templett stopped short and stared into the wings.

'What is it?' Dinah demanded.

Georgie Biggins was thrust on the stage. He had painted his nose carmine, and Miss Prentice's hat for the third act was on his head. He had a water pistol in his hand. The girls in the front row screamed delightedly.

'Georgie,' said Dinah with more than a suspicion of tears in her voice, 'take that hat off and go home.'

'I never –' began Georgie.

'Do what I tell you.'

'Yaas, Miss.'

Miss Prentice's arm shot through the door. The hat was removed. Dr Templett took Georgie Biggins by the slack of his pants and dropped him over the footlights.

'Gatcha!' said Georgie and bolted to the back of the hall.

'Go on, please,' said poor Dinah.

Somehow or another they got through. Dinah took them back over the scenes that had been outstandingly bad. This annoyed and bored them all very much, but she was adamant.

'It'll be all right on the night,' said Dr Templett.

'Saturday's the night,' said Dinah, 'and it won't.'

At midnight she sat down in the third bench and said she supposed they had better stop. They all assembled in one of the Sunday School rooms behind the stage and gathered round a heater, while Mrs Ross gave them a very good supper. She had insisted on making this gesture and had provided beer, whisky, coffee and sandwiches. Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice had both offered to make themselves responsible for this supper, and were furious that Mrs Ross had got in first.

Dinah was astounded to learn from their conversation that they thought they had done quite well. The squire was delighted with himself; Dr Templett still retained his character as a French man; and Selia Ross said repeatedly that she thought both of them had been marvellous. The other two ladies spoke only to Mr Copeland, and each waited until she could speak alone. Dinah saw that her father was bewildered and troubled.

'Oh, Lord!' thought Dinah. 'What's brewing now?' She wished that her father was a stronger character, that he would bully or frighten those two venomous women into holding their tongues. And suddenly, with a cold pang, she thought: 'If he should lose his head and marry one of them!'

Henry brought her a cup of black coffee.

'I've put some whisky in it,' he said. 'You're as pale as a star, and look frightened. What is it?'

'Nothing. I'm just tired.'

Henry bent his dark head and whispered:

'Dinah?'

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll talk to Father on Saturday night when he’s flushed with his dubious triumphs. Did you get my letter?’

Dinah’s hand floated to her breast.

‘Darling,’ whispered Henry. ‘Yours, too. We can’t wait any longer. After tomorrow?’

‘After tomorrow,’ murmured Dinah.

CHAPTER 7 *Vignettes*

'I have sinned,' said Miss Prentice, 'in thought, word and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my most grievous fault. Especially I accuse myself that since that last confession, which was a month ago, I have sinned against my neighbour. I have harboured evil suspicions of those with whom I have come in contact, accusing them in my heart of adultery, unfaithfulness and disobedience to their parents. I have judged my sister-woman in my heart and condemned her. I have listened many times to evil reports of a woman, and because I could not in truth say that I did not believe them –'

'Do not seek to excuse rather than to condemn yourself,' said the rector from behind the Norman confessional that his bishop allowed him to use. 'Condemn only your own erring heart. You have encouraged and connived at scandal. Go on.'

There was a brief silence.

'I accuse myself that I have committed sins of omission, not performing what I believed to be my bounden Christian duty to the sick, not warning one whom I believe to be in danger of great unhappiness.'

The rector heard Miss Prentice turn a page of the notebook where she wrote her confessions. 'I know what she's getting at,' he thought miserably. But because he was a sincere and humble man, he prayed: 'Oh, God, give me the strength of mind to tackle this woman. Amen.'

Miss Prentice cleared her throat in a subdued manner and began again. 'I have consorted with a woman whom I believe to be of evil nature, knowing that by doing so I may have seemed to connive in sin.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.