

**THEIR EXITS AND THEIR
ENTRANCES**

BY ILIL ARBEL

INTRODUCTION

**All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.**

Send Me No Lilies is completed, and the whole party is flying in style to Hollywood! They plan to create a huge musical extravaganza based (very sketchily) on Aubrey Clover's urbane and witty comedy, *Dance We Shall*. The play is entirely unfit for such a production, but who cares? Such is the power of Hollywood, as long as the censors do not object. A new and exciting star is rising on the horizon, Glamora Tudor is ditching the glamorous life as well as her high heels, and is headed in a completely new and admirable direction. Mr. Alcott is being put under the guidance of the most awe-inspiring (and strangely familiar) English butler of immense wisdom, but that does not prevent him from making a fool of himself... and most surprising, Mrs. Rivers is swept off her respected feet by the love of a younger man, so much like one of her own novels that she feels that at last, at last, life is imitating art. Will she stay with him in glittering Hollywood, or will she do as all her heroines always did, and go back, so pure and chaste, to her dull and friendly husband?

But when all these adventures take place in Hollywood, Barchester is still very much with us. Something even more exciting is happening there as Lady Norton and her new friend, a famous professor of botany, are trying to create a horticultural miracle. Will the two plant fanatics be able to raise, under the rainy skies of England, the rare cactus *Echinocactus horzonthalonius var. nicholii*, a monstrosity that can only grow on alluvial fans composed of limestone-derived soils in the Waterman and Vekol Mountains, and can split rock with its bare roots? And will the villainess who is trying to steal their secrets succeed in her heinous plans, and grasp the horticultural glory?

Have no fear. We keep to our traditions, and as always, nothing really unpleasant ever takes place in the County. Somehow or other, everyone ends up feeling happy with what fate hands them on a silver platter, next to a nice cup of tea and a perfect cucumber sandwich.

Chapter One

“Lady Norton, I am devastated,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “I don’t know what to say, how to apologize.”

“But why, Mr. Goldwasser?” said the Dreadful Dowager, wagging her tall hairdo graciously. “It’s of no consequence!”

“No consequence? My dear Lady Norton, when I give my word, I don’t take it back. Now I am forced to do so!”

“But you are not taking it back, Mr. Goldwasser. You are only postponing the filming by a few months, and I hope you will return soon enough.”

“Of course, but you will have to put your house in order, and then rearrange it again for the filming. Such imposition!”

“I will touch nothing, Mr. Goldwasser. Since the war, I do not entertain on a lavish scale. I will be perfectly comfortable leaving everything as you have arranged it, and waiting for your return.”

“You are so gracious, Lady Norton. You really make me feel better,” said Mr. Goldwasser, for once feeling that the difficult lady was acting very kindly.

“And don’t forget, Mr. Goldwasser, that your generosity in paying me half my fee in advance allows me to construct the cacti and succulents hothouse I have been longing for,” said Lady Norton enthusiastically.

“With your extensive conservatories, do you really need to build a new construction?” asked Mr. Goldwasser, surprised.

“Oh, yes. These plants require very specific conditions, and the hothouse I plan will be highly specialized. I will have to order much of the equipment in the United States. It will cost a great deal of money, but it will be worth it.”

“Will you write a new book about the subject?” asked Mr. Goldwasser. He had no interest whatsoever in horticulture, and this was probably a sycophantic behaviour, but he felt he owed something to Lady Norton, be it such a small thing as showing an interest in her avocation.

“Only if I can find a specimen or two of *Echinocactus horizontalonius* var. *nicholii*,” said Lady Norton with the sudden wild, fanatic look of the plant enthusiast.

“A what?” said Mr. Goldwasser, bewildered.

“Allow me to show you,” said Lady Norton with the air of a monarch who was about to bestow a rare treat on a favourite subject. She took a folder from her desk, brought it Mr. Goldwasser, and opened it. Inside were pictures of something that Mr. Goldwasser could only describe as a nightmare. He knew it had to be some kind of a cactus, having seen so many in California, but other than that he could not tell what the ghastly thing was. In one of the pictures, the plant was growing out of a rock, which it had obviously split, and an elongated stalk-like protuberance was squeezed between the two halves of the rock, on which sat a grey-green globe, covered with a filthy yellowish wool-like substance and ferocious spines. As he stared at the picture, Mr. Goldwasser felt it was unthinkable that even Lady Norton would willingly submit herself to looking at the revolting object, let alone write a book about it.

“Eh, how interesting, what is it?” he asked cautiously.

“It is a rare variety of *Echinocactus* that grows only in Arizona,” said Lady Norton, gazing lovingly at some of the many pictures of the monster that she had in her file. “Its common relatives grow abundantly in Texas and Mexico, but not this treasure. It thrives only on alluvial fans composed of limestone-derived soils in the Waterman and Vekol Mountains.”

“Would it grow in England?” asked Mr. Goldwasser, to whom the unrecognizable words “alluvial fans” suggested dinosaurs and primordial landscapes oozing with slime. He soon recollected that the oozing slime would not be suitable for the desert-like environments where the adored object was probably most happy to grow, slime being more in accordance with a primeval forest where large lizards lurked, so the whole thing was a mystery. However, he was determined not to ask for a detailed explanation.

“Yes, I believe so, if I can prepare the proper hothouse for it. I plan to reproduce the exact conditions the plants enjoy in

their natural environment; I will even attempt to import the limestone soil.”

“Well, if I can be of help, just let me know,” said Mr. Goldwasser feebly, and perhaps rather rashly, considering Lady Norton’s straightforward approach when asking for favours.

“Thank you, Mr. Goldwasser. How very kind.”

“I should go and tell the crew that we have settled everything, Lady Norton; they will be pleased. Ever since I got the telegram from one of my partners, Joe Mammoth, I was really angry, and the whole crew was rather perplexed. I can’t believe he rearranged the filming schedule without consulting me first. Well, he will hear from me, you may be sure of that...”

Lady Norton, who was secretly a little afraid of Mr. Goldwasser, felt that she would not want to be in Mr. Mammoth’s place and bear Mr. Goldwasser’s wrath.

“And you would think Harry Guttenberg, my other partner at GMG, would have stopped him, right? I simply can’t understand it,” Mr. Goldwasser continued.

“But what exactly did he do, what happened?” asked Lady Norton.

“As you know, we were going to film the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*, then go back to Hollywood and work on Mr. Clover’s play, *Dance We Shall*, converting it to a large-scale musical. Since Glam is starring in both films, they can’t be produced simultaneously. Joe knew all about it, and yet he made all the arrangements, the fool, setting up studio space, hiring people, contacting the script writers, etc., ordering everyone to be ready to start almost immediately. The musical is so big and expensive, that we simply can’t reverse his actions.”

“Script writers? So Miss Robinson will not work on *Dance We Shall*?”

“No, Maisie Robinson is strictly romantic films, not musicals... But I am thinking of letting Alcott do it; he will have a name after *Send Me No Lilies* is released. I think the boy has serious star quality. We’ll see. Of course, if he were allowed to do the sequel first, it would have been so much better. This

change is so unexpected and stupid; what a mess. Ah, well, one must resign oneself to higher powers, as we say in Montana.”

“Montana? Is Montana near Arizona?” asked Lady Norton.

“No,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “They are at a considerable distance. Why do you ask?”

“I thought perhaps, since you are from Montana, you knew some people in Arizona, where I am trying to obtain my cactus specimens.”

“Actually, I was only joking, Lady Norton. I was born in Brooklyn. Montana is just a catch word with me, and then I generally do an imitation of John Wayne... it works well in meetings with some of my associates, but I will spare you that. However, I do know people in Arizona; it borders California. When I get back to Hollywood I will ask Miss Brinton to get in touch with them and make sure to find a contact in a botanical garden. This should do the trick and get you seeds, at least. These, ah, things, have seeds, right?”

“Oh, yes, seeds would be just as good as a specimen. Better perhaps, because the journey to England might damage such delicate plants. I am sure I could sprout them, and such a scientific experiment will add a significant scholarly touch to the book. Thank you so much for your interest, Mr. Goldwasser.”

And as Mr. Goldwasser was returning to his crew, musing about the long, sharp thorns of the so-called fragile little cactus and its horrifying and brutal ability to split stone without any tools, Lady Norton left the house, and sailed majestically into the grounds, to search for an ideal situation for the new hothouse that would soon protect and cherish the ugliest collection of plants in England.

“Glam, have you ever heard the words ‘alluvial fans’ mentioned in polite conversation?” asked Mr. Goldwasser pensively.

“No, it sounds horrible,” said Glamora. “Like something out of the science fiction films we used to make, with giant lizards and things. What is it?”

“I have no idea. Lady Norton wants some.”

“Why?” asked Glamora.

“She needs the stuff to raise some awful plants. I am stuck with it, since I am supposed to get in touch with a botanical expert in Arizona for her.”

“Jake, you did not have to promise her that. You always get yourself into these situations, above and beyond, really.”

“I guess I felt guilty because of the trouble we are giving her with the change of plans, and after all, I do know Professor Erasmus van der Vere Hamilton from the botanical gardens in Arizona, where this monstrous cactus she is infatuated with lives. She looked at its pictures with love light in her eyes. Glam, the thing broke a rock out of which it grew... it’s scary.”

“Well, I suppose getting the two plant fanatics together will do no harm. But how did she take the change in plans?”

“Very well, I must say. I’m beginning to almost like the old horse,” said Mr. Goldwasser with complete lack of chivalry.

“That is one obstacle removed, Jake. But now you must speak to Mr. Clover and Mrs. Rivers.”

“I am not worried about Clover. We will work something out; he is the most reasonable man I could ever hope to work with, and he understands my business as well as I do. Sometimes I have a strange feeling that he almost turns into a film producer when we talk. But Mrs. Rivers... I think the only way to appease her would be to invite her to come with us. She has this great desire to study Hollywood from close up.”

“Heaven help us, Jake; she will want to stay with us...” said Glamora resignedly. “Well, when we must, we must.”

“I simply can’t go, Mr. Goldwasser,” said Aubrey. “I am committed to the current play.”

“Of course, I am fully aware of that. I would not expect you to throw your play away and rush to Hollywood. I am not sure how to proceed, but we will work something out. I thought you might have an idea, you usually do.”

“As a matter of fact, I do indeed have an idea, Mr. Goldwasser,” said Aubrey, turning into Talleyrand, the man behind the throne who, at a whim, could create and ruin empires.

“I would like to send Edmond as my substitute playwright. He is ready. In addition, he studied all my plays and he knows them by heart. Rather flattering.”

“Now that *is* a brilliant idea. And when needed, we will send long telegrams, and place trunk calls, as you call long-distance conversations here. We will manage.”

“Edmond will do very well, I am sure, Mr. Goldwasser. He can turn a phrase as well as I do, as long as it is funny. The boy is a complete flop with drama, but a genius with comedy.”

“Would you allow me to invite little Emma to come with us? Could she take a break from her studies?”

“Yes, she could. She is apprenticing, not attending classes, so everything can be easily rearranged. How very generous and kind of you to invite her, Mr. Goldwasser. But don’t you think she may be a nuisance, when all of you are working and she has nothing to do? What will she do with herself?”

“Run around with Glam to all the couture houses and all the design departments,” said Mr. Goldwasser, laughing. “They will have a grand time. Glam will introduce her to very influential designers. Besides, Keith will be happier with his fiancée coming along for the ride.”

Aubrey tried not to flinch from the horrible word “fiancée,” and decided not to hold it against Mr. Goldwasser, who was, after all, an American, and therefore, at least to some extent, spoke a foreign language.

“Mr. Goldwasser! How delightful!”

“So you don’t mind the postponement of the sequel, Mrs. Rivers?”

“Of course not! Not when you invite me to go with you to Hollywood! I have been longing for an opportunity to study it.”

“As a backup for the book about the famous middle-aged actress, who is secretly married, I suppose?” said Mr. Goldwasser with a smile. “There is no longer a single objection to the book. Just between you and me, Mrs. Rivers, I have already leaked a few rumours about Glam and me being married,

to one of the worst gossips in Hollywood. Now we just wait for the series of explosions.”

And indeed a few hours later, as the Company was dismantling equipment, packing costumes, and generally getting ready, the first explosion came in the form of a very long telegram. “Darling Jake, I was shocked to hear how you and sweet Glamora have been deceiving us all these years! I have always suspected that you were living in sin, but had not a single proof. This is so much better, such a thrill for everyone, a secret marriage! Could anyone think of anything more romantic, even for people your age? All the papers are soon to be full of it... etc.”

Glamora laughed when Mr. Goldwasser showed her the telegram. “Even for people your age... this witch will never lose an opportunity to insult me, bless her vicious little heart... Well, I am not insulted at all. I can now move officially to your house, Jake. What a relief this will be... let’s sell my house and become a nice old married couple, living in peace.”

“Indeed, love. So much easier, you were so right. And I have some good news for you. Clover is sending Keith to substitute for him, and I invited Emma to come along for the ride.”

“How delightful! We’ll have Hank and Emma, it will be such fun!” said Glamora, the large violet eyes shining with anticipation of a much better time than she had originally expected. “It reconciles me to entertaining Mrs. Rivers! Well, almost...”

Emma, who was in a perpetual state of speechlessness and awe due to the excitement of the trip, sat in Lydia’s dining room and watched Palmer, who was engaged in setting up tea. The next day everyone was to meet in London, to board the aeroplane that would take them to America, and Emma could not believe that this was really happening. No one else came in for tea yet, and Emma began to notice, despite her own giddy mood, that Palmer’s silence had become extremely eloquent.

“Is something wrong, Palmer?” she asked diffidently.

“Well, Miss Emma, it’s not for me to say. I know my place.”

“But I am the only one here, Palmer. Surely you could tell me?” said Emma, who clearly saw that Palmer was almost bursting with a burning desire to air her views.

“I don’t like all this gallivanting,” said Palmer. “It worries me something dreadful, Miss Emma.”

“Gallivanting? What do you mean?”

“I read my Bible regular-like,” said Palmer. “And you know who he was that was always going to and fro in the earth, as he told the Good Lord.”

“No, I am sorry, I do not know that,” said Emma uncomfortably.

“It was Old Nick,” said Palmer darkly. She did not like to mention Satan’s name and preferred the euphemism, just in case.

“Did he really?” asked Emma, not quite sure how to proceed on these philosophical and religious lines.

“Yes indeed, Miss Emma, also walking up and down in it, as is written in the Book of Job. No good can come from all this gadding about, and wandering the earth, and particularly flying in an aeroplane, which is an abomination.”

“But so many people fly in aeroplanes these days, Palmer. How else should we go there and be in time for the filming?”

“Filming!” said Palmer, who was extremely proud of the fact that she had never set foot in the Barchester Odeon, which was not entirely true, since she did attend one of Glamora Tudor’s films. But as she understood absolutely nothing, and was so outraged by Glamora’s daring costumes that she left the theatre in the middle of the film, she felt it did not count and her purity was unsullied. “And from what I hear about the goings-on in Hollywood, it’s no better than Sodom and Gomorrah. The girls in the kitchen showed me one of them Hollywood magazines once. I told them they ought to be ashamed of themselves, and did no one bring them up properly, to read such shameful things, and I wanted to throw it into the fire, but Cook

took it. She said there was no harm in it. No harm, I ask you...”

“When I was visiting the Towers, Cook and the housemaid read my tea leaves, and they saw an ocean voyage for me. But I suppose it had to be changed since everyone is in such a great hurry to get to Hollywood.”

“An ocean trip is no better, Miss Emma. We was never meant to fly in the air or to swim in the water, and we was never intended to go so far. It is defying Providence to do so, it is,” said Palmer. “And all this hurrying and bustling is sinful, too. There is Time for Everything Under the Sun...” and Palmer left the room with the air of a Cassandra who did her painful duty by delivering a message from the gods, or better yet, a Biblical Prophetess, and had done so much against her will. Emma looked after her, amazed at the sudden godly airs Palmer adopted, and Noel came into the room.

“Lydia and Edmond are on their way, we will have our tea presently,” he said.

“Good, I would appreciate some strengthening after Palmer’s lecture about the sinfulness of my trip to Hollywood,” said Emma, and repeated the conversation, which made Noel laugh. He felt that Emma had much improved since her engagement, was less childish, perhaps, and as for Emma, she had by now forgotten her infatuation with Noel to such an extent that she looked upon him as a benevolent older uncle. Noel, who knew nothing of her previous state of mind or her present one, and probably would not have cared one bit about either, sat by Emma and smiled at her.

“You must be excited, dear. Life had become so full of adventures for you ever since Jessica brought you to Pomfret Towers.”

“Oh, Noel, you cannot begin to imagine,” said Emma. “Apprenticeship in Paris, meeting Miss Tudor and Mr. Goldwasser, and of course, the very, very best, getting engaged to Edmond! And now we are going to Hollywood! I cannot express my feelings.”

“This trip will be extremely important for both you and Edmond,” Noel said seriously. “Obviously, working on one of Mr. Goldwasser’s films is going to make Edmond’s name. And as for you, I think Miss Tudor is very fond of you, and her help will be invaluable to your career. That is, if you decide to have one. You might choose to devote all your time to your future family.”

“I would like to try my hand at doing both,” said Emma thoughtfully. “I think it will be possible, since Edmond and I are going to work together. Look at my cousins Aubrey and Jessica. They manage very well, having marvellous joint careers and taking excellent care of their children; Edmond and I should at least try for that. Of course, if I find it impossible, my future family will always come first... And yes, Miss Tudor’s help will be very important, and I am so proud of the fact that she likes me. She is an extraordinary person.” She said that in a reverent tone, since she hero-worshipped Glamora ever since she saw the album with the magnificent costumes.

“Indeed,” said Noel politely. He did not like Glamora Tudor, but of course he was not going to be so rude as to say it to Emma. “But Emma, while I am very happy to have you and Edmond here, why didn’t you stay in London with the Clovers and go to the airport on your own?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? Sarah Siddons is measling. So they sent little Harry to his grandmother, with Nurse, and Miss M. is taking care of Sarah Siddons. And what with the last moment rehearsals, and preparations for the new play, we thought Cousin Jessica was just too busy to put up with us. Besides, Mr. Goldwasser said that we cannot be in a house where anyone was sick, even if we both had had the measles.”

Noel smiled. “And while Mr. Goldwasser is always extremely pleasant and polite, when he lays down the law, one obeys his commands, I believe. He has a very forceful personality.”

“Well...” said Emma, loyalty to Mr. Goldwasser preventing her from admitting that Noel was right, but as she could not

really deny the accusation, which was entirely true, it amused Noel a great deal.

Lydia came in, followed by Edmond, and started to pour out the tea when Palmer suddenly opened the door, announced, "Mr. Alcott!" and retreated. A little surprised, as she did not expect him, Lydia of course invited him to join them and have some tea. Mr. Alcott sat down, and started toying with the cake and toast in a distracted way. He was quiet and subdued, and despite his lamp-acquired tan, looked rather haggard. Edmond immediately realized that something was bothering Mr. Alcott a great deal. He hoped it was not his calf-love of Glamora, but then it might be worse; he might be losing his nerve with all the excitement. Edmond had always suspected that Mr. Alcott's character was not very strong. "All right, Alcott," he said firmly. "What is it?"

"Ah, well," said Mr. Alcott weakly. "Lady Merton, would it be very rude of me to ask if you have a little orange juice? I need some strengthening, I am afraid."

"I will go and check," said Emma. This request for orange juice sounded serious. They all knew how important orange juice was to Mr. Alcott, who needed it at difficult moments that would drive other men to request a stronger drink. The other three sat uncomfortably silent, looking at Mr. Alcott, until Emma came back with a pitcher, and gave Mr. Alcott a full glass.

"Well?" said Noel after Mr. Alcott drank the glass in one huge gulp. He looked considerably better, the colour coming back to his face, and Emma poured him a second glass, which he started sipping with more restraint.

"Mr. Goldwasser cast me in *Dance We Shall*," said Mr. Alcott flatly.

"My goodness!" said Lydia. "How exciting!"

"You mean, how terrifying, Lady Merton," said Mr. Alcott miserably.

"Are you mad? That is what you have always wanted. This film will make you a huge star!" said Edmond. "Why, three films with Miss Tudor, including this giant musical!"

“Well, yes, of course, but I am scared to death,” said Mr. Alcott. “It’s not as if I can drink spiked orange juice every day... how can I do it?”

“But you are a terrific dancer,” said Edmond. “What is the problem?”

“Singing is part of the problem. I never took a single singing lesson in my life. But it’s not just that. It’s Miss Tudor. She doesn’t like me the way she likes you, Keith, and I feel so awkward about it. That is why I came here. I needed to speak to you and ask your advice.”

“So you are still mooning after her?” asked Edmond. “I just don’t understand you. Honestly, when you have this thoroughly attractive young friend, so charming, pretty, and intelligent, how can you waste your life on a married, middle-aged woman?”

“Attractive young friend? Who? Oh, I see. You must mean Maisie Robinson. But Maise and I are just buddies.”

“Oh, come now,” said Lydia. “It’s up to you to change that, if you feel like it. Soon you will be a big star, and everyone will say how handsome you are. Even a level-headed young woman like Miss Robinson is bound to pay attention and start to think about you in a different way, if you would just make the slightest effort. But even if you don’t like her in that way, Edmond is right; you must stop this mad attraction to Glamora Tudor. It will make your life into a misery, you know. It is not worth it.”

“Listen to me, my boy,” said Noel. “I know these things. Flirting with and enjoying the company of a charming lady is one thing. Thinking about her day and night is another. It’s not good for you, and it’s not good for your career. As for the singing, I trust Mr. Goldwasser to set you up with a teacher straight away.”

“He did. I am supposed to meet her as soon as we get to Hollywood. What if she is strict, like Miss Brinton? She will be so intimidating.”

“Look, Alcott, you have to stop fretting about everything so much,” said Edmond sternly. “You have not even met the teacher, and already you are afraid of her. Look at me. I am going to do something rather daunting myself, standing in for

Aubrey Clover. Can you imagine doing *that*? Standing in for the best playwright in England? But I refuse to be intimidated by it. One day at a time, I say.”

“But you are different, Keith. You are, how shall I put it...”

“Stolid?” asked Edmond, grinning.

“Oh, no, Keith! I would never say such a thing about you. You have always been such a pal.”

“But I am stolid. It’s the nature of the Englishman, stiff upper lip and all that.”

“But I thought Americans were strong and silent,” said Lydia, smiling.

“Nah,” said Mr. Alcott. “It’s all pretence. Has something to do with John Wayne’s films, the solitary cowboy thing and all that. Truth is, we are rather nervous people. Think about how quickly we shoot people in these same Westerns! But you are right and I will do my best. Maisie said she will help me out. She will be in Hollywood, as you know, working with Mrs. Rivers on the sequel. And you will help me too, right, Keith? Between the two of you, I will survive this.”

“But what about Miss Tudor? Are you or are you not still in love with her?” asked Edmond.

“I don’t think so, Keith. Her being married makes a difference. I still think she is a goddess, the most wonderful woman on earth, of course, but really, it’s just respect and admiration. Naturally I wish that she liked me better, that she felt about me the way she feels about you.”

“She might now, Alcott. What she did not like was your mooning after her,” said Edmond. Noel was impressed with the young man’s insight. “Just so,” he said, considering. “I have a feeling, Alcott, that once you stop persecuting poor Miss Tudor with your unwelcome adoration, she and you will become great friends.”

“Really, that is all I want, Sir Noel. I just need to know she does not resent me for not being Keith. The way she took to Keith, it was truly amazing... Well, I should leave you and let Miss Lover and Keith get ready for the trip.” For Mr. Alcott suddenly realized that he was not necessarily the only person in

the world with troubles, plans, and obligations. “So thanks awfully, everyone. My, but this orange juice bucked me up like anything. Did you spike it, Keith?” and his face became radiantly handsome again as he smiled at the company and left.

“This boy will break many hearts,” said Lydia.

“Only when he realizes how attractive he is,” said Noel. “He has no clue to it yet. I do wonder what it will do to his character when the ladies start to show their appreciation. Too much adulation may do much damage to someone like Alcott, who is very nice but not very strong.”

“He is in love with Maisie Robinson,” said Emma. “I am pretty sure of it. But he does not know it, since he imagined himself in love with Miss Tudor for so long.”

“And if heaps of women throw themselves at him after *Send Me No Lilies* is released, not to mention *Dance We Shall*, he may never know that he cares for her,” said Lydia. “And since she would be perfect for him, with her strong character and down-to-earth personality, that would be a great pity.”

Chapter Two

The huge white car rolled along merrily on its way to Heathrow Airport. Mr. Goldwasser, Miss Tudor, who we are still not quite used to calling Mrs. Goldwasser but we promise to try, Mrs. Rivers, Emma, Edmond, Maisie, and Mr. Alcott fitted in quite nicely. The chauffeur would later take it back to Norton Hall, and wait with it until the crew returned to film the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies* which was still unnamed, to Maisie's chagrin; she simply could not think of a proper name for it yet. "And of course, Sir," the chauffeur said to Mr. Goldwasser, who was not in the least interested, "I will take her out on the road every other day, to keep her in good condition. It stands to reason she will need some exercise, a sweet little car she is, and I will give her a good polish with my special cloths and wash leather every time, so she won't be making us ashamed of her."

Fortunately, Mr. Goldwasser was by then used to the fact that the English lower classes often referred to their cars as if they were females, and therefore did not think that his chauffeur had lost his mind. He was even able to encourage the man by telling him to spare no effort to keep her happy, and followed up with some money that changed hands very comfortably. And so they rode on, each with his or her own feelings about flying over the vast ocean, while the rest of the crew, taking only some of the equipment, were about to board a ship in a week or so.

"Well, well," said Mr. Goldwasser to no one in particular. "So now I understand what happened." He was reading something that looked like a wire, but it was so long that most people would not recognize it as such.

"What is it?" asked Glamora.

"I got this wire just before we left Norton Hall and had no time to look at it until now," said Mr. Goldwasser, looking at her over his spectacles which as usual were riding half down his nose. "It's from Joe Mammoth. He finally explains why he had

to change the dates for the filming so abruptly. It's the song-and-dance man."

"Who did you settle on?" asked Maisie curiously.

"We wanted Dennis Stonor. His large-scale choreographed pieces have no match, and *Dance We Shall* would be just perfect for him. He agreed to take it on, but only if we could fit his schedule, since he is very much in demand and is always extremely busy. This explains everything, I should say, and it's worth it. Stonor is one of a kind."

"Mr. Goldwasser, do you know he is a personal friend of my cousin Aubrey?" asked Emma.

"How about that," said Mr. Goldwasser. "What a small world. I knew he was British, of course, even though he has been working in America for decades. But I had no idea he was Mr. Clover's friend."

"More than just a casual friend," said Edmond, who knew every line in every play that Aubrey Clover wrote, directed, produced, or played in. "They collaborated on a play when Miss Dean was too far into her pregnancy to act."

"He is extremely talented," said Mrs. Rivers enthusiastically. "I never met him, but I have heard so much about him from the late Lord Bond. You might know, Mr. Keith, that Lord Bond backed Mr. Stonor's first ballet, and after that Mr. Stonor went from one success to another."

"One more Bassetshire connection and I will begin to believe in the supernatural," said Mr. Goldwasser irritably before Edmond had a chance to answer.

"Yes, it does seem almost impossible," said Glamora pensively, looking at her fingernails; she was not sure she liked the new colour Miss Dahlia had talked her into, a pale mauve that had no personality at all.

"It was *Meant*," said Maisie reverently, and as no one could find an answer to such a statement, the conversation lagged and everyone settled in their seats and looked at the passing scenery, which was really rather beautiful, with varying degrees of boredom.

And this is the right time for a slight divagation, regarding travel. Indeed, as our loyal readers know, we always try to stay close to our beloved Bassetshire. We debated whether perhaps we should let Mr. Goldwasser, Glamora, and Mr. Alcott go to Hollywood for the film, and stay with the rest of our friends in Bassetshire, waiting for their return. They could be assisting Lady Norton in the design of her cactus house and following Maisie and Mrs. Rivers in their attempts to create the sequel. But after serious deliberation we decided that a short foray into the magical land where so many dreams are created, not to mention meeting Denis Stonor, whom we like, on his chosen grounds, would be more interesting to our readers than Lady Norton's horticultural obsessions. Besides, in Hollywood the sun is more likely to shine, while in Bassetshire it would undoubtedly rain at this time of year, and that decided the issue. We sincerely hope our readers will enjoy the trip.

"This is a fairy tale," said Emma to Maisie, who was standing next to her, cool and experienced. "It can't be true." She was looking at the aeroplanes, standing all in a row, shining and gleaming and perfectly clean; they were so bright she had to shade her eyes with her hand. Maisie laughed. "This is our plane," she said, pointing at a monster that looked a like a great whale. Pan American Clipper service gave only the best, of course, and Emma stared at the efficient little luggage carts that moved quickly and most efficiently toward the plane with the last bits of luggage. About seventy passengers assembled for their walk to the plane just as the crew rolled the staircase into place. Everyone was elegantly dressed. Even two young girls, aged around nine and six, who stood waiting patiently and politely with their very beautiful mother, wore well-cut little coats, and sported lady-like white gloves and patent leather Mary Janes. Standing below the tall rolling stairway, Emma looked at Miss Tudor's high heels, and worried about their suitability for such a climb, but she should not have been concerned. As usual, Glamora ignored the peril and went up the stairs with complete ease and comfort. A few beautiful stewardesses, wearing

perfectly lovely uniforms that emphasized their tiny waists and petite figures, not to mention the jaunty hats that were tilted over their eyes and made them sparkle, welcomed the passengers aboard. They could have been sisters, they looked so much alike, thought Emma as she looked at them with frank admiration. Noticing how impressed Emma was with the stewardesses, Maisie said, “Would you believe that these beauties are registered nurses, and that they do the gourmet cooking on board as well? There is no end to these girls’ talents... No wonder they all marry rich passengers or these dashing pilots.”

“And speaking of the pilots, look at this one,” whispered Emma. “Quite good looking, is he not?” The captain was standing next to cockpit, ready to greet his passengers.

“Why, Captain Jordan!” said Glamora. “How delightful to fly with you again.”

“I am very happy to see you, Mrs. Goldwasser,” said the captain. He maintained a completely serious poker face, but could not hide the smile in his blue eyes. Glamora laughed, and Mr. Goldwasser asked, shaking hands with the captain, “So it’s known already by the general public?”

The captain relaxed his attitude and broke into a charming crooked smile, revealing the most beautiful, even, white teeth. “All over the United States, sir, ma’am” he said in a distinctly Southern accent. “The headlines appeared in every blessed newspaper. Things like, ‘Who is the mysterious Mrs. Goldwasser?’ ‘Our Glamora is a married lady!’ and the best one, ‘The Woman Who Cannot Love Has Loved For Over Twenty Years.’ It’s all quite amusing...”

“Well, well,” said Glamora. “As long as they are enjoying it.” They turned to go and the captain said, “Of course it’s all in good fun, Miss Tudor.” Glamora, already walking away, turned and said, “Mrs. Goldwasser, darling...” and gave the captain that special Glamora Tudor glance that involved a very complicated operation. Our intelligent reader must visualize how Glamora’s head had to be turned over the right shoulder, since it was the left hand that held on to Mr. Goldwasser’s arm. The head also had to be slightly lowered, and the eyes looked sideways and up so she

could gaze through her eyelashes and meet the captain's eye at just the right angle. It all took but a second, unlike our attempt to describe it, since as we all know, Glamora was a master of the trade.

"Now, now, behave yourself," said Mr. Goldwasser, laughing. "You must learn to act like a married woman..." And to the captain he said, "She will vamp them when she is ninety, you know. What a woman, I always say."

"We won't have her any other way," said the captain loyally. "We love our Miss Tudor. I am so glad to take you all back to America."

To an inexperienced traveller, the inside of the flying palace was even more amazing than the outside, and Emma stared at the elegant compartments, each seating up to eight passengers. The comfortable seats were placed next to picture windows through which Emma hoped to observe every second of the take-off, and the travellers put their overnight bags under them in the ample storage space, since these seats would convert, at night, to the perfect Pullman-style berths, each wider than a twin bed, and extremely comfortable. Each seat had its own window, a ventilator, a reading light, and a small removable table. The stewardesses hovered around them, ready to help; one pointed out a substantial table whose purpose was playing cards or other games, and told the passengers that should they require it, a portable typewriter was always at their disposal. Mrs. Rivers brightened as she heard that, thinking that perhaps she could catch up with her Work before retiring.

The travellers settled themselves in their seats and awaited take-off with various degrees of apprehension. The veterans, like Mr. Goldwasser and Glamora, and to some extent, Mrs. Rivers, gave it no thought at all. On the other side of the spectrum, Mr. Alcott seemed very uneasy. Emma was so excited that she forgot to be afraid, and Edmond, who was rarely shaken by anything, hoped privately that they would soon be served something good to eat or drink. Maisie, sitting next to Mr. Alcott, said quietly, "Don't fret, Nes. You have done it before on your way to England; you can do it again."

“I know, Maisie. What can I say, flying frightens me a bit,” said Mr. Alcott, who was extremely pale. “But really, it’s only the take-off. I am okay after that.”

“We’ll soon get you some orange juice, and all will be well,” said Maisie.

The aeroplane roared like a demented elephant, and started its run. Mr. Alcott held on to his seat with both hands, whose knuckles were white with the pressure. Maisie put her hand on his reassuringly, and he looked at her gratefully. No one else noticed. Mrs. Rivers, whose love of travel included flying, was chatting with Miss Tudor, and Mr. Goldwasser, completely oblivious to his surroundings, read an American newspaper. Emma was almost glued to the windowpane, trying not to miss anything. With a shrill scream the aeroplane went up on the diagonal, and after a while straightened up and went on its journey to New York.

“If Palmer could see me now,” said Emma to Edmond.

“Palmer? Do you mean Lydia’s Palmer? Why on earth?”

“She is expecting Old Nick is the pilot, and we are heading toward Sodom and Gomorrah,” said Emma, laughing, and told him Palmer’s dire views of journeys of any kind. Edmond laughed. “I am rather enjoying it,” he said and turned to see how Mr. Alcott and Maisie were doing. “I am fine now,” Mr. Alcott said. “I can wait for my orange juice until they serve lunch.” Maisie patted his hand and stopped worrying about him, allowing her mind to return to the annoying problem of naming the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*. *The Dance of Hearts*? No, so boring. *Tango, My Love*? Too awful. I can’t understand it, she thought irritably. I always find these names so easily, why am I having so much trouble here? She closed her eyes and tried to make a mental list of all the romantic titles she liked best, as an inspiration.

A half-hour or so after take-off, Emma managed to unglue herself from the window and concentrate on her favourite pursuit, looking at clothes. There was much to look at, but naturally she started with Glamora, who had taken off her light coat and appeared in a magnificent dress of chequered black and

white pattern with a cinched waist encircled by a black patent-leather belt, three-quarter sleeves with turned-up large cuffs, and a bow at the neck. On her lapel she wore the latest style brooch of bright red wooden cherries with dark green stems and leaves made from a substance that defied identification but looked lovely. As she removed her straw hat which had a black, short chiffon scarf tied around the brim, her hair glowed softly. It was no longer the bright red she needed as Lady Aurora Fitz-Gardner, but her own natural dark auburn which made her white skin and violet eyes simply gleam. After acknowledging and appreciating such beauty, Emma turned to see the other passengers. While no one could match Glamora, the other passengers were nevertheless beautifully dressed. She suddenly noticed the two little girls whom she had seen at the airport. They were standing up, whispering to each other and giggling very quietly. Their mother, looking extremely beautiful in a well-fitting navy blue suit that showed her perfect figure to advantage, got up and moved toward the group.

“Please excuse me,” she said politely, “I am Mrs. Wayne. My little girls are in awe of the fact that they are wearing the same jewellery as the lovely lady, as they refer to you, Miss Tudor. They want so much to meet you. They have not yet seen your movies, of course, they are much too young, but they know you from the magazines they sometimes like to look at.”

Miss Tudor looked up, smiling, at the pretty mother. “Of course!” She said. “Let me see, I must have some pictures here I could sign for them... Come over, little girls!” She rummaged in her large black leather bag and fished out two pictures of herself in Egyptian outfits, not necessarily historically correct, but very suitable for the little girls’ lively imagination.

The girls came over shyly, and indeed, each wore a bunch of red cherries on the white collars of their pink dresses.

“What pretty girls,” said Miss Tudor. “Indeed, we are wearing the same brooches! Are we not fashionable, all three of us? And you look as if you could be one of the stewardesses, Mrs. Wayne, in this lovely navy blue suit which I must say I admire.”

“Thank you! What an honour to hear this from Miss Tudor!” said the young mother, smiling. “And to tell the truth, indeed I was a stewardess years ago, on American Airlines. And then I went and married one of the pilots!” Maisie and Emma laughed, and Mrs. Wayne looked at them, surprised. “On boarding the aeroplane, I told this young lady how many of you married pilots,” said Maisie by way of explanation. “Not to mention rich passengers... It is a glamorous profession.”

“Quite demanding, though,” said the young mother thoughtfully. “What with the nursing school, and cooking school, and having to be the exact height and weight specified by the airlines, and having our pictures taken endlessly for promotions, and the elaborate make-up every day to hide my freckles, done by Twentieth Century-Fox, believe it or not. Running our farm in Arkansas, which is what I do now, seems an easy life by comparison... but all the same I enjoyed it. It paid well and you met such nice people.”

“Are all pilots as handsome as ours?” asked Maisie.

“Yes indeed,” said Mrs. Wayne. “I don’t remember ever seeing a pilot who was not attractive.” And from her purse she pulled out the picture of her husband in full uniform, an incredibly handsome man and very like their own pilot. “That’s Daddy!” said the two little girls proudly, in unison.

“What a life,” said Maisie and sighed. “I am in the wrong profession. I should have tried to be a stewardess.”

“In my time they would not have accepted you, despite your being so attractive,” said Mrs. Wayne, laughing. “Would you believe you would have been considered too tall? You had to be under five feet four inches, and never weigh over a hundred and five pounds; I believe you must be around five-seven or -eight. I am not sure what the regulations are today, though.” Maisie laughed and admitted to her elegant height.

“And what are your names, little girls?” asked Glamora. “I want to write them on the pictures.”

“I am Patricia,” said the nine-year-old.

“And I am Mim,” said the six-year-old.

“I call her –“ Patricia started to say but was firmly interrupted by her mother. “No one needs to know how impertinent you can be, Patricia,” said the mother. “You are not allowed to call names or to tease.” Little Mim seemed gratified but Patricia did not appear to be too upset by the rebuke. She flashed a big smile at Emma, whom she immediately recognized as the not-quite-grown-up-yet and therefore a fellow conspirator. “I’ll tell you later,” she whispered. Her mother gave her a stern look and she subsided.

The travellers settled comfortably to their occupations, looking for their books, or scripts, or needlework, as their tastes commanded, none of them wishing to play cards at the moment. Glamora produced a piece of knitting from an ornate bag. “Look, Emma,” she said, leaning forward to show the handiwork to her young friend. “Merry taught me how to knit. Isn’t it fun? We can design some beautiful sweaters together...”

“I adore knitting,” said Emma. “Let me see. My goodness, Miss Tudor, you are good! This stitch is spectacular. Are you sure you are just a beginner?”

“Oh, yes, Merry taught me just a few weeks ago, and I made a scarf. Then, she bought this gorgeous soft violet wool as my going-away gift and said it would match my eyes. The knitting is simple, though. I mastered the stitch, which is truly beautiful, I thought, but I haven’t learned how to increase or decrease, so I am making a straight shawl, but if you will show me how to increase and decrease, the next piece will be a gorgeous sweater.”

“Of course I will,” said Emma. “I wish I had brought some knitting with me, too. Such a good idea for our long flight.”

“Plenty more,” said Glamora, and produced a second bag with more soft wool, apple green this time, and the appropriate knitting needles. “All yours, love.”

“How nice!” said Emma, delighted. “I will make a little stole, such a nice colour for it, and then we will move into the sweater designs.” She started casting on with such speed and expertise that Glamora smiled with appreciation.

Lunch was served in style. The group stepped into a dining room, worthy of the Orient Express with its beautifully laid tables. The linen was thin and sparkling white, with a delicate coloured frame and the initials of Pan American printed on it. The china was white, also edged in colour, and with the logo of the airline on top of it. The cutlery was real silver, beautifully polished. The light and elegant lunch was as good as any meal served by a Continental restaurant, cooked to perfection and beautifully presented. Mr. Alcott, of course, had his orange juice, but the selection of wines was quite varied. They had a very pleasant meal, and then returned to a restful afternoon, for more gazing out of the picture windows at the blue sky with fluffy white clouds, reading, knitting, and relaxing, until it was time to freshen up for dinner. The ladies' well-appointed dressing room offered all the necessary amenities, and everyone felt ready for dinner even though they were not required to change into an evening dress. The tables were even more elaborate than lunch, and the food just as marvellous.

"I simply cannot believe the luxury these airlines supply," said Emma.

"It won't last," said Mr. Goldwasser, and drank some water.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Rivers. "What do you mean, Mr. Goldwasser? Surely more and more people fly every day, and this business will grow."

"That's just it, Mrs. Rivers," said Mr. Goldwasser. "More and more people are to be accommodated. I predict that in a few years there will be a first-class and a second-class flying arrangements, and slowly the service will erode. The demand will grow nonetheless, so the airlines will stop being so generous. And those unlucky second-class travellers will not have silver and linen and crystal wine glasses... Nor will they sleep in Pullman style, but sit on some narrow benches or seats so more and more people could be fitted, something like a bus, I imagine. Mark my word, Mrs. Rivers. By the time the fifties close and the sixties start, quite a lot of elegance is going to disappear from this world, just as the changes took over after the War. But let's not think about such depressing things! For the

moment, life is still a lot of fun.” He refilled the wine glasses all around and smiled benevolently at the company, but his intelligent eyes were troubled. “Sometimes I think Jake knows a bit too much for his own good,” said Glamora rather seriously. “Being a genius is not always pleasant.” Everyone laughed and thought no more about the unpleasant future.

Since the flight from London to New York would take twenty-three hours, they expected to have a normal night’s sleep. The ladies arranged themselves in one compartment, the gentlemen in another. Glamora and Mr. Goldwasser, who originally planned to stay in the deluxe suite, graciously gave way when they were told earlier that a honeymooning couple related to the royal house of a small principality in Europe was going to be on the plane, and so the group remained together. One by one the little reading lights were turned off, and everyone slept well, lulled by the movement and soft sounds produced by the plane. The night passed peacefully.

They woke up to bright sunshine and coffee was brought in on silver trays by the cheerful stewardess. Vanity tables were attached to each berth, to help as the ladies prepared for the day. When dressed, ready, and having had their breakfast, the passengers expected to reach New York in a couple of hours, perfectly on time. The aeroplane was to land in the water of the “Marine Terminal,” and there they would change to American Airlines that would take them to California. And since the flight from New York to California was achieved in the same luxurious and pleasant style on American Airlines, which was just as accommodating and helpful as Pan American, we will not weary our readers with more descriptions, since this modest work does not presume to be a learned treatise about aviation, a most serious subject on which we know nothing at all.

Chapter Three

“I have invited a few people to join us,” said Miss Tudor, pouring drinks for Mrs. Rivers, Emma, and Edmond; the three of them were staying in Mr. Goldwasser’s house for the duration of their visit. They sat in the magnificent glassed winter garden which could have been the pride of any European royal castle, the afternoon had the glow of a Los Angeles fall, and Emma could not shake the feeling that it was all a fairy tale. “I just love the clover-shaped pool,” she said pensively and completely out of context.

Mr. Goldwasser laughed. “Would you believe, this is the second ugliest house in Hollywood,” he said proudly. “The winner in the ugliness contest belongs to a great lady; she won because she had the courage to paint it pink. She also created a heart-shaped pink swimming pool to go with it, and planted pink roses all around it. Ghastly.”

“But Jake’s house is so comfortable,” said Miss Tudor. “We were debating which house to live in, Jake’s or mine, which is rather pretty and is much smaller. But it’s not half as comfortable as this one, so we are planning to sell my house at some point, but we don’t have time for that now; we will just keep it for a while, maybe get a tenant... I rather like living in this monster. But here are Maisie and Nes!” and she gave each a hug and a drink. Mr. Alcott seemed extremely gratified by the attention, but it was clear that he was no longer in love, a fact that gave Glamora great pleasure.

“And here is another guest,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Come right in, Rush. Everyone, in case you don’t recognize this Adonis-like face, please meet Mr. Rushmore Yukon, Rush to his friends.” Emma stared at the newcomer. She had never seen anyone as handsome as this tall, dark young man with his magnificent physique and classical features. His black hair was flawless, his suit impeccable, his unbelievable face slightly tanned. Not a Greek god, since she had always imagined they were blond, but certainly something superhuman. Even Edmond

and Mr. Alcott, two very handsome men, paled in his presence. But Mr. Yukon did not seem to be in the least self-conscious and carried his extreme beauty with ease. He shook hands all around, accepted a tall drink, and sank gratefully into a comfortable chair, stretching his long legs in front of him – which took quite a lot of space.

“I have heard a lot about you, Mr. Yukon,” said Mr. Alcott. “And I saw your latest movie. You know, he is fresh out of a tremendous success with Worldwide Studios, a movie called *The Resplendent Fascination*. It was wonderful, and you really gave quite a performance.”

“Indeed,” said Maisie. “I saw it too. Not only did you act very well, but you looked like a dreamboat in this movie, Mr. Yukon. Not that you ever look less than that, come to think of it.”

“It had a great script, a wonderful director, a magnificent leading lady, and a superb supporting cast,” said Mr. Yukon modestly. “What are looks? Big deal. When actors are good-looking, it gets them their bread and butter for a while, and then the looks vanish. In a few short years I will look like my father – and he is no beauty; skinny, bald and wrinkled... And anyway, these two here are at least as good-looking as I will ever be.” And he gave Edmond and Mr. Alcott an appreciative look which surprised Emma but no one else, and for some reason she remembered her dear friend Gaston from France, the one she ran around the fashion houses with, and who did not look like Mr. Yukon at all but something brought him to mind.

“You have a very interesting name,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I would have dearly loved to give it to one of my heroes.”

“It’s not my name, it’s a fabrication,” said Mr. Yukon. “They rarely allow us to keep our own, normal names. I wish they left me alone. Rush Yukon, honestly. Embarrassing. Humiliating. Horribly affected.”

“Not half as bad as Hank Granite,” said Edmond with feeling, looking malevolently at his host who had given him the name before casting him in *Fever in Peru*.

“There is a strong similarity between these two names,” said Mr. Yukon thoughtfully. “A strange coincidence, don’t you think?”

“No coincidence at all,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “It’s all about masculinity and strength. Granite, a stone. Mount Rushmore, full of boulders. Yukon, a powerful river. Hank, one syllable, brings to mind the strong and silent type. It’s all deliberate and thought-out, creating an image in the female mind.”

“I think the male mind as well,” said Mr. Yukon thoughtfully. “They can aspire to be like that and they love the fantasy. I guess it’s the price we have to pay for fame...”

Suddenly Miss Tudor said, “And here comes Miss Skull.” Emma jumped to her feet involuntarily. There was only one Miss Skull in the world, as far as Emma was concerned. Miss Odette Skull, the legendary designer, the doyenne of clothes, the creative genius behind so many costumes. Could that be her? Yes, it could, and Emma, trembling all over, soon shook hands with her idol, who was very kind to the awe-struck girl and quite happy to tell her the inside stories of Hollywood costumes. Emma forgot everyone else, including her own beloved affianced and the gorgeous Mr. Yukon, and listened with rapt expression, every so often asking a most intelligent question, which Miss Skull answered carefully and in detail.

When a short lull in the conversation between them occurred, though, Rush Yukon turned to Emma and said, “I was listening; you seem to know a great deal about clothes.”

“I am studying fashion in Paris,” said Emma proudly.

“I love clothes,” said Mr. Yukon. “And while I am totally uneducated, this is a subject I know something about.”

“You are very well dressed,” said Emma, looking at his faultless suit and perfect accessories. “But I would have never thought you would be interested in such things.”

“But I am,” said Mr. Yukon, smiling, “and I bet I know a few interesting and out-of-the-way places I could show you, places that even our incomparable Miss Skull never heard about. I must take you to these establishments sometime.”

Emma was a bit taken aback, since she was not sure if it was appropriate for an engaged young lady to run around with a magnificent creature like Mr. Yukon, but Edmond, noticing her hesitation, came to the rescue. "Great idea, Mr. Yukon," he said. "Emma can learn a lot from you, I am sure."

Mr. Yukon flashed a smile that would have dazzled Helen of Troy and the lovely Iseult (whose name we refuse to spell Isolde), notwithstanding Paris and Tristan, respectively, and said "But you must call me Rush. I know how formal you Britons are, but here you are in America and we are much quicker to assume a first-name basis. When in Rome, you know..."

"Very well, Rush, then," said Emma, who felt surprisingly comfortable with this young man despite his fame and fortune. "And thanks for the invitation. I am looking forward to our excursion."

At that moment, the housemaid, who had not bothered to announce any of the previous guests, entered the winter garden and said formally, "The General and Mrs. Lewis," and vanished. Mrs. Lewis, the *ci-devant* Miss Brinton, entered with a gentleman who was so obviously military that his nice civilian suit seemed entirely out of place.

"General Lewis, how elegant you look in your civilians," remarked Glamora.

"Thank you, Miss Tudor. I feel like a monkey in them, to be quite honest, but what can I do? I must accept retirement in good spirit. Besides, would Meg have married me if I were still in the military and running all over the world, trying to save all these fake new nations from themselves? I am not at all sure about it. So all is well." And he smiled most affectionately at his wife.

"I have some good news for you, Mr. Goldwasser," said Mrs. Lewis. "The gentleman from the horticultural society in Arizona has answered my letter. Not only does he have the seeds of this disgusting cactus Lady Norton set her heart on, but he will deliver them in person, since he is going for a full year to England, to teach in Kensington Royal Gardens."

"How wonderful," said Mr. Goldwasser. "Mrs. Lewis, I am happy to say you have not allowed married life to cause a change

in your style and your efficiency. Would you kindly write to Lady Norton?"

"I already have, Mr. Goldwasser. Naturally I had to do so since I knew it would make her very happy. But there was something else I wanted to bring up. Mr. Alcott must think of a good place to live. Mr. Alcott, when the interviews and the rest of the publicity begin, you can't remain in your small apartment."

"You mean I need a real house?" asked Mr. Alcott, obviously panicking. "I know nothing about getting houses, or taking care of houses, for that matter."

"I will help you to look for a house," said Mrs. Lewis briskly. "You need a small, but elegantly appointed house; you are a star, Mr. Alcott, and you might as well get used to it. And I will also arrange for staff, probably a housemaid, a cook, and a valet."

"But all this would cost a great deal," said Mr. Alcott timidly, as usual looking at Maisie for support. "What if I fail miserably and then be stuck with all these expenses?" The whole group started laughing.

"The likelihood of failing is very low right now," said Rush. "Once the ball is rolling. Judging from experience and observation, you have at least ten years to be a successful heart-throb, and make a great deal of money. You must put some money aside, and then, if and when you fade, you will have enough to start a business. Many actors invest in restaurants, things like that, so when the time comes, they are ready to resume normal life, away from this madhouse. Believe me, there is life after Hollywood, and I, for one, won't regret it at all."

"Why not stay in my house for the time being, Nes?" asked Glamora. "It is the perfect size for a single man, it is elegant and well furnished, and it is free of charge. Just look after the house until we decide what to do with it."

"Miss Tudor, er, Mrs. Goldwasser, what an honour..." stammered Mr. Alcott. "I will consider it a sacred duty and a pleasure and..." realizing that he was getting entangled in his own speech, he added, "Thank you so much."

“Excellent idea, Glam,” said Mr. Goldwasser, looking benevolently at his new star who seemed to be cowering under the pressure. “As soon as Alcott is settled, which should not take long, we will arrange for a photo interview. And yes, Mrs. Lewis, he will need staff right away.”

“Indeed. I will take care of everything,” said Mrs. Lewis, with her usual tone of authority that had to be obeyed.

A little later, a man appeared at the door of the winter garden. He was extremely tall and quite thin, and his face had a strong resemblance to a rather sad monkey.

“Denis!” said Glamora. “I am so glad you could make it. I almost gave up on you.”

“I am sorry, I was held up at rehearsal,” said the gentleman. “These dancers can be trying at times.”

“Never mind, allow me to introduce you. Mrs. Rivers, this is the one and only Denis Stonor. And these are Miss Robinson and Mr. Alcott. Of course, you know everyone else.”

“I have heard so much about you from Lord Bond,” said Mr. Rivers. “I am from Barsetshire, too.”

Mr. Stonor looked at her oddly. “You are from Barsetshire, and your name is Mrs. Rivers...” he said pensively, his sad monkey-like face very thoughtful and serious. “Could I hope to find out that you are Mrs. Hermione Rivers, the authoress?”

“Indeed I am,” said Mrs. Rivers, surprised. Deep in her heart, despite all her delusions and pretensions, she knew perfectly well that her readers were mostly women of the not-quite-upper-classes, and she did not expect this famous composer, cosmopolitan, educated, and well-bred, to even know her books existed.

“I read every single book you have ever written,” said Mr. Stonor. Mrs. Rivers was so shocked by this statement that for a few seconds she was speechless, and then all she could say was, “Why?”

“Because they are psychologically penetrating and fascinating,” said Mr. Stonor with great candour. “Some day, if you will allow me, I will go further into it, and perhaps you will do me the honour of explaining some points on which I require

clarification. But for the moment, I must say that the way you grasp and describe the tension between a mature, elegant woman of the world, and a younger man who cannot help being attracted to her, all the while knowing it is a hopeless quest, is masterful. You know the human heart, Mrs. Rivers.” He said that in a low voice, almost a whisper, as if he wanted no one else to hear him. Mrs. Rivers suspected that Mr. Stonor was talking about his own experience, but good manners forbade her to ask any questions. She was burning with curiosity, though, and knew she wanted to pursue this conversation very much.

“Of course, Mr. Stonor,” she said amiably, “I will be happy to discuss my books with you, and do my best to clarify any obscure point.”

“Where are you staying, Mrs. Rivers? May I call on you next week?”

“I am staying right here, with Mr. and Mrs. Goldwasser,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I am sure they will give us permission to use their library one afternoon for our literary discussion, and then undoubtedly invite you to tea.” She turned to Miss Tudor for her consent, but Miss Tudor had not heard their conversation, nor had anyone else. Perhaps it was for the best this way. We certainly think so.

“Thank you, Mrs. Rivers,” said Mr. Stonor, and his face was momentarily illuminated by one of his rare and beautiful smiles, transforming the monkey-like face and making it extremely attractive. “And if I bring a few of your books, would you autograph them for me?”

“I will be honoured,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Do you really have them?”

“Oh, yes, I have been buying them regularly for years, ever since I was in Barchester, staying with my relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Middleton,” said Mr. Stonor. “Someone gave me one of them, and I was entranced. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Rivers, the reason I was so attracted to your books is because they described my own state of mind. But we should not discuss it here. Some day, if you like, I will tell you some more; I am sure I could trust you with my story.”

“I will consider it a sacred trust,” said Mrs. Rivers, who was beginning to feel as if she was placed inside one of her own novels, a most pleasant sensation.

Even though we are now spending some of our time away from our natural milieu, namely Bassetshire, that does not mean we have forgotten our friends there. We must leave the glittering society of our friends in Hollywood for a while, and go to Norton Hall, which, I suspect, may be a great relief for some of our readers. If we may be allowed to divagate for a minute, we would like to thank our loyal readers for putting up with our extravagant trips. We know, of course, that most thinking people would much rather spend time in Bassetshire than in the artificial splendour of Hollywood, or as Palmer would put it, Sodom and Gomorrah, but since we are following the fortunes of such old friends as Mr. Goldwasser, Miss Tudor, Maisie, and Mr. Alcott, we must. After all, that is their natural milieu, and we will never know them very well unless we visit them there. And let us not forget that Emma and Edmond also have great hopes hanging on Hollywood, and we would not like to disappoint them. But we promise not to stay there for too long. So let us see what was taking place in Norton Hall.

Lady Norton was at her private sitting room, but even though she was surrounded by all the reassuring and restful bric-a-brac, pillows, lace doilies, and everything else, and even though the room was very comfortable and had a roaring fire built in the fireplace, she was not relaxing. She sat at her elegant desk, which was piled with blueprints depicting various elevations of the cactus house, which were sent to her by the noted architect, Mr. Middleton, who was going to build it for her. Lady Norton felt rather overwhelmed by these designs, but she knew that if she asked Mr. Middleton to explain them, all she could hear would be a barrage of verbiage that no one could check, let alone understand. Perhaps, she thought, she could find his partner, Mr. Alister Cameron, but even he, though certainly much easier to

get along with, was not who she wanted at that moment. Her thoughts wandered into the past.

Our readers may think that no one could possibly miss the toady, the sycophant, the unbearable Mr. Holt, whom we had met so many years ago when he visited Rushwater with such unhappy results during Martin's seventeenth birthday party. Possibly, no one even remembered him. But at that moment, Lady Norton would have been very happy to see him. Yes, he was an awful little man, but he shared her great love of horticulture, and he would have been so helpful with the cactus house, not to mention taking care of the cactus itself, the wonderful *Echinocactus horizonthalonius var. nicholii* which might turn out to be an extremely temperamental plant. Even his worst enemies, and there were plenty of those, could not deny Mr. Holt's knowledge and deep love of gardening. Well, thought Lady Norton, you cannot bring back the past. How sad.

At this moment the housemaid walked in with a few letters on a silver tray. "Thank you, Carla," said Lady Norton absent-mindedly, and took the letters. Two of them were from America, and as Lady Norton opened the first one, her troubled countenance changed into a smile. It was from Mrs. Lewis, she who was Miss Brinton and who had always met with Lady Norton's approval because of her efficiency and imperious manner, as long as she did not use it against Lady Norton herself. It contained the wonderful news, which we already told our readers, about the availability of the seeds of *Echinocactus horizonthalonius var. nicholii* and the visit from the expert. This news cheered Lady Norton considerably, but the second letter was even better. It was from the horticulture expert himself, and it was everything Lady Norton could wish for, just the right blend of deference to a titled English Lady, combined with the evidence of deep knowledge of his subject. And not only was he looking forward to meeting her, but even had read her books! And he was at her disposal for starting the precious seeds! Lady Norton, in the state of euphoria of one who was about to have a wish magically granted, namely the seeds of the grotesque cactus with help on the way, immediately took out some writing paper

and pen and invited Professor Erich Buckholz-Schuller to stay with her for as long as he wished.

After giving the letter to the butler to take to the post office as early in the morning as possible, she telephoned Mr. Cameron at his home. His wife, the wonderful lady who we all know as Lilian Stonor, née Middleton, answered the call.

“Lady Norton, an unexpected pleasure,” she said. “I imagine you are calling Alister about the greenhouse?”

“Yes,” admitted Lady Norton. “I am sorry to say that about your brother, but you probably know that asking Mr. Middleton for an explanation of the blueprints would be futile.”

“Indeed I do, Lady Norton,” said Mrs. Cameron. “Even I can never understand him. I do wonder what makes him talk so much... but then again, it might be a family curse. I talk too much myself, but I hope in a less overbearing manner.”

“You are never overbearing,” said Lady Norton politely. And she, as an expert on the subject of acting in the most overbearing manner imaginable, probably knew what she was talking about.

“I will call Alister,” said Mrs. Cameron. “And Lady Norton, both Mrs. Middleton and myself are dedicated gardeners. We look forward to seeing the completed greenhouse. Alister tells me it is going to be done on a grand scale, and much of the equipment is coming from America. I do like cacti, you know.”

“As soon as it is up I will invite you to visit it,” said Lady Norton with sudden enthusiasm. “It will not be finished before Mr. Goldwasser and his crew come back to film the sequel to the film, but it should not signify. They are not going to be near it, unless they particularly want to look at it, even though they filmed quite a bit in the greenhouses and plan to do some more. You see, Mrs. Cameron, I am putting the new greenhouse further away, in an area that would take as much advantage of the sun as possible, if this can be said in England. Of course we shall have plenty of artificial light.”

“That will be delightful,” said Mrs. Cameron. “I will tell Mrs. Middleton about your kind offer, she will be very pleased. And now I will go and call Alister.”

“Lady Norton,” said Mr. Cameron pleasantly. “What can I do for you?”

“I would very much like to have the blueprints explained to me, Mr. Cameron,” said Lady Norton. “I would rather talk to you than to your partner, if this is possible.”

“Of course, I will be happy to come over at your convenience,” said Mr. Cameron. “Mr. Middleton does not explain things very well, no matter how long he talks, so it will be best.”

They settled the day of his visit, and Lady Norton, well pleased with her evening’s work, took out an obscure *Who’s Who in American Horticulture* and looked up professor Erich Buckholz-Schuller. She gasped at his credentials. The position he held in Austria until the war, when he was obliged to escape to America, was only equalled by his current position, which was extremely high. And he had published a dozen books and many articles... The gentleman was a star in the horticultural heaven. What an opportunity, thought Lady Norton, and went downstairs to see to the houseplants in the drawing room, her usual evening chore which she would not yield to any servant. Her mind was full of images of the cactus that soon was to grow into monstrous proportions in the new cactus house. And Mr. Holt was sadly forgotten one more time – but he will be remembered again some day.

Chapter Four

Mr. Alcott got out of his car and opened the gate. A stunningly handsome young man, evidently an aspiring actor like most of Hollywood's denizens, no matter what they did to earn a living, was engaged in trimming the hedges, and another one who looked very much like him was mowing the lawn. A truck that stood by made it clear that they were hired by a professional gardening service that was kept after Glamora moved into Mr. Goldwasser's house. The two waved at Mr. Alcott in the friendliest manner, and he waved back and entered the house.

Mr. Alcott put his bags down by the entrance, and walked gingerly into Miss Tudor's empty drawing room. True, he was no longer in love with Miss Tudor, but the feeling of awe remained. To live in the house of one who once was his Goddess was intimidating. He thought he should look around, see where his bedroom was to be, where the kitchen was located, but his nervousness kept him fidgeting in the drawing room. He longed for fresh orange juice, and was annoyed at himself for not stopping on his way to buy some, but it was too late. Obviously, there would not be any fresh foods in a house that was unoccupied, so there was no sense in searching for it in the kitchen. He stood in the middle of the room, trying to muster the courage to explore the house, when suddenly the doorbell rang loudly, startling Mr. Alcott considerably. He went to answer the door, wondering who could be visiting him so soon; Maisie, the most likely visitor, was busy that evening with long meetings, and not too many people knew about his move.

He opened the door, and was surprised to see a total stranger, holding a suitcase and a large grocery bag. Putting the grocery bag down, the man took off his hat, exposing an egg-shaped head. His brown eyes, shining with intelligence, looked respectfully at Mr. Alcott's. It was a look brimming with candour and reliability, even though his face was completely impassive. "Mr Alcott, sir? My name is Shymmering. Mrs.

Lewis advised the Agency to send me over.” This was said with a perfect English accent; Mr. Alcott was wondering if the gentleman was an aspiring actor, too, with perhaps Shakespearian experience, but it seemed a little farfetched.

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Alcott. “You wish to consult me about hiring the staff? I thought Mrs. Lewis handled it.”

“She did, sir. I am a member of the staff that she had engaged,” said the man, with a mixture of pity for Mr. Alcott’s low intelligence and his own desire to help the class he served. “I am happy to announce that I am your new valet, or as we prefer to call the position in England, I am your gentleman’s gentleman.”

“I see,” said Mr. Alcott, eyeing his new employee with suspicion and a little fear. “Do come in, Mr. Shimmering.”

The man walked softly in and closed the door very quietly behind himself. “If I may mention it, sir, while I certainly appreciate your good intention, the etiquette requires that you call me simply Shymmering, without the salutation.”

“I understand,” said Mr. Alcott. “Shimmering it will be from now on. Is it within etiquette to ask you to sit down?”

“Not quite, sir; I shall remain standing at present, but you should sit down by all means as we talk. We do not wish you to be tired out, as we have very busy days ahead of us. And if I may mention another small matter, the name is Shymmering, not Shimmering. As a matter of fact, sir, I have left my previous employment because the gentleman whom I had served insisted on using the wrong spelling when he addressed me, despite my expressed protestations, and even made crude jokes about it. It is beyond belief, I know, but he also made it a point to mention, again and again, that I moved so softly that I seemed to shimmer, and therefore the name fitted me. Naturally I could not put up with such behaviour.”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Alcott, who could not tell the difference between Shimmering and Shymmering if his life depended on it. “How very vulgar of him. I will make a point of pronouncing your name properly.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Shymmering. “That is most gratifying. I am to start my duties immediately, and the cook and housemaid will arrive tomorrow. Even though the Agency is extremely careful, I personally inspected their references and they met with my complete approval.”

“That’s great,” said Mr. Alcott. “Thank you. By the way, I have just arrived and I have no idea where your room is, Shymmering. We must look for it.”

“I have the plan of the house, sir,” said Shymmering, pulling a piece of carefully folded paper from his pocket. “The Agency is most thorough when it gives instructions. Let me see, all the servants’ rooms are on the third floor. You should not be uneasy about the arrangement, sir, as both the housemaid and Cook are persons who have reached the age of discretion, and so am I, of course, so there should be no gossip about our apartments being on the same floor... the butler’s pantry, which I will use for polishing the silver, pressing your clothes, etc., is by the kitchen, and your bedroom, sir, is on the second floor, along three guest bedrooms, and of course bathrooms, dressing rooms, etc.. By the way, sir, I have brought some provisions for tonight – I can do excellent light cooking when Cook is away if I may say so myself – and Mrs. Lewis informed me that you should require plenty of orange juice.”

“You brought orange juice?” asked Mr. Alcott, almost trembling with anticipation at the magic words. “That is brilliant! May I have some right away?”

“I shall serve it to you immediately, sir, if I could just use one of the glasses from the bar... the juice is ice cold.” He quickly polished a large glass with a napkin, put it on a tray, and handed it to his new employer.

Mr. Alcott gulped the orange juice and felt much better. Shymmering looked at him benevolently, much like a cow observing her well-fed and contented calf, and poured another glass in a most understanding manner which felt very soothing to Mr. Alcott’s nervous constitution.

“What a difference a good glass of orange juice can make,” Mr. Alcott remarked. “I feel much stronger.”

“Indeed, sir, I have witnessed the power of orange juice before, while I was in service in England; a number of gentlemen are highly invigorated by it. Some of the chemicals in the fruit of the orange tree must correspond to certain areas in the brains of susceptible individuals. However, I have noticed that this happens only with gentlemen who are strict teetotallers; alcohol undoubtedly inhibits the action of the fruit chemicals.”

“I am a teetotaller, Shymmering; you must be right. Incidentally, what did you mean when you said we had busy days ahead of us?”

“Mrs. Lewis informed me that my first duty is to reorganize your wardrobe, sir. She felt that the Studio did not do justice to your looks and much more must be done. My natural instinct would have been to dress you as a highly refined, soigné English gentleman, as I have done for all my employers. I am sure you know what I mean, sir. Quiet, elegant suits, not too obviously new, elegant ties, never loud, impeccable evening wear suitable for both white and black tie events, plenty of appropriate socks, classic coats and perfect leather shoes would always do. I do not wish to boast, sir, but I have succeeded in improving a number of gentlemen who, not to mince words, needed such assistance. However, when I mentioned the plan to Mrs. Lewis, she warned me that it would not do in the circles in which you are to move. She requested that I dress you like a Hollywood star, with special attention to exciting accessories, particularly hats, neckties, scarves, and ascots. I have, therefore, studied the subject carefully at the best establishments, and I believe I know exactly what her wishes are. When Mrs. Lewis asked me if I were up to such a challenge, I expressed an opinion that it will be a new and interesting experience for me, and I believe I am ready.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Alcott, who felt quite audacious after drinking two big glasses of orange juice; under their bracing influence he thought nothing of the trouble and expense of his new adventure. “Let’s go tomorrow and start on it! I am finally beginning to feel like a movie star! Well, maybe just a little bit... actually, Shymmering, I must confess to you that the whole thing is making me quite jittery. I have a feeling it’s all a hoax and

soon everything will disappear and I will be back in my mud hovel. Though come to think of it, the mud hovel was not too bad, I was secretary to Mr. Goldwasser...”

“I am a student of the Psychology of the Individual,” said Shymmering. “Something that all gentlemen’s gentlemen should aspire to. What you need, sir, is a strengthening of your ego; for reasons that I cannot fathom, your ego is frail... It is strange, since you have the support of the best studio behind you, and if I may mention it, your looks are extremely impressive. I do not know if you have what they refer to as “talent” in Hollywood circles, but it should not matter; most great stars cannot act. I feel strongly that the audience will idolize you, particularly the female population, and that both the studio and yourself will reap the benefits. The new wardrobe would be the first step toward strengthening the ego, since one feels well when one knows that one looks his best, and then we should work on the society you keep. It is essential to mingle with the correct and proper people. We shall soon look into it, and you will be backed up by people who will make you shine; I shall take care to make a list, first of all, of all the appropriate young women who are part of your studio and whose presence would benefit you in various events; you must be seen with the most famous and most beautiful.”

“Would Mr. Goldwasser approve of such a list?” asked Mr. Alcott nervously.

“I will do nothing without his consent, sir. We will consult him on everything. But I would venture to suggest that he has already planned something on these lines; the studios do it routinely, sir. You might have noticed the list of ladies that have been associated with, for example, Mr. Rushmore Yukon. At least twelve young ladies were employed in this capacity since his latest film has been released.”

“I have met him,” said Mr. Alcott. “He never mentioned his publicity techniques, but I am sure he has a knack for it; he was rather helpful to me, and said pretty much the same things you did, about the support of the studios.”

“Indeed, sir, I am pleased to hear of his approbation. Incidentally, sir, your name brings to mind the great

Transcendentalist, Mr. Bronson Alcott. Would you be connected to this illustrious family?"

"Old Bronson was one of my ancestors," said Mr. Alcott.

"That is indeed gratifying, sir. I am extremely fond of the writing of the Transcendentalists, and have studied them for years. As a small child I was introduced to the works of Mr. Bronson's daughter, Louisa May Alcott, and my interest developed as I grew up and progressed to the works of her father and his group; it is remarkable that while many people admire and love her books, they fail to see the strong influence of the Transcendentalist movement on Miss Alcott's philosophy... I congratulate you, sir, on such an eminent family connection. I find serving the scion of such a family a great honour."

"So you think I should read his works?" asked Mr. Alcott timidly.

"Indeed you should, sir. I am sure you will enjoy them, but more importantly, you must mention his name often when meeting certain people. He is highly esteemed by the Intelligentsia in this country. I must procure a handsome copy of some of his works for you, with tooled leather and gold edges to the pages... but of course, not new. I frequent a rare and used bookstore that has many excellent editions, and I will look there. The book must have the look of an object which is much used. You will carry it with you to certain events."

"Indeed, that is a good idea," said Mr. Alcott. "And if I don't understand the writing..."

"This eventuality will not present a problem, sir. I will explain everything as you go along. I have another idea. We will create a small library, including the works of other Transcendentalists; Thoreau's *Walden*, of course, Emerson's essays, etc. It will look very good if you sit in front of the shelf during interviews. The intellectual side of the great star, sir."

"But I don't need to read all of them, do I?" asked Mr. Alcott anxiously.

"No, just Mr. Bronson Alcott's works; I shall prepare a list of quotations for you from the rest of the Transcendentalists group, sir. That will suffice, I believe, considering the level of

intelligence of the reporters who are going to interview you. And now, with your permission, sir, I should prepare a light supper for you. Would a herb omelette appeal to you? With some consommé to start the meal?"

"Immensely," said Mr. Alcott. He settled himself comfortably on one of Miss Tudor's pristine white couches and put his feet on a convenient crimson ottoman. "Thank you, Shymmering." Life seemed a lot easier with Shymmering hanging around one and doing one's thinking for one. Extremely restful. Mr. Alcott was so comfortable that he did not even feel the usual need to call Maisie for moral support.

An hour or so later, almost finished with his excellent supper, Mr. Alcott heard the doorbell ring. He automatically got up to answer it, but caught himself just in time. That would not be etiquette, he knew, and Shymmering would prefer to open it himself. So he sat down again, obeying higher laws. In a minute, Shymmering announced, "Miss Robinson, sir," and Maisie walked in, looking extremely tired and sans lipstick, but quite cheerful. "Hello, Nes! The meeting ended early, and I thought I would drop in and bring some orange juice. But I see you are well looked after."

"How kind of you, Maise," said Mr. Alcott gratefully. "Indeed, while I am always happy to see you, I wish you would not tire yourself doing this after your long day at work. Please sit down. Incidentally, that was Shymmering, my new valet. Or as he calls himself, my gentleman's gentleman. He is going to dress me differently and make me read my esteemed ancestor's books."

"It's about time you read something other than the comics," said Maisie, laughing. Shymmering walked in with coffee and expensive-looking after-dinner mints. "Will you have a cup of coffee, miss?" he asked respectfully.

"Yes indeed," said Maisie. "And some of these luscious candies... Thank you, Shymmering. Mr. Alcott tells me you are about to improve him, dress him up, and make him read books. Your ideas seem highly appropriate to me."

“I am following Mrs. Lewis’s instructions to the best of my ability, miss.”

“Something tells me you have original ideas as well, Shymmering,” said Maisie, who immediately recognized the value of this new employee.

“Thank you, miss. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that I must strengthen Mr. Alcott’s ego by various methods, if it meets with everyone’s approval. A more assertive approach should help during interviews and publicity.”

“A stronger ego will help a great deal,” said Maisie, “as long as he does not become insufferable and too full of self-satisfaction. Incidentally, Shymmering, have we ever met? You look extremely familiar to me.”

“No, miss, not to my knowledge. I have been in America for only three months, with my previous employer whom I have just left. As for Mr. Alcott’s behaviour and attitude, we shall aim at the perfect balance between self-assurance and impeccable manners, miss. I am thinking of modelling his behaviour after Mr. Clark Gable; in films, of course. I hear he is quite different in private.”

“Well, I have complete confidence in your plans and methods, Shymmering,” said Maisie.

“I endeavour to give satisfaction, miss,” said Shymmering, and flickered out of the room, proving that “shimmering” was indeed quite wrong and the mot juste would be “dematerializing.”

“Now where have I seen this man?” said Maisie, astonished by the zephyr-like disappearance of the rather substantial valet, and furling her brow. “I can swear I know him, but it makes no sense, I would have remembered his intelligent eyes and his egg-shaped head if I had met him anywhere at all... Have you noticed, Nes, how his head bulges in the back? I am told this is the sign of a huge brain; if I were you, I would follow his advice to the letter. It will keep me awake, trying to figure out where I have met him...Ah well, one of life’s little mysteries. Cheers, Nes!” and she sipped her coffee. Mr. Alcott, who did not seem to care, or even notice, that his friend and his employee spoke

about him as if he were not present in the room, or were a tiny child, ate one of the superb mints and smiled happily.

And as is our habit, now we must leave Mr. Alcott and Maisie in the capable hands of Shymmering, who for some reason seems rather familiar to us too, though we cannot quite place him, and move back to Norton Hall. Lady Norton was entertaining Mr. Alister Cameron, and felt that finally she understood the plans for the greenhouse perfectly. "It is a beautiful design," she said as he was sipping his tea.

"Mr. Middleton is an extremely talented architect," said Mr. Cameron. "I don't know where he learned so much about creating greenhouses, but there you are. He just soaks up information. I must tell you what happened some years ago. Mr. Middleton wanted to meet an expert on Balkan architecture. Naturally, he dragged Mrs. Middleton and myself with him on the Orient Express, God only knows why."

"But the Orient Express is wonderful," said Lady Norton, surprised.

"It was not that time. And Mrs. Middleton became so exhausted it nearly killed her... well, we survived and reached Prasvoda, where the expert was awaiting our visit."

"So did Mr. Middleton get the information?"

"He did, in his own way. The man could not speak a word of English, and just a few words of French, and Mr. Middleton's French is not good. Since it was summer, Prasvoda was practically empty, and we could not find an interpreter."

"So how did Mr. Middleton acquire the information?" asked Lady Norton. "I suppose I would have requested it in writing and then had it translated. Did he do that?"

"No, that would have been too logical. Instead, Mr. Middleton talked to the man, in English, for three days without stopping to breathe, about the influence of Graeco-Roman civilization in Prasvoda, with asides about the Greek elements in

three or four great poets; I think they were Goethe, Shelley, and Keats, but I may miss someone.”

“And what happened then?” asked Lady Norton.

“We went back home, and Mr. Middleton shut himself in his office and wrote an extremely erudite article about the architecture of the Orthodox Entente, Prasvoda, and other little states, between 1900 and 1936.”

“Then he already knew all that? Why go to Prasvoda, then?”

“But you see, he did not know it before the trip; I am absolutely certain of that. This kind of situation has happened before. No one can understand how Mr. Middleton acquires information. He never lets people get a word edgewise, even if they do know English... as I said, he soaks up the information magically. In many ways he is a genius. If only he did not talk so much, people would realize it much sooner.”

“Indeed,” said Lady Norton. “And now that you have explained everything, let us start with the building. Incidentally, I am delighted that I don’t have to ship everything from America – the fact that Mr. Middleton knows where to acquire the materials in England represents great savings in time and money. The professor will be here in two weeks, and even though the cactus seeds take six weeks to germinate, the sooner I have the greenhouse ready the better.”

“The thing takes six weeks to germinate?” asked Mr. Cameron in disbelief and complete lack of respect for the revered object. “Why, marigolds germinate in three days!”

“Oh yes, it is quite a difficult undertaking,” said Lady Norton. “Marigolds are annuals, Mr. Cameron. The cactus is a perennial, and so each has a different schedule. But I am sure the professor will be a great help.”

“Mr. Middleton asked me to tell you that he would like to visit you this week and decide on the exact date you wish to start building.”

“I will be looking forward to his visit,” said Lady Norton. As she was now mistress of the plans and no more intimidated by the blueprints, she felt she could face Mr. Middleton with complete confidence.

“Lady Norton, what a pleasure, what an honour...” this was said with a thick Austrian accent as Professor Buckholz-Schuller was advancing briskly toward Lady Norton.

Lady Norton offered her hand, a gesture practiced for so many years it had become automatic, but at the same time she stared at the newcomer with shock and disbelief. The professor was the image of her old friend, Mr. Holt. They could have been identical twins. Doing her best to recover from the surprise, and determining to make discreet investigations as to a possible family relationship between the two, Lady Norton invited her guest to sit down and offered him an excellent tea. They were sitting in her drawing room, and Lady Norton noticed with satisfaction that the professor’s eyes were constantly darting to her magnificent ferns, some of which were extremely rare.

“I have the seeds right here,” said the professor, and took a small packet out of his pocket. Both looked at it reverently.

“I have no words to thank you,” said Lady Norton. “I simply cannot wait to start the experiment.”

“I can’t open the package here,” said the professor. “The seeds are so small, they are like powder. We will have to open it right over the pots in which we will germinate them. We will use half of the seeds, and keep the rest, just in case. I brought the clean sand the plant needs, too, from the Arizona desert, it’s in my suitcase. We will just need a few small clean pots, some shards for the bottom, a layer of clean gravel for drainage, and glass tops so light reaches the seeds at all time. Yes, and a couple of small stones we could put on the rim of each pot while lifting the glass two or three times a day for ventilation; of course, everything must be sterilized with boiling water. Then, we will put the pots under lamps and time the lamps to shine for sixteen hours a day. The rest of the time we must give the seeds complete darkness, much like the Arizona night. Any light during these hours may interfere with the germination, so the pots will have to be in their own room, I suppose, or perhaps we can cover them with large boxes for the duration of each night, if a whole room is inconvenient. If we do these simple little things,

I am sure we can germinate some of the seeds, and the first step will be accomplished.”

“Of course, these requirements are no trouble at all,” said the infatuated Lady Norton. “Perhaps tomorrow morning, after you had a restful night, we can start?”

“No, no!” exclaimed the scandalized professor vehemently. “In the morning we will destroy the experiment. The seeds must be planted at night, when the air is moist.”

Lady Norton could have told him that the air in England was always moist, probably too moist for this desert denizen, but she was not at all averse to launching the experiment that same night, if that was what the professor meant to do. We are certain that if the professor had said that the seeds must be planted under the full moon, with some musicians playing the harp, tambourine, and cymbals behind a black curtain, and the two of them dancing around the pots, wearing beaded leather gowns and chanting sacred songs composed in the darkest recesses of Arizona by mysterious tribes, she would not only have consented, but would have procured the items as soon as possible and learned how to chant. Nothing would deter the true horticulturists from their plans. Most people think that bird enthusiasts are fanatical enough, but they are mere children next to plant enthusiasts. Perhaps only philatelists come close in their insanity – but not quite. It is told that, for example, a certain plant hunter had to climb a huge mountain which was possibly an active volcano, all the while travelling among settlements of cannibals and head hunters, to discover a new species of banana on a faraway island. No one other than a well-trained botanist who specialized in tropical fruit could tell the difference between that banana and the many other species of banana that existed in the books (and in the gardens of the world) already, but risking life and limb, after being separated from his family for years, seemed the right thing to do at the time. For his efforts, the plant hunter gained a small footnote in an obscure tome, and he was very happy about it for the rest of his life. Such is the power of botany.

Chapter Five

Mrs. Rivers stood before her mirror, putting final touches on her appearance. She was about to receive Mr. Stonor and discuss her books, and the prospect was rather exciting. She still could not believe that such a sophisticated, well-educated man would be interested in her books, which were clearly written for women, and not the most educated women at that. What would he say? She had never discussed her books with someone of his calibre. He would ask deep, penetrating questions... luckily, Mrs. Rivers was blessed with an unusual ability to remember her own books. As those of us who write books would agree, an author usually forgets the plot and characters she had so diligently developed, after a relatively short time. Most authors can recall embarrassing situations, when meeting a lady one has never seen before, and she starts gushing over a scene in a book written a few years before. "I have been so impressed with Hazel's purity and innocence, particularly when she sees Ethelbert for the first time as he emerges from the ocean, and she thinks how much he looks like a Greek god." You nod intelligently, or smile wanly, depending on your mood, all the while wondering if Hazel and Ethelbert are really your own creations, or have you, or the lady you are speaking to, suddenly gone mad? Could you have possibly created such a boring scene? Would you conceivably call the hero *Ethelbert*? Why would you sink to such depths, when the telephone book is full of good names you could have put to use? But not so with Mrs. Rivers. She would remember not only Ethelbert, but also Lady Elmira, who was his affectionate mother, his delightful, comical, cousin Madeline, and his pure love for beautiful, sad, remote Hazel. As she was combing her beautifully waved black hair, which required very little help from art to remain the glossy, raven-like crowing glory, she ran all her books quickly in her mind, wondering which one Mr. Stonor would declare as his favourite, and bring over to be autographed. It had to be a book that dealt with music, of course. He would identify with a hero

who was musically inclined, or a heroine who was an accomplished musician. Would it be *Moorish Serenade*, about the young diplomatic attaché who meets the mature, exciting Spanish contessa when he is transferred to Madrid, and who would risk his life in the bull ring to win her freedom from her controlling family? Or would it be *Czardas!*, the one about the English Marchioness whose husband is sent on a secret mission to Budapest, and she must accompany him for the sake of secrecy even though it is so dangerous there, and who meets the young Gypsy who plays the violin so divinely at a tiny, smoke-filled café, but is really a Hungarian nobleman in disguise, and must hide his parentage from the Soviet authorities and who had learned his music when he was a young child, roaming the grounds of his parents' castle with the Gypsies? Possibly... That was not a very good book since Mrs. Rivers could not go to Budapest because of the political situation, and she had to work from the encyclopaedia and from old Baedekers, she mused. Not that it interfered with sales... But then, Mrs. Rivers remembered that Denis played the piano very well, and used it for his composition process. A piano... suddenly she knew – with the kind of certainty that feels almost supernatural. It was *Moonlight over Angkor Wat*. The story of Lady Travers and the titled Corsican savant who never travelled without his piano.

Mrs. Rivers' hand froze in midair as the memory of writing the book suddenly flooded her mind. She wrote most of it in Pomfret Towers, so long ago. The year when Gillie became the heir to Pomfret Towers, met Sally Wicklow, the estate agent's sister, and was forever lost to Mrs. Rivers' beautiful daughter, Phoebe, who luckily was not interested in him in the least and never aspired to the title of Lady Pomfret, despite Mrs. Rivers' efforts to unite them. She remembered that weekend so distinctly, Gillie's father's death announced, her own publisher, Mr. Johns, coming to persuade old Lord Pomfret to allow him to publish his memoirs, which turned out to be so successful... so many years since old Lord Pomfret passed away, but Mrs. Rivers' son, Julian, still held a grudge against the Pomfrets because of his treatment there on that fateful weekend, which he

considered harsh and everyone else thought to be too mild... Mrs. Rivers looked in the mirror, trying to shake the depression caused by thinking about the passing years and the treachery of Time. However, we must admit that Time treated her rather kindly. When she wrote *Moonlight over Angkor Wat*, she modelled Lady Travers after herself at the time – forty-eight years old, tall, dark, with an upright figure, shining black eyes, and ivory skin. Of course, she made it clear that no one would take Lady Travers for forty-eight. Sixteen years later, no one would take Mrs. Rivers for a woman of sixty-four. She looked at least ten years younger, having maintained not only the aforementioned black hair, but her elegant posture, slim and athletic figure, and a skin that was almost free of wrinkles. True, her expression was still discontented and overly eager, but this was balanced by her poise, and in her new dusty rose suit she looked very well. Sceptically, she looked at a new lipstick on her dressing table. It was the latest creation by the gigantic cosmetic firm that used Miss Tudor as their model; its embarrassing name was “Thunder Orchideé.” Miss Tudor told her, when she gave her the lipstick, that one member of the marketing department was going to name it “Resplendent Rose” and another one wanted “Volcano Blossom” but they were told by their director that these names were much too mild and unexciting, and the director made them call it by its current name. Mrs. Rivers rarely used any cosmetics other than a touch of powder on her nose, but this lipstick matched her suit perfectly, and after all, she thought rebelliously, who would guess the ghastly name? She shrugged her shoulders and put it on, and it had a very nice effect. Finally she added one piece of jewellery, a string of blush-coloured pearls that was a gift from her long-suffering husband George and which fitted quite nicely in the open collar of the suit, and the pinkish-beige suede shoes, with their sensible heels, finished off the impeccable at-home look.

Mrs. Rivers was to meet Mr. Stonor at the library, a lovely room she particularly liked. It was lined with books on all subjects imaginable, reflecting Mr. Goldwasser’s eclectic taste, diverse interests, and voracious reading habits. In between the

bookcases, the walls were panelled with dark wood, and the furniture was mahogany, aged to a pleasant patina. Soft, extremely comfortable armchairs were scattered around the room, and next to each one stood a small end table equipped with a reading lamp that shed bright light on the individual space, but did not disturb the other occupants of the room. Surprisingly, a piano stood at one of the corners. It was used when Mr. Goldwasser chose to discuss musical aspects with some of his people at home rather than at the studio.

Entering the library, she was surprised to see that Mr. Stonor was already there. He was sitting at the piano, playing an intriguing piece of music, which Mrs. Rivers at once recognized as a favourite – Erik Satie’s *Gnossienne #1*. The mysterious, almost mystical music seemed to be in tune with the soft light that came through the partially drawn green velvet curtains. She stood there, listening, not wishing to disturb him. However, after a few minutes he noticed her and smiled with pleasure as he got up. “Do come in, Mrs. Rivers,” he said. “I imagine I have surprised you. But here I am, and I brought my favourite with me.” He pulled out of his pocket the very same book Mrs. Rivers knew he would bring, *Moonlight over Angkor Wat*. She took the book and smiled. “Believe it or not, Mr. Stonor, I was sure that this book would be your favourite. It was because the Corsican nobleman never travelled without his piano, am I correct?”

“Partially,” said Mr. Stonor. “Of course, as a piano enthusiast, I could relate to him. But it really was Lady Travers... she was so much like someone who mattered to me a great deal, or at least that was how I saw her when I was reading it.”

“And the plot made sense to you? The renunciation, in particular?”

“Oh, yes. There was no other option. Lady Travers could never have broken her vows, throw away her principles and her sense of duty, no matter how much she cared for the Corsican savant. She followed her true path, and one respects her, even as one’s heart breaks over her sacrifice. But there is a sentence in the book – about her pale, moonlit face that would forever stand

between him and happiness – and that sentence, Mrs. Rivers, is why I admire your work so much. It is simply the embodiment of truth.”

“I want to tell you something, Mr. Stonor,” said Mrs. Rivers, shedding her pretensions and literary silliness under the influence of his sincere regard for her work. “My publisher, Mr. Johns, and many of my critics, see me as entirely commercial. They feel that I have found the audience, that I tapped into the feelings of the library subscribers over forty years old, and that I am exploiting this market.”

“But this is not the whole truth, is it? Not that there is anything wrong in wishing to earn a decent living from your chosen metier, but there is more to it in your work, Mrs. Rivers. Isn’t this true?”

“Yes, you are right. Indeed, I have discovered my audience, but you see, I sincerely want to add some sparkle to the dull life of the middle-aged housewife. A little platonic love affair with an exciting gentleman, a walk in an exotic location she may have seen – travel is cheaper than it used to be, at least in Europe – or a place she will never see, such as Angkor Wat... or Argentina... these women are happy when they read my books, they imagine themselves in place of the heroine, and I know this is true because they send me letters, all the time, thanking me. But I am not really literary, you know. I write for the masses.”

“So did Charles Dickens,” said Mr. Stonor decidedly. “It did not detract from the quality of his work. For that matter, come to think of it, so did Shakespeare. I read somewhere that he said he hated to see his plays in print, anyway, since the audience preferred them on stage, as they were not intelligent enough to visualise the written word. Your work, Mrs. Rivers, goes beyond the love affair and the trip. It delves into our hearts.” He sat at the piano again and played a few bars in an absent-minded way, then turned and fully faced Mrs. Rivers. “I want to tell you how I relate to all this, Mrs. Rivers. May I? Or would it burden you?”

“Of course you may,” said Mrs. Rivers, who was burning with curiosity.

“When I was twenty-five years old, Mrs. Rivers, I was very much in love with a great lady. Her name was Mrs. Middleton, and she still resides at Skeynes. You may know her, I am not sure.”

“So what happened?” asked Mrs. Rivers, the author in her taking over the well-mannered lady who would not ask such a question in a hundred years.

“Nothing, of course. She never knew about my feelings,” said Mr. Stonor, which was a gallant lie, as all our readers, who are familiar with Mr. Stonor’s earlier years, must know. But then Mr. Stonor was a perfect gentleman. “However, I regret to say it took me several years to get over this affair.”

“I do know her a little. Wasn’t she considerably older than you?” asked Mrs. Rivers, enchanted with a true story which was so much like her own novels.

“Yes, about twenty years older than me, I believe,” said Mr. Stonor. “But this is the way I am. I do not know why, but I have never fallen in love with a woman my own age, always preferring someone more mature than I am. Incidentally, I refuse to use the word ‘older,’ since age is really a meaningless concept. The meeting of minds, of souls, that is all that matters.”

“How absolutely wonderful of you to feel this way, Mr. Stonor.” said Mrs. Rivers wistfully.

“But rather sad for me,” said Mr. Stonor, passing his hands in a light arpeggio over the piano. It twinkled like fairy music in the gathering dusk. “You see, Mrs. Rivers, I cannot form a permanent relationship. There were two other women during the fifteen years that have passed since that time. Both older than me. Both too wise, too mature, too stable to stay with someone like me.”

“So you are forty now,” said Mrs. Rivers. “This is the right time to try again, Mr. Stonor. You will find love, I am sure of it.” She felt as if she had floated into one of her own novels, a strange, unaccountable sensation, both pleasurable and frightening.

“Would you do me a great kindness, Mrs. Rivers?” asked Mr. Stonor, playing softly. Mrs. Rivers did not recognize the tune; perhaps it was one of his ballets, she thought.

“Of course, I will try,” she said.

“Would you call me Denis? Mr. Stonor is so formal; it no longer fits us.”

Mrs. Rivers, slightly shocked, felt as if she was splitting into two women. The higher self was the writer, the businesswoman, the backbone of the County, practical, shrewd, tough. The lower self was an elegant, beautiful, ripe woman of the world, listening languidly to the dangerous conversation of an attractive gentleman. For a few seconds the two selves fought, and we must admit that the lower self won. It looked at the younger man from under its long lashes, and said, “Of course, Denis... and you must call me Hermione.”

“It will be an honour,” said Mr. Stonor, whom we are now going to call Denis until further notice, and a radiant smile transformed his rather monkey-like face into something of rare beauty.

To break the spell, Mrs. Rivers said “Well, allow me to autograph the book, and then I must take you to tea. Miss Tudor is expecting you.”

“Of course,” said Denis. “But you must promise me to meet and talk again. So many other of your books I wish to discuss with you, Hermione.”

“It will be a pleasure,” said Mrs. Rivers.

In the meantime, Mr. Goldwasser and Miss Tudor were waiting for their guests to come for tea in the drawing room, and using their rare leisure time and privacy to discuss certain plans.

“The question is, do we plunge right in, get you a role on stage, or do a film first?” asked Mr. Goldwasser.

“I don’t think anyone would want me on stage right away,” said Glamora. “Perhaps a high-brow film first would be best. Then we’ll see about the stage.”

“Yes, I think you are right,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “A progression. But for the film, we are going to get the kind of

actor that has done stage, preferably in England. A big name, well respected. No more handsome boys for you, Glam.”

“I never cared about them, as you know very well; they annoyed me. Except Hank, who was like a son to me... What play do you have in mind?” asked Glamora curiously. Mr. Goldwasser pulled a thin book from his pocket and handed it to her without words.

“Macbeth?” said Glamora, her face white and tense. “Are you serious? Shakespeare? So soon? True, I read a few of the plays, but not with the idea of acting in them, not quite yet.”

“Why not? Your English has always been perfect; you can whip Shakespeare. Start reading it to yourself, on a regular basis. Familiarize yourself with it, all the while imagining you are doing Lady Macbeth. Immerse yourself in it. Perhaps Mrs. Dale can recommend the best book of commentary and analysis of Macbeth. Then you will start reading it to me. I’ll know when you are ready, trust me.”

Glamora smiled at him affectionately. Of course he would know, she thought. What doesn’t he know about me and my work? She wanted to tell him how much she trusted him, with her life if necessary, but even though she had developed her language skills considerably with the reading course she was working on with Mrs. Dale, she still could not express her own emotions very clearly. So she just said, seemingly out of context, “You know, Jake, this is the first house that really feels like home.” Mr. Goldwasser, who had known Glamora for so many years, understood her train of thought perfectly and was touched.

“Well, love, despite all the deceptions, difficulties, and sacrifices, we still had a pretty good life together, didn’t we?” he said, responding to her unspoken, rather than the spoken words.

“The best,” said Glamora and stretched her long legs, putting them on the coffee table in the most disreputable and un-lady-like way imaginable. But of course the feet were clad in extremely expensive, soft, pink, feather-trimmed slippers, with a few rhinestones here and there, so it did not look too bad. And the slippers were perfectly flat with no heels at all – since

Glamora had decided, right or wrong, that luxury and glamour do not always have to come on high heels. She held the little book tightly in her hands and smiled to herself. Yes, she would give it a try; she would do her best. She had always done so, and why would she fail now? Had she ever failed? Lady Macbeth, she thought. The dream part of every actress worth her salt. Yes, it would happen. And she must write to Merry about it as well as Mrs. Dale – Merry will be totally supportive and happy for her. She hugged the book. Just then, Mrs. Rivers and Denis came into the room and Miss Tudor removed her elegant feet from the coffee table and rose to greet them and call for tea.

“Miss Tudor,” said Denis, “It is so nice to get a real English tea in Hollywood. Only a few of our neighbours adhere to this delightful habit.”

“I never got over being a simple English girl,” said Glamora, smiling as she poured the tea. “Why should I give up our most delightful tradition just because I live so much in America?”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And Glam taught me to like it, too, over the years. Incidentally, where are Emma and Edmond?”

“Edmond is at the studio, conferring with the writers over some obscure point in Mr. Clover’s original play. He might be out most of the night,” said Glamora. “You know how they work, those night owls. Emma went out with Rush Yukon to see a very unusual costume establishment. She should be home soon.”

Just then Emma then ran into the room, breathless with excitement. “Rush took me to the most amazing establishment,” she said as she sank into a couch. “It was all stage clothing, burlesque, feathers, sequins, maybe some circus, I am not sure. I am dizzy with what I saw. I wanted to take all the clothes home.”

“Where is Rush? Could he not come to tea?”

“No, he had to meet a friend, he said, for dinner. So he went home to change. I think he changes six times a day,” said Emma, laughing. “He adores clothes. I told him that when he fades as a movie star, he should look into the garment and costume industry, not the restaurant business, and he totally agreed. He

would be so successful, modelling his own lines, too, with his looks.”

“Emma, Jake wants me to start studying *Macbeth*,” said Miss Tudor. “He plans to shoot a film, with me as Lady Macbeth and some big name from England as Macbeth. Of course, Miss Skull will be the chief designer, and I think you should do an apprenticeship with her when it starts, work at the studio, learn the ropes. It would be valuable for both film and stage, you know, since it is Shakespeare.”

Emma stared at Miss Tudor and started to cry. “My dear girl, don’t do that,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “We have always planned this, as you recall.”

“This is a fairy tale,” said Emma, gulping. “To work with Miss Skull... would she agree?”

“Of course she would. I have already spoken to her about it,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Not about *Macbeth*, since this only came up this afternoon, but in general. She said you are a smart little thing, and she would love you to apprentice with her. So all is well.”

Emma started crying again, and Mr. Goldwasser had to give up and let her finish her cry in her own good time, which she did and then managed to eat plenty of cake.

After Denis left, not before fixing the day for his next visit, Mrs. Rivers was suddenly a little tired, a sensation she was not normally prone to, being a most energetic creature. It was an enjoyable afternoon, if a little strange, and she wanted to think about it. Fortunately, everyone had some business or other to attend to, so Mrs. Rivers could go peacefully to her room without even bothering to pretend that she was going to do Her Work. She really intended to change her suit right away – every woman knows that sitting down more than absolutely necessary in a good suit is a crime, since it sadly stretches the fabric – but her eyes were practically closing with fatigue, and she sank into the comfortable arm chair that stood in front of the totally unnecessary, but comforting fireplace. Poor Denis, she thought. She knew Mrs. Middleton well enough, and did not think much of her, a wishy-washy kind of a woman, always looking as if she

wandered in a sort of private fog. Her husband was even worse. Never stopped talking, never let anyone else say a word and so utterly boring. He probably bored his wife to death, why else would she bother with a twenty-five-year-old boy? Mrs. Rivers did not believe in those May-September romances she had glorified in all her books. The books were good business, but life was life and it had little magic in it, particularly when September was represented by the woman. To tell the truth, she did not think middle-aged women very attractive, with very few exceptions, and those chosen few were more like Glamora Tudor, not like the faded, uninspiring Mrs. Middleton. Agnes Graham, yes, definitely. She would be alluring for as long as she lived. Mrs. Brandon, yes, and perhaps even Mrs. Dean, but not Mrs. Middleton. Why would Denis fall for her? That was a mystery. He said he saw Mrs. Middleton as Lady Travers. That was sheer nonsense, since they had nothing in common. Nor did she believe that Mrs. Middleton did not know about his infatuation. Of course she knew, and being so bored at home, encouraged his torment for her own amusement. How nasty, thought Mrs. Rivers, and went to sleep quite comfortably.

Denis, on the other hand, did not feel comfortable as he drove home. He was thinking that perhaps it was foolish of him to dig into the old wounds, to pry into feelings to which he was already resigned. He knew he would never find a woman he could love and settle with, and he accepted his fate, but nevertheless he could not resist talking about it to the one person he believed really, truly understood. Also, he felt very unhappy about comparing Mrs. Rivers' books to Shakespeare's or Dickens'. He was very fond of her books, and they sustained him through much pain, but he knew full well that they were not great literature, and saying what he said was hypocritical – a quality he abhorred – even though it was not what he meant at the time. All he meant was that writing for the masses was not something to be ashamed of, and he sincerely hoped Mrs. Rivers, whom he greatly respected, would not think he was being a sycophant. Ah, well. Should he mention it to her? No, he decided. It was said in

the emotion of the moment, and the best thing was to forget such silliness.

And now we must fly back to the County, since even though the spark that might fly between author and artist is fascinating, dangerous, and perhaps foreboding, it does not come close to the excitement generated by planting the seeds of a really rare plant. At least, that is what true horticulturists would think; botany is stronger than love. And so, here we are in the special room that was given to the cactus seeds. The professor looked around him with approval. Everything was there – the sterilized pots, the glass tops, the shards, the gravel, and even the small stones that were to be used for ventilation. The room was chosen carefully, mostly for its southern exposure, and the light on the windowsill, supplemented by the lamps that stood at on each side of the window, would be quite sufficient, the professor felt. “Excellent,” he said. “I must congratulate you, Lady Norton, on these meticulous preparations. You are a true horticulturist.” Lady Norton was highly gratified.

The professor opened a bag full of clean, white sand, the essential Arizona sand that he brought with him, feeling that the seeds could not sprout in English soil. “We will moisten the sand, just barely of course, to activate the germination process” he said. “Would you have something I could use?” Lady Norton produced the appropriate bottle, which looked just like the ones with the perforated tops every housewife uses for moistening clothes before ironing them. However, this particular bottle, though manufactured by the exact same machines, was produced by a horticultural company. As a result of such distinction, it was sold exclusively to gardeners, and was called Mist-A-Flower; naturally it cost three times as much as the ironing bottle.

The professor put a shard on the hole at the bottom of four pots, placed a small metal ruler in each of them in turn, poured the small gravel to precisely half the height of the pots, and filled

the pots with the sand. He then took the ironing bottle and very slightly moistened the sand.

“It is as much moisture as the dew the desert would receive on a spring night,” he said, and proceeded to open the little seed packet. “Naturally, any more water will rot the seeds.”

“I brought a box for the seeds you wished to reserve,” said Lady Norton, and produced a box made of silver, with a large red stone decorating the top. “I would like to keep the remaining seeds in my bedroom, on my dressing table, so they will be perfectly safe.”

“Good idea,” said the professor, who was concentrating on pouring what looked like brown powder, making sure only a little bit went into each pot. He then spread the powder gently over the sand, with his finger. Once this operation was completed, he refolded the paper and put the seed packet into Lady Norton’s silver box, then arranged three little stones on the edge of each pot, and tenderly covered them with their glass tops. “And now,” said Lady Norton, “I will lock the door and keep the key.”

“Dear Lady Norton,” said the professor, looking more like Mr. Holt every minute, “I am convinced that with your care and understanding, you will be the first gardener in England to grow *Echinocactus horizonthalonius var. nicholii*.”

Lady Norton, who was beginning to feel she was spending time with someone made of ectoplasm rather than flesh and blood, could no longer resist asking a probing question. The professor, beaming at her, was truly the living image of Mr. Holt. The same stout little person, the round red face with an imperfect shave, the short grey hair, the plump hands, this was uncanny. “Professor,” she said, “are you related to a gentleman by the name of Mr. C. W. Holt? He was a great friend of mine; we shared a love of gardening.”

“Carl William Holt? The gardening expert?”

“Yes,” said Lady Norton. “You look so much like him, and he was so interested in plants and horticulture. I don’t know how to explain it, unless you are related.”

“Yes, of course. He was a distant cousin,” said the professor. “Had he been alive, I would have enjoyed meeting him; we never had. His branch of the family immigrated to England about two hundred years ago, while our branch remained in Austria until I had to leave because of the troubles. They were called Holtzmann before they immigrated, and changed their name when they arrived here; it was a more convenient name to go by in England.”

“How interesting,” said Lady Norton. “Fascinating that you should both end up with botanical interests.”

“It was natural, since this was the family business in Austria,” said the professor. “For hundreds of years, the family was engaged in gardening, sometimes at the very great houses. It’s in our blood.”

“What a delightful coincidence,” said Lady Norton. “To think that the expert from the United States would be related to my old friend...” and since Lady Norton was so much the product of the upper classes, she could not add what she really felt, which was that it was *Meant*.

A week later, the professor went to London for his first cycle of lectures, expecting to come back after a month or so. Lady Norton, after sending him off safely, went to her room, and as was her habit, checked the silver box where she kept the half of the seeds reserved by the professor. To her horror, the box was empty. Immediately she rang the bell, and the butler appeared.

“Kindly send Carla to me right away,” said Lady Norton, visibly disturbed. The butler did as he was told, and Carla came very quickly, as Lady Norton’s servants knew she would not be trifled with.

“Carla,” said Lady Norton, “The seeds that I have put in this box are gone. Do you know where they are?”

“Seeds?” asked Carla. “There was none of them seeds in there, my lady. Only some dirty brown powder, like old tobacco that is gone bad.”

“Where is the powder, then?” asked Lady Norton, a horrible fear creeping over her.

“Well, my lady, it was my day for polishing the silver,” said Carla, “and the box was not closed properly, the little hook thingy wasn’t latched, so it opened and this nasty powder fell all over the lace on the table which I just put there after the wash. I was afeared that the powder would stain the lace, which was washed so nicely, so I tooked it quickly to the window and shooked it out and there was no stain, so I didn’t wash it again. Then I polished everything, and the box, with my silver clorth, and put it back.”

“But there was a paper that was holding the powder,” said Lady Norton in despair. “What did you do with the paper?”

“I thrown it into the fireplace,” said Carla virtuously. “It was filthy. Everything is very clean now, my lady, just the way you like it. Do you want me to wash the lace again, just in case?”

Lady Norton looked at her in total frustration. The professor was away, the seeds were gone, and there was nothing she could do. It was her own fault that she did not lock the silver box in the room with the cactus plants. Naturally, she would have loved to murder, or at least whip Carla, but since killing or even administering physical punishment to your own servants, once permitted and even encouraged by enlightened authorities, was out of the question in this degenerated age, she dismissed the miscreant and went to the window. The begonias that were planted under it glistened with the kind of rich wetness that spelled death for her lovely cacti. By now, the seeds were rotted, even if she could find them, which would have been impossible in the first place. No, she could only hope that the seeds in the cherished pots, luckily placed in a locked room, would do as well as possible.

Chapter Six

“The leather has just the right patina, the gold letters are slightly faded, and the pages are cream, not white,” said Shymmering, carefully inspecting the book that bore the respected name of its author, Bronson Alcott, ancestor to Nestor Alcott who was looking at it with a marked lack of interest. “I recommend this copy.” Mr. Alcott obediently paid for the book and put it in his pocket. The bookstore was their last shopping experience of the day, having spent all day at several tailoring establishments, shoe stores, and shops that specialized in elegant accessories. At first, Mr. Alcott took a lively interest in the proceedings, but as the day dragged on he became increasingly bewildered and tired, and so left the choices to Shymmering, who seemed to know his business and even to enjoy himself. Everything was to be delivered to the house, the accessories and the shoes right away, and the suits, pants, and jackets over the next couple of weeks, after subjecting Mr. Alcott to numerous fittings.

A few days later, Maisie rang the bell. She was not in the best of moods, but she expected Nes to cheer her up a bit, maybe go out for a beer. She did not look her best either, after a long day at work, but it did not matter since this was only Nes and he won't really care.

“Good Evening, Miss,” said Shymmering. “Please come in.”

“Good evening, Shymmering,” she said, smiling. “How are you?”

“Very well, Miss, thank you.” Had Maisie known Shymmering for a long time, she would have noticed that one side of his mouth twitched for a second, a sure sign of being highly perturbed. This would have scared anyone in the know, but Maisie stepped in blithely, suspecting nothing at all.

“Please sit down, Miss,” said Shymmering. “Would you care for a glass of sherry?”

“I would rather have a beer, if you have any,” said Maisie. “I am terribly thirsty. Where is Nes?”

“Mr. Alcott is dressing for dinner,” said Shymmering. The other side of his mouth twitched ominously, but still Maisie noticed nothing at all. In a few minutes Shymmering returned with a bottle of beer and a glass on a silver tray, and put it on a small table next to Maisie.

“Nes is surely taking his time dressing,” said Maisie after a refreshing sip. “Usually he just throws something on...”

“Well, er, yes, Miss,” said Shymmering. “We are trying the new wardrobe we have discussed previously. Some of it has arrived, Miss.”

At that moment a peculiar apparition entered the living room. Maisie stared in disbelief. Simultaneously, she suddenly noticed a small round table by the fireplace, set for two. Her eyes darted between this table and the strange, new Nes. “Are you expecting company, Nes? I should leave immediately,” she said with an effort to sound casual.

“Well, yes, I am, but you don’t have to run,” said Mr. Alcott in a strained voice. “It is only one of the ladies Mr. Goldwasser wants me to be seen with. Some photographers are going to show up, too.”

“I see,” said Maisie, finishing her beer and getting up. “I think it would be best if I leave, anyway, let you get on with business.”

She started toward the door, acutely conscious of the silence behind her. Nes did not attempt to make her stay, and somehow it was clear to her that he wanted her to leave, and as quickly as possible. Why that was, if the evening was just business, she could not tell. She practically ran out, and as she opened the door she bumped against the expected visitor.

“Oh, sorry,” said the blond young thing. “Are you the maid? Would you please tell Nes that Olga is here?”

Maisie simply could not talk, so she just mumbled “Excuse me” and ran out. Shymmering was just behind her and Maisie heard Olga say, “Oh, the maid probably can’t speak English, right? So many of the help these days are foreigners...”

Maisie jumped into her car and started driving around. She was intensely upset, which was strange, because nothing terrible happened. Why was she crying? She could not understand her own behaviour. And why was Nes dressed like that? She was shaking and she knew it was not safe to drive in that state, so she turned and drove the short distance to Mr. Goldwasser's house. Miss Tudor would give her some clues.

Glamora opened the door herself, and was taken aback by Maisie's stricken face. "Come right in," she said. "Have a drink and tell me what happened."

"I just had a beer," said Maisie.

"And now you will have a cognac," said Glamora firmly, pouring a generous amount of the fragrant, golden liquid. "It's medicinal. What is wrong?"

"I just dropped in on Nes, Miss Tudor," said Maisie, gratefully sipping the excellent cognac. "He was expecting company... and he was wearing a most outlandish costume."

"Outlandish costume? Like what?" asked Glamora.

"He wore a red velvet smoking jacket, over black pants. And around his neck he wore a white silk ascot, or cravat, or whatever they used to call that thing. His hair was slicked back... it was like a bad imitation of a Valentino film, like a nightmare, a ghost... I can't vouch for it, but I think he wore some makeup, too. His lips were reddish."

Glamora laughed aloud and Maisie looked at her with utter amazement. "What is funny?" she asked, bewildered.

"This must be Shymmering's idea," said Glamora, dabbing expertly at her eyes to avoid mascara accidents. "He bought him a whole wardrobe, as you know, all based on his studies of what a movie star should look like. The jackets, suits, etc. were fine, I am sure, they were ordered at the best tailoring establishments, but obviously Shymmering went a little overboard with his idea of an 'at home' attire."

"And then came this blond little thing," said Maisie. "And she thought I was the maid! The maid, can you imagine my humiliation?"

“Good Heavens, that must have been awful,” said Glamora with feeling. “Was she beautifully dressed and made up?”

“Oh, yes, perfectly,” said Maisie. “She was probably dressed at the studio. Nes said she came on the studio’s request.”

“One of those,” said Glamora tolerantly. “They are harmless. Rush has dozens of them.”

“But it’s different with Rush,” said Maisie. “Nes is not like that...”

“Anyway, why should you care so much? He would snap out this phase soon enough and go on dressing normally. And what if a girl is visiting, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” said Maisie. “When I saw the girl, and Nes really wanted me to leave...”

“I see,” said Glamora. “I am beginning to see... Don’t worry about this girl. Nes needs such rendezvous for publicity, and the photographers were probably scheduled, and if you were there, the whole story about a new love affair with a new little actress would not have worked. It’s all business.”

“You really think so, Miss Tudor? Really? You don’t think Olga is his girlfriend?”

“Olga? No. I don’t know her, but there are so many of them, and they would not want to get personally entangled because they know the studios frown on such relationships and might drop them from the list. The jobs are rather competitive.”

“Well, if you say so, I will try to ignore all that,” said Maisie. “I can’t imagine why it bothered me so much, anyway.”

“I think I can,” said Glamora, smiling, “but there is no need to go into anything unpleasant right now. Jake will be home soon, and you shall stay for dinner and we will have a pleasant evening.”

“Thank you so much, Miss Tudor,” said Maisie obediently. “I should wash my face and comb my hair, or I will frighten Mr. Goldwasser.”

Glamora laughed. “Yes, do, and I’ll drop a hint to Jake about Nes’ ridiculous clothing.”

Mr. Goldwasser listened carefully to the description of Mr. Alcott’s attire. “This must be looked into,” he said. “We don’t

want him to make a monkey of himself right now, unless... sometimes such things actually work... let's see what happens during this session. A red velvet smoking jacket, my God..." His shrewd eyes went to Maisie's face, noting how upset she must have been, but on that subject he said nothing at all, drawing his own conclusions but exercising his usual discretion.

"Ah, Olga," said Mr. Alcott uncomfortably, looking at the door and thinking of Maisie's reaction. "How are you?"

Olga was staring at Mr. Alcott with disbelief.

"You can't be serious," she said.

"About what?" asked Mr. Alcott.

"Your appearance! You look like something from the twenties! Why did you dress like that?"

"Shimmering dresses me like a movie star," said Mr. Alcott. "I don't know anything about clothes, really, and he orchestrated my new wardrobe."

"But this is outrageous! I particularly don't understand why you had to slick your hair like Valentino!"

"Should I go change?" asked Mr. Alcott timidly.

"Too late for that," said Olga, looking out of the window. "They are here. Take your position and don't say a word about the clothes. Maybe they will think there is a secret reason for that."

The bell rang, and a crew of five came in, carrying equipment, just as Mr. Alcott and Olga settled themselves at the well-appointed table.

"Wow!" said one of the photographers, a very young man. "Is this the latest fashion in men's attire? Wow! I love it!"

"Yes," said Olga. "It's a whole new trend, the Valentino look."

"I am going to try the hair tonight, with your permission, sir," said another very young man. "I am taking a new girl out... she will be amazed!"

A more mature woman, who was obviously a reporter since she already had her notebook in her hand and a pencil stuck behind each ear, looked at Mr. Alcott critically. Suddenly she laughed. "You know, this just might work," she said. "I actually like the idea even though many would think you look like a trained monkey. Why not try to emphasize it... boys, go on, stop gawking and set up the equipment." The four young men started to busily arrange the equipment around the room.

"I see you are holding a book, Mr. Alcott," said the reporter. "May I ask what you are reading? Our readers are always interested in the stars' taste in literature."

"I was just browsing a little before Olga came," said Mr. Alcott, recovering his wits since now he was on familiar ground, well-rehearsed with Shymmering. "I should put it away. It is a book by my ancestor, Bronson Alcott. I do love his works." He got up and stepped to the bookcase, which Shymmering had filled with various works of the Transcendentalists.

The reporter smiled and said, "I see, the Transcendentalists... this will impress the public... boys, snap a few pictures of Mr. Alcott in front of the bookcase. Most important, make sure the titles show clearly. You know, Mr. Alcott, I majored in literature, years ago, and I do love the Transcendentalists." She looked at the titles quietly. Mr. Alcott was terribly afraid that she might ask some questions that would be beyond him to answer, but she only said, "Walden...it still lives on my nightstand, Mr. Alcott."

Mr. Alcott suddenly remembered his lines quite intelligently. "Thoreau," he said meditatively. "No one can make you want to change your life, go into nature, like Thoreau. The natural life is what I would so much prefer..."

"I am sure of that," said the reporter, looking at the red velvet jacket, the expensive furniture, and the elegantly dressed Olga. "Yes, I'm quite sure..." she smiled to herself but Mr. Alcott, who congratulated himself that he pulled this off very nicely, did not notice.

"And now," said the reporter, "Mr. Alcott, Olga, please sit at the table. Pick up a utensil, take a sip from a glass, look

natural, as if you were interrupted during an intimate dinner at home.”

The session lasted for over two hours, making Mr. Alcott feel more and more exhausted, while Olga seemed to not only take it in stride, but actually enjoy it. She refreshed her lipstick occasionally, fluffed her blond curls, and took directions from the crew with professional ease. The reporter asked questions, took notes, and treated Olga like an equal, but Mr. Alcott as a slightly backward child. Finally she said, “Well done, we are finished. I am going to try to boost this new look, Mr. Alcott. If it works, you will have to stick with it for a while... We’ll see how it goes.” The young men collected their equipment, and the group mercifully left.

“Well...” said Mr. Alcott. “It’s finally over. You must be as tired as I am, Olga. Let’s eat something.”

“Not me, love,” said Olga briskly, obviously not tired at all. “I have another job tomorrow and I must go to the hairdresser and change my looks; it won’t do to look the same, you know.” She ran off, to Mr. Alcott’s secret relief, and all was peace and quiet as Mr. Alcott ate the dinner, which luckily was meant to be a cold one. Shymmering walked in, carrying a cup of coffee on a tray.

“Shymmering, did you watch?” asked Mr. Alcott.

“Yes, sir, I did,” said Shymmering. “It was quite impressive.”

“The crew liked the look, but Maisie and Olga did not. Do you think it was a mistake, perhaps?”

“No sir. I rarely make a mistake, sir, if I may say so myself. This look is going to be admired, and even copied. The lady reporter, who knows better than Miss Maisie and Miss Olga, thinks so. Just as she left, she asked me how you came by it. I told her that you made a serious study of gentlemen’s fashions through the ages, in preparation for an upcoming role, and came to the conclusion that the look of the twenties should make a comeback, since it was the most elegant decade of this century, at least so far. So you had developed this look with the help of various designers. I explained to her that someone with your

sensitive nature has a great love for the elegance and beauty of past days, as proven by the way you love the literature of the nineteenth century, for instance.”

“And what did she say?” asked Mr. Alcott.

“She said ‘Intriguing. This look may very well spread like wildfire’ and smiled at me in a conspiratorial way, if I may use this term about a lady. She did not comment about the love of literature.”

“Well, in a couple of days we shall know,” said Mr. Alcott gloomily. “I do wish things did not happen this way with Maisie...”

“Don’t worry about that, sir. She will understand, I am sure,” said Shymmering.

The next morning, Edmond staggered into the dining room as everyone was having breakfast, except for Mr. Goldwasser who slept much later than his usual early rising, since he was up half the night working. Edmond looked pale, dishevelled, and altogether as if he had undergone some harrowing experience.

“Angel!” Emma cried. “What have they done to you at the studio? Do you want coffee?”

“I don’t want to ever look at coffee again, thanks,” said Edmond wearily and sank into a chair. “I was drinking the vile stuff the scriptwriters manage to get and swill all night. I don’t know how they do it. I have never met such a nasty group of people.”

“I thought they called you because they just wanted to discuss a few points,” said Mrs. Rivers, surprised.

“The whole plot is more like it,” said Edmond, looking vaguely into a plate of scrambled eggs he would normally devour instantly.

“Whatever do you mean?” said Glamora.

“*Dance We Shall* is a sophisticated drawing room comedy,” said Edmond. “Think Noel Coward. There are four characters: a husband, rather meek and uninspiring; his enchanting, vivacious

wife; the handsome roué she is in love with; and a plain and ordinary girl, with whom the husband, who is really unhappy with his glamorous wife, is in love with. The play is very witty, and in the end the couples reshuffle themselves with a divorce and a few confessions and everyone is happy.”

“Well?” said Mrs. Rivers, reflecting. “While I cannot see how such a story could be turned into a large musical, I see no flaw in the plot, as you describe it.”

“Apparently, two flaws,” said Edmond in cold despair. “In the final scene, the enchanting wife and the roué are walking through a door that was always closed during the play and so leave the stage together. The scriptwriters heard from the censors that this was too suggestive. The door just may be, the censors claimed, a bedroom, Heaven forbid. They are not too sophisticated in this town, you know...”

“And what is the other flaw?” asked Glamora.

“The casting. The roué is played by a bigger star than the one who plays the husband. That means that the audience will be more interested in the roué, and this makes it seem as if we don’t respect the institution of marriage, which is sacred to censors of all ages, genders, and descriptions.”

“Did they have any suggestions?” asked Glamora with apprehension. At this moment Mr. Goldwasser walked in, and in his usual quick way grasped immediately that something was very wrong. On asking, everything was explained, and to everyone’s surprise, Mr. Goldwasser burst out laughing.

“You worry too much, my boy,” he said to Edmond. “What do you think Mr. Clover would have done?”

“I have no idea,” said Edmond.

“I venture to suggest that he would shrug eloquently, say ‘Hollywood!’ in a most derogatory way, and figure out a compromise. A funny one, if possible.”

“But why are they wishing to destroy the play?” asked Edmond, confused.

“Because they must obey higher powers, namely, the censors. The censors are immensely powerful in Hollywood, Edmond. You can’t fight them and they are entirely capable of destroying

anyone they choose. We must play along with them, we have no choice. So, think about a very funny scene that will show how domestic the wife really is, for instance.”

“Well,” said Edmond, rising to the occasion. “I saw on television a very funny thing... the housewife was cleaning her kitchen with a mop and bucket, wearing a very pretty dress, a frilly apron, a string of pearls, and extremely high heels...”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And could the wife sing while she cleans?”

“Why, that’s exactly what I was thinking,” said Edmond, visibly cheering up. “We could work out a song with Mr. Stonor. The girlfriend could walk into the kitchen, and they could sing together how unhappy they were to be doing something that may seem a bit immoral, while really they were such chaste and honourable ladies. The girlfriend could hold a cup of coffee, the housewife a mop, and they could perform a dance, too...”

Glamora laughed. “Great idea,” she said. “The audience would love that. Why let television steal all the fun?”

“Then,” said Edmond, beginning to see the possibilities. “How about the roué walking along some very pretty street scenes, wearing an evening attire since it’s night, singing about his change of heart and how his love is making him into a better person?”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And if you add one more scene in which the husband and his girlfriend sing a duet about how they used to be high school sweethearts and were torn asunder by cruel fate until they met again when it was too late...”

“So you don’t think it will ruin the screenplay?” asked Edmond.

“Not really. By the mere fact that you are turning it into a musical, you have already changed it. A few more changes would not greatly signify. This is no longer Mr. Clover’s witty play, Edmond. It is a huge production that is meant to please the masses and make a lot of money for everyone.” Edmond nodded and turned to his plate.

Emma looked at Edmond and sighed with relief. He was busily eating his breakfast, already adjusting his mind to the new circumstances. He would do just fine, she thought. Clearly, one must learn a lot in order to survive in Hollywood, but he could do it, and be quite a success. Soon it would be her turn, too, to learn and adjust, and she was ready for it.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and in came a young woman; she was enormously tall, blond, broad-shouldered, and quite beautiful if one liked her very athletic, outdoors-type looks.

“Hello, everyone,” she said cheerfully. “I am Helga, the singing teacher, for Mr. Alcott I came. In six weeks, Helga will teach him to sing like a bird, Helga promises!”

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Helga, of course. But Mr. Alcott does not live here. He has his own home.”

Helga burst into a laugh that could easily have shattered glass. “Misinformed Helga vos by the Agency. Proceed Helga shall immediately to Mr. Alcott’s house, if she would be informed of his place of residence.”

“You had better come to the studio with us,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Mr. Alcott is very likely already on his way there. And Edmond, sleep for a few hours and then join us and we will resolve the script issues. I have an idea, too, of what to do with the offending bedroom door.”

“I can come right now,” said Edmond. “I don’t feel tired anymore, and I would like to settle this issue. The bedroom door, right...”

Glamora, Edmond, Mr. Goldwasser, and Helga, who towered over everyone, went out. Mrs. Rivers and Emma looked at each other and said, “Poor Mr. Alcott” in unison.

Back in Bassetshire, the Towers’ Cook and the housemaid were having supper. Cook’s niece, Rita, burst into the kitchen.

“Auntie, here is an article about them!” said Rita, rather out of breath.

“Who is them now?” asked Cook placidly.

“The whole party, Miss Tudor, Mr. Goldwasser, everyone,” said Rita, throwing the magazine on the table.

“Sinful,” said Cook, placing a sausage on her plate, and looking admiringly at a full page photo of Glamora Tudor wearing a magnificent evening dress. “I was so shocked when I found out... them not telling about being respectably married like it was something to be ashamed of ... and all these leading men, and the gossip...”

“Yes, imagine never telling,” said Rita, relishing the thought. “Like a film, really, so exciting...”

“Don’t you say such improper things,” said Cook. “If I said such like things when I was young my father would have given me a good thrashing, and rightly so.”

“But when you was young, Auntie, you had many admirers. Mother told me so.”

“That is as it may be,” said Cook, not quite willing to deny the delightful allegations. “But all was proper. This is such goings on, upon my word, enough to make one want to give notice, if one was in service for them. I felt the shock all down my back, you know how my back always opens and shuts when I am upset.”

“Yes, Auntie, of course, but still it’s romantic, though, a secret marriage and she such a beautiful lady...”

The housemaid, who until then was concentrating on her very good supper, suddenly said, “Cook, are they going to have babies now?”

“Maybe they already have them babies,” said Cook darkly. “Maybe they all are brought up in the country, like I saw in Glamora Tudor’s film, *A Royal Mother’s Anguish*.”

“I never saw that one,” said the housemaid.

“No, you couldn’t, it was many years ago,” said Cook. “It was such a treat, though. Miss Tudor played a queen, her name was Mary and she was queen of Scotland, I think. She is secretly married to Oliver Cromwell, who is a rebel. Mary’s evil cousin, who is named Elizabeth...”

“What?” screamed Rita, scandalized. “Our good queen Elizabeth was evil?”

“Don’t be so stupid, girl. Our good queen? I never... No, it was a thousand years ago, another Queen Elizabeth.” Rita relaxed, and the housemaid said, “And what happened?”

“The evil queen found out about the secret marriage, and about the baby, which Mary put up in the country, with a nurse. But no one would tell her where the baby lived, so Elizabeth was angry, and kidnapped Mary and put her in prison, and then killed Oliver Cromwell.. so the baby grew up and he was also called Oliver Cromwell, like his daddy. Then one day, just after Elizabeth decided to kill Mary, them people who stayed loyal to Mary and knew where the baby lived went to little Oliver who was then ten years old...”

“She kept poor Mary in prison for ten years?” asked Rita, quite upset.

“Yes, and she wore rags but was still so beautiful, with her long golden hair all down her back, but when they took her to be burned at the stake they let her wear a marvellous silver gown, such a waste of a good dress, I thought... and she gave a speech, very clever, but I forgot what she said... anyway, the child hears the story from the people who are loyal and vows to revenge his mother when he grows up. And then by the end of the film, he is a grown man and you see him grabbing Elizabeth by the hair and stabbing her, with lots of blood all over her dress, and then you see him crowned king.”

“What a beautiful film,” sighed the housemaid. “I wish I could see it. Cook, may I have seconds of the fried potatoes? They are very good.”

“Now don’t be greedy, my girl,” said Cook, happily supplying the housemaid with a generous helping.

“Me, too,” said Rita, “and maybe another sausage please, Auntie. Yes, I think Miss Tudor must have a few babies being brought up in the country; it stands to reason.”

“Maybe the babies are here in Barsetshire?” suggested Cook, intrigued with the idea. “Maybe we even know them.”

“You must look at the tea leaves, Cook,” said the housemaid. “Maybe they will tell you.”

“Too late for these cups,” said Cook. “They have been disturbed. I will look tomorrow morning. Them tea leaves are bound to tell me something.”

Chapter Seven

“**W**hat a pleasant surprise,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I had no idea you intended to visit today, Denis.”

“I had no idea I was coming, either,” said Mr. Stonor, laughing in a slightly shamefaced way. “I was driving by, and I thought I’d just try and see if you were at home.”

“Oh, yes, I am almost always at home at this time,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Miss Robinson and I work on the script for the still-nameless sequel every morning, then she goes to the studio for her other projects, and I work on my new book.”

“A well-balanced schedule,” said Mr. Stonor. “I’ll make a mental note of it for future visits.”

“Would you care for tea?” asked Mrs. Rivers. “I will be delighted if you stay, they will serve it momentarily.”

“Only if I am not imposing,” said Mr. Stonor.

“Oh, not at all, on the contrary. Everyone else is out, so I will be happy for the company,” said Mrs. Rivers. And indeed, at this cue the maid brought in the tea tray, and they sat down to it.

“And how have you been, Hermione?” said Mr. Stonor, obviously enjoying the use of first names that was established between them on his previous visit.

“I had some good news,” said Mrs. Rivers, who seemed to give every indication, judging from the look on her face, that the news was not at all that good.

“Yes? Do tell,” said Mr. Stonor.

“My son Julian is coming to America for an art exhibition. He, and of course his art group, the Set of Five, will be opening in two weeks, right here in Hollywood.”

“I have heard of them. Were they not once called the Society of Fifteen?”

“Yes, and they are now a smaller group, very exclusive, highly successful and very, very avant-garde. Not exactly my style, but nevertheless, much appreciated in England and abroad. This is their first exhibition in the United States.” She sighed deeply.

“How nice!” said Mr. Stonor, studying her unhappy face. “But something is bothering you, I can see it quite plainly. What is it?”

Mrs. Rivers looked at his kindly face, curiously attractive and ugly at the same time, sighed, and decided to unburden herself. “You are very sensitive to moods, Denis. Thank you. It’s true. I love Julian dearly, but he can be... difficult. Very difficult.”

“Where will he stay?” asked Denis.

“He did not mention it. Not here, of course, he cannot expect hospitality from total strangers, so probably at a hotel with his friends.”

“Naturally, not here,” said Denis firmly. “Look here, Hermione, it will be all right. Between Jake, who can handle any situation, perhaps short of famine and pestilence, and Glamora, who could charm a snake if she put her mind to it, Julian will behave. And if not, I’ll personally have a word with him. He will be the dutiful, pleasant son, or else...”

“Why, thank you, Denis. It’s not that he is a bad person. Not at all. He is intelligent, successful, a truly serious, good artist, and loyal to his friends who all love him, but for some reason, he and I clash. I am afraid he still thinks of me as an interfering, overly maternal creature.”

“Heavens, not you, Hermione!” said Denis indignantly.

“Oh, yes, me... and with some justification, too. I used to be like that. I did interfere with my children’s lives, but this happened many years ago, and I have learned my lesson. My daughter Phoebe and I get along very well these days, but Julian... well, we shall hope for the best.”

“May I ask what it was that your children complained about?” asked Denis with some curiosity.

“Some years ago, I did my best to match Phoebe with Lord Pomfret, at the time plain Mr. Giles Foster, or as everyone called him, Gillie. He was a very nice young man, just as pleasant as he is today, and he and Phoebe were great friends. At the time, I thought that just a little push would send them in the right direction.”

“I don’t see anything terrible about wishing your daughter a happy and successful marriage with the right man,” said Denis, reflecting. “Most mothers would.”

“Phoebe did not see it that way. She was young, headstrong, very beautiful, and not quite as emotionally stable as she is now. She really hated me for my efforts. The things she said about me to other people – who always felt it was their duty to tell me everything she said – were dreadful. Rude, even cruel at times... well, it’s water under the bridge. Of course I had no idea at the time of Gillie’s sudden infatuation with Sally Wicklow... and when I noticed, I felt this was an unsuitable match for the man who would one day inherit the title of Lord Pomfret. But I was wrong, I fully admit that. They are very happy together, and Sally became the perfect countess, a wonderful help for Gillie, whose health is rather delicate, and a pillar of the community. She is much loved by the entire county and she certainly deserves it. As for Phoebe, she is also happily married, so everything turned out well. She married Lord Humberton – you may have heard his name – and they live in Shropshire and have such a wonderful family. But Julian...

“What did Julian complain about?” asked Denis.

“Everything. I could not, and still cannot, say one sentence he would approve of, and he is very forthright in his objections. I used to think that he resented being dependent on me and his father for money, in an immature way, but now he is successful, and earns plenty of money. I am very proud of his success, actually. In addition to his painting, in 1951 he was appointed by Lazarus College to a Professorship of Culture at a very good salary. So it is nothing to do with dependency, and must be something else which I cannot fathom. I adore Julian, but I dread meeting him.”

Probably not a very complicated situation, simply a case of a self-centred and spoiled individual, thought Denis privately. Loudly he said, “This time we will work something out. Stop worrying, Hermione, and do tell me what the new book is all about.”

Mrs. Rivers poured out a second cup of tea for both of them. "I decided to drop the story about the mature actress who is married to a London producer and is involved with a young actor. It's just too similar to Miss Tudor's and Mr. Goldwasser's real life, and even though Miss Tudor vowed that she would not mind, I feel it may not be quite in good taste. Some people may suspect I took advantage of my friendship with them, and I would not wish that to happen since I am sincerely fond of both of them. So I am trying to develop a new storyline, but it's too nebulous even in my head."

"But you will tell me when you know?"

"I'll be happy to. For the moment, all I know is that it must be about an Englishwoman visiting Hollywood, since I might as well use all the wonderful information I was so lucky to gather due to Miss Tudor's and Mr. Goldwasser's kind invitation."

"Have you ever thought of casting yourself as the heroine?"

"Cast myself?" asked Mrs. Rivers, surprised. "Wouldn't you say it's a little too late for that?"

"Too late? In what way?" asked Denis.

"I think I am too old for a heroine, Denis," said Mrs. Rivers in a forthright way.

"Too old? I would not say that, Hermione. You will never grow old. You should remember the line from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety,' and realize how much it fits you."

"How gallant," Mrs. Rivers laughed at the obvious flattery. "Honestly, Denis, I have never thought anyone could compare a middle-aged, or perhaps even elderly English woman to Cleopatra... very charming. Now have some more cake, would you?" Mrs. Rivers did not see the strange look in Denis' eyes, or if she saw it, paid no attention whatsoever, since this could only be a silly joke, of course. And we must agree with her in these assumptions. Denis ate his second piece of cake, and after talking a little bit longer, they made an arrangement to meet again and discuss more of Mrs. Rivers' books. Finally, Denis went home, leaving Mrs. Rivers to fret about her upcoming meeting with Julian, despite her attempts to assure herself that

as Denis suggested, it would be easier to meet him in America than in England. After all, in Hollywood both of them would be surrounded by people who were not used to and would not accept Julian churlish ways.

Maisie drove to Mr. Alcott's house in an unsettled mood. At a late hour of the previous night, Shymmering telephoned her and said that Mr. Alcott, who was out at that moment, requested that he would invite Miss Robinson to dinner the next day, if she was not too busy, to discuss a matter of importance. For a moment, Maisie was about to decline since it was done on such short notice, but her better self laughed at the idea of employing such outdated and silly notions with an old friend, and she accepted.

But while driving to Mr. Alcott's house, she was wondering if she had done the right thing. Nes, in his new and unsettling image, was somewhat uncomfortable to be with. His Valentino looks were making huge waves in Hollywood already, and a few magazines had him featured with his hair slicked back and the hateful silk ascot around his neck. Maisie hoped he would be dressed normally at least that night, because every time she looked at him when dressed as Valentino, she almost had the giggles and had to fight it so as not to offend Mr. Alcott, who was, as we all know, quite the sensitive plant.

To her relief, he opened the door himself and was dressed normally. His hair was clear of the oil and was not slicked back at all. Maisie sighed with relief, entered the house, and gasped in disbelief.

The tasteful, elegant drawing room that Glamora had designed herself was covered and filled with new decorations and artifacts. Fur throws were draped on the chairs and the couches, and red and orange silk cloth that was probably the type used for Indian saris was attached to the existing curtains and also hanging from a hook in the ceiling, making the room look like something out of an old film about Empire Builders.

Scimitars hung on the walls, and carved walking sticks made of dark wood and sporting silver animal heads as handles leaned against the walls. A huge brass affair stood on a little table, but Maisie could not tell if was a hookah or a samovar. It gleamed malevolently, as if trying to menace the beholder. She suspected it was a modern imitation of something ancient, but what that something was she could not guess. The worst objects stood near the fireplace. On each side sat a huge porcelain creature, almost as tall as Maisie. She stared at the creatures and decided they must be some sort of felines, even though they were rather thin and elongated. One was totally black, the other striped like a Bengal Tiger. Maisie burst out laughing. "Hello there, Shere-Khan and Bagheera. Greetings to you, old friends!" She sat on the couch and laughed until tears came into her eyes. "Where did they come from? Did the ghost of Kipling choose to visit?"

Mr. Alcott looked a little hurt. "Shymmering found them in an antique shop. Why are you laughing? I thought they were swell!"

"You did? Well, maybe it's just that they were so unexpected. I had not realized that you had redecorated," said Maisie, trying to control her amusement. "Why did you do that? The house was perfectly good as it was."

"This was on the advice of one of the magazine people," said Mr. Alcott. "They thought that an exotic lifestyle would match my appearance. You know, Valentino, and Arab Sheiks, and India, and all that... Shymmering quite approved."

"I think Shymmering is losing his British style," said Maisie. "He is becoming the embodiment of Hollywood marketing. He may turn out to be a fake valet and steal your socks... well, never mind all that. You wanted to consult me about an important matter, Shymmering said."

"Yes, let's sit down and eat and I'll tell you all about it."

The elaborate dinner, prepared by Mr. Alcott's cook and served by the maid, was excellent in every way, but Maisie did not enjoy it; Mr. Alcott's dilemma took away her appetite. What he wanted to know was staggering – did she approve of the idea

of having him get temporarily engaged to a starlet, a course of action suggested by the marketing department?

“Engaged? But would it not interfere with your image as a ladies’ man?” asked Maisie. She put her knife and fork down, since she noticed, to her annoyance, that her hands were shaking a little with the tension she felt.

“They say it is quite the opposite. Apparently, the audience adores engagements, and then the same people love to see the engagements broken over something lurid and horrible,” explained Mr. Alcott, helping himself to more salmon.

“I know nothing about marketing, obviously,” said Maisie, “but no, I don’t like the idea. It is downright deceiving the public. Unless, of course, you fall in love with your fake fiancée and then it becomes the truth, but then it may ruin your career.”

“They say I must take the chance,” said Mr. Alcott.

“And what does Mr. Goldwasser say?”

“He approves. So does Miss Tudor. And I asked Rush, and he says everyone does it. But I wanted to hear what you say.”

“My opinion does not count, Nes. You have to do as the studio tells you, and that is how it is,” said Maisie, realizing she had no power left at all and giving in to fate.

“So I will have to do it,” said Mr. Alcott gloomily. “I don’t know yet who they picked for me. I hope it’s not Olga, at least, since she is so annoying. Remember her, Maise? The one who took the photographs with me? She constantly fiddled with her hair and jewelry... Life is hell, Maisie.”

“But you love acting, right?”

“No, I don’t care about acting, never did, I just wanted to be a star. I thought it would be great fun to be famous.”

“And now you are a star.”

“I know, but I am not sure if it will ever be fun.”

“What would you have done if you were not ‘discovered’ by Miss Tudor?”

“I would stay in the business of production. I enjoyed the work tremendously when I worked with Mr. Goldwasser. But I still want to be a star. It’s all so confusing, Maisie.” Maisie’s kind heart relented a little toward her old friend. She decided she

would wait and see how the engagement went on before she condemned him as a fake and a charlatan. At that moment, the doorbell rang.

“Oh my God,” said Mr. Alcott. “I completely forgot. It’s the singing teacher... she said she would drop in to deliver some sheet music we must start working on.” From behind the door, Maisie heard Helga’s robust laugh and a few words, and then the door burst open and Helga strode in.

“Good evening, Miss Robinson. Good evening, Mr. Alcott,” roared Helga cheerfully. “Helga remembered, and brought the sheet music she did, Mr. Alcott. You will sing them like a bird.”

“So how are the lessons advancing, Helga?” asked Maisie. She would have preferred to call Helga Miss something or other, but Helga never divulged her surname, and everyone called her by her Christian name.

“Superb!” said Helga. “Mr. Alcott has a voice like this little bird, what’s her name, Helga forgot...”

“Nightingale?” suggested Maisie.

“I thank you, yes, nightingale,” said Helga and patted Mr. Alcott’s shoulder with a loving touch that made him cringe with pain. “One day, a great singer he will be, Helga promises.” And she sat down heavily on one of the chairs, smiling at them like a doting mother.

“Will you have some coffee and cake, Helga?” asked Mr. Alcott, resigning himself to the inevitable.

“Oh yes, they will be delightful, coffee and cake Helga likes,” said the Amazon. Maisie poured the coffee into three cups, and sighed. Poor Nes, he must feel like his own worst enemy, she thought. Had he not been so infatuated with Glamora in the past, he would not have attempted stardom, but would have remained where he was, doing the work he loved. And now, when he no longer cared for Glamora, other than as a good friend, what a price he had to pay for his folly. Would there be a way out for him? Maisie doubted it.

Back in Barsestshire, Lady Norton glided majestically through her conservatories, snipping a leaf here, tying a branch there. Her gardener and his crew of helpers were excellent, but Lady Norton felt that there was never a substitute for the personal touch. The conservatories were a little oasis of summer magic while the world outside was bleak and cold, and that was the time Lady Norton loved them most. When the visit with her flowers was completed, she went to the special room where her new and precious cactus pots were housed and pampered. Not a single seed had sprouted yet, but she was not discouraged; the professor said it should take at least six weeks before she could see any change. Lady Norton made sure that the humidity, light, and temperature were perfectly in order, and then went back to the house for tea. She was expecting Lady Pomfret and Miss Merriman, a rare occasion since both ladies were so busy. She was looking forward to it. Somehow, since the filming of *Send Me No Lilies*, and the visits that this event prompted, the two ladies developed a slightly warmer relationship, and as for Miss Merriman, her company was always pleasant. Lady Norton overcame her unreasonable resentment over Miss Merriman's refusal to work with Mr. Goldwasser, a feeling that Mr. Goldwasser himself never shared, and was ready to accept Miss Merriman's right to conduct her own life as she pleased. She decided to offer her guests, before they left, some flowers from the hothouses. She knew Lady Pomfret no longer kept hothouses, and she was sure that such a present would give the ladies much pleasure.

In the car, Lady Pomfret said to Miss Merriman, "You know, Merry, for some reason I am beginning to enjoy the company of the old horse. I can't imagine why, but I do."

"I think I understand," said Miss Merriman after a few minutes of reflection. "It is not that Lady Norton has changed for the better, but this may be the clue. She has not changed at all. She represents the old order, and as all of us miss it, there is comfort in spending time with someone that has not bothered to accommodate the new ways."

“Could it be age, Merry? Am I getting so old that I cannot accept the new?”

“I don’t think so, Lady Pomfret,” said Miss Merriman. “First, you are far from old. Second, I believe it has to do with fatigue. Constantly having to adapt to the changes around us, on top of the hard work you do and some very natural worries, would exhaust anyone, young or old. Lady Norton, who looks and acts like a pillar of a never-changing edifice, allows you a moment of respite. I feel it myself.” And then they turned into the driveway, the butler ordered his underling to take the car to the garage, and the two ladies entered the hideous drawing room with great pleasure.

Lady Pomfret was not one for introspection, but Miss Merriman’s explanation made sense to her as they settled to tea. The fire burned brightly, reflecting itself in all the myriad brass objects, little mirrors sewn to Indian pillows, silver pots, and anything else that could shine. These ornaments were always there and were not about to be changed or removed, and the room was safe and comfortable in its sheer ugliness and supreme fussiness. Lady Pomfret leaned back in her overstuffed chair, leaned her head on the white crocheted antimacassar that was draped on the chair’s back, and half-listened to Lady Norton’s description of some plants she planned to grow in the coming spring. She did not need to listen attentively, she thought. Merry would ask intelligent questions, somehow knowing everything about the subject as she usually did. Lady Pomfret idly wondered if Merry read about gardening before the visit. Probably so, she often prepared herself for conversations...But then the subject changed and Lady Pomfret sat up.

“Yes, I received a letter from Miss Tudor,” said Miss Merriman, seemingly answering a question that Lady Pomfret had not heard. “She is rehearsing *Macbeth*. What a courageous leap she is making. I truly admire her.”

“Why a leap?” asked Lady Norton. “She is an actress. I would think a part is a part. It’s not as if she is changing to another profession.”

“She is not used to the classics, and in addition, she is accustomed to greatly rely on her magnificent looks. Macbeth requires very serious acting, more serious than anything she has ever done before, while good looks mean very little in this part.”

Lady Norton, who had little use for actors, sniffed loudly, but decided not say anything that might cause distress to her dear friend, Mr. Goldwasser. So peace and quiet continued undisturbed.

“Any news from Hermione?” asked Lady Pomfret. “Have you perhaps heard from her, Lady Norton?”

“Yes, indeed I have,” said Lady Norton. “She has just written. Poor Hermione... her son, this odious Julian, is about to have an exhibition of what he calls paintings in Hollywood, together with other disreputable fellow artists. They call themselves the Set of Five, or something like that.”

“Julian seems incapable of growing up,” said Lady Pomfret. “I have lost all patience with him. Phoebe is a dear, she completely got over her whining ways and is quite happy and on good terms with everyone, but Julian, wherever he goes, must cause some mischief.”

“And yet he is highly successful in his profession. Not many painters are,” said Miss Merriman. “Also, he has his professorship at Lazarus... quite an honour, I would say.”

“What would you expect?” said Lady Pomfret. “He was hand in glove with Them during the war, and They helped him develop his reputation. Remember how They would not send him to war, since They decided he was too important as an artist, and the country should not lose him? His career really took off, and he has a faithful following of people who buy everything he produces. When I think of all the good men and women who did serve, some losing their lives, while he was living a life of luxury in London during the war...”

“Indeed,” said Lady Norton with feeling. “And making these nightmarish pictures that I simply cannot abide. I love a good painting, but I expect to know if I am looking at someone’s face or at a bunch of cows under a tree. With Julian, it’s triangles and squares and blotches, and nasty colours, too. At least I hope

he will not make himself a nuisance to Hermione while in Hollywood.”

“He will have Mr. Goldwasser to contend with if he does not behave,” said Miss Merriman quietly.

“That is so,” said Lady Norton. Neither wanted to elaborate, but both knew that the clash, while inevitable, will undoubtedly end in a total triumph for one of the combatants. Julian Rivers was no match for Mr. Goldwasser.

Chapter Eight

“Glam,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “I must consult you about an important matter.”

Glamora looked up from the notes she was making as she was studying *Macbeth*. “Yes? What is it, Jake?”

“Well, Glam, the fact is, since you are soon to move into new roles, GMG needs a new Glamora Tudor...”

“I see,” said Glamora. Her voice showed no emotion at all. She seemed to be waiting for him to continue, fiddling with her pencil.

“We need someone to step into your type of films, your old roles, my dear. This type of films is the chief money-maker for GMG, as you well know.”

“I can see that,” said Glamora. “Naturally you need a new star. What do you want to consult me about?”

“I don’t want you to feel bad when a new star is going to rise, Glam. I am afraid you will regret your decision.”

“But Jake, I am not leaving the industry. I am only going in a new direction, a direction I have been dreaming about for awhile.”

“So you won’t feel bad when I promote a new star? You will not feel replaced, abandoned, or anything like that?”

“Not in the least, Jake. This phase of my career is over, and as soon as we finish the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*, I will be happy to see a new star. That is, as long as you don’t decide to marry her the way you married me after our first film.”

Mr. Goldwasser laughed. “After all the trouble we went through over the years? No, I think I will stick with my current marriage... but seriously, Glam, the masses will start adoring her. They will lose interest in you.”

Glamora sighed and put her book and pencil down. “Jake,” she said gently, “look at me. Look at what I do in my spare time. I am working on my future. The masses will move on, but if all goes well, I will create a new audience. In addition, I am not a

dog in the manger, and I will not grudge stardom to a new person. Bring on the girls, I say..."

Mr. Goldwasser was visibly much relieved. "Okay, Glam, you convinced me. I will stop worrying about it. As a matter of fact I have one in mind already, though I have never met her. Miss Brinton, I mean Mrs. Lewis, realized the need for a new star before I even mentioned it to her, and she told me she had a candidate with great potential, a girl from the town of Peoria, in Illinois."

"Peoria? Well... I hope she is not too much the small town type. That image would be hard to transform," said Glamora. "You know the type I mean – girl-next-door, athletic, wholesome... that type is very nice and sweet, but not what you need. Still, Mrs. Lewis knows the business as well as we do, Jake. I would trust her instincts. By all means, meet the girl."

"I agreed to meet her, of course. Mrs. Lewis also said that she would like you to take a look at her, and that your advice would be invaluable. She said the perfect time for our meeting would be the party we are giving this weekend. The girl can impress us, or not impress us, as she makes an entrance into a society event. What do you think?"

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Jake. Get me her address and I'll send her a formal invitation. By the way, Mr. Julian Rivers is also coming to the party. He had arrived yesterday, and called his mother. He could not come to her right away because his artists' group had so many engagements, so they will meet at the party, Mrs. Rivers said. She is so tense about it, poor thing."

"Mr. Julian Rivers is a bit of a trouble-maker, I gather," said Mr. Goldwasser. "Well, he can't do too much harm while surrounded by a large crowd. I will tell Mrs. Lewis to send Madge along. Madge Sorensen, that is the name of our potential star."

"You are going to give her a new name, I hope?" asked Glamora, shuddering at the name. "You won't let her stay Madge?"

"Of course," said Mr. Goldwasser. "I already thought about it. Nothing I can do with her real name, it's impossible to

modify, the way I did with your name. The only thing that came to my mind was Magdalena, which is a pretty name, but it is too religious, and therefore might offend the censors. I asked Mrs. Lewis what Madge looked like, and she said the girl is an elegant brunette type, and she plans to dress her in silver. Sort of star-like, don't you agree? I don't mean Hollywood star, but a real star, like a galaxy...I think I will call her Estella... Estella Starlight, at least for the moment. No, that is too much astronomy... Estella Moonshadow. What do you think?"

"Nice, a very pretty name," said Glamora, and returned to her book. Lady Macbeth was much more interesting to her, at that moment, than the young woman who might one day take her place in the galaxy of stars.

Mr. Goldwasser sipped his sherry and looked at Mrs. Rivers' son with idle curiosity. Julian was talking about himself, something that our loyal readers would not be too surprised about, since they know that Julian always talked about himself, wherever he went and whoever was his listener. While this was the first time Mr. Goldwasser ever met the famous artist, he was not entirely taken aback by his bad manners. A shrewd judge of character, Mr. Goldwasser immediately took the measure of Julian's personality and nature, and was secretly amused by his crude behaviour.

Julian stood in the middle of the crowded room, waving his glass of sherry with careless abandon that threatened the dress of anyone standing near him. At that moment, his would-be victim was Maisie. Generally extremely bored with anything relating to modern art, she only remained in her place because, to tell the truth, Julian at almost forty was as good looking as he had been when we had first met him as a very young man, perhaps even better looking. The deep-set, dark blue eyes were as intense as ever, and the black locks that were still flung recklessly above the marble brow, which bore practically no wrinkles, were slightly touched with silver. He could not be called elegant,

exactly, since he still slouched and carried himself sloppily, but he remained as slim as ever and his tall figure looked impressive in his very expensive suit, since at least he had learned how to dress well over the years, with the help of very good London tailors. After about ten minutes of listening to tiresome art jargon and name-dropping, Maisie decided that the good looks were not worth the boredom of listening to Julian's story about the reason for the exhibition in Hollywood, and excused herself, saying she had to talk to her employer. Julian, caring very little who his listener was, turned around and noticed a golden-haired starlet who looked at him with adoring eyes. All was well, therefore, as far as Julian was concerned, and he resumed his monologue undisturbed. The starlet seemed to like it.

Maisie wandered off into another room, just as crowded and extremely noisy, to make sure she would avoid Julian for the rest of the evening. Suddenly she noticed a hush, and many heads turning in one direction. A newcomer walked slowly into the crowd, and almost everyone was looking at her.

Even in Hollywood, where beauty was a regular commodity, the young woman stood out in the crowd. Tall and willowy, her slim figure was emphasized by a dress made of delicate silver cloth, cut on the bias and floating around her like a soft cloud. Her very short, coal-black hair was cut *à la garçon*, fitting closely around her well-shaped little head. Her eyes were also coal black, slightly turned up at the corners, surrounded by the longest, thickest lashes imaginable and set under perfectly arched, thin brows. Her pale, luminescent skin was warmed by the deep crimson lipstick she wore on her full lips. She wore no jewellery except a pair of enormous Tahitian black pearls as earrings. Maisie looked at the girl's feet. Her beautiful black patent leather shoes sported heels as high as any shoes worn by Glamora Tudor. Maisie thought wistfully that the girl could play Titania without changing her wardrobe, trailing fairy dust and Celtic glamour wherever she went. The gorgeous apparition moved softly to Mr. Goldwasser, who was standing not too far from Maisie, taking to a small group of people which included

Mr. Alcott, who usually tried to stay close to Mr. Goldwasser, possibly for the sense of security he apparently provided.

“Mr. Goldwasser,” she said in a low, husky voice, directing her smouldering eyes at her future employer and offering her hand, “I am Estella Moonshadow.”

“How nice of you to come, Miss Moonshadow,” said Mr. Goldwasser, shaking her hand warmly. “I was hoping you could make it to our little gathering. Mrs. Lewis told me so much about you. I would like you to meet a few very nice people. Mr. Jones, Mr. Roberts, Mr. Stonor, Mr. Alcott...” Maisie sighed. She clearly knew who the fake fiancée was going to be. Or, judging from the way Nes was looking at Miss Moonshadow, perhaps not so fake after all. Maisie turned around and returned to the first room; the threat of colliding with Julian Rivers again did not matter much anymore.

At that moment, she noticed Mrs. Rivers, who had just come down from her room. Maisie wanted to go to her, but was prevented from it by seeing her approach Julian. She could not hear what they said, but they seemed to meet amicably enough, so Maisie decided that the only thing to do was to find someone she knew and start talking to him or her so to not to be seen standing by herself. With this excellent plan in mind, she walked to the bar at the far end of the room, and was pleased to see Glamora standing there, waiting for her drink to be mixed, and as usual, surrounded by a group of admirers.

“Maisie! Come and have a drink with me!” said Glamora. Maisie smiled and accepted a sherry from one of the waiters. “Such a nice party,” she said politely and with a sad lack of sincerity, as she was not enjoying herself at all. “Yes,” said Glamora, “it seems to be a success. What a crowd, though. I am losing my taste for such huge gatherings, I am afraid... Maisie, I need to talk to you. Let’s move to the window, where we can have some peace.” She waved at the small crowd around her and took Maisie to a window seat. “I wonder if the new girl has come yet. Did you see her anywhere?” she said to Maisie

“New girl?” said Maisie, wondering if Glamora meant the fake fiancée.

“Yes, did Jake tell you?” said Glamora. “He is searching for a new star to replace me after the sequel is released and I move on to different roles, and there is a girl, introduced by Mrs. Lewis, who was supposed to come to the party. It’s all hush-hush, of course, but she may become a great star soon, if Jake likes her. It will take place only after I change my roles, of course, so sales of the sequel and of *Dance We Shall* would not be hurt.”

“I think I did see her,” said poor Maisie. “Is her name Miss Moonshadow?”

Glamora laughed. “More like Miss Sorensen,” she said. “Miss Madge Sorensen. She is a good little girl from Peoria, but according to Mrs. Lewis, very beautiful, and more important, possesses great star potential.”

“She is magnificent,” said Maisie with her usual candour and her talent of accepting reality. “Not as magnificent as you, Mrs. Goldwasser. No one will ever be like you, not in a thousand years, and that is the plain truth and not a silly compliment. But she is very beautiful, and Mrs. Lewis chose her wisely, because since her type of beauty is so different from yours, it won’t seem as if she is trying to imitate you, or that she was hand-picked. She is the willowy brunette type, all silver and stardust and exotic eyes turned up at the corners.”

“Good, that is perfect,” said Glamora. “Come, let’s go meet her. Just remember to call her by her new name, forget she was once Madge, that is very important. I should know...” Maisie could not refuse, and anyway, it had to be done some time, so the sooner it was over the better. They went to the next room and there stood Miss Moonshadow, surrounded by a group of men who were so obviously entranced by her, it was a shame to disturb them, thought Maisie. But Glamora did not have such scruples as she approached the new star.

“Glam,” said Mr. Goldwasser, who was the only one who did not seem to be moonstruck by the newcomer. “Here you are. Allow me to introduce Miss Estella Moonshadow to you.” Glamora held out her hand and Miss Moonshadow took it reverently. Velvet violet eyes met black diamond ones, and the two ladies smiled at each other. No, Madge will never be a

Glamora, thought Maisie, gazing at them. But times change, the world must go on, past must merge into future. Estella Moonshadow would do for a star.

“I have always admired you so much, Miss Tudor,” Miss Moonshadow said simply. “I am so happy to meet you.”

“I am very pleased to meet you too, Miss Moonshadow. I would like you to meet Miss Robinson, our best and most admired script writer.” Miss Moonshadow smiled and shook hands with Maisie. Her eyes were so black that you could hardly see the transition between the iris and the pupil, and they had an unpleasant, disturbing effect on Maisie, as if she was looking into an abyss. But she behaved politely and expressed her pleasure at meeting Miss Moonshadow. Mr. Alcott stood nearby. He was very quiet and did not seem to notice Maisie’s presence.

“And what do you do, Miss Moonshadow?” Maisie asked pleasantly. “You certainly look like a movie star to me.”

The girl smiled. “Thank you, Miss Robinson, you are so kind. No, I am not a movie star, far from it, since I am a mere beginner, but I do want to act in films. That is why Mrs. Lewis, who is so very encouraging, sent me here to meet Mr. Goldwasser and Miss Tudor, and here I am, meeting so many wonderful and interesting people. I do hope to become an actress.”

“Have you acted before?” asked Maisie.

“Only in amateur theatricals, at home in Illinois,” said Miss Moonshadow, “but I do love acting so much... I would so much like to find a role in a film, to see if I am any good. My mother always says, if you don’t try it, you’ll never know.”

“I am sure you will find a role,” said Mr. Alcott. Maisie suddenly thought that he looked as sheepish as he did during the days of his calf-love for Glamora. But this time everything was different. Mr. Alcott had become famous, extraordinarily handsome, and had influential friends and excellent prospects for a long, financially rewarding career. His attentions would be very, very welcome by any unattached young woman, particularly one who aspired to roles in films. Yes, this time he would not feel rebuffed.

This is it, Maisie said to herself. I have to stop worrying about Nes, he is on his own, and he is doing very well. He no longer needs me, and frankly, I can't imagine why I even think about it – surely I have no need to have Nes hang around me. We can remain good friends, of course, but take separate roads. I can't imagine why I would even mind who is his fake fiancée, or his real one, at that. If this girl becomes Mr. Goldwasser's new star, naturally it would be fitting to present her as the fiancée of the rising male star, it would work well for the box office and Mr. Goldwasser would certainly encourage it. What do I care, though? I have no reason to... for all I know, Mr. Goldwasser will engage me to write scripts for them as a couple, for quite a few romantic films. That will be a very good thing for my own career, so it's all for the best... And perhaps Maisie believed what she was saying to herself. We hope so, because we certainly do not believe it at all, not a word of it.

In the meantime, Denis Stonor, who was not terribly interested in the newcomer, went in search of Mrs. Rivers. He wanted to make sure that her meeting with Julian was going well, and perhaps, if needed, act as a buffer and diffuse any ill feelings that might arise. He found them quickly enough, standing in a corner, and approached them with a smile.

"Ah, Denis," said Mrs. Rivers with what seemed to Denis to be some relief at having him near her. "Allow me to introduce my son, Julian."

Julian shook Denis' proffered hand. "I have heard your music," he said grudgingly.

"And I have seen your paintings," said Denis, laughing. "So we are even."

"Strange to meet you here," said Julian. "Of all places."

"Well, most of my work is done in America, Mr. Rivers, since I was here from before the war. I don't do much work in England, so it's not really strange. I only come to England occasionally, these days."

“This is my first exhibition here,” said Julian. “About time, I say. Can you imagine that I was never invited before? A slight, I should say.”

“No, not at all,” said Denis. “Recognition of artists from Europe takes time in America. But I am sure the exhibition will be a great success.”

“They don’t have too many great artists in America,” said Julian loudly, so loudly that a few heads turned in their direction. “I don’t see a single painting of mine in this house, by the way, or any of my group’s. Don’t these people have any taste in art?”

“This might change after the exhibition,” said Denis, maintaining his composure for Mrs. Rivers’ sake.

“They would do well to buy from us. Good investment, and you know how they care about money here. Americans adore money, that is all they think about. No culture at all, I think.”

Denis did not look at Mrs. Rivers, but he could sense her embarrassment even without seeing her face. Changing the subject would be the only way, but how?

“I understand that all five of your group are here?” he finally said.

“Yes, come to think of it, I must go and join them, we have another engagement. Goodbye, mother. I’ll see you soon.” He turned around and left abruptly, not bothering to look for Mr. Goldwasser or Miss Tudor to thank them. Mrs. Rivers looked after him with some despair.

“Not too bad, Hermione,” said Denis, desperately wanting to comfort her. “Nothing terrible happened.”

Mrs. Rivers sighed. “You are right. Nothing terrible, not yet. Not very nice, but it could be worse. If he stays for a long period, it will be.”

“Come along, let’s have a drink and forget about it. Other than the comment about Americans, which only a few people heard and they don’t even know who he is, nothing at all. Was he rude to you?”

“No, no more than usual. But he is staying for a while. It will come, and at the worst time, as always.”

No one had ever seen Lady Norton exhibit such discomfiture before. She was pacing the room, back and forth, much like a prisoner in his cell. Once in a while, she even wrung her hands pathetically; Glamora would have appreciated the gesture, perhaps consider adapting it to her interpretation of Lady Macbeth. The professor had just returned from London, and at that moment, was refreshing his appearance in preparation for tea, unaware of the dreadful fate of the discarded seeds. Lady Norton had not seen him yet. How was she going to tell him that the precious seeds he so carefully obtained for her in the arid wilderness of Arizona were gone forever? She imagined him, wearing a pith helmet and a hunter's vest with many pockets, walking from cactus to thorny cactus under the scorching desert sun, conquering the rough, stony terrain and braving the dangerous coyotes, that is, if coyotes existed in Arizona and if they were dangerous, in his attempts to secure her, Lady Norton, the rare and valuable seeds, which now lay rotting under the dead begonias. She had forbidden the gardener to clear away the flower bed. Anyone else would naturally be afraid to order a gardener to do anything, since gardeners, as we all know, are most imperious and obey no one, but Lady Norton knew no fear. Her gardener actually feared her, and stayed in her employment only because he could boast about her abusive ways to his friends, who relished the stories over their evening beer. Why she had forbidden him to remove the dead begonias was not entirely clear to Lady Norton, since the seeds were already drowned in all the moisture, but she had a vague hope that the professor could do something, create some kind of miracle, pull a rabbit out of a hat. She might have felt better if she had known that he had obtained the seeds from the Seed Department, where large quantities of useless but well-organized seeds were kept for no reason at all, and had never faced the dangers of the wild, but they had never discussed his methods for obtaining plants and seeds.

After a quarter of an hour or thereabout, the professor came in, cheerful and eager for his good tea. Seeing his desperate, pale hostess, he immediately noticed that something was wrong.

“My dear Lady Norton, what is the matter? You seem disturbed, much disturbed!”

Lady Norton wished she were wandering the desert herself at that moment, with or without a pith helmet. She would have much rather face a ferocious coyote, baring his teeth at her and growling, then confess her crime of losing the seeds. But she was a brave woman. The truth had to be told, and she pulled herself together and told it.

The professor listened to the tale of horror without flinching. To Lady Norton’s surprise, he even ate his toast and cake and drank his tea as she was telling it. “Do not let it distress you, dear Lady Norton,” he finally said. “In my position, I have encountered other enemies... this is not the first time.”

“Enemies? My maid Carla is your enemy, professor? But why?” asked Lady Norton, bewildered.

“Your maid did not act on her own, Lady Norton. I suspect she was acting under the directions of my true Nemesis, Professor Elspeth Hilliard-Sabre, from Kensington. I had noticed a gleam of joy in Professor’s Hilliard-Sabre’s eyes, which surprised me, since my lectures were such a glorious success. I expected her to be green with envy, but instead, she looked triumphant. So I believe that while I was taking her audience away from her, she knew your maid was doing the nefarious deed, and it gave her great pleasure.”

“But how would Professor Hilliard-Sabre know Carla?”

“These international criminals have their ways; they always find the person they need. She must have contacted Carla, and bribed her with large sums of money. Would you object to my interviewing your maid, Lady Norton? Perhaps I will have a chance of learning something from her, unless she is very cunning indeed. I am anxious to know if Professor Hilliard-Sabre was the mastermind behind this shady affair.”

Lady Norton did not think of Carla as particularly cunning, but the Professor’s word was Law, and she rang the bell. The

butler appeared, expecting to be asked to take away the tea things, but instead was instructed to send Carla to Lady Norton immediately. In a few minutes, Carla appeared and curtsied to the professor. Lady Norton looked at Carla's rather vacant eyes and dull expression. Could she be such a consummate actress as to hide her criminal nature under such a stupid appearance?

"Carla," said the professor, "I wish to speak to you about the seeds."

"Wot seeds, sir?" said Carla, who had forgotten the whole incident.

"The seeds you threw out of the window when you cleaned your mistress' silver."

"Oh, them seeds. I never saw seeds, sir. I saw brown powder. I told my lady it was brown powder and it spilled all over the white lace, something dreadful, sir."

The professor rose from his seat. He was much shorter than Carla, so he could not tower over her, but his angry expression was enough to frighten anyone. "Who told you to throw out the powder?" he roared. "Why didn't you ask your lady's permission to do so?"

Carla took a step backwards. "But my lady is always a-telling me to clean, clean, clean, sir! If my lady ever saw filthy brown powder on the white lace..."

"Yes, yes, but did someone pay you to remove the powder, Carla? Did anyone speak to you about it? I am warning you – the truth must be told. Who paid you to clean the brown powder?"

"Pay me to clean? Only the housekeeper pays me wages, sir. Regular like, she does, sir, but not for cleaning any powder. No one said anything about powder to me, or seeds, too, ever, sir."

"Did you know these seeds were very valuable? Rare?" said the professor in desperation.

"Rare seeds? Whatever do you mean, sir? Seeds is seeds, there are ever so many seeds in packets in the gardener's shack, them with the nice pictures on them, and them from the garden in brown paper, too. Seeds, sir, they come from plants, you see, so they come up every year regular-like, they are not rare, sir. I never heard of such a thing..."

The professor gave up. Hearing Carla teach him, the great horticulturist, about the origin of seeds was too much for his sensitive nature, and he felt somewhat offended. Waving his hand, he dismissed the maid. She left the room, just as offended as the professor, and shaking her head about the stupidity of the upper classes. Rare seeds indeed! Next, they will be talking about rare water and rare bread! Carla had a mind to give notice, but after talking it over with Cook, who said that the gentry would be a bit crazy wherever she went, she wisely decided to stay; after all, the professor was not going to stay forever.

When she was gone, the professor said, "Well, I did not learn anything from her, but it does not prove that Professor Hilliard-Sabre was not the mastermind. I am sure she is, somehow. May I see the area where the seeds were thrown into?"

Lady Norton led him to the window, and showed him the watery grave of the precious seeds.

"I did not let my gardener clean it, in case you wanted to see it, Professor," she said.

"How long ago were the seeds thrown out?" the professor asked.

"About three weeks ago."

"Ah, well, you may allow the gardener to clear the beds for winter. We will find nothing there. But do not despair, dear Lady Norton. Let us go and look at the pots where we have planted the other half."

"Why is Professor Hilliard-Sabre your enemy?" asked Lady Norton as they were walking to the cactus room.

"Our feud started many years ago," said the professor. "It began with her idea of producing small booklets, with colourful botanical illustrations added to the text, and selling them to the masses. I objected vehemently to such vulgar methods. She won and the books were produced and sold in England, and then in America as well."

"And what happened then?"

"As I continued to object, her argument was that the booklets made plenty of money for Kensington Gardens. Money! What about scholarship? Of course, Kensington agreed with her, while

my department in Arizona agreed with me. It went on and on, with other botanists and horticulturists joining the feud. Botanists, as you know, can have strong views, and the arguments had been raging for decades, even though the booklets are now long out of print. She hates me, she truly hates me. You should read the article she wrote, ten years ago, to the *New York Times*, denouncing me as an old-fashioned creature who does not understand modern times, just because I objected to a new solar panel in an historic greenhouse in Iceland.”

“Obviously a very disagreeable person,” said Lady Norton loyally, though deep in her heart she thought that illustrated versions of her own books could look very well. “Did you respond to the article?”

“Of course. Honour demanded it. I exposed her unscholarly approach to raising sweet peas out of season. One of my comments, about how the Romans knew how to use thin mica panels for raising roses out of season, two thousand years before the learned professor was born, made the whole horticultural world laugh at her expense.” He shook his head vindictively, but the thought of Professor Hilliard-Sabre’s temporary disgrace apparently pacified his wounded pride. At that moment they reached the cactus room, and Lady Norton unlocked the door.

“Do you think the locks are secure, Lady Norton? Does anyone else have a key?”

“No, this is the only key to this lock. I ordered it myself some time ago, when we had just started our correspondence.”

“So it would not be possible for anyone else to enter the room. That is good. You cannot be too careful with people like Professor Hilliard-Sabre.”

The professor took out a magnifying glass and observed the soil under the glass. Suddenly he exclaimed with joy. “I can see a sprout!” he said, handing the glass to Lady Norton. Indeed, a green dot which would be barely visible to non-botanizing mortals, could be clearly seen by Lady Norton. Instantly, the professor and Lady Norton forgot the arch-enemy and experienced the glow of success that only plant enthusiasts can

feel when they see a green object, smaller than the head of the pin, miraculously appear over what used to be barren soil.

Chapter Nine

The next day, Mrs. Rivers and Maisie finished their morning work on the script for the unnamed sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*. Maisie busily tucked her papers into a dilapidated briefcase, while Mrs. Rivers put hers into a neat paper file. “Are you in a great rush, Miss Robinson?” she asked. “Won’t you stay for a while, have a cup of coffee and some cake? It is still early, we did not work very long.”

“As a matter of fact, I am not in a rush at all,” said Maisie. “My afternoon session was postponed until three o’clock, since the other writers had to attend a conference. I would love a cup of coffee.”

“I’ll call for it, then. Yes, we did not do much work this morning... it’s my fault. I am a bit tired today, after yesterday’s party,” said Mrs. Rivers, and rang for the maid.

“So am I,” said Maisie listlessly. “I feel rather weary. Did you meet Miss Moonshadow?”

“No, I didn’t even see her very well, but they talked about her at breakfast, and she is coming over this afternoon to talk some things over. Mrs. Lewis is coming, too. It seems to me they have some plans for her future.”

“Yes,” said Maisie. “That is the plan, I gather.”

“Is she that beautiful? They said she has rare star quality.”

“Well, yes, she is very beautiful, and exotic looking. As for the star quality, I am not sure. She has a pretty speaking voice, low and romantic, but her conversation is that of a good, sturdy small-town girl. I couldn’t tell.”

“Mr. Goldwasser is a good judge of stars. I imagine he will know if he gets a chance to spend some time with her.”

“Yes, he has picked some of the best, and of course he will know how to improve her style. Everyone at the party was rather enchanted with her. By the way, I met your son, Mrs. Rivers.”

“Did he say anything terrible?” asked Mrs. Rivers anxiously, expecting the worst.

“No, not at all,” said Maisie, a little surprised by the question. “He talked about modern art, that is all. I did not understand much of what he said, since I know nothing about the subject, but he did not say anything terrible. Why?”

“In England he is thought of as brash and rude...” said Mrs. Rivers.

“We are less sensitive to manners in America,” said Maisie. “Not that we like bad manners, not at all, but we appreciate straightforward behaviour more than you do in England. I think it is because we are a much younger country.”

“I do feel comfortable in America,” said Mrs. Rivers, musing. “You know, in England, I am thought of as grasping, tough, and sometimes extremely hard to deal with. I don’t think I really am, but that is the general idea, and it’s shared by many, even my own publisher, even though he made quite a bit of money off my books. You would think he would like me, but he does not.”

“I can’t imagine why,” said Maisie. “You know what you want and you say it, but there is nothing wrong with that in my book.”

“I think that finally, after all these years, I can explain it. Have you ever met Mrs. Morland, the famous author of the delightful Madame Koska books?”

“Yes, once, in Barchester,” said Maisie. “A very nice lady, I liked her very much. Why?”

“That is just it. Everyone, and I really mean that literally, everyone likes Mrs. Morland very much. No one dislikes her; I should hate her, or at least be jealous at her for her general popularity, but I like her nonetheless. In contrast to my situation, her publisher adores her and has become a personal friend, almost a member of the family, since he married her goddaughter. As I said before, my own publisher cordially dislikes me, and has a horrible nickname for me, always behind my back of course, but people told me about it often enough. You see, Mrs. Morland does not take herself, or her work, very seriously. She always says she writes strictly for badly needed money, in the early years to educate her sons, then to give them

gifts, or something along these lines, and she insists that she is not a “real author,” whatever that term means to her. She takes her financial dealings with her publisher on faith, too, and does not bother much about her sales, or about marketing; she does not even read reviews of her books. Once, long ago, I offered to introduce her to the firm that does a cutting service for me, you know, reviews and suchlike, where my work is mentioned. She was not at all interested. Polite, of course, she always is, but totally bored with the idea of the clippings. The English love that kind of character in a woman. They don’t like a woman like myself, who takes her work very, very seriously, and who is concerned about the business side of it as well, such as advances and royalties and advertisements. They think of me as too pushy.”

“In America, Mrs. Rivers, you would be considered a perfectly normal author, and Mrs. Morland, nice as she is, would be an anomaly,” said Maisie. “Working women like us need to take their business seriously. My work means a lot to me.”

“That is exactly what I was wondering about. I feel so comfortable here. No one gives me a look of disdain when I mention my work, or my fans, or if I talk about writing as a business, which of course it is. I suspect I am happier here than I am at home.”

At that moment, Denis Stonor was announced. Neither of the ladies was surprised, since he came very often, and most of the times unannounced, to visit Mrs. Rivers at that time of day after she had told him about her morning and afternoon working routines. They were pleased to see him, coffee was offered, and Denis settled for a short but pleasant visit.

“Did I hear you say something about being happy here, Hermione?” he asked.

“Yes, you did,” said Mrs. Rivers, and repeated her conversation with Maisie. Denis sat quietly, deep in thought.

“Have you ever considered the possibility of settling here, Hermione?” he finally said. “With your experience, talents, and connections, you could easily get excellent script work in Hollywood. And of course, you should continue writing your

wonderful books, and simply send them to your publisher in England.”

Mrs. Rivers stared at him in surprise. “Stay in America? But I couldn’t...”

“Why couldn’t you, Mrs. Rivers?” asked Maisie enthusiastically. “Of course you could! How delightful that would be!”

“But... but... my family, my work...”

Denis looked at her with a little smile lighting his face. “Your work will continue, even expand. Your children are grown. As for your husband, I understand that you often spend time in different locations because of your respective lines of work. What would be the difference?”

“But in England we are just in different towns, not in different continents!” said Mrs. Rivers, still shocked by the idea. “What will people say?” Denis laughed.

“Honestly, Hermione... What will people say? Why would they object to your work in Hollywood? We live in fast times, people work on both sides of the Atlantic, the steamships and aeroplanes are busily taking everyone back and forth, and you are a sophisticated traveller who had been all over the world. There is nothing unusual about my suggestion.”

“None whatsoever,” said Maisie. “You should think about it, Mrs. Rivers. You could do magnificent scripts, with your talent for romance, and you will be so highly appreciated here. I can assure you, Mrs. Rivers, we will all love to have you. Why, I can see every single one of your books turned into a splendid film. Mr. Stonor knows that I, too, admire your work very much.”

“Very well, I will think about it,” said Mrs. Rivers, suddenly becoming brave. “This could be the adventure of a lifetime. Thank you so much for your encouragement, Miss Robinson. You are so kind.”

“That’s the spirit, Mrs. Rivers,” said Maisie, putting down her cup. “You and I could do a lot of good work together! Well, I must be off to my afternoon session. Goodbye, Mr. Stonor. I’ll

see you tomorrow morning, Mrs. Rivers. Thanks for the lovely coffee and cake!”

Mrs. Rivers sat quietly, looking at her coffee cup. Denis sipped his own, saying nothing, allowing her to digest the revolutionary idea. After a few minutes, she raised her eyes and said, “Do you really think I could, Denis?”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t,” said Denis. “It’s not such an extraordinary idea, after all.”

“Perhaps not... Should I mention it to Mr. Goldwasser?”

“Not quite yet. Talk about it first with Glamora, and see how she feels about it. There is a mix of shrewdness and sympathy in her, and as a woman, she will be better able to put herself in your place. Then, Mr. Goldwasser will see to the practical side. Just take your time and think about it.”

“Both Miss Robinson and you seem to wish that I stay here. I am very grateful for it, and a little surprised. I am not used to that, to be quite honest.”

Denis said nothing for a few seconds. “I wish it very, very much, Hermione. I don’t think you realize how much I will miss you when you go back to England.”

“You will miss me? Really?”

“Don’t you know it? Really? Well, I had better leave now. I know you want to go into your afternoon’s work on your book. By the way, did you ever find a name for the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*?”

“No, not yet,” said Mrs. Rivers absent-mindedly. “No, we can’t think of anything, somehow. The story is about the reunion of the lovers after the husband’s death, as you know. It should be a simple thing to find a title, but for whatever reason, we can’t.”

“How about *My Love, Far Away*?” said Denis, and left abruptly. Mrs. Rivers stood staring after him. Then she sighed and went to her room to work on her Hollywood book. She did not make much progress, though.

A few hours later, Mrs. Rivers went down to tea. She was rather curious about meeting Miss Moonshadow, but her thoughts were mainly occupied by Denis’ idea. Should she

attempt to settle in Hollywood, at least for a while? Why not? Yes, it was an interesting and unusual career move. Anyone would view it as a good business deal. So if it were strictly business, why did it feel as if something else was at the bottom of it, some mystery, some intrigue? Why would she be more emotional about staying in Hollywood than spending time in Paris or Rome, which she had done often? Mrs. Rivers shook her head, decided to dismiss the thought for the moment, and entered the living room. Only Glamora and Mr. Goldwasser were there, but after a short wait, Mrs. Lewis and Miss Moonshadow were announced.

Even in the strong light of a California afternoon, Miss Moonshadow looked like Titania. She was dressed in a white suit, simple to a point of starkness, wore no jewellery, and again her only makeup was her crimson lipstick. And yet her beauty was so sophisticated, so dazzling, that it took Mrs. River's breath away. They were introduced, and everyone sat down to tea.

"I've never had English-style tea before," said Miss Moonshadow, eyeing the thin porcelain cups with some discomfort.

"Have you ever been to Europe, Miss Moonshadow?" Asked Glamora.

"No, never. To tell the truth, Miss Tudor, I never travelled much even in the United States. I went to New York once, on a school trip, when I was sixteen. I was so scared..."

"Scared? Of what?" asked Mr. Goldwasser.

"So many people... We were taken to Times Square and everyone pushed so hard and they were screaming... not like Peoria at all."

"Well, and what do you think of Hollywood, then?"

"Scary, too... but I go in the car everywhere, so it's better. Mommy told me to be very careful."

"Of what?" asked Mrs. Rivers.

"Oh, everything. Strangers, bad people... one can't be too careful, Mommy said so..."

“And what does your father do, Miss Moonshadow?” asked Mrs. Rivers, desperate for a subject Miss Moonshadow could discuss.

“Daddy is a supervisor in a company that manufactures tractors and cranes and things like that,” said Miss Moonshadow proudly. “They have quite a few of these in Peoria, but Daddy works for the best one. And all my little brothers and sisters go to school. I am eighteen, you know, and I graduated high school last year, but they are still in school.” She looked at a scone, a masterpiece baked to perfection by Glamora’s English cook which she had brought over from England so many years ago.

Miss Moonshadow was obviously a bit confused as to how to eat it, so Mrs. Rivers, taking pity on the girl, took one herself and put clotted cream and strawberry jam on it, very slowly and carefully. Miss Moonshadow looked on very seriously, and attempted to imitate her lead, not very successfully; some cream dripped on the plate and the jam did not stick.

Mr. Goldwasser sighed inaudibly. This perfect beauty, so exotic and sophisticated at first sight, needed a lot of polish to make her into a star. He looked at Mrs. Lewis in mock despair, and she smiled reassuringly. She knew, apparently, what to do. At least, Mr. Goldwasser hoped so. He remembered the first day Glamora showed up at the auditions in London. A simple London girl, true, but the seeds of sophistication were there, the great potential shone in the large violet eyes. He looked at his wife affectionately, remembering the young Maura-Gayle Stewart, so scared, so brave, so splendid. Of course, no one would ever be like her, it was not to be expected... but they will do their best with Miss Moonshadow.

At that moment, the maid appeared, and announced Mr. Julian Rivers. He was not invited to tea, but of course no one objected to his visiting his mother whenever he could find a moment in his very busy schedule.

Julian slouched into the room. He seemed rather unkempt, as if he spent his day doing unlikely physical work at the exhibition in preparation for the opening, which was to occur in two days. His hair was falling over his brow, he was not cleanly

shaven, and altogether seemed as if he did not expect to find guests. Which was rather silly, because everyone knew that tea time was usually very busy at Mr. and Mrs. Goldwasser's welcoming home, and guests almost always showed up, bidden or unbidden.

"Oh, I had no idea you had guests," he said sulkily to Glamora.

"Do sit down, Mr. Rivers," Glamora answered graciously. "Have a cup of tea. Mrs. Lewis, have you ever met Mr. Rivers? I am sure Miss Moonshadow never did. Mr. Rivers is a well known artist from England, and he has an exhibition which we are all looking forward to visiting."

"I saw you at the party," said Julian to Miss Moonshadow, ignoring Mrs. Lewis, who seemed surprised at his rudeness. "I'd like to paint you. You will do nicely as a black and white study with red spots. Come to my hotel, I'll introduce you to the group." Miss Moonshadow seemed very scared by this offer and said nothing. Instead, she stirred her tea.

"I am afraid right now Miss Moonshadow is not coming to anyone's hotel, nor does she have the time to be painted," said Mrs. Lewis firmly. "Perhaps some time in the future."

"I don't plan to be here some time in the future," said Julian as he accepted a cup of tea. "Ah, scones, good, I miss them." He put a large amount of cream and jam on the scone and took a big bite. "If she does not come to the hotel to be painted within the next few days, she will lose the opportunity of a lifetime of being painted by a genius."

"I think we will take that chance," intervened Mr. Goldwasser quietly. "Miss Moonshadow will be extremely busy in the next few months."

Julian looked at the girl and said, "Well, you had your chance for immortality. Listen to me, my girl, you will come or not come, but if you always let other people tell you what to do, you'll never get anywhere."

Mrs. Rivers, who was too mortified to say anything, ignored the exchange as if it did not happen. She noticed that Miss Moonshadow glanced at Julian a few times, very furtively.

This would not do. Julian was tremendously good looking, and some women found him attractive, particularly silly and innocent women, but even an empty-headed little actress like Miss Moonshadow should know that if she was going to be groomed by Mr. Goldwasser and Mrs. Lewis for stardom, scandalous personal romance with an older man had no place in her current activities. But did she know that? And would Julian ever stop making mischief? Mrs. Rivers wished her beloved and difficult son were safely back in England.

“Well,” said Mr. Goldwasser and got up. “Mrs. Rivers, I am sure you and your son have plenty to talk about. We will leave you to it, and the rest of us must go to the library and discuss some plans. Very nice to see you again, Mr. Rivers. I look forward to the opening of the exhibition.” He opened the door for the ladies, and they all were about to leave the room, when voices were heard from the corridor and to Mrs. Rivers’ relief, she heard the voices of Emma and Edmond who came home from their respective occupations at the same time, accompanied by Rush Yukon, who apparently had met them at the entrance. The meeting at the library was postponed for a few minutes until introductions were made and a few words were exchanged.

Emma had met Miss Moonshadow at the party, but they had not had a chance to talk at any length. She was struck by her beauty. It was not easy for anyone to get used to the sheer number of incredibly beautiful people in Hollywood. Emma used to think about herself as an attractive girl, and indeed she was, but her delicate style could not compete with the flash and glamour of the many starlets she met, and she began to feel intimidated by them. However, her work with Miss Skull, which she had recently started, improved her mood considerably. Very quickly she realized that Miss Skull, her true idol, viewed the beautiful girls as fodder to her own talents, and nothing else. They were to be dressed, to show off the creations she, Miss Skull, had given to an admiring world; in themselves, they did not matter at all. Emma, young as she was, tried to emulate the attitude and it restored her confidence to an extent, at least at work. But here she was at home, confronted with the ever-

present possibility, at least in her own mind, that Edmond would be struck by the great attraction of a stranger, and she was not comfortable with the feeling. To relieve it, she started talking to Miss Moonshadow.

“What a lovely suit, Miss Moonshadow. Did you get it at the studio?”

“I don’t know,” said Miss Moonshadow. “Mrs. Lewis brought it to me and told me to wear it. She does not approve of the clothes I brought from Peoria. Do you really like it?”

“Oh, yes. It is extremely well designed,” said Emma, eyeing it professionally.

“I don’t know much about design, Miss Lover,” said Miss Moonshadow, “but I would never wear such a thing in Peoria. I like a different kind of dress when I go out, you know, the big skirts with the net petticoats, and more colour to it ... this white is so boring.”

“The white suits your coloration very well,” said Emma, considering her.

“I don’t know. They dress me as if I were an old woman... and the haircut... oh, this haircut is so horrible. I used to have long hair, with curls, and look at this, they cut it so short, like a man. I hate it.”

“This is the most fashionable hairdo in Paris,” said Emma, who thought the hairdo fitted Miss Moonshadow’s shapely head to perfection and emphasized her exotic features. “Have you ever seen Leslie Caron and Zizi Jeanmaire, you know, the great ballerinas? They wear their hair a-la-garcon, just like you, and it’s smashing.”

“I don’t know any ballerinas. If Daddy saw my hair he would be furious. But of course he told me to do what the studios say, Miss Lover, so I do. Ah, well, I see Miss Tudor is calling me. They want to talk to me about something, Mrs. Lewis said, I don’t know what. I don’t quite understand their plans...” She left the room.

Mrs. Rivers, who was left to preside over a second tea for the newcomers, poured out for everyone. “Would you like another cup, Julian?” she asked.

“No, but I will have another scone,” said Julian, and proceeded to cover one with cream and jam, “and then I must be going. I am very busy.”

“His exhibition is to be opened soon,” explained Mrs. River.

“Really, mother, I am sure they all know about the exhibition,” said Julian wearily and looked at her with an exasperated expression. “Everyone knows about the exhibition.” He stuffed the rest of the scone into his mouth.

“What exhibition?” asked Rush Yukon. “Who is exhibiting? Are you an artist?”

“Haven’t you heard about me and the Group of Five?” asked Julian. “You must know very little about art if you did not.”

“I am not very well educated, as I always say,” said Rush with utmost good nature. “But I think I know a thing or two about artists. Perhaps I am more familiar with American artists.”

“No such thing as American artists,” said Julian curtly. “At least, not good ones. Well, I must be off. Mother, tell this girl, what’s her name, I will still be willing to paint her if she will come to my hotel.” He turned and left rather abruptly, still chewing on his scone. Mrs. Rivers sighed. “He’ll never learn any manners, I am afraid,” she said. “I am sorry, Mr. Yukon.”

“No harm done,” said Rush pleasantly. “But I suggest you make it clear to him that he must leave Miss Moonshadow alone. I don’t think Mrs. Lewis would like his interest in the girl, nor would Mr. Goldwasser.”

“I’ll speak to him,” said Mrs. Rivers, knowing full well she would never dare. “Will you forgive me if I go to my room to rest? I am suddenly very tired. Emma, would you pour if anyone wants a second cup?”

“Of course, Mrs. Rivers,” said Emma. She felt bad for Mrs. Rivers and rather disliked Julian.

“So what do you think about Miss Moonshadow, Edmond?” asked Rush when Mrs. Rivers left.

“She is very beautiful, but she seems rather stupid to me,” said Edmond. “I understand they want to promote her, but unless she learns how to talk, they won’t have much luck.”

“Many starlets are dumb,” said Rush.

“But not the great stars. They have to be shrewd, they have to understand the business,” said Edmond. “Well, I, for one, am not much impressed with her. I spoke to her during the party, and all she could discuss was her high school experiences in Peoria.”

“Mr. Alcott, on the other hand, seemed rather struck by her,” said Rush.

“That would help,” said Edmond. “He is quite successful already, and the association of the two up-and-coming stars would be very good for both.”

Emma, who secretly believed that Maisie was the one for Mr. Alcott, did not like the idea, but she would not betray her friend to the two men. She decided to change the subject, and pulled a new cosmetic out of her purse.

“Look at this eye shadow, Rush. Miss Tudor just gave it to me,” she said. “It has such a peculiar name – Oleander Reverie – the names they pick here for their cosmetics are truly strange.”

Rush burst out laughing. “If they knew what oleander can do to you if put it on your skin, they wouldn’t have called it by that name.”

“Really? I thought oleander was some kind of plant,” said Emma, surprised.

“It is a plant, and even though it has very nice flowers, it is terribly poisonous. Eating a single leaf would kill a person.”

“How would you know such a thing?” asked Emma, impressed.

“Because I recently read a thriller by Anya Seton, and someone there used an oleander leaf to murder his wife. It is called *Dragonwyck*.”

“Anya Seton? I love her! I must read this one. But Rush, she writes girls’ novels – how can you stand them? Edmond would not even think about reading one.”

“I like girls’ novels,” said Rush sheepishly.

“I don’t understand you, Rush. You like girls’ novels, and clothes, and you understand cosmetics – how come, when you look like some romantic hero from one of these novels yourself?”

Rush looked helplessly at Edmond, who just sat there throughout the short conversation, smiling quietly to himself. “Edmond, would you please explain to her? I want to tell her, but I don’t know how... but Emma, what is going to be told here is a secret.”

“Do tell,” said Emma excitedly. “I will never breathe a word to anyone.”

“Very well,” said Edmond. “I’ll explain to her. Emma, do you remember Miss Hampton? Or rather, have you ever read any of her novels?”

“Only one,” said Emma. “It was called *Chariots of Desire*, about the love life of truck drivers. I didn’t quite like it – oh my goodness, oh Rush, I understand now... I am so sorry to have been so stupid...”

“Nothing to be sorry about, love. I just did not make it clear, since I am so well trained to hide it, and I know I don’t look the part.”

“I would say you don’t... of course you must keep it a secret. Your audience would not like it.”

“Does it bother you?” Rush asked with quiet dignity.

“Not in the least,” said Emma. “Why should it? I am just sorry I did not have the sensitivity to understand you better.”

“Didn’t you notice that the girls I go out with have been set up for the job by GMG? Every blessed one of them?”

“I never thought about it. What if the world found out, Rush?”

“Big, big trouble. I would very likely never get a decent part again, if you call what I do decent parts... I have to get married, you know. Mr. Goldwasser told me to.”

“But... who will you marry?”

“It’s been arranged. I will marry my confidential secretary, Miss Rosemary Lancing. We will stay married for a couple of years, then get an amicable divorce. It will be good for her, too,

for the same reason. Rosemary and I are very good friends, so sharing a house for a year or two will be rather pleasant. And of course, I will provide for her friend that she lives with, a very nice young woman. Perhaps we can have her live with us as a trusted companion, if she likes the idea. We will need a huge house, but the fans will love all the gossip about house-hunting for the newlyweds.”

“Excellent plan,” said Emma with unexpected sophistication that rather impressed Edmond, who thought his naïve fiancée would be shocked by these revelations. Which was silly of him, but most of us never give enough credit to those we love, no matter how much we adore them, and Emma was a loyal friend and a very practical young woman despite her youth.

“So just remember to keep it a secret,” said Rush. “I am glad you know, though.”

At this moment Mr. Goldwasser came into the room, alone. “Rush,” he said. “We have been discussing all sort of plans for Miss Moonshadow. The only question remains, should she be going out with you, before we connect her with Alcott? Do you have any objection to assisting with this project?”

“Not at all, Mr. Goldwasser. I’ll be happy to help. My marriage can be postponed, say for six months?”

“Yes, that would be good time management. Miss Moonshadow can spend three or four months with you, then you will both break it up and she will move on to Alcott, who would be back from England after the filming of the sequel. And you, of course, will discover that you have been in love with the faithful and lovely Miss Lancing all along, and quickly marry her... Yes, that would be fine. Very well, then, I will go and tell the ladies, and Mrs. Lewis will start working on the scheme right away.”

“Mr. Goldwasser, did you notice that Miss Moonshadow is a bit of a country bumpkin?” asked Edmond bluntly.

“Of course I noticed,” said Mr. Goldwasser, laughing. “How can you miss it? Do you know she told me all about the parade in Peoria, when she was the homecoming queen? But we’ll train her. They can train sea lions and poodles, so surely

we can train our little Peoria girl... If it does not work out, we'll approach another starlet. We have plenty of time until Glam really needs to be replaced. We are not even done with *Dance We Shall*, let alone the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*."

"You'll have to leave Miss Moonshadow here while you go to England to film the sequel," said Edmond. "Would that be safe? She is likely to make a fool of herself."

"Mrs. Lewis and Rush will work with her," said Mr. Goldwasser casually. "She'll be safe with them." Edmond and Emma were not so sure, but they trusted Mr. Goldwasser and said nothing.

Two days later, Mrs. Rivers, Glamora, and Mr. Goldwasser went to Julian's exhibition. None of them was particularly interested, least of all Mrs. Rivers who was clearly uncomfortable with the whole thing, but one must be polite and all three of them were very careful of social obligations. Invitations were sent all around, so Mrs. Rivers expected a large crowd, the way it usually was in London when the Group of Five opened an exhibition. To her surprise, the large gallery was practically empty, and they were greeted by a very irate Julian.

"Would you believe it, Mother, this is half an hour after the time stated, and only five or six people showed up. I don't understand it."

Mr. Goldwasser, who disliked abstract art, and Glamora, who never pretended to understand it, could have told him that the name of the Group of Five was not well established in America and that no one was particularly interested, but they were too polite. "I am sure people will soon show up," said Mr. Goldwasser, and wandered away to look at the paintings. As far as he was concerned, all the paintings looked exactly alike, he could not tell which artist painted what picture, and he found the exhibition utterly boring. One of Julian's associates, hoping for a large sale, followed Mr. Goldwasser and started explaining the art to him. Mr. Goldwasser could not get away without being

extraordinarily rude, so he accepted his fate and pretended to listen to the artist's enthusiastic conversation. Why a green triangle should represent the artist's impression of the "Statue of Liberty, Collapsing Under Its Burden," Mr. Goldwasser could not tell, anymore than why two big black spots on a purple background would represent the concept of "Freedom and Equality in Mortal Danger," but he did not comment, just nodded wisely and thought about other matters.

Julian was getting visibly angrier and angrier. Mrs. Rivers tried to keep away from him, and wandered around the gallery. A few more people came in, most of them unknown to Mrs. Rivers, but including Mrs. Lewis, who was accompanied by Miss Moonshadow, and to Mrs. Rivers' joy, Denis Stonor. They walked about the gallery, pretending to enjoy the art, and one of the artists approached them with a tray of wine glasses. "Have a drink, ladies and gentlemen," he said cheerfully, obviously accepting the empty gallery with more grace than Julian. Mrs. Rivers took a glass, and for a few minutes carried on a pleasant conversation with Mrs. Lewis and Denis, when suddenly her attention was arrested by some loud conversation behind her. It was Julian, again trying to persuade Miss Moonshadow to come to his hotel to be painted. Mrs. Lewis looked at Mrs. Rivers and said, "Mrs. Rivers, your son must stop approaching Miss Moonshadow. Mr. Goldwasser will have a fit if she agrees to be painted. She is not ready for any publicity, we are just starting to show her, and any rumour will be disastrous. We plan to show her developing a relationship with Mr. Yukon, you see, and then with Mr. Alcott."

"Why in the world did you bring her here?" asked poor Mrs. Rivers. "You saw that he showed an interest in her before."

"It never occurred to me that he would persist after he was told to stop it," said Mrs. Lewis. "I am sorry I brought her here, I really am, but it seemed a good thing to bring her to a cultural event, where she knew people. You know, little steps, one at a time."

Mrs. Rivers looked at her son and Miss Moonshadow. "So," she heard Julian say. "You will come tonight? I'll wait for you in

my room.” Miss Moonshadow smiled and said nothing. Mrs. Rivers looked around desperately, trying to attract Mr. Goldwasser’s attention, but he was still deep in conversation with the artist and noticed nothing.

“I don’t think they will let me come,” said Miss Moonshadow, looking at Julian in a flirtatious way. “I can’t come, really...”

“Sure you can,” said Julian loudly. “They are not your keepers. Let’s go right now. This exhibition is not going anywhere, it’s a total failure, I might as well leave.” He grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her to the door. Mrs. Rivers knew she had to act.

“Julian, stop this immediately,” said Mrs. Rivers bravely, blocking his way. “Miss Moonshadow cannot come with you, nor can she be painted. She has other obligations, and her people want you to keep away from her.”

“For Heaven’s sake, Mother, can’t you mind your own business?” screamed Julian. “I can talk to anyone I want and do anything I want. Just get out of my way, will you!” Mrs. Rivers took a step backward, and stumbled against Denis Stonor who was standing right behind her. To her mortification, everyone, other than Mr. Goldwasser and his host, was staring at the ugly scene.

“How dare you speak to your mother like that, Rivers?” Denis said in a low, menacing voice. “Who the hell do you think you are?” He pushed Mrs. Rivers behind him and stood very close to Julian, staring at him. Julian seemed taken aback and looked at Denis, a bit surprised by his strong reaction.

“You will immediately ask your mother’s forgiveness for your boorishness, Rivers. And I mean *right now*.”

“I didn’t do anything,” mumbled Julian, like the bully that he was, scared when someone stood up to him.

“You have done plenty. Beside apologizing, I want you to keep away from Miss Moonshadow. You have nothing to say to her, let alone paint her as a few triangles and a blotch of colour, which is probably your artistic plan. You have been encouraged by your government, Rivers, we all know that, and coddled by it,

but a genius you are not, and the sooner you realize it the better. Besides, you are too old to try to impress an eighteen-year-old, anyway. Now apologize to your mother for what you said.”

“I am sorry, Mother,” grumbled Julian, turned away, and left the gallery. One of the other artists laughed. “He is like a child sometimes, Mrs. Rivers. No offence, but we have to squash him every so often...” Mrs. Rivers was not laughing. Julian’s behaviour was worse than ever, worse than it was for years, and she was deeply hurt.

“Come along, Hermione,” said Denis. “We are getting out of here. Mrs. Lewis, would you kindly tell Mr. and Mrs. Goldwasser that I am taking Mrs. Rivers for a drive?” He took her arm, led her out of the half-empty gallery, and proceeded to his car.

Mrs. Rivers sank into her seat and sighed with relief. “What a scene,” she said. “I am so sorry, and so grateful to you, Denis.”

“Nothing to be grateful about. Let’s just drive a little.”

“You see, Denis, to an extent it is my fault. I did not discipline him or guide him properly when he was young. He was terribly over-indulged by me.”

“And where, may I ask, was his father?”

“George? Well... he did not do much for the children. He loved them, of course, and was a kind father, but he was not much involved with their upbringing.”

“You don’t see much of each other, do you?”

“Well... we are not separated, if that is what you mean, but our lives have little in common. George is mostly interested in the estate. I need to travel and I need some peace and quiet for my writing, so I am mostly in London. As the years went by, we drifted apart.”

Denis drove silently on. “Do you love him?” he suddenly said.

“That depends on what you mean by love. I am fond of George; he is a nice, kind man. We don’t have much in common, though.”

“I am very happy to hear that,” said Denis.

“Happy that my husband and I have little in common? Why?” said Mrs. Rivers.

“Never mind right now. I’ll explain some other time,” said Denis. “I have two tickets to a concert. A most fantastic performance of Mendelssohn’s Fourth Symphony, The Italian, as the second part of the program. I am not sure what is in the first, but it will be a concert to remember even if we don’t love all the pieces. The New York Philharmonic, with a marvellous conductor... who happens to be a personal friend of mine. It starts in an hour.”

“But you would have missed it if you stayed in the exhibition, Denis. Why did you come? You could have seen it on a later day!”

“Because I thought you might need me, Hermione. I am very glad I came. Yes, I know Mr. Goldwasser would have eventually taken care of the issues with Julian, but I thought he might be engaged by the hordes of visitors, while I would be left alone and available to take care of you.”

Mrs. Rivers sat quietly. She was still rather shaken by the incident, and besides, hearing the words “take care of you” was a new and thrilling experience. She had not heard such words for many years. To avoid the emotional subject, she said, “Who is the conductor?”

“He is a relatively young man, a protégé of Dimitri Mitropoulos, you know, the Philharmonic’s principal conductor. Mitropoulos could not come on this tour, so he sent my friend instead. His name is Leonard Bernstein. Only thirty-six years old, and a genius. A real genius. Also a very nice person, everyone likes him.”

“I would love to hear it,” said Mrs. Rivers.

The concert was magnificent. Two pieces by Schubert, soft and romantic, followed by the majestic Italian, were played to perfection by the New York Philharmonic, one of the best symphony orchestras in the world despite Julian’s view on art in America, and the conductor was superb. His tall, slim figure, moving energetically with the music, seemed to guide the orchestra into unexpected heights of beauty. Mrs. Rivers, who

loved music very much, forgot herself in the delight of the performance.

After a short visit with Mr. Bernstein, who greatly impressed Mrs. Rivers by his charm and friendliness, they decided to stop somewhere for a light dinner, since the hour was awkward and they would have missed dinner at home. They entered a small, half-empty restaurant, and Mrs. Rivers, enjoying the peace and quiet as well as the excellent omelette, almost forgot the unpleasant interaction with Julian. But Denis, to her surprise, brought the subject up.

“When is your son going back to England?” he asked, sipping a cup of coffee.

“In a couple of weeks, I think he said. And soon it will be our time to go back, to film the sequel. By the way, I suggested your name to Maisie. She seemed intrigued by it.”

“And after the sequel? What are your plans?” asked Denis.

“I don’t know, the usual, I suppose. What exactly do you mean?”

“I mean, have you given some thought to my idea of remaining in America?”

“Well...” said Mrs. Rivers. “I did think about it, but it depends on so many things. Why would you even want me to do so? It is such a complicated and unexpected move...”

Denis put his cup down and said, “It is simple. I want you to stay here because I love you, Hermione. I want you to leave George Rivers, settle in America, and marry me.”

“Love me? Marry you? Denis, are you mad?” said Mrs. Rivers, fully believing that she was shocked by his statement.

“Stop pretending, Hermione. You know I love you.”

Yes, Mrs. Rivers knew. She had known all along. But she had done her very best not to see it, and succeeded in deluding herself that the feelings between them were just friendship.

“What is more, I think you could learn to love me, too,” said Denis. Yes, Mrs. Rivers knew that this, too, was true. Her feelings toward him were so strange, so unexpected, so inexplicable, and she put them at the back of her mind and ignored them so as not to be made unhappy by her own folly.

“Denis, I am sixty-four years old. I am old enough to be your mother.”

“So what? I have told you my story. You know that as far as I am concerned, the years between us represent an advantage, not a detriment. You know I am incapable of loving a younger woman, or even a woman of my own age. This is who I am. But Hermione, I am no longer the shy child that was in love with Mrs. Middleton and suffered so deeply. I am an adult, I know what I want, and I intend to persuade you to marry me and stay right here in America, where you belong. We both deserve some happiness in our lives, happiness that had eluded us, so far.”

“But still, why me? I am not a very nice person. I am certainly not the mild mannered, sweet Mrs. Middleton you loved so long ago. Many people hate me.”

“They don’t understand you. I do.”

“But...”

“There are no buts or ifs or maybes. Can’t you see that you are everything I had ever wanted? Your beauty, your intellect, your strength of character, they are all ageless. So what if I am forty? At heart, I am much older than you will ever be. I can be sad, and tired, and resentful. You are always alive, sparkling, new. And can’t you see that I loved you even before I met you, Hermione? I loved you through your books. I felt you were the only human being on the face of the earth who would understand how I feel, who I really am. Surely you can see that, after all the books you have written about men who are so much like me?”

“But I have never met anyone in real life who acted this way. Well, come to think of it, this is not entirely true. I did see a few young men in the County fall in love with Agnes Graham... and Mrs. Brandon... and the beautiful Mrs. Dean, Jessica’s mother, before she became so ill with this strange sleeping disorder... yes, you are right, I did know some people who felt like you. But still, it is strange to be in this situation. I feel as if I had stepped into one of my books, Denis. A middle-aged woman loved by an adventurous young man...”

“There is a difference, though, between books and real life. In this romance, there will be no renunciation scene and no

return to the middle-aged husband who had been waiting in the wings. No, in this romance, the heroine will do what no lady in your books has ever done. She will remain with the adventurous young man, living happily ever after. And that, my dear Hermione, is a huge difference.”

Mrs. Rivers could not answer. Strongly doubting her own sanity, she suddenly felt very happy. The flash of happiness lasted only a moment, and then her usual mild melancholy returned, but it did happen, and she could not deny it or ignore it. Yes, for the first time in decades, Mrs. Rivers was ecstatically happy, if only for a moment, and we cannot attempt to explain it since the human heart will always be a mystery us, as we are always ready to admit.

Chapter Ten

Mr. Alcott sat at the table with his head buried in his hands. He wore one of his at-home, well-fitted velvet jackets, the colour of eggplant, or, as Shymmering referred to it, aubergine, and a white silk scarf around his neck. His hair, though somewhat ruffled by the way he stuck his fingers in it, was carefully oiled and slicked back. Shymmering, who came in carrying a tray with glasses, disapproved of Mr. Alcott's stance, which did not show the elegance and pleasant superiority a gentleman's gentleman expects from his employer, though of course no observer would have noticed his displeasure, which was expressed by a lightly raised eyebrow.

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" he asked. "You seem to be disturbed."

"I can't take much more of this, Shymmering," said Mr. Alcott, raising a tormented face and looking sadly at his valet.

Shymmering looked around him at the exotically decorated room, the two large porcelain felines by the fireplace, the extensive sideboard he himself had prepared for the dinner guests who were about to arrive any minute, the elegant attire Mr. Alcott wore, and said, "Take what, exactly, sir? Kindly illuminate me, and perhaps I will be able to resolve the problem. It seems to me, at the moment, that all is well, but of course I may be ignorant of some important facts."

"Well, I am not sure how to explain," said Mr. Alcott. "As you know, *Dance We Shall* is completed, and this is why I invited these people over, to celebrate. All we have to do now is deal with the promotions, before going back to England to film the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*."

"Indeed, sir, I am fully aware of this. I have already started packing your wardrobe. However, this is good news, is it not?"

"But Shymmering, I will be away, and you know what? Mr. Goldwasser now wants Miss Moonshadow to be the fake fiancée of Rush Yukon!"

“A very good scheme, I believe. Do you disapprove of it, sir? May I ask why?”

“Because I worship her. Estella Moonshadow is a goddess. She might fall in love with Rush, and where will I be, then?”

Shymmering cleared his throat. This, as was already well known to Mr. Alcott, was a sign of discretion, of words that had to be surmised but not said. But Mr. Alcott did not know what his valet wanted to express, and he was too upset to think about it with the required mental effort. “Out with it, Shymmering,” he said in desperation.

“Well, sir, I would not concern myself about that. Mr. Yukon will not encourage Miss Moonshadow to fall in love with him. He has his own plans.”

“What plans?” asked Mr. Alcott suspiciously.

“You may have not heard about it, but Mr. Yukon will soon be marrying his confidential secretary, sir, a Miss Lancing, Miss Rosemary Lancing.”

“So he will be deceiving poor Miss Moonshadow? Stringing her along, toying with her emotions, while all the while he is about to be married? That is not to be tolerated!” said Mr. Alcott, scandalized with the villainy of men in general, and Rush Yukon in particular.

“Oh, no sir,” said Shymmering pityingly. “This marriage is not an affair of the heart. Mr. Yukon is strongly advised by the studios to marry, once his so-called romance with Miss Moonshadow is over.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Alcott.

“I have not been informed, sir,” said Shymmering, his face entirely expressionless.

Mr. Alcott looked at him with suspicion. Shymmering always knew everything, so he had to be hiding something. But Mr. Alcott could not imagine what it could be. “I still don’t understand why Miss Moonshadow cannot become my fake fiancée right away,” he said petulantly.

“It’s a ruse, sir. Since you are going to be away, a romance between you and Miss Moonshadow cannot blossom with the necessary allure for the public. A long-distance relationship and

letters from England are not exciting to the average movie goer. So for a short while, Miss Moonshadow will appear to be dazzled by Mr. Yukon, but when you come back, she will realize where her heart really belongs, and will leave him for you.”

“This sounds like a script by Maisie,” said Mr. Alcott with professional appreciation. “Did she create it?”

“No, sir. It was conceived by Mrs. Lewis and approved by Mr. Goldwasser.”

“And this is what the public wants?”

“Yes, sir. The public will adore it, and during your absence, Miss Moonshadow will be given enough exposure as to make her worthy of your attention. If I understand correctly, she will also embark on her first acting part in a film Mr. Yukon will be starring in. She is to be the evil Oriental seductress who tries to lure Mr. Yukon’s character away from his true love.”

“That sounds really good. What is the name of the film? And who is Rush Yukon’s character?” asked Mr. Alcott with interest.

“The name of the film is *Golden Sails of Love*. Mr. Yukon is a pirate, an outlaw, who has become a converted character through his love for a pure and beautiful young woman. He risks his life for Queen Elizabeth as he sails the seven seas in search of gold and spices for his queen and her Empire.”

“I had no idea Queen Elizabeth is particularly interested in spices. And gold? Is it legal for English royalty to collect gold in foreign countries?”

“This film is not about Her Majesty, the current Queen of England. It all happens during the 16th Century, and Her Majesty is the first Queen Elizabeth, the daughter of King Henry the Eighth, sir.”

“I see... this is a really good story. Who is to be Rush’s true love?”

“She has not been cast yet, sir. But the character is that of a duke’s daughter, a lady in waiting for Queen Elizabeth, who vows to wait for Mr. Yukon as long as the stars shine in the sky, as she puts it in one of the songs.”

“Songs?”

“Yes, sir. It is to be a musical. GMG is making many musicals these days, they seem to be quite financially rewarding. For this song, the young lady will be in the palace’s garden, singing it to a pet unicorn, and then Mr. Yukon appears and joins her in a duet.”

“I did not know Rush could sing.”

“Mr. Yukon’s talents are highly versatile. I understand that he can even work on the trapeze, and had performed on it himself in one of his films, instead of hiring a stuntman.”

“My goodness, he has some courage... and did you say his girlfriend is singing the song to a unicorn? The creature with the horn on his nose? I thought they were from fairy tales. I had no idea they lived in England at any time. Are they extinct?”

“They had never existed, sir, despite many alleged sightings, which always turned out to be fraudulent. However, in the film, they have a herd of the mythical beasts in the garden. There are also magical birds, I believe. GMG commissioned Mr. Ray Harryhausen to create all the magical animals with his special animation techniques. The unicorn will be performing a dance with the couple.”

“I see. Yes, it can work, Harryhausen is a genius... And did they tell Miss Moonshadow about her part as the evil seductress?”

“Yes, sir. The young lady is delighted. I understand that she is particularly happy about the costumes – they are to be quite opulent and colourful, you see, and she is sick of wearing black and white. Her entire wardrobe is black and white now, with a few touches of silver, on Mr. Goldwasser’s request. I took it upon myself to explain to her that she is moulded into a particular image, very lady-like, hence the black and white, but she is more comfortable with Oriental splendour, I believe. I have never been to Peoria, Illinois, sir, but it seems they love colours there. During a parade, when Miss Moonshadow was the homecoming queen, her float was covered with flowers of all colours, as the young lady informed me.”

“But what if she does fall in love with Rush?” said Mr. Alcott.

Shymmering cleared his throat again. "It will not happen, sir. She will be too busy to fall in love with anyone. She will be under the guidance of Mrs. Lewis, who will not go to England during the filming of the sequel. In addition, she will only see Mr. Yukon for planned occasions, other than the actual filming."

"So I will still have a chance with Miss Moonshadow when I come back?" asked Mr. Alcott.

"Yes, sir, if you will still wish it."

"Wish it? I want to marry her. Had you ever seen a more beautiful girl in your life, Shymmering?"

"Why yes, sir. Many. Her style of beauty is not one I admire. If I may say so about a respectable young lady, her looks remind me of something vaguely reptilian, a lizard, perhaps, sir? It's the eyes, sir, so dark, almost without pupils, and slanted..."

"Everyone thought she was so lovely..." said Mr. Alcott feebly.

"There is no accounting for taste," said Shymmering firmly. "And, if I may add, I have met more intelligent young ladies as well. Miss Moonshadow, sir, is not brilliant, and you require an intelligent wife."

"She is just innocent, young, and pure," said the susceptible Mr. Alcott, who seemed to have forgotten that he had once worshipped at another altar. For a moment he wondered if Shymmering thought he needed an intelligent wife because he himself was rather stupid, but immediately decided that Shymmering meant the exact opposite and simply felt that he needed a companion as intelligent as himself.

"She is very wise in her own way," he added. "I am sure of it."

"Yes, sir," said Shymmering. "Excuse me, sir, the doorbell rang. I believe your guests are beginning to arrive."

And indeed, the first guests, Edmond and Emma, came in. Drinks were handed round and accepted. "So I understand you two are staying here for a while," said Mr. Alcott.

"Yes," said Emma, glowing with happiness. "Miss Skull offered me a formal apprenticeship for a year, with pay! What an opportunity for me, Nes. Can you imagine? And what is

happening to Edmond is even bigger! Remember his fights with the script writers regarding *Dance We Shall*, and how he eventually fixed everything and saved them from any trouble with the censors, particularly with the issue of the alleged bedroom door? Well, he was offered a contract for two new films! They adore him! So we are staying for a year or so, then we will return to England and get married at home.”

“And after that?” said Mr. Alcott with great interest. “Where do you plan to live, here or in England?”

“I think both,” said Edmond. “If all goes well, we plan to divide our time between Hollywood and London. While I am working here, I will still be able to complete a play that I had started in England, and Mr. Clover approved of when he read the first few scenes. He promised to help me put it on stage in London shortly after I come back, and Emma will design the costumes for it, of course. When we come back to Hollywood, Miss Skull will very likely offer a regular job to Emma, and no doubt I will get more contracts. It’s all too good to be true.”

“It’s heaven!” said Emma. “A fairy tale!” Mr. Alcott laughed. “You will be leading very similar lives to Mr. Clover and Miss Dean,” he added.

“Yes,” said Edmond. “It is exactly what we have in mind.”

At that moment, Mr. Goldwasser and Miss Tudor arrived. It was a good thing that Mr. Alcott had forgotten his love for Miss Tudor, because she looked even lovelier than her usual gorgeous self. She wore a casual evening outfit that was so clearly the latest creation from Paris, it could not be doubted by the least understanding person, and Emma, the connoisseur, simply gasped with admiration. The outfit consisted of a blouse made of white lawn, slightly transparent so it required its own half-slip. It had big three-quarters sleeves and an elaborate, wide collar, with a touch of white embroidery. Glamora paired the spectacular blouse with a long brown velvet skirt, cut in an A-line, and added soft brown leather shoes, a simple, very large gold bracelet, and heavy gold earrings.

“How magnificent you look, Miss Tudor,” Emma said. “Pure Paris...”

“Well, for a short while I still have to shine,” said Glamora, laughing. “Soon, I will become as dowdy as you wish. I shall wear shabby tweeds and soft cardigans.” Seeing Emma’s horrified face she smiled and told her she was just joking. Of course, she added, just because she was moving into serious acting did not mean she would lose her sense of style. Emma sighed with relief.

Soon the rest of the guests arrived, consisting of Maisie, Denis Stonor, Mrs. Rivers, and Mrs. Lewis, and after a short while everyone sat down to dinner. Maisie found herself sitting next to Denis Stonor. “So in a couple of weeks, you are all gone,” said Denis. “I enjoyed working on *Dance We Shall*. I am a bit sorry to see it end.”

“I am rather happy to go to England, though,” said Maisie. “It will be nice to feel the peace and quiet of Barseshire.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Denis. “But I’ll miss the lot of you.”

“You mean you will miss somebody in particular, Mr. Stonor,” said Maisie, bluntly but very kindly.

“So you realized it,” said Denis. “Do you think I am strange?”

“No,” said Maisie. “I think you are wonderful to be able to see beyond convention, beyond the hackneyed views of everyone, and follow your heart.”

“It is not easy,” said Denis.

“When is it ever easy? Do you think life has been particularly kind to me on these lines?” said Maisie.

“I don’t really know,” said Denis. “You are a very attractive, charming, intelligent woman. I would imagine you have many admirers.”

“Not really, Mr. Stonor. Perhaps if I lived in a normal place... but in Hollywood, men are blinded by so much sheer beauty, and a woman like myself, who is not a beauty nor has anything flamboyant about her, is not likely to attract attention. Girls like Miss Moonshadow attract men, but even for them, marriages break and so do hearts. Hollywood is not conducive to longevity in love, and Miss Moonshadow will have her own troubles, I am afraid.”

“That poor girl is an idiot,” said Denis without a trace of chivalry.

“Yes, she is,” said Maisie. “But did you observe the impression she made? Almost every man who meets her falls at her feet.” Her eyes wandered to Mr. Alcott, who sat almost across them, and Mr. Stonor noticed.

“I see,” he said. “So Mr. Alcott is smitten?”

“Yes,” said Maisie. “He seems to be.”

“Too bad,” said Denis, “but I imagine he will get over it soon and realize that she is not good enough for an intelligent man like him.”

“I am beginning to wonder how intelligent he really is,” said Maisie, and they both laughed.

“I will make a prediction, Miss Robinson,” said Denis. “By the time you come back to America, after the filming of the sequel, Mr. Alcott will be a changed man. He will know where he belongs, and he will forget poor little Miss Moonshadow. After that, I don’t know.”

“I hope you are right,” said Maisie, somewhat sadly. “Nes may be silly and easily swayed, but he deserves better than a silly homecoming queen from Peoria. And now I will also make a prediction. Mrs. Rivers will decide to come back to America, at least for a while, perhaps for one more film. After that, I don’t know.”

Denis nodded thoughtfully. “Well, we shall see if either of us was right, soon enough,” he said.

Mr. Goldwasser was pleased to find himself sitting near Mrs. Lewis.

“Well,” he said. “I did not see you for a couple of days. Where is the General?”

“Had a reunion with some war friends,” said Mrs. Lewis. “He won’t miss that for the world.”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And how is Miss Moonshadow doing?”

“Thank goodness, at least she is obedient,” said Mrs. Lewis. “I was afraid she would rebel and go to Mr. Rivers’ hotel to be painted, but she is really afraid to take a step on her own, and of

course, everyone had their orders not to take her there. So she did not go, though I think she really wanted to. She seems to like Julian, for some reason.”

“Julian Rivers is a nuisance,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “From what I hear, he has always been one, and unfortunately, he managed to make the British government think he is a genius. It wouldn’t have worked here, I should think. Anyway, the important issue here is clear. Does Miss Moonshadow understand what she has to do during the next three months, while I am in England?”

“I think she does,” said Mrs. Lewis. “She is very happy about the part of the seductress in Mr. Yukon’s film. I tried a couple of Oriental outfits on her, and she looked very well in them, very appropriate for the part. And I introduced her to an acting teacher, and also to Helga, who is supposed to teach her to sing. Helga did so well with Mr. Alcott, she has a genius for teaching, and Mr. Alcott developed a rather good voice and style with her. She promised me that Miss Moonshadow will sing like a bird.”

“She said the same about Alcott and indeed she came through perfectly. Look at how he danced and sang in *Dance We Shall*, not a flaw, really.”

“He is good, Mr. Goldwasser. Very good. He acts, he sings, he dances. He is a wonderful asset for GMG. But tell me, do you think his heart is really in it?”

“I can’t be sure,” said Mr. Goldwasser, considering. “He likes the fame and fortune aspect. He enjoys being admired. But does he love the work? I don’t know. Well, if he does not, neither does Rush Yukon, who cordially despises everything about Hollywood except the money he is making, and still, he is as conscientious and hard-working as can be. Hopefully, Mr. Alcott will also be reliable.”

“I have no doubt of it,” said Mrs. Lewis. “But it won’t make for longevity. Mr. Yukon has no delusions about longevity, he knows he will last only as long as his good looks do, and he works fast and furiously to make as much money as possible during the years of success. He is even willing to go through

with this marriage.... But I had hopes of seeing Mr. Alcott become a permanent feature in Hollywood.”

“Only time will tell,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “He works hard. Look how fast he learned how to sing. He put hours into studying, practicing, reading sheet music, everything Helga told him to do. I can only hope Miss Moonshadow will be as reliable as Alcott. At least, I noticed that she has a lovely speaking voice. I have a feeling she can learn to sing very well.”

“That will be an asset,” said Mrs. Lewis. “As we are going into so many musicals, her singing will come in handy. There is something I wanted to discuss with you, though, Mr. Goldwasser, regarding Mr. Alcott. I think he is falling for Miss Moonshadow. I am afraid he has a strong habit of falling in love with the wrong women.”

“You can’t blame him for having fallen in love with Glam, who was his original flame,” said Mr. Goldwasser, smiling at the memory of the love-sick Mr. Alcott. “Most of the boys who acted with her did.”

“Not the way he did. He made a real nuisance of himself to Miss Tudor. And now, Miss Moonshadow... I am not in favour of such relationships. They interfere with business.”

“Well, he is going to be away for three months. Let’s hope for the best,” said Mr. Goldwasser, and his eyes wandered to Maisie. Why couldn’t the boy see that Maisie was the woman for him, something that everybody else saw so clearly, Mr. Goldwasser could not understand. He had a feeling that something drastic had to be done to bring Mr. Alcott to his senses. Suddenly he smiled, remembering how Aubrey Clover helped him make Mr. Alcott dance by spiking his orange juice with alcohol. Perhaps Mr. Clover would have an idea of how to make Mr. Alcott realize who was (or should be) his true love.

After returning home, Mr. Goldwasser and Glamora sat in their living room, relaxing in their own ways. Mr. Goldwasser was reading a particularly silly script, shaking his head over the idea of turning Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* into a musical. How

could a large bug sing and dance? And would any glamorous young heiress from Boston really kiss the giant bug, with whom she somehow fell in love, and turn him back into a human? No, not even Glorious Technicolor could fix that... besides, it was so much like Beauty and the Beast...

Glamora was writing something. "There!" she said triumphantly, and slammed her pen on the table.

"There what?" asked Mr. Goldwasser, looking at her over his spectacles.

"I finished my homework. I have written an essay on *Macbeth*, and tomorrow I will have it mailed to Mrs. Dale in Barchester. She will then read it before I get back to Barchester, and once I am there, we can talk about it in person. She told me that when I am done, she will start me on reading history books, about the periods that are connected to the play. First, she wants me to understand Shakespeare's England, the way it was during his lifetime. Second, she wants me to understand the period *Macbeth* is taking place in, more or less."

"This would be your first history lesson, right? Up to this point, your studies were strictly literature, am I correct?"

"Yes, that is true, though I did try a history book on my own. I find it difficult, much more difficult than literature. But I will go through with that, Jake. I am determined to."

"You will, Glam. I know that. Nothing can stop you when you make up your mind. But may I make a suggestion? Why not start with something lighter, instead of the usual dry history books?"

"Like historical novels? I already did that, I read lots of them. They are very easy, but they are not what Mrs. Dale has in mind. A lot of them are very inaccurate, she tells me."

"No, not historical novels. There is a writer, his name is Hendrik Willem van Loon. He is Dutch, but he lives in America. He writes pure history. However, he is a great innovator, and he writes it journalistically, making it easy and fun. Why not start with him? I have a few in the library, and I suggest starting with one of his best, *Van Loon's Lives*."

"What a great idea, Jake. Do you like his work?"

“I love it. I even get ideas for historical films from it. If anyone can get you interested in history, it is him.”

“Then let me take a look. I should take the book with me to Barchester. It will make good reading material for the aeroplane.”

Mr. Goldwasser went to the library, and when he handed the thick volume to Glamora she practically pounced on it, she was so full of interest. He looked at her affectionately as she immediately started reading, smiling over the clever introduction, telling of Mr. Van Loon and a good friend entertaining historical figures, long dead, for sumptuous dinners. “Look, Jake, he mentions Shakespeare!” she said enthusiastically, as she browsed through the book. Mr. Goldwasser smiled. Ever since the study plan was devised with Miss Merriman, Glam was reading like a regular bookworm. What a woman, he thought. Never a dull moment with her, she was forever changing, growing, evolving. She always says to me, he went on musing, “What would my life be without you, Jake?” I wonder if she realizes how often I think, “What would my life be without *you*, Glam?”

One day before the journey home, Mrs. Rivers looked out of the window; she disliked the heat, so late in the year, and the sultry atmosphere that was surely going to end in a storm. She decided to go and read peacefully in the library until dinner, but to her annoyance, she realized that she had left her spectacles in the drawing room. Entering it, she saw, to her surprise, that Denis was sitting in one of the chairs. He rose and came toward her.

“Well, Hermione, you will be leaving tomorrow,” he said.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Rivers, “I am all packed.”

“Have you given some thought to our conversation?”

“I have been thinking of little else, Denis.”

“And to what conclusion did you arrive?”

“I have arrived at total confusion,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I do not know what to say to you.”

“So don’t try to make any decisions just yet,” said Denis. “Just tell me that to some small extent, you care about me.”

“I care about you to a great extent,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Had I been twenty years younger... but we won’t go into the age issue again. I will admit to you that what you said brought me a strange sensation of happiness. I don’t know exactly how to account for it and I must think about it. I must sort it out, quietly, alone, in Barssetshire.”

“Will you write to me?”

“I will. And look forward to your letters, Denis. Look, the rain is coming down so heavily, at last. It’s storming.”

“It will clear the air for your journey.”

“I wish it would clear my head, Denis. This is so inexplicable, so strange.”

“There is nothing strange about my loving you, Hermione. It was inevitable. Well, I will go. I will start writing to you tonight, I suspect...” He touched her hand lightly, turned and left. The room was suddenly very empty and lonely, and Mrs. Rivers, after a few moments of listening to the torrents of water lashing against the window panes, left the room. She could not bear to be alone a moment longer.

She went to the library, and found Glamora sitting there, reading a book. When she saw Mrs. Rivers, she smiled and put the book down. “You look tired, Mrs. Rivers. You must rest before we go on our trip...”

“I am not really tired, Miss Tudor,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Maybe a little under that weather.”

“And what weather it is,” said Glamora. “How the wind is gusting.”

“Yes. I hate it when the wind is warm and the storm is tropical,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Even the cold drizzle of England is better. But yes, I am a little off-colour, I suppose. So much is happening...” she desperately wanted to tell Glamora about Denis’ offer, but did not dare.

“There is something on your mind, Mrs. Rivers,” said Glamora, very kindly. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Well, yes, I do want to talk about it,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I just don’t know how to begin... I am afraid you would disapprove... perhaps judge me.”

Glamora sighed. “Mrs. Rivers, we have gone through so much together. We started out fearing and mistrusting each other, but we worked through it and now we are friends. I will not judge you. On the contrary, I am going to assume the privilege of a friend and tell you quite bluntly and honestly – you don’t want Denis Stonor.”

“So you know about it? Does everyone know?” asked Mrs. Rivers miserably.

“I doubt anyone else knows. No one said anything, I assure you. But I have noticed, and I am here to remind you that this is not real. Mr. Stonor is very attractive and charming, but your heart is with your husband and with your normal life.”

“How can you know for sure, Miss Tudor? Please explain to me,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I am so confused...”

“I want you to think about your own novels, Mrs. Rivers. What happens to all your heroines, even when they are sorely tempted by a handsome admirer? They search their hearts, then go back to their husbands, whom they never stopped loving. You know the human heart better than anyone, Mrs. Rivers.”

“But George and I are so totally apart,” said Mrs. Rivers. “And this is so, well, so flattering! I am so much older than Denis... and then, when he stood up for me and told Julian how to behave, I felt he was like a knight in shining armour, and ever since then Julian is behaving. George never did that for me.”

“Think, Mrs. Rivers. What is marriage, really? An adventure? An escapade? No indeed. It is a form of deep friendship and esteem. Look at Jake and me.”

“But of course someone of your beauty and fame never had to deal with such a situation, you are above such things,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Your life is so complete!”

“Oh yes, of course I had to deal with such situations. In each film, I am joined by a new Adonis, who almost always falls in love with me. A few times, I was swept off my feet, emotionally, just a little, but then I would look at Jake... sure, Jake is no Adonis, far from it, but I will love him till the day I die, and I will never allow anyone to endanger our marriage. And yes, to answer your unasked question which nevertheless I can sense, I think there were a couple of times where Jake did look at another woman. For example, I really thought he lost his head a little over Miss Merriman, and could you blame him? She is a treasure. But he never strayed. We are the best of friends... and so are you and Mr. Rivers, despite all the misunderstandings.”

“You are right,” said Mrs. Rivers and wiped a tear. “You are so right, but it’s not easy.”

“No, it’s not easy. But you are a strong woman, Mrs. Rivers. Strong and intelligent and creative. Your books bring joy and a new interest in life to so many women, with the love stories, the deep understanding, the travel all over these interesting places; you take them out of themselves.”

“Do you know what my publisher calls me?” asked Mrs. Rivers with a little laugh. “He calls me the Baedeker Bitch and he thinks I don’t know – but I do – and I am rather proud of it. It’s because of all these trips my heroines take, and what he considers my grasping and greedy behaviour, which he thinks is unseemly for a woman.”

Glamora burst out laughing. “In the end, isn’t it the most important thing we do? Bring happiness to our audience? It doesn’t matter if we are men or women as long as we do our work right. For my fans, no matter what I will do or where I will go, married or single, I am forever Miss Tudor, known in Hollywood as ‘the woman who could not love,’ as you know... and inside, I never loved anyone but Jake.”

“Thank you, Miss Tudor,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I know you have tried to put my work, my life, and my marriage in perspective. I will remember your help for the rest of my life,

since you came to my aid while I was at a crossroads. Thank you.”

“But you are not entirely convinced, are you?” asked Glamora.

“No, not quite. Our situations are not the same. You see, Miss Tudor, your marriage was, after all, an adventure, since you had to hide it and play a part. And the two of you must have had an interesting time trying to reconcile such diverse backgrounds. With George and me, it’s all boredom, I’m afraid.”

“It’s true to an extent,” said Glamora, musing. “I have never been bored with Jake, and somehow, despite my ignorance and lack of education, he never seemed bored with me. I will never understand why he fell in love with me. I was a pretty Cockney girl, with neither class nor style. He was from Brooklyn, the son of a middle-class Jewish family. You know how they are – education is everything to that group of people, and they are rather sophisticated in their world view. The scraped and saved and sent him to the best schools... and then he travelled all over the world, advanced like a meteorite in his career, met such exciting and interesting people – and still, we had such fun together.”

“George and I were bored with each other almost from the beginning,” said Mrs. Rivers. “We come from exactly the same background. Sometimes it’s wonderful. Sometimes it’s not. Ah, well. Time will tell. Thank you for talking to me. I will go to England and think things over, and I will not do anything rashly, as I do not wish to ever bring shame or sorrow to my husband and children. But sometimes I feel I deserve some happiness, even if it is a little late... and Denis and I have something between us... I can’t explain it... don’t judge me harshly, Miss Tudor. I value your good opinion.”

“I will not judge you at all, Mrs. Rivers. No matter what you decide, I will not judge. I promise.”

Mrs. Rivers felt strangely relieved, even though her situation was not clear to her at all. With a lighter heart, she went to see if all her packing was indeed complete, and Miss Tudor went back to her book, and started reading a chapter about Empress

Theodora of Byzantium. But she could not concentrate on the lady's fascinating rise from the lowest ranks of society into royalty. "Poor Hermione," she said to herself. "Poor woman. How hard it must be..."

At the Towers, Cook and the housemaid were having supper. Cook's niece, Rita, suddenly burst into the kitchen, waving a newspaper.

"Auntie, did you hear? They are coming back!" said Rita, rather out of breath, and put the paper next to her aunt's plate.

"Who?" asked Cook placidly, helping herself to more peas.

"The whole party, Miss Tudor, Mr. Goldwasser, everyone, to do the sequel! They are saying so in the newspaper!"

"Well, well..." said Cook, looking at the paper with great interest. "More scandalous doings... and all of them women no better than they should be. I never..."

"But Auntie, you liked it last time, you even bought the lipstick that Miss Tudor was wearing, the orange one, with the funny name."

"Now don't be impertinent, girl. Sit down and have some supper. All the girls are going to think of nothing else but the films, they will be good for nothing."

The housemaid said, "What with the Christmas season a-coming, and the filming, it will be plenty to do at Lady Norton's place. My youngest sister, Molly, is looking to go into service. I should ask my cousin Carla, she is Lady Norton's maid."

"How old is Molly?" asked Rita.

"She is fourteen," said the housemaid. "Big girl, she obliges when she can find work, but it's time for her to work regular-like."

"She does not want to go into the shops?" asked Cook with appreciation of the girl's good taste, "or Mr. Adams' Works?"

"No, she wants to go into service. She knows it's easier work. Mother doesn't care, as long as she gets some wages. Ten children, mother had, and she is tired of feeding so many of us as

we were a-growing. Our father died when Molly was two, and good riddance too,” said the housemaid without any filial feeling. “He drank all his wages anyway.”

“It’s not a decent place for a young girl with all these goings-on and Hollywood,” said Cook. “Still, they pay well at Lady Norton’s.”

“Carla will keep an eye on her,” said the housemaid. “She won’t come to no harm with Carla. I will talk to her tomorrow.”

And indeed, everything was busy and lively at Norton Hall. Carla herself was overseeing many women who came from the village to oblige, since every room had to be cleaned and prepared. Lady Norton’s pride demanded that not a speck of dust would be seen by the most obscure GMG worker, let alone Mr. Goldwasser and Miss Tudor. The professor was jostled from one room to another, and after a day of irritation, decided to go to Kensington for a week or so.

“Ah, Lady Norton,” he said over tea.

“Yes, Professor?”

“I have been asked to go to Kensington for a week. Would that be convenient?”

“Yes, of course, Professor. What is the occasion?”

“Believe it or not, it was an invitation from Professor Hilliard-Sabre herself! She wants to have three joint lectures with me, about the tropical palms that were brought to Florida from Tahiti during the 18th Century and naturalized there, crowding out some of the native palms. I cannot credit it myself, but there it is. She invited me!”

“I thought she was your mortal enemy, Professor.”

“She is, Lady Norton. She is... which is why it is so strange. Could it be she is trying to cover up for her theft of the cactus seeds, through Carla? Is she trying to hide her heinous crime?”

“Well, it’s hard to say...” said Lady Norton. “Did you ever give joint lectures with her before?”

“Goodness, no!” said the professor, scandalized by the thought. “No, when I was in Kensington, it was the first time we met in person. Before that, our feud was entirely through the papers, and letters.”

“Perhaps she is seeing her evil ways, and is trying to atone for them,” suggested Lady Norton. “Once she met you in person, perhaps she realized how wrong she was to doubt your scholarship and your wisdom.”

“That would be gratifying,” said the professor cautiously. “If it were not for the cactus, perhaps I would be bold enough to hope for such reconciliation, but under the circumstances...”

“I think,” said Lady Norton, “that under the conditions you describe, that is, giving these joint lectures, you may be able to find out, once and for all, if she really was the mastermind behind the disappearance of the seeds. Perhaps, even, Carla sent her the seeds, rather than throwing them out of the window, as she claimed to have done? If so, Professor Hilliard-Sabre would probably try to grow the cactus, and be the first to do so in England, rather than you and me. Therefore, I consider your trip a rare opportunity to resolve this issue, find out if she has the seeds...”

The professor looked at Lady Norton with new respect in his eyes. “This is a stroke of genius, Lady Norton,” he said. “You are right. I will go and write to Professor Hilliard-Sabre immediately!”

“And I have another suggestion to make, if I may,” said Lady Norton. “After the lectures are over, if you do not find out everything about the theft of the seeds, why not go a step further? Invite Professor Hilliard-Sabre for a few days here. Between us, we will be able to resolve all doubt, I am certain of it.”

“Absolutely! How clever of you to suggest that!” said the professor, his admiration for his hostess growing by the second. “I will suggest to her that you have the best conservatories in England, and that she would enjoy seeing them, as much as you would enjoy meeting such an expert as herself. Brilliant, brilliant idea!” Lady Norton inclined her head graciously. “More tea, Professor?”

Chapter Eleven

The weather in Bassetshire, as in all England, was cold, damp, and unpleasant, a fact particularly noticeable by people who had blissfully experienced sunny California. Norton Hall remained its usual uncomfortable large abode, with the august presence of Lady Norton not helping make it any cosier. Nevertheless, most of the crew enjoyed being back in the County, where the peace and quiet permeated the air itself, where the brittle glamour of Hollywood did not exist, though had it existed would have been looked down upon by the residents, where one could enjoy the soft scent of fertile earth and wet foliage rather than the burning cement and rubber tyres on the highways, mixed with the artificial perfumes worn by countless starlets. The crew members settled to their appointed tasks as if they had never left, and looked forward to spending Christmas in the country.

The sequel to *Send Me No Lilies* was more or less on its way. Lord Arthur and Lady Aurora Fitz-Gardner, as represented by Peter, the very tall, thin, elegant actor who generally specialized in the parts of a British Nobleman even though he really was the son of a greengrocer from Sydney, Australia, and Glamora Tudor, had already returned from their second honeymoon in Tahiti, and settled down to a delightful private life in London. Unfortunately, their happiness did not last long, since Lord Arthur was promptly killed, as planned by Maisie and Mrs. Rivers when they audaciously decided to make a highly modern sequel, which would include a dangerously risqué tango danced by Aurora and Nestor Chardonay at midnight in the Wigwam, the kind of dance that could not be performed by a respectable married woman, as any Hollywood censor would agree. Crossing the street soon after the couple's arrival in London, Lord Arthur heroically saved a golden-haired child from a runaway car, and was himself hit and killed instantly, mercifully never knowing that his untimely death would pave the way for the reunion of his

widow with Nestor Chardonay. This segment was already filmed in Hollywood, in a studio made to look like a London street, so Peter did not have to travel to England, and could stay home to celebrate Christmas with his own family, enjoying plenty of money from his payment for *Send Me No Lilies* and the segment of the sequel – enough to buy enormous presents, which were rightfully expected by his wife and children.

Mr. Goldwasser planned to show the accident segment at the absolute beginning of the film, right after the title, accompanied by intense, heroic music. The research department was bitterly debating whether the *Flight of the Valkyries* was even appropriate, since Lord Arthur was a mere man, not a female warrior flying on a horse. No, said one of the members. He thought they would be safer with someone's, anyone's, requiem. But *was* there a requiem that sounded heroic as well as sad? The debate was sure to rage for a while. Whatever the choice would be, if any viewer came to the theatre a few minutes late because she had to give the kiddies their tea, well then, she would miss this all important part and would not understand where Lord Arthur had disappeared to and why Aurora was suddenly free to surrender to her love for Nestor Chardonay. Still, no doubt the unlucky viewer would see the film more than once, since it stood to reason that an ever-so-nice Glamora Tudor film was worth seeing again, particularly since this would be the first time, ever, that she had made three films with the same young man! But of course Nestor Alcott was no longer just any young man, her friends would argue when they went to the tea shop after the film was over, wiping their eyes with emotion. Nestor Alcott was a great star himself and don't you forget it, and did you notice the colour of his eyes, my dear? I have never seen such green eyes on any gentleman – they simply glow, if I may be so bold as to say so...

The broken-hearted Lady Aurora Fitz-Gardner would not be able to bear the London life, naturally, not when she was so alone and in deep mourning. So she would retire to Lord Arthur's great country estate, and take with her all the children from the poverty-stricken but oh, so full-of-love orphanage,

where the little innocent golden-haired boy lived, and she would also bring their saintly teachers, and settle them to a life of luxury in the great house, where she would look after them like a mother and devote her life to good deeds.

This part was not so easy to film. “Where could I get a bunch of handsome but obviously poor children?” Mr. Goldwasser asked Glamora soon after their arrival. “They have to be really pretty, particularly the little golden-haired thing that killed Lord Arthur.”

Glamora laughed. “Don’t say such a thing... the ladies would be horrified if they thought of the innocent little creature as a killer. There is only one thing to do, Jake. You must beg Miss Merriman to help during the filming of the sequel.”

“I thought about it, Glam, but I don’t know... don’t you find it a bit awkward, after she turned us down last time?” said Mr. Goldwasser with uncharacteristic hesitation.

“Not a bit of it. She did not want to change her life permanently and go to America, but why would she not consent to a couple of months right here in Barsetshire? I am sure she would love that. You know how she adores the movies and she is such a friend to both of us.”

“True, and the sequel should not take very long,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Damn it, Glam, I wish Maisie and Mrs. Rivers would find a name for it already. I am tired of referring to it as *The Sequel*. Yes, you are right. I will ask Miss Merriman. I will call Pomfret Towers right away and beg Lady Pomfret to send Miss Merriman to help us.”

“And while you are begging, Jake, do tell Lady Pomfret she should come whenever she likes to watch the filming. She enjoyed it when she came over during the filming of *Send Me No Lilies*. But as for the name, yes, I agree with you. I wish the new film would have a name already.”

Coincidentally, Maisie and Mrs. Rivers were engaging in a similar conversation. “This is becoming ridiculous,” said Maisie irritably, looking up from the papers she was collecting, her face clearly exhibiting an expression of impatience and even anger,

quite unusual for her. “We have got to find a name for this blasted film! Why are we incapable of solving this?”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Rivers uncomfortably. “We have thought of so many titles, and none of them worked.”

“I want something poetic,” said Maisie. “A name that will give a sense of distance, despair, hope, all mingled together. I can’t choose a single title that I like from all those we came up with, and we have been trying for months!”

Mrs. Rivers hesitated for a second, then took courage and said, “Mr. Stonor had an idea for us. I wonder what you would think about it.”

“Yes?” said Maisie, “So what was it? Mr. Stonor is a creative person, he might come up with something really good.”

“He said, call it *My Love, Far Away*,” said Mrs. Rivers. She found it difficult to say the title, but Maisie, whose eyes suddenly lighted with joy, did not notice.

“This is magnificent!” she said in exultation. “So simple, so effective... why didn’t we think of it? Of course, Lady Fitz-Gardner is in Tahiti with her husband, as far as Nestor Chardonay is concerned. He does not know that Lord Arthur has been killed in an accident. How utterly perfect... excuse me, Mrs. Rivers, I must run and tell Mr. Goldwasser. I believe he is losing patience with us.” She took her papers and ran out of the room.

Mr. Goldwasser was just coming out of his office when Maisie approached him with the good news about the title.

“This is an excellent title,” he said. “I like it very much, and as far as I am concerned, it’s official. By the way, Miss Robinson, I think things are beginning to look brighter. I just called Pomfret Towers, and spoke to Lady Pomfret and Miss Merriman. I am happy to say that Miss Merriman is coming over to help us during the filming!”

“That is good news indeed, Mr. Goldwasser. What with Mrs. Lewis babysitting Miss Moonshadow, you can use the help,” said Maisie.

“Babysitting is a good description,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “If it were not for her incredible looks, I would have dropped

Miss Moonshadow and tried to find another star, possessing a higher level of intelligence. Mrs. Lewis is more optimistic about her than I am. I think Miss Moonshadow is so simple, so unable to learn.”

“Do you think she will be ready to become Mr. Alcott’s fake fiancé when we return to the States?” asked Maisie with considerable discomfort that she was trying to hide.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “But let me tell you, Miss Robinson, if she is not ready, and somehow messes up the fake romance, off she goes back to Peoria. I have neither the time nor the inclination for babysitting.”

“How will you determine her readiness?” asked Maisie.

“There are three things that I will require, to start with. First, she will have to stop constantly talking about Peoria. Second, she must understand what a sophisticated wardrobe looks like and stop longing for her vulgar teen-age attire. Third, she should avoid looking interested when a man, other than Mr. Alcott, is approaching her, the way Julian Rivers did. I did not like her reaction to Mr. Rivers, and such behaviour would be instantly caught by the journalists. As time goes by, she has to show growing levels of sophistication. I don’t expect her to be a genius, but she must develop a personality that matches her looks. I want her to be mysterious and enigmatic, as you know.”

“The part she takes in Mr. Yukon’s film will help, I think,” said Maisie. “The Evil Seductress is the epitome of the mysterious and enigmatic female.”

“We’ll see if it helps any. Perhaps I chose the wrong person; she may be just too young, I don’t know. The part is very small and she will be finished in a few weeks. I wanted Hollywood to think she is temporarily in love with Rush Yukon, but I am not sure I can trust her to do even that. When I remember how good Glam was when we were planning such things at the very beginning of her career... she always had a head on her shoulders. There will never be anyone quite like Glam.”

“Of course not, Mr. Goldwasser. No one can fill Miss Tudor’s place, she stands alone. But as you always say, we must work with what we have.”

“We are trying,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And we have been successful at least with Miss Moonshadow’s looks, if not with her brains. I have an idea, Miss Robinson. Perhaps we should ask her to come here, with Mrs. Lewis, once they are done with the Evil Seductress part? We could help her develop her new personality, and Glam is here to point the way. It’s really not a big deal if Miss Moonshadow becomes Alcott’s fake fiancée right away. We can always say she missed him so much she had to follow him to England, chaperoned, of course, by Mrs. Lewis.”

Maisie’s heart seemed to fall down a staircase and land somewhere on the floor, but she held on to her dignity. “Yes, it may be a good idea,” she said. She did not think Mr. Goldwasser noticed that she spoke in a voice that was not her own, but she was wrong. Mr. Goldwasser noticed everything, every time, everywhere. Mr. Goldwasser never, ever, missed a clue, which is why he was such a success in his cut-throat business. However, he had a few ideas of his own which he could not share with Maisie at the moment, and since we do not know what they were, at least not yet, we cannot share them with our readers, which is much to our chagrin since we love being open and above board with our readers at all times. We suspect that Mr. Goldwasser thought that Aubrey Clover, who had rescued Edmond from dancing and exposed Nestor Alcott’s star magnetism by the simple method of spiking his orange juice with alcohol and making him drunk, could save him from his infatuation with the silly little Miss Moonshadow and help him find his true love. By doing that, Aubrey Clover would also be assisting Mr. Goldwasser with his new mission – the quest for a new star to replace Glamora Tudor – and he would do it better if he saw Miss Moonshadow with his own eyes and studied her behaviour. So there were many reasons to bring Miss Moonshadow to England.

Miss Merriman, back at Norton Hall, was having tea with Mr. Goldwasser, and listening to his plans and difficulties, particularly regarding the children which he needed right away.

“Why, I could arrange for any number of children for you, Mr. Goldwasser,” said Miss Merriman. “The first group that comes to mind are the Pollett children. Ed and Millie, their parents, are sweet-tempered individuals, though definitely wanting, and so are the children. Ed and Millie seem to welcome a new addition to the family every year, so there are plenty of children, though I forget their exact number. These children are extremely handsome, though always quite dirty, but I suppose they can be thoroughly scrubbed before each filming session. And there are many other children among the cottagers, since so many girls there have illegitimate children. Lady Pomfret has quite a few on her hands. How many children would you like to have?”

Mr. Goldwasser, his head spinning with these wild revelations of life as experienced in the supposedly quiet countryside, resisted the temptation to ask where the children’s fathers came from, and said he needed about twenty or twenty-five, since a group of this size would be enough to give the impression of a full orphanage.

“They cannot be permitted to run all over the place, though,” said Miss Merriman firmly. “They are likely to damage the flowers. I expect they will pick them for their mothers, who don’t want them in the least.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “I will have to assign guards during the filming, since I can’t let the children destroy Lady Norton’s property. Do you expect them to be very wild and undisciplined?”

“Keep them well-supplied with sweets, give their mothers plenty of tea, and all shall be well,” promised Miss Merriman philosophically. Mr. Goldwasser laughed. “Excellent,” he said. “Would you speak to the Polletts? I would like to start as soon as possible. I want to finish the film not long after Christmas, if at all possible. And we must select the little golden-haired killer of Lord Arthur.”

“I’ll have them here tomorrow afternoon,” said Miss Merriman. “I am sure one of them must have golden hair, once it’s properly shampooed.” And since she had never failed him before, Mr. Goldwasser was certain that Miss Merriman could produce a herd of elephants in record time, should they be required, let alone a few pretty children.

Lady Fitz-Gardner strolled around the wintry garden, looking utterly forlorn, pale, tired, and sad. Her mood would be made clear to any viewer by her very soft, mauve-tinted lipstick, extremely light makeup and powder, and most importantly, the fact that she wore no rouge at all. But all this only made her look as if she were made of the finest porcelain. The delicate look was emphasized by her wearing deep mourning, consisting of a black dress, black shoes, and a small black hat that was perched on her bright red hair, which was combed back severely into a tight knot worn low on her neck. In short, Lady Aurora Fitz-Gardner was as beautiful as she ever was in *Send Me No Lilies*, perhaps even more so, and the audience’s hearts would go out to her, the poor suffering woman, treated so cruelly by Life Itself. She stopped and leaned on a grey stone statue, touched with dried moss and depicting an angel who was covering his face with his wings for an unexplained reason. She looked significantly at a bare, wintry rose bush, which clearly symbolized her dashed hopes, and sighed deeply and eloquently.

But the sad moment did not last long. The camera moved into a close-up, and showed the large violet eyes suddenly lighting up with innocent happiness. The camera moved on to a group of children of various ages, accompanied by a few nurses or teachers wearing very plain navy blue dresses. The children walked toward Lady Fitz-Gardner, chattering and laughing. The camera zoomed on the face of a small, golden-haired child. “Cut!” said Mr. Goldwasser. “Miss Merriman, where are the guards?” he asked. “I am rather afraid of these children. They are bound to do damage unless they are watched. The Polletts, and

some of the mothers, were very honest about their children's destructive tendencies. They are excellent actors, though. We have rehearsed very successfully."

"The guards are here, hiding behind the walls, the trees, and anything else that they could find," said Miss Merriman. "I warned them that they must not be seen, but must pounce on the children as soon as they see them do anything dangerous. You can resume, Mr. Goldwasser."

The children saw Lady Fitz-Gardner, and stopped chattering. They stood gaping at the beautiful lady as the head teacher came to speak to her. All except the little golden-haired little boy that Mr. Goldwasser referred to as "Lord Arthur's Killer." The brave little boy seemed to be drawn to Lady Fitz-Gardner. He came to her and held out his arms, and she picked him up lovingly. The little boy put his head on her shoulder in the most trusting and touching manner. "Cut!" said Mr. Goldwasser. "This boy is a born actor," said Miss Merriman appreciatively as he jumped off Glamora's arms and headed back to his group, unconcerned. "Indeed," said Mr. Goldwasser.

"Thank Heaven he is bathed," said Glamora. "You should have seen his original condition, Jake."

"I'd rather not," said Mr. Goldwasser uncharitably, looking at the children greedily accepting sweets from Miss Merriman, who seemed to know exactly how to handle them.

"I would trust this woman in a lions' den," said Mr. Goldwasser with deep appreciation. "Tea time, everyone." And the group headed toward the commissary, which was beautifully resurrected for the filming.

Lady Norton, though, was having tea alone with the professor, who had just come back from his lectures. They were discussing their scheme and what happened during the professor's meeting with Professor Hilliard-Sabre.

"I simply can't understand it, Lady Norton," said the professor. "I am at a loss. During my visit, Professor Hilliard-

Sabre was so invariably pleasant, so helpful, so accommodating. She has not shown her claws even once!”

“I firmly believe she was trying to hide her crime,” declared Lady Norton, feeling like a female Sherlock Holmes, a rather pleasant and thrilling sensation. At that point in time, she was entirely converted to the professor’s point of view, namely, that a crime was perpetrated when the seeds were disposed of, rather than a simple accident. Her better sense tried to tell her that Carla could not possibly be an accomplice for such a crime, but she energetically repressed these thoughts and clung to the much more exciting idea of a nefarious plot. An added incentive was the thought that such a plot could bring so much interest to the book she could write about raising the cactus, particularly if Professor Hilliard-Sabre were arrested.

“You must be right, after all these years of animosity, she must have an ulterior motive,” said the professor. “But still... she introduced me to the students as Her Distinguished Colleague from America, she invited me to tea, and altogether she treated me as a respected friend... I don’t understand at all. She is my sworn enemy!”

“But you discovered nothing about the cactus seeds?”

“Nothing at all. There was no opportunity to talk about the subject. I could not find a way to bring it up, and she never mentioned it at all. She pretended to know nothing about it, I assume, as a ruse.”

“Did she ever ask what you were doing at Norton Hall?”

“No, never. I suppose she took it for granted that I am an old friend. Perhaps I could have told her about your plan to raise the cactus, but every time I thought of doing so, I was afraid I would not sound natural and would raise her suspicion. I did mention to her how beautiful are your conservatories, and also the books you have written. She showed a keen interest, and said she would love to see both.”

“So this gave you the needed opportunity to invite her to come for Christmas?”

“Yes, exactly, and she accepted most enthusiastically. She said that she would much prefer to meet you and see your

conservatories and your books to any other invitation that she had received for Christmas, and that she looked forward to interesting discussions with both you and me about horticulture... she is acting like a different woman. She must be trying to hide her crime, as you say, because why else would she do that?"

"Well, when she is here, Professor, we will be able to discover the truth. To begin with, we will have someone search her room for evidence. I had an idea of someone who can help us."

"Who is that, Lady Norton? Remember, we must be very secretive about it."

"He is the soul of discretion," said Lady Norton, and rang the bell. Instead of Lady Norton's butler, Shymmering entered the room.

"Professor, this is Shymmering, Mr. Nestor Alcott's valet," said Lady Norton. "He had come with him to film the sequel to *Send Me No Lilies*. Shymmering, this is Professor Buckholz-Schuller, who is staying with us. There is something I would like to ask you to do for us."

"Yes, my lady," said Shymmering respectfully. "I have heard much about your work, Professor, particularly about your astounding achievement with hybridizing rare orchids from Venezuela. Admirable work, if I may say so."

"You have an interest in horticulture?" asked the professor, surprised.

"Yes sir. And botanical research as well. I have recently studied your paper on the effects of Northern butterflies on the flowering of cacti in the American Southwest," said Shymmering. "A most advanced theory, I thought."

"Speaking of cacti," said Lady Norton, "Would you allow me to take Shymmering into our confidence, Professor?"

"Why, yes, Lady Norton," said the professor, conquered by Shymmering's knowledge and interest. "By all means, tell him."

"I believe I know what you have in mind, sir," said Shymmering modestly. "Would it be related to the issue of the *Echinocactus horizontalis* var. *nicholii* seeds that had

disappeared mysteriously from Lady Norton's room?" The professor gaped with disbelief. How did this man know about the deep secret? And what's more, where did he learn how to pronounce the name so correctly?

"How do you know about it, Shymmering?" asked Lady Norton. She was just as surprised, but her dignity would never allow her to gape.

"Well, my lady, Carla was talking about the incident in the servants' hall," said Shymmering. "She seems to return to the subject quite often, since she feels that she is unjustly blamed for an honest mistake. She is trying hard to convince everyone that this is all it was, an honest mistake. But when someone tries so hard to do so, it always arouses my suspicion that there is more to it than that, particularly since no one in the servants' hall seems to show the slightest interest in the affair. I believe that normally, she would have forgotten the incident by now, my lady. Her intellect is not the kind that would retain information for very long, unless it were an important matter to her. Therefore, I suspect someone put her up to it."

"Exactly," said the professor, highly gratified. "We have a suspect..."

"Would you mean Professor Elspeth Hilliard-Sabre, sir?" asked Shymmering.

"How would you know?" asked the professor, shocked again.

"Well, sir, I put two and two together. It is common knowledge that you have just gone to Kensington for joint lectures with Professor Hilliard-Sabre. I am aware of the rivalry between you and Professor Hilliard-Sabre, sir. I have acquainted myself with her unjustified letters and criticisms regarding your work. It would make sense that such a rival might be interested in stealing the glory of being the first person in England to raise the rare *Echinocactus horizonthalonius* var. *nicholii*. A simple deduction, Sir. I assure you no one else knows about the delicate situation, which if you entrust to my care, I will handle with utmost discretion."

The professor looked at Lady Norton and nodded his assent. "Very well, Shymmering," she said. "We are both highly gratified by your helpful suggestions and your deep interest. This is going to be a very difficult case, though, I am afraid."

"Not at all, my lady," said Shymmering. "If handled delicately, I expect success. I will take it upon myself to keep an eye on Professor Hilliard-Sabre, I will personally search her room, and I will also conduct an investigation in London even before she comes."

"You seem to know how to handle such cases," said the professor. "Have you done it before?"

"Yes, sir," said Shymmering. "I am not at liberty to divulge details, of course, but I have often been called upon, in my capacity of a gentleman's gentleman, to perform acts of great discretion and delicacy. At one point in my career I even had to impersonate a police officer in order to achieve my employer's aims."

The professor and Lady Norton were deeply impressed and relieved. Obviously, this was the man to solve their problem.

"Will there be anything else, my lady?" asked Shymmering.

"No, not at the moment, Shymmering," said Lady Norton.

"Then I will clear the tea things, my lady, with your permission."

Chapter Twelve

“Come in, sorry about the mess,” said a muffled voice behind the door. Maisie, who had come to find out why Mr. Alcott was extremely late to an important meeting, opened the door and looked around her with astonishment. Nes was usually neat in his personal habits, but at that moment, his room looked as if Scotland Yard had spent a few happy hours searching every drawer, wardrobe, and desk, and tossing everything on the floor as they did so. A couple of blood hounds, sniffing and worrying the piles on the floor, may have joined the fray, for all Maisie could tell. At that moment, Nes’ head was buried in a drawer as he was flipping articles of clothing about, hence the muffled voice.

“Where in the world did I put it? I can’t find it, I am going nuts!” said Mr. Alcott, straightening up and looking at Maisie with despair.

“Whatever possessed you to throw the whole room about like this?” said Maisie.

“It’s the hair oil! I can’t find the hair oil!” said Mr. Alcott in an aggrieved manner.

“Hair oil... do you mean the vile stuff you put on to look like Valentino? But you don’t need it here, Nes. Not for this film. Nestor Chardonay would not touch this stuff.”

“No, I don’t need it for the film,” said Mr. Alcott, visibly embarrassed. “It’s just that... ah, well, never mind. Maybe Wardrobe has some oil that I could borrow.”

“But what in the world do you need it for? The Hollywood photographers are not coming here.”

Mr. Alcott looked quite sheepish. He hesitated for a moment, and then blurted out, “I wanted to put it in my hair before Estella... I mean, Miss Moonshadow, arrives. She never saw me without it, you know.”

“Miss Moonshadow would not care if you put butter and jam on your hair. Have you really lost your head again? Nes, this is becoming a bad habit with you.”

“I have no idea what you mean by a bad habit,” said Mr. Alcott with utmost dignity. “Anyway, did you want to tell me something?”

“Yes, everyone is waiting for you; we are supposed to attend a meeting, remember? We wanted to make a few decisions before Mrs. Rivers leaves to spend Christmas with her family.”

“Heavens, I completely forgot about this meeting... let’s go right away. Mr. Goldwasser will be furious.”

“He already is; he sent me to fetch you. Or rather, I volunteered, since I thought you would be less scared of me coming than if he came to get you himself.”

“Ouch...” said Mr. Alcott. “That’s bad. Let’s go. I’ll ask Shymmering to look for the oil.”

“Will you give up this disgusting oil already? Oh, here is Shymmering. Yes, Shymmering? We are about to go to a meeting.”

“It will not be necessary, miss. Mr. Goldwasser asked me to tell you and Mr. Alcott that the meeting is postponed until this afternoon.”

Maisie and Mr. Alcott looked at each other with alarm. Mr. Goldwasser might be the most charming individual on earth, but it was a very bad idea to make him angry. Few people did. Shymmering saw their concern and cleared his throat.

“The meeting was postponed because Mr. Goldwasser received a trunk call from his partner in America, miss, and they are having their own conference, which seems to be urgent. So your meeting would have been postponed even if you had been there.”

Both Mr. Alcott and Maisie heaved a sigh of relief. Shymmering allowed himself a slight twitch of a corner of his mouth, representing a smile, but at least it was a benevolent one. “Is there anything else, miss?” he asked. “I think I should attempt to restore Mr. Alcott’s room to some order.”

“Very well, we’ll get out of your way and go to the commissary,” said Maisie. “Nes, let’s go... Nes? Nes, where are you?”

Mr. Alcott was under the bed, ferreting among some shoes on the floor.

“What is Mr. Alcott looking for, miss?” asked Shymmering. “Perhaps I could be of assistance.”

“He is looking for the disgusting oil that he puts on his hair in Hollywood,” said Maisie.

“Sir,” said Shymmering, “There is no need for you to search any further; I have personally removed the bottle. It was practically empty, so I decided to have it refilled at a hair dressing establishment in Barchester.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” said Mr. Alcott angrily, emerging from under the bed, his suit covered with a thin layer of dust. Shymmering shook his head ever so slightly, obviously frustrated by the chambermaid’s inattention to details, produced a brush from his pocket, and proceeded to clean his employer.

“I had no idea that you would have a need for it at the moment, sir,” he said, brushing away, “I expected you would only need it in two days, so I made sure to have it refilled. I will put it in the bathroom, sir.”

Maisie realized that Shymmering knew exactly why Mr. Alcott wanted the oil, and for some reason, it angered her. She turned to Mr. Alcott and said fiercely, “You know what, Nes? The only time you are tolerable, these days, is when you are acting. You are very nice as Nestor Chardonay, and do you know why? It is because Nestor Chardonay behaves like a man, not like a spoilt child. Come to think of it, this is probably because I wrote the script and created his character. As soon as the filming session is over, there you go again, foolishly following your new guiding star.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I say and you understand me perfectly well. You seem to conveniently forget your crush over Glamora Tudor. You acted like a fool during your infatuation, but at least she was worth it. She is Glamora Tudor and therefore irresistible. But this silly girl, what do you see in her?”

“Why, she is so lovely, so innocent, so child-like...”

“So stupid, you mean. How many times did she tell you about her stunt as the homecoming queen in Peoria? Do you find it interesting? She told me at least three times.” Mr. Alcott did not answer. He just looked at her, deeply offended, and remained silent.

“Well, never mind, Nes, I will not try to help you anymore. Go and break your heart over this mindless creature. It’s your life!” and she stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

“Miss Robinson seems to dislike the oil, I perceive,” said Shymmering tactfully. He was floating around the room, skilfully and effortlessly putting everything to perfect order. Mr. Alcott watched the operation with admiration.

“When is Miss Moonshadow coming, Shymmering?” he suddenly asked. “I did not want to sound too inquisitive when speaking with Mr. Goldwasser.”

“In two days, sir. That is, naturally, why I thought you wanted the oil in two days. We are having quite a full house for Christmas, by the way. Professor Hilliard-Sabre is also coming, and Miss Tudor asked Mr. Clover and Miss Dean to drop in whenever they could, since they will be spending Christmas with the Dean family.”

“Who is he?” asked Mr. Alcott. “The professor you mentioned, I mean.”

“Professor Hilliard-Sabre is a lady, sir. She is a great botanist, an associate of Professor Buckholz-Schuller, who is helping Lady Norton with her Arizona cactus experiment.” Mr. Alcott immediately lost interest.

“Maisie is mad at me, Shymmering,” he said, returning to his own sorrows. “It’s all because I like Estella... I mean, Miss Moonshadow. I can’t imagine why she does not like Miss Moonshadow.”

“Miss Moonshadow is not the type to encourage companionship with another young lady, sir,” said Shymmering. “She is more likely to be friendly to gentlemen. Miss Robinson, on the other hand, is friendly to both, and she does not like to be rebuffed. Besides, Miss Robinson is exceedingly intelligent, and

Miss Moonshadow's immaturity and lack of education does not please her."

"Perhaps she is rebuffed because Miss Moonshadow feels that Maisie does not like her?" asked Mr. Alcott.

"I highly doubt that this is the case, sir," said Shymmering. "Miss Moonshadow would not notice whether Miss Robinson likes her or not. She would be oblivious to such nuances. I personally would not have encouraged friendship between Miss Moonshadow and yourself, sir; however, it is your duty to be friendly to her, since Mr. Goldwasser thinks it is essential for business to pretend she is your affianced. You cannot disobey your employer, and I am sure Miss Robinson will come to understand that."

"Well, I sure hope so," said Mr. Alcott. "I don't like it when Maisie is mad at me."

"No, of course not," said Shymmering. "Miss Robinson's opinion matters to you a great deal, I perceive; it always has. Your room is now in perfect order, sir. Would you be going to lunch?"

"I suppose I should," said Mr. Alcott hesitantly. Both business and inclination made him wish to see Miss Moonshadow very much, but seeing the anger in Maisie's eyes made him uncomfortable.

Maisie went to the winter garden. The warm air, redolent of earth and tropical plants, proved soothing to her strained nerves, and she decided to sit on one of the benches and compose herself. To her surprise, she found Lady Pomfret and Mrs. Morland, accompanied by Miss Merriman, strolling toward the same bench from the opposite direction.

"How nice to see you," said Maisie, genuinely delighted. "I had no idea you were coming today."

"It was more or less on the spur of the moment," said Lady Pomfret. "Merry knew Mrs. Morland was coming to visit me, so she telephoned and invited us to lunch at your delightful commissary, and also to take a tour around the filming premises."

She said that new rooms were prepared for various scenes, and the conservatories were at their best. We could not resist.”

“You should also come to see some of the shooting after Christmas,” said Maisie. Mrs. Morland, who remembered Maisie as a cheerful, spirited young woman, wondered why she looked so subdued.

“Will you join us on our tour?” asked Miss Merriman, whose sharp eye also noted Maisie’s state of mind.

“Certainly, I’ll be happy to,” said Maisie, and followed them around the winter garden. In a rather natural manner, Miss Merriman and Lady Pomfret went ahead to talk about joint interests as they were admiring the magnificent greenery, and Maisie walked with Mrs. Morland.

“You look a little tired,” said Mrs. Morland. “I hope we are not imposing on you.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Morland, you are not imposing at all. I am very pleased to see you,” said Maisie. She was quiet for a minute, and then, doing what most people did when encountering Mrs. Morland, burst out with her real trouble. “It’s just that I had a bit of an argument with Mr. Alcott, and was rather annoyed with him.”

“What happened?” asked Mrs. Morland kindly, always willing to be a good listener.

“He wanted to put some repulsive oil on his hair, to impress the new lady in his life,” said Maisie bitterly. “I told him the oil is only necessary in Hollywood, where he is creating the image of Valentino, but he would not listen. Wardrobe would not be happy with the idea, either, I am sure of that. The oil is vile and hard to remove.”

Mrs. Morland, who knew human nature very well, realized at once that the oil was secondary to the fact that there was a new lady in Mr. Alcott’s life, but she knew better than to allow Maisie to see that. For a moment she wondered if Maisie knew her own heart, and decided that she did not. “I remember when my youngest son, Tony, and many of his friends at school, insisted on putting some revolting oil on their hair, and Matron

was very upset because it stained all the fresh pillow cases,” she said, musing about the past.

Maisie laughed. “They were children, so one can forgive such behaviour, but Mr. Alcott told me that he stained his own pillowcase in Hollywood, and was so embarrassed that he hid it under the bed, and his housekeeper could not find it and made a terrible fuss.”

Mrs. Morland smiled. “Men never grow up,” she said.

“I know,” said Maisie. “And Mr. Alcott, in particular, is so childish. He does not have a strong mind, really, and he keeps falling in love with the most unsuitable women. The results of his infatuations can be catastrophic. I thought that if he became famous he would develop some backbone, some arrogance, perhaps think that every woman should worship him, but he just goes on falling in love as usual. He is not breaking any hearts, which is his job to do. I think eventually Mr. Goldwasser would be mad about his inability to act like a star.”

“He will get over his infatuations,” said Mrs. Morland in her most sibilant manner. “Men like him usually do. It suddenly dawns on them where their heart really is, and it’s just a matter of time and patience.” Maisie looked at her sharply, but Mrs. Morland seemed perfectly at ease and did not give the slightest sign of intending the remark to be significant to Maisie in any way.

“Who did he fall for this time, by the way?” she asked. “Anyone I know?”

“Well, at first it was Miss Tudor. Can you imagine? He irritated her so much by his constant devotion that she almost refused to work with him. And now it is a new starlet, very beautiful I must admit, but so very silly... ah, well. I hope you are right, because if he goes on like that he will ruin his own career. A Hollywood star must orchestrate his life as carefully as he orchestrates his career.” She sighed and shrugged her shoulders in mock despair.

They entered a room that was made to look like Lady Fitz-Gardner’s intimate sanctuary, a small sitting room decorated with sombre elegance and relieved only by a large bouquet of

white flowers. Miss Merriman and Lady Pomfret were already there, admiring the design.

“The next scene will be filmed here,” said Miss Merriman. “Lady Fitz-Gardner will be sitting alone, reading a note that has come to her from London. It will be made clear that a year has passed since Lord Arthur’s untimely death, and she will be wearing the appropriate half-mourning, black and white with touches of lavender. She will ring for her maid, and instruct her to pack her bags, since she has been informed that Lord Arthur’s colleagues are about to give a memorial service in his honour, and would like to have Lady Fitz-Gardner attend it. The little golden-haired child, who has become as attached to her as if he were her own child, will burst into the room, laughing and playing with a ball, and she will take him on her knees and tell him that she must attend an important event in London. He will cry a little and then be reconciled to her trip by the promise of nice presents for everyone when she comes back home.”

“Is this the child that cost Lord Arthur his life?” asked Lady Pomfret in her forthright manner. “Why does she like him so much? It seems to me I would have hated the cause of my husband’s death, and so would most sensible women.”

Maisie laughed. “Indeed, in real life it would be like that, at least in most cases. But in sentimental films, Lady Pomfret, it’s my job to create these ridiculous emotional situations. We are trying to make Lady Fitz-Gardner as saint-like as possible, at least until she meets Nestor Chardonay again, and then all hell breaks loose, as the saying goes, and she will be a saint no more... wait until you see them dance the famous tango...”

Lady Pomfret, always literal, did not quite understand the implications, but Mrs. Morland laughed. “I thoroughly enjoyed *Send Me No Lilies*,” she said. “I can’t wait to see the sequel.”

“We finally came up with a name for it,” said Maisie proudly. “It will be called *My Love, Far Away*.”

“Very nice,” said Mrs. Morland with professional appreciation, “Highly evocative.” Maisie was so pleased with the praise from such a famous authoress that she almost recovered her cheerful spirits.

Two days later, Mrs. Rivers was in her room, attempting to start packing a few things for her trip home for the holidays. Her daughter Phoebe and her family were expected, which would be very nice, but Julian was also coming, and that was not a pleasant thought, since Mrs. Rivers was sure he would remember the way Denis humiliated him, and would probably take it out on her. She was determined not to allow it this time, and decided that if Julian misbehaved, she would demand that her husband, George, would master his courage and do something about it, since she knew full well that defying Julian herself without Denis by her side would not be possible. She simply could not do it.

She stopped her half-hearted packing, sat on the bed and thought about Denis, something that she did every day, perhaps every hour. It was a ridiculous situation, she thought. As silly as the plots of her own books, and secretly she knew that the plots were very silly indeed. How could she care so much for a man so much younger than herself? A man so young he could be her son? And yet, every day that passed, and every letter exchanged, made him dearer to her and more important. She anticipated each letter with the kind of emotions she had never before experienced and devoted much time, usually late at night so as not to be disturbed, to answering them. The letters were difficult to write. She tried to write cheerfully, tell him fun little anecdotes about the filming, and appear to be just friendly. Some of the time, being a professional writer, she succeeded in writing such a letter. Other times, she could not, and her letters were full of her real emotions, though she never openly confessed them. Denis did not comment on either style; his letters were honest and true to himself and to her, and he was always unwavering in his affection. What was she to do? She got up and started her packing, determined to put all such things out of her mind until after the holidays. Then, she thought, she would make a decision, once and for all.

As Mrs. Rivers was going down to tea, she heard a cheerful sort of commotion, and entering the living room, saw Mrs. Lewis and Miss Moonshadow, who had just arrived, being welcomed by everyone. Mrs. Rivers thought that Miss Moonshadow was even more beautiful against the soft English background than she was in Hollywood. Her well-cut, simple suit of black and white houndstooth pattern, was cinched with a black belt with a silver buckle. Her high-heeled shoes, also made of black leather, matched her belt and small handbag, and she had not as yet removed her white hat, set with a medium brim and decorated with a floppy black rose. As she was taking off her short white gloves, she looked simply perfect. She did not seem to be happy, though. Perhaps, thought Mrs. Rivers, she did not want to come? But why would she not? Everything was done to help her develop a magnificent career, and very likely this would be the first time she left the United States and travelled to a new and interesting place. What could be the problem?

Unfortunately for Mr. Alcott, Miss Moonshadow arrived just as the shooting ended for that day, and he had no time to go to his room and slick his hair down with the oil before greeting his new guiding light. Maisie looked at their meeting with apprehension. Mr. Alcott had told her that he had brought a few of his velvet at-home jackets with him, and she was afraid he would put one on and make a complete fool of himself, but fortunately he still had on a normal and elegant suit, one that was worn by his character in the film during the shooting. He looked at Miss Moonshadow with dumb admiration, and Maisie was thoroughly annoyed. Why didn't Nes remember that he was a movie star, someone who should represent a superior being to this stupid child? He was incredibly handsome, too; didn't he know it? Well, Nes never had any backbone, so why should he develop it now? Maisie decided to ignore the romance as best she could.

However, to her surprise, Maisie saw that his apprehension was justified. One look at him and Miss Moonshadow asked, in her annoyingly artless little-girl manner, "Whatever happened to your hair, Mr. Alcott? It's different; you look funny this way."

“I am supposed to look like Nestor Chardonay,” said Mr. Alcott miserably. “He does not wear oil in his hair, I am afraid.”

“Fancy that,” said Miss Moonshadow. “I thought it was your natural look. I liked it better. What is the word I am looking for? Sofis... sofs...”

“Sophisticated,” said Maisie, but she might as well have said nothing, as she was totally ignored by both Mr. Alcott and Miss Moonshadow.

“I can put it on before dinner,” said Mr. Alcott.

“You will not touch that oil, Mr. Alcott,” said a man from Wardrobe, who came to reclaim Nestor Chardonay’s suit from Mr. Alcott. “Not until we finish this film. It is murder to take it off, we have no time to do it when we start filming each morning, and we have such trouble keeping your hair in perfect condition anyway. You can get back to the oil when we return to Hollywood, and you become Valentino again.”

“Oh, it’s not important,” said Mr. Alcott pettishly. He was looking at Miss Moonshadow, who had already left him to talk with Mrs. Rivers.

“Is your son back in England, Mrs. Rivers?” she asked with an air of innocence that worried Mrs. Rivers very much. “I have not seen him again in Hollywood after we met at the show. I wondered how the exhibition turned out to be.”

“Yes, he is in London,” said Mrs. Rivers. She looked at Mrs. Lewis, who shook her head in despair. Obviously, the girl did not forget Julian, which was what they were vainly hoping for.

“So will he be visiting us at Christmas?” asked Miss Moonshadow.

“No, I will not be here for Christmas. I am leaving in a few days,” said Mrs. Rivers. “He will be joining me at home for Christmas, the whole family is coming.”

“Oh, bother,” said Miss Moonshadow. “I wanted to see more pictures. I liked his pictures.”

“I had no idea that you were interested in art, Estella,” said Mrs. Lewis. “It’s a pity I did not know, since we had some very good opportunities to see exhibitions by various good artists.”

“Oh, I am not an art connoisseur, or is it a connoisseur? I am not sure how to pronounce it,” said Miss Moonshadow, giggling. “I just liked Mr. Rivers’ pictures; they were so funny, with everything out of place, eyes in the middle of the face, and triangles and circles. I never saw anything like that in Peoria. He must be a genius. He told me he was one, so I guess he is.”

“He told you he was a genius? When? Did he keep in touch with you?” asked Mrs. Lewis sharply.

“No,” said Miss Moonshadow, just a bit too quickly. “I meant that he told me that at the show. He said that if he painted me, I would be even more famous than if I were a star.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Lewis. Mrs. Rivers thought Mrs. Lewis looked tired. Looking after Miss Moonshadow turned out to be a rather difficult task, it seemed. Well, as long as Julian kept away from the girl, it was not Mrs. Rivers’ concern. She smiled wearily and walked into the dining room, where Glamora was preparing to pour out the tea. She felt she could use a cup of tea, or perhaps something a bit stronger, when it became available later on.

Chapter Thirteen

We rarely write about Christmas. Generally, we prefer to avoid the subject altogether, since what could be said about it that had not been said a million times before? Dickens had already expressed all the proper emotions related to the season, and to be honest, we see almost every literary attempt that had followed as bah, humbug. As for real life, what with church, and snow, and overeating, and drinking more than is good for us, all we wish for is to arrive safely on the other side of Christmas, so to speak, and think of it no more. Let the year advance toward spring and warmth, we say, away from ice and snow, and we shall be content.

But here we must discuss this unpleasant time of year, since certain important events had taken place at Norton Hall that Christmas, and not the least of them the memorable visit from Professor Hilliard-Sabre. She was expected to arrive the day before Christmas, and stay for at least a week. The lengthy visit was ostensibly intended to give her the opportunity to enjoy the conservatories, discuss Lady Norton's amateur, but brilliant, horticultural work, her books, *Herbs of Grace* and *Along My Borders*, (while doing her best to ignore the fact that both were published by a vanity publisher), and to tell Lady Norton, who was genuinely interested, about her own highly important botanical work. The sad truth, though, was that the main reason for her invitation was to give Shymmering the chance to find out about her heinous crime, the alleged theft of the missing cactus seeds.

When the chauffeur brought Professor Hilliard-Sabre from the station, Lady Norton thought that her appearance was all that one would have expected. The professor, who had clearly reached an age of discretion, was tall and angular, and had a pointy nose, sharp and intelligent brown eyes, and slightly wavy, gray hair set in a simple and becoming fashion. She wore a non-nonsense tweed skirt and coat, well cut and unmistakably expensive. Her brogues and handbag, made of dark brown

leather, matched perfectly, and her hat, though it could not be called elegant, was of a classic shape and showed good taste. You could not take her for anything but a lady of birth and a scholar. She was polite, polished, and respectful to Lady Norton, and the two ladies made an excellent impression on each other. So much so, that Lady Norton was almost sorry to think of the professor as a criminal out to deprive her of her botanical achievement, a scoundrel under the guise of a distinguished scholar.

Nevertheless, Lady Norton knew her duty, and immediately summoned Carla to take the professor's luggage to her room. Carla was chosen over the butler, because Shymmering advised Lady Norton that it would give her an opportunity to observe the first meeting between the two alleged conspirators. To Lady Norton's disappointment, not the slightest sign of recognition passed between the two. The professor quite properly ignored Carla, and Carla maintained her usual vacuous look and took the luggage upstairs without further delay.

Professor Buckholz-Schuller came downstairs to greet his colleague, and Lady Norton thought that the two arch-enemies seemed to get on rather well. They treated each other with extreme politeness during tea, and Lady Norton thoroughly enjoyed their lively stories of the time they spent together at the joint lectures in Kensington.

"A most brilliant student brought up an old debate that had started years ago between Professor Buckholz-Schuller and me," said Professor Hilliard-Sabre, laughing at the memory. "Highly appropriate, since it touched on the same subject we were lecturing on."

"What was it about?" asked Lady Norton, intrigued.

"It was about the insects that fertilized the male and female palm trees in Tahiti, before they were brought to Florida," said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. "We do not know if the same insect does it in Florida, or if the fertilization was taken on by a native Floridian insect."

“I don’t think we could ever settle this discussion, my dear Professor Hilliard-Sabre,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “Not unless someone conducts a brand new research project.”

“You see, Lady Norton, I maintained, years ago, that it could not possibly be the same insect, since why should it migrate to Florida?” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre, “While my dear colleague here insisted that a Floridian insect would not know the trees. He maintained that only a migrating insect would have recognized its old feeding grounds.”

“Perhaps it followed the trees as they were brought to Florida?” suggested Lady Norton. “Would it not be possible that some of the insects’ eggs remained on the leaves?”

“It certainly would have been realistic to expect that,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre, “if the trees were brought there in leaf. However, only dried-out, thoroughly cleaned seeds were brought to Florida, and the insects could not have had any contact with the dried seeds. The seeds were successfully germinated in Florida.” Lady Norton looked sharply at Professor Buckholz-Schuller when his colleague mentioned the germination of seeds, and she noticed that he, too, studied her face, but the learned botanist seemed innocent and sipped her tea.

“I should think there is only one way to find out,” said Lady Norton. “Someone must go to Tahiti and find out if the insect that fertilizes the trees in Florida lives there, too. If the insect lives in both places, you will resolve the argument.”

“But someone did go, many years ago,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “A student of mine, for whom I had arranged a grant with the greatest difficulty, stayed there for a few months and did serious research. He did not find the same insects.”

“Which is why I wrote this article that had so offended you, my dear friend,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “I do regret having written it, now that we have met.”

“Not at all,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller in his most magnanimous manner. “You had to follow the scientific truth as you had seen it at the time. After all, you are a scientist, above all else.”

Professor Hilliard-Sabre sighed almost inaudibly. “Yes,” she said wistfully. “As a scientist, one must do one’s duty. But sometimes, and I am sure Lady Norton will understand, it is not easy...” Lady Norton did not understand, but nevertheless smiled benevolently at her guest and offered a plate of scones.

“As you recall, I did remind you in another article that the same situation had happened long ago. It is much like the story of the orchid *Angraecum sesquipedale*,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “Would you not agree, Professor Hilliard-Sabre?”

“Yes indeed,” said the distinguished professor. “Have you heard this story, Lady Norton? In 1862, Charles Darwin saw that orchid in Madagascar. Its common name is now Madagascar Orchid. It has a foot-long throat that holds the nectar that would attract a pollinating insect, but what insect could reach into it, unless it had a foot-long feeding tube, or proboscis? Darwin predicted that such an insect existed, but no one had ever seen one, and he was ridiculed; it proved to be a bit of a scandal. However, forty years later, the giant hawk moth was discovered in Madagascar. It indeed pollinates the orchid with a long proboscis that easily reaches the nectar. The moth was named *Xanthopan morganii praedicta*, to honor the prediction that Darwin dared to theorize on, despite never having seen the insect.”

“Fascinating,” said Lady Norton. “Yes, it may be the same situation.”

“It could be,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre with utmost good nature. “Some day, I would love to take some time off my heavy schedule and go to Tahiti myself, to resolve this issue. I will be happy to write a new article and concede that your theory was correct, Professor Buckholz-Schuller.”

“That is most gracious, Professor Hilliard-Sabre,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “And I, as well, would be more than happy to concede that you were right all along, with an article as well, of course, after proper research is done.”

“How delightful such a trip would be,” said Lady Norton. “I hope you will both have the opportunity to do so some day. They say Tahiti is a place of great natural beauty.”

“And it has the most interesting flora, aside from the palms,” said Professor Buckhoz-Schuller. “Ah, what a delightful busman’s holiday such a trip could be.” He put his cup down with the sigh of a busy man whose schedule does not allow many holidays. “Such grants are not easy to arrange, though, since the research has little to with practical matters.”

“It is always important to know the right people,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “But indeed, more grants are now given to applied science than to pure science. I do have to admit that.”

“It is sad to see that pure science is not encouraged these days,” said Lady Norton. “But the world is not changing for the best... more tea?”

Christmas dinner at Norton Hall had always been a memorable event, but at that occasion Lady Norton had created a scene suitable for a royal house. She felt that she owed something to having been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Alexandra, and had to show those Hollywood people what England could do. The table was set for over thirty people, since everyone who did not go to their families, including many of the American crew, were expected. Lady Norton ordered that the table must be decorated with hothouse orchids, and even though these winter-flowering specimens were extremely expensive, she had them cut with great abundance and their gold, purple, and white beauty shimmered together with the expensive china and the special gold-lined silver she used for such a holiday extravaganza. She observed the table with great satisfaction; her inspection revealed no need for any change, and she complimented the butler on his achievement. At that moment, Shymmering walked into the room.

“May I have a word with you, my lady?” he asked. The butler, seeing that a private conversation was about to occur, discreetly disappeared, possibly planning to listen at the keyhole, though we cannot prove that it was his intention. However, whether he intended to do so or not, he had no opportunity to achieve his goal, since no one could interfere with Shymmering, who knew everything about secrecy and discretion. That wise individual made a motion to Lady Norton to move away from the door, a caution which she understood immediately.

“Yes, Shymmering?” asked Lady Norton. “I imagine you wish to discuss our plans?”

“Indeed. While you are having your dinner, I propose to search Professor Hilliard-Sabre’s room for evidence, with your permission, my lady.”

“Of course, Shymmering, it is an excellent plan. Do you think she would bring anything incriminating with her, though?”

“She would have to, my lady. She would not dare to leave the evidence in Kensington. A criminal knows that the police could pounce any moment. It could be the seeds themselves, incriminating notes, duplicate keys to the cactus room, or a map of the Norton Hall premises. I will recognize a suspicious object when I see it, I expect.”

“Very good, Shymmering. You will have plenty of time, since the Christmas dinner, and then the tea, would be a lengthy occasion.”

“I shall report to you after the reception is over, my lady, if you wish.”

“Thank you, Shymmering. I shall wait for you in my sitting room.”

“Will that be all, my lady?”

“Yes, Shymmering. And thank you. I hope you will find time for your own Christmas dinner?”

“Yes, thank you, my lady. I will arrange everything with Cook.”

Before dinner, the company gathered in the living room for a glass of sherry. Everyone was beautifully dressed. Glamora's opulent gold lamé was probably the most stunning, but Miss Moonshadow was not far behind in her silver and white shimmery elegance, with an opera-length string of pearls lent by the studio. Maisie looked very well in a soft brown and white velvet dress that set her brunette colors to great advantage, but sad to say, few men would have noticed her next to Miss Moonshadow's glory, and as for Mr. Alcott, he did not see her at all. But the greatest surprise of the evening was Professor Hilliard-Sabre. To everyone's amazement, the distinguished, middle-aged professor chose to wear a yellow chiffon dress, printed with tiny pink and green roses, that would have been right for a young girl. She even had on lipstick, a shade too bright, and her hair was set in tight curls. Naturally, no one stared or said anything, but Maisie and Glamora exchanged a surprised glance. Such an outfit needed a reason, and neither of the ladies could think of one.

"Miss Moonshadow," said Mr. Goldwasser to his new star, "tomorrow you will have an opportunity to meet two extremely delightful people, Miss Jessica Dean, the great actress, and Aubrey Clover, the playwright and actor-manager of the Cockspur Theatre in London. They promised to visit us, since they have brought their children and they are spending Christmas with Miss Dean's family."

"Children?" said Miss Moonshadow. "But you said *Miss Dean*..." She looked scandalized by the implications.

"Oh, they are married, Miss Moonshadow," said Mr. Goldwasser, disgusted with his beautiful star's simplistic attitude to life. While highly concerned with the morals of a pair of total strangers, she seemed to have no interest in their professional acclaim. And she was supposed to become a great star? A famous actress?

"But why would she call herself Miss Dean? It gives a very bad impression..." said Miss Moonshadow primly.

"That is what famous actresses do, Miss Moonshadow. They keep their maiden names, or a name that was given to them by

the studio, the way we did with you. If you become a big star, you will remain Miss Moonshadow no matter whom you married. Miss Dean naturally uses her stage name, the name she is known under. She is very famous, Miss Moonshadow. Have you never heard of her?"

"No, I never heard of her, I am afraid, Mr. Goldwasser," said Miss Moonshadow. She was deep in thought for a moment. "I could never do that... keep my maiden name after marriage? But that is almost immoral. Of course, in Peoria, Miss Dean would not do so," she continued.

"Probably not," said Mr. Goldwasser. Two conflicting thoughts flitted through his mind. One was the ridiculous vision of Jessica Dean settling in a small town in America, which almost made him laugh out loud. The other thought was not funny at all. He had a sinking sensation that occurred every time he spoke to the ravishing creature. It was the feeling that he had made a huge, expensive mistake in his judgment of Miss Moonshadow's capabilities. He wished Miss Merriman were there, to help him decide once and for all what to do about it, since Mrs. Lewis was adamant that Miss Moonshadow would be able to assume the role they needed, and would not admit defeat. But Miss Merriman was away for Christmas, which she kept with Lord and Lady Pomfret, and looked forward to a delightful visit with Miss Choyce, that nice aunt of Mr. Choyce, with whom Miss Merriman had a slight, but significant understanding, as we are sure our readers would recall.

"I do hope Mrs. Rivers is having a nice time with her family," said Glamora to Maisie when the ladies retired after dinner.

"Not with Julian there," said Maisie grimly, glancing at Miss Moonshadow, who was standing at the other side of the room, talking to Mrs. Lewis and out of earshot.

"You think he will be horrible to her?" asked Glamora.

"Do you remember how Mr. Stonor treated him at the exhibition? Julian will never forgive Mrs. Rivers for that scene," said Maisie.

"But I understand he is a little more restrained when his father is around," said Glamora.

“I do hope so, Miss Tudor. But I have the worst feeling that we have not heard the last of Mr. Julian Rivers,” said Maisie. “And I think Miss Moonshadow is a little too interested in him. I don’t trust either of them.”

“Poor Jake,” said Glamora. “I sometimes feel I should have stayed in the business and avoided giving such a headache to everyone with my own wishes.”

“You can always change your mind, Miss Tudor, should the need arise,” said Maisie. Glamora sighed. “It might be too late,” she said.

On the other side of the room, Miss Moonshadow related the story of Miss Dean and Mr. Clover to Mrs. Lewis. Mrs. Lewis did not quite understand why this issue should mean anything to the girl, but she noticed that something was really bothering Miss Moonshadow, and kindly asked her what was she concerned about.

“It’s about you and Mr. Goldwasser wanting me to be Mr. Alcott’s fake fiancée,” said Miss Moonshadow. “I am not sure what that would mean.”

“It means exactly what we said, Estella,” said Mrs. Lewis. “There is nothing ominous about it. You will be going out with him to parties and receptions, he will escort you to film openings and other professional situations, and the world will assume that you are engaged. Also, we will plant little stories about you in the magazines and newspapers, so your fans will have fun reading about your romance.”

“But I don’t like Mr. Alcott...” said Miss Moonshadow.

“What difference does it make?” asked Mrs. Lewis, mystified by her protégé’s concern. “It’s not as if you are really his fiancée. After a few months, when you are sufficiently well-known, we will say that the two of you broke your engagement because of differences of opinions, but that you remain the best of friends. At that point, we may find another fake fiancée for him, and one for you. It’s simply marketing.”

“But...” said Miss Moonshadow, and stopped.

“Yes?” said Mrs. Lewis, encouragingly.

“If someone really liked me, and I liked him, he would think I am engaged to Mr. Alcott and then he won’t try to see me,” said Miss Moonshadow.

“My dear Estella, you can’t have any real romances now for quite a few years,” said Mrs. Lewis. “Not if you want to be a movie star. When you are a big star, you can have all the romances you want, you will be safe, but right now, you have to go along with the beaux that the studio supplies. Look how beautifully Rush Yukon is handling it. He has been connected, in the public eye, to at least ten actresses, and now he is about to marry his secretary, which the studio will say was always his true love.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Lewis. It’s just so strange to live like that... and then, what if Mr. Alcott gets it into his head that he really wants to marry me? He seems to like me a bit too much.”

“If that becomes an issue, we will discuss it with Mr. Goldwasser. He won’t let Mr. Alcott do or say anything that will interfere with Mr. Alcott’s career or yours.”

“Perhaps Mr. Goldwasser will want me to marry Mr. Alcott. What do I do then?”

“I don’t think there is a chance of that, Estella. Mr. Goldwasser has other plans for both of you.”

Miss Moonshadow did not look entirely convinced, and Mrs. Lewis was beginning to feel a bit worried herself. Perhaps Mr. Goldwasser was right; the girl did not seem to have as much star quality anymore.

The evening was a great success in every way, and when finally it was over, and everyone dispersed, Lady Norton went to her private sitting room, which was situated right by her bedroom. The house was very quiet, since everyone went to bed and the washing up was done at the distant kitchen. Throughout dinner, Lady Norton was in suspense, wondering if Shymmering would find anything in Professor Hilliard-Sabre’s room. She did not have to wait too long before she heard a discreet knock on her door. “Come in,” she said, and Shymmering walked in.

“Lady Norton, I have found the seeds in Professor Hilliard-Sabre’s room,” said Shymmering without further ado.

“So we were right,” said Lady Norton. “In a way, I am sad. I had begun to like Professor Hilliard-Sabre. Well, let me see.”

Shymmering handed her a matchbox, in which was hidden a bit of paper, containing a small amount of brown powder. “Should I call the police, my lady?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” said Lady Norton. “Just leave it with me, Shymmering. I’ll show it to Professor Buckholz-Schuller and we’ll proceed from there. I don’t think we will involve the police in such a matter, though. It is more a rivalry gone too far than a crime.”

“Very well, my lady,” said Shymmering. One could not tell if he was disappointed or not.

“In the meantime, don’t say anything to Professor Buckholz-Schuller. I am going to wait until some of the guests leave and the festivities are over. I really don’t want a scandal.”

“Of course, my lady,” said Shymmering. “Is there anything else?”

“No, nothing else, and thank you for a job well done, Shymmering,” said Lady Norton, very sadly. She really liked Professor Hilliard-Sabre. What a pity she was a mastermind of crime.

When Aubrey and Jessica stopped for a visit at Norton Hall, a day after the events described above, everyone was extremely pleased to see them. Few people can maintain a cheerful and bubbly attitude during the heavy days of Christmas, but nothing could keep Jessica and Aubrey down, and Christmas was no exception. They were to have dinner, spend the night, and go back to the Dean’s family home on the next day.

“Miss Dean, Mr. Clover, I would like to introduce Miss Moonshadow,” said Glamora. “She is being groomed to become a big star. Miss Moonshadow, I am sure you have heard of Miss Dean and Mr. Clover, they need no introduction.”

Aubrey could tell that Miss Moonshadow did not know much about either of them, but of course he said nothing. During the evening, he paid close attention to her, though no one would have noticed. After dinner, he waylaid Mrs. Lewis and by the power of turning into a father confessor, heard the entire story of Miss Moonshadow, and also Mrs. Lewis' secret fears that the girl was not exactly suitable for her part.

"But was she good at the film she did with Rush Yukon?" asked Aubrey.

"There was not much to do, only parade in costumes," said Mrs. Lewis. "Of course she could do that. She is very beautiful."

"Beauty is not enough," said Aubrey. "What did Rush Yukon think of her? He is a shrewd person."

"He disliked her. She had taken a fancy to him, and despite being warned that he was engaged to his secretary, and the fact that he did not encourage her at all, she made a spectacle of herself a couple of times. But her real interest remained Julian Rivers. She is infatuated with him, and keeps asking about him. Fortunately, he left for England before seeing her again, and now, he is with Mrs. Rivers at their home, so he cannot see her. I imagine he had forgotten her, anyway. I am just worried that she would contact him."

"Can she do that?"

"If she knew exactly where to reach him, she would undoubtedly call him," said Mrs. Lewis. "But I told her that no one knows where he is spending the holiday, and that is what everyone else was instructed to do in case she asked."

"Well, I am going to smoke a cigarette, Mrs. Lewis. Would you join me?"

"Thanks, no, I have to see to some matters, Mr. Clover. You will find some cigarettes and probably a few people in the library."

Aubrey entered the library, and found Maisie and Mr. Alcott there. Mr. Alcott seemed to be in deep despair.

"So what is the matter now, Alcott?" asked Aubrey indulgently, since he regarded Mr. Alcott as a rather juvenile character.

“She turned me down, Mr. Clover.”

Aubrey glanced at Maisie. Did she turn Mr. Alcott down? No, that was impossible. The woman who turned Mr. Alcott down had to be someone else, or Maisie would not have been sitting there, he reasoned with himself. But who was it?

“Who turned you down?” he asked patiently.

“Estella Moonshadow. A few minutes ago I offered her my heart and my hand and she said that she does not even like me and I could never be a part of her social group in Peoria,” said Mr. Alcott.

“And would you like to be a part of a social group in Peoria?” asked Aubrey.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Alcott, considering. “I have never been to Peoria.”

“For the love of God, Nes, you are a star. You are supposed to break women’s hearts, not break yours over some starlet,” said Maisie.

“Why would I want to break anyone’s heart? It’s not nice to do so,” said Mr. Alcott.

“Because it is your job,” said Aubrey. “That is what it is all about. You are supposed to be dashing and attractive and careless, and dress like Valentino and have women talk about your magnificent eyes and your smile.”

“But if I couldn’t even appeal to Estella... Miss Moonshadow, I mean...”

“Her name is Madge,” said Maisie. “Madge Sorensen. She is no more Estella Moonshadow than I am.”

Aubrey burst out laughing. “You could fall in love with someone called Madge Sorensen? From Peoria? Long live O. Henry!”

Maisie did not read O. Henry, as we had mentioned before, so she did not understand Aubrey’s point, but she said, anyway, “She is a simple little small town girl, who just happened to look exotic when properly dressed. A fool as well.”

“No, no, she is not a fool... I could not love a fool,” said Mr. Alcott.

“But you never loved her,” said Aubrey calmly, assuming the role of a wise advisor and as usual, looking the part to perfection.

“I didn’t?” asked Mr. Alcott, surprised.

“No, you didn’t,” said Aubrey.

“But I told her that I would go with her to Peoria, leave the business, if that is what she wanted,” said Mr. Alcott. “I must love her, as I was willing to sacrifice everything for her...”

“That would not be much of a sacrifice, my boy,” said Aubrey. “You are undoubtedly good at acting, singing, dancing, and all the trimmings, but you don’t love the life of an actor. There is not a trace of the gypsy in your soul. You would have been happier had you stayed on the production side, like when you originally worked as Mr. Goldwasser’s assistant.”

“That was such fun,” said Mr. Alcott wistfully. “Such challenges to overcome, so much to arrange, truly interesting business... I used my brain doing that, Mr. Clover. As a star, all I do is pretence work. It’s just not real.”

“I know how you feel, my boy, even though as a playwright who loves acting and theatre and films I must disagree with you, but things turned out as they did, and now you are a huge success. Don’t worry about what could have been, it never does to do so. Do your job properly. Be the star you are supposed to be, make lots of money, and in a few years, when you begin to fade as a heartthrob, get back into the business with Mr. Goldwasser.”

“Would he want me?” asked Mr. Alcott.

“Why shouldn’t he want you? You were very good at the business side of GMG, and you could rejoin on a higher position, since you would be experienced, older, and well-to-do. I believe he would be more than happy to take you back into the GMG business, perhaps even groom you as his successor, to step into his shoes when he decides to retire.”

“Wow,” said Mr. Alcott, deeply impressed. “Do you really think he would... what a wonderful thing that would be...”

“It’s a good plan, and it has great potential. But in the meantime, you have to do your part, Alcott, and stop these stupid infatuations with women who don’t care about you. Most

important, stop feeling sorry for yourself – there is nothing to whine about.”

“Everything you say sounds so good, Mr. Clover,” said Maisie with admiration. “You can resolve anything.”

“Only if people cooperate with me, Miss Robinson,” said Aubrey, laughing. “If only I could make this silly boy understand that he never cared about the girl, what’s her name, Madge... honestly, the idea of settling with her in Peoria. What a joke.”

“I was really going to do it, I guess... but I was also worrying about you, Maise, when I suggested going with her to Peoria. I was wondering if you would visit us, keep in touch. I would miss you so much if you didn’t.”

“Why?” said Aubrey. “Why would you miss her so much if you were happily married to your idol?”

“Because... she is my best friend, I can talk to her about anything, and she always understands everything,” said Mr. Alcott. “We go back a long way. Right, Maise? You are still my best friend after all this mess? I always feel so safe with you, I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

“Of course, Nes, I will always be your friend,” said Maisie, feeling a certain amount of pity toward him, despite her anger. “However, if you married Miss Moonshadow I would not have visited you. I would have quietly disappeared from your life.”

“Heavens,” said Mr. Alcott, his face turning pale with apprehension. “Really? I could never stand that... how could I live without you?”

“Miss Robinson, I am going to have to say a few things that require your forgiveness in advance,” said Aubrey. “But I find that I must say them.”

“You may say anything you think right, Mr. Clover,” said Maisie. “I will object to nothing that may help Nes get back to normal. I am losing my patience with his insane behaviour.”

“Thank you for your trust,” said Aubrey. “Are you sure?”

“I am sure,” said Maisie, bracing herself for the worst.

“Very well. Alcott, do you even begin to guess what a fool you are?” said Aubrey pleasantly. “Just listen to yourself. When will you realize that you care more about Maisie Robinson than

about anyone in the world, that her opinion means everything to you, and that parting from her, even in the company of a pretty starlet, would make you miserable for the rest of your life?"

Mr. Alcott sat up, raised his head, which was buried in his hands, and stared at Mr. Clover, then looked at Maisie. No one in the history of romance had ever been as surprised at anything as Mr. Alcott, realizing how much he loved Maisie Robinson.

"Wow," he said. "I didn't know..."

"You should have known!" said Aubrey severely, turning into a stern father about to engage in a shotgun wedding.

"My goodness, what a mess I have made," said Mr. Alcott, ignoring Aubrey's sudden transformation. "Why didn't you tell me, Maise? You know I would have listened to you if you told me I that I loved you."

We regret to say that hearing this intelligent and original comment, Maisie burst out laughing without a trace of sentimentality. But then again, over-emotional romance was not necessary to her, though she had loved Nes just as well and for much longer. As always, real life had nothing to do with maudlin scripts as far as Maisie was concerned.

"Don't worry, Nes," she said in a comforting manner. "We'll work everything out. Just remember, anything we say here must remain a secret. You have a public to consider and you should never let Mr. Goldwasser down."

"Whatever you say, Maise," said Mr. Alcott meekly, a sense of wonderful relief going through his mind. It was so good to know that he would never have to part from Maisie, that she would take care of everything, and that the future held such happiness...

Aubrey shook his head, became a wise old man to such a point that one could almost see him stroking a long white beard, and said, "I'll leave you now to sort out your affairs, children. Ah, the things I do... and of course I must tell Jessica. She will be so pleased, and she knows how to keep a secret, bless her. A good day's work, I say."

The next morning, Mr. Goldwasser was reading a book in one of the sitting rooms, and for once, really relaxing. He had no idea, not the slightest touch of his usual talent of divination or prophecy, of what was about to hit him when he welcomed Mrs. Lewis with a happy and comfortable smile. She walked into the room and sat on the edge of a very comfortable couch that would normally encourage lounging, but Mrs. Lewis did not lounge. She sat straight up, unable for a few seconds to bring herself to discuss most disturbing news with Mr. Goldwasser. But she was a strong and honest woman, she was not used to shirking her duty, so she finally plunged in.

“Mr. Goldwasser, I have bad news,” she said.

“What is it?” asked Mr. Goldwasser, prepared for the worst, since Mrs. Lewis was not one to be upset over small matters.

“I have just found this note in Miss Moonshadow’s room,” said Mrs. Lewis in a voice that had a tone of desperation. She handed him a note, her hand visibly trembling. Mr. Goldwasser’s heart sank, but he made no comment and glanced at the note. It was covered with a sprawling, childish handwriting, each line containing only a few words.

“Dear Mr. Goldwasser and Mrs. Lewis,” he read. “When you read this, I will be far away, so please don’t try to find me. I am going away with my true love, Julian Rivers. I’d rather be his moose, or is it musse, I am not sure what the word is exactly, but that is what he called it, than be a star, since being a star means wearing only black and white and short hair like a man and dating a stupid creature like Mr. Alcott who is so very annoying and useless. He asked me to marry him and I was afraid you will force me to do so and I won’t marry Mr. Alcott if he was the last man on earth. Julian says that I should grow my hair long again and wear bright colours and he will always paint me and the whole world will know me and I’ll be famous. I hope Julian agrees to settle in Peoria after we get married, but if not, I will go wherever he goes. Thank you for everything and goodbye.”

“How about that,” said Mr. Goldwasser, putting the note on the side table.

“It’s my fault,” said Mrs. Lewis. “I thought she would be the right person. You had a hunch she was not.”

“Nonsense,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “It was my fault just as much as yours. Like everyone else, I was misled by her exotic looks. Can you imagine, she thinks we would look for her... good riddance, I say.”

“But a new star is needed as soon as possible,” said Mrs. Lewis. “And now we have lost so much time, and a new film will be starting soon and we will have no star.”

“I know, I know. But please, my dear Mrs. Lewis, don’t fret over it. I always formulate a plan B. You know that.”

“Yes, I do know that,” said Mrs. Lewis. “It’s just...”

“There is always a solution,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “We’ll think of something.”

“The new film is to start shooting only three months from now, Mr. Goldwasser. Can you groom someone in such a short time?”

“As we say in Montana,” said Mr. Goldwasser, “God created the world in seven days.”

Mrs. Lewis laughed, a little relieved, but she was not really fooled. Mr. Goldwasser, for once, had no idea what to do, and she knew it. Her eyes smarted, and as she quickly left the room so Mr. Goldwasser would not notice her crying, she bumped into Glamora, who was just about to walk in.

“Sorry, Miss Tudor,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“My dear Mrs. Lewis, you are crying! What is the matter?” asked Glamora.

Mrs. Lewis hesitated, then motioned to Glamora to come with her quietly. Glamora followed her to another room, and Mrs. Lewis told her the entire story.

“Well, well,” said Glamora. “To throw away her future just like that... still, that is her concern. So what is going to happen now?”

“I don’t know, Miss Tudor. I don’t think Mr. Goldwasser knows. He said he would develop Plan B, as usual, but I don’t think he really has one.”

Glamora thought for a few minutes, then looked at Mrs. Lewis with a bright smile.

“I will have to stay for a while, Mrs. Lewis,” she said simply.

“How wonderful, Miss Tudor,” said Mrs. Lewis with indescribable relief. “Mr. Goldwasser needs you.”

“I know, I know. I will never let him down.”

“A few more years would not make much of a difference, would they?” said Mrs. Lewis.

“A few more years? How do you know how long it would take?” asked Glamora, surprised at the prophetic statement.

“The world is changing rapidly, Miss Tudor. For a few more years, Hollywood will go on as it does, with the kind of films you are so famous for, and musicals, and marvellous costumes, and Glorious Technicolor... but soon the changes will come. I do not know what they will be, but they will come.”

“It is interesting that you should say so about films, Mrs. Lewis. Jake said the same thing about aeroplanes, and lifestyles, and other subjects. He predicts huge changes.”

“Yes, Mr. Goldwasser and I had often talked about the way things are going, Miss Tudor. He is sure about it, and his predictions often come true, I have noticed.”

“Well, I will go and tell Jake directly. No point in keeping him in suspense. Thank you, Mrs. Lewis, and now just stop worrying; I am back in the saddle.”

“It was my fault, Miss Tudor. If your plans are ruined, you can blame me.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” said Glamora. “Picking this girl was such a natural mistake. Anyone would have thought she was glamour itself with her incredible looks. Well, you need a brain as well if you wish to be a star, and she had none. Now don’t torment yourself, all will be well, I promise.” And she went back to the sitting room.

Mr. Goldwasser was not holding his head in his hands and sobbing. He was not pacing to and fro like a slightly demented devil. He was not even sighing to himself. He simply sat in an armchair, doing nothing at all. But one look at him and Glamora knew he was extremely unhappy.

“It’s okay, Jake,” she said in her straightforward fashion. “I will be staying for a while in the old roles.”

Mr. Goldwasser looked at her, amazed. “How did you know what I was thinking about?”

“Not very difficult,” said Glamora, sitting in the facing armchair. “Mrs. Lewis told me about Miss Moonshadow’s elopement with Julian Rivers. Normally, I would be concerned about her, since we know that in no time at all Julian will leave her, and she will have to head back in disgrace to Peoria. The mere idea that he would marry her is ludicrous. But right now, I am more concerned about you and so I don’t particularly care about the foolish girl who could not appreciate her own good luck. Look, Jake, it’s quite simple. I have decided to stay in my usual roles for a few more years. I still have my looks, you need me now more than ever, and I don’t mind doing so at all.”

“I’d say you’ve still got your looks, love. And you will have them for years to come... but are you telling me the truth? You really don’t mind?”

“Not a bit. After all, it’s not as if I am discarding my plan, I am just postponing it a little. Come to think of it, perhaps I am not even postponing it, exactly. If you approve, I suggest that we do the usual two films a year, but also add on a serious one every two years or so. In a few years, the demand for my kind of roles will vanish, according to both you and Mrs. Lewis, and then I can slide into more serious roles with ease and without any abrupt change.”

“There is something in that. I don’t have to tell you that my success was partially based on my ability to predict the way the world changes. I can tell you without the slightest hesitation that now, in the middle of the decade, things are still going as smoothly as ever. But in five or six years, with the strange new generation that is coming into its own, the changes will be extraordinary, and not only in films. On the good side, I suspect there will be more demand for serious films and great acting during the sixties than during this decade, for many reasons, some of them political and economic.”

"I don't understand either economics or politics, Jake, but I'll take your word for it; you are never wrong. So I am staying, and let's think of the next film, which is to start shooting in three months in Glorious Technicolor. Here comes Miss Glamora Tudor with her new young man..."

"Funny that you should say that."

"Why? I can't go on doing films with Nes indefinitely. He can manage on his own now, he is a star already."

"I was not thinking about Alcott. It is just that I was recently introduced to a young man, a newcomer at GMG, and I remember thinking rather wistfully that he would have been perfect for you, had you stayed in the business."

Glamora laughed. "Well, I am staying in the business. What are you going to call this young man?"

"Turf," said Mr. Goldwasser.

"Turf? As in grass and sod?"

"Exactly. Turf is strong, masculine, reliable, the usual. He will be either Turf Johnson, or Turf Gregory."

"Both names are good," said Glamora. "What does he look like?"

"Dark blond, very tanned, deep brown eyes, sculptured features, and the usual amazing physique."

"Charming," said Glamora. "He sounds like the beach type, outdoor, surfing, and so on. The ladies will love him. It will be fun, Jake. Don't worry about me. I am perfectly okay playing with Turf Johnson-Gregory. What the hell, I'll even buy some new shoes with high heels, if you like."

"Thank you," said Mr. Goldwasser softly. "Thank you so much, my dear. I don't know what else to say."

"Nothing," said Glamora, very gently. "Don't look dejected, Jake. We always have fun working together. We will continue to do so."

"A lot more fun than I would have had with the homecoming queen from Peoria, that's for sure," said Mr. Goldwasser, shuddering. "Heavens, but that girl was stupid... the first mistake Mrs. Lewis had ever made, choosing her."

“I’ll never understand how she managed to get in touch with Julian Rivers, though,” said Glamora. “Everyone was warned to never mention him. Do you think it just slipped out that he was at Mrs. Rivers’ home?”

“I have a general idea that it was not an accident,” said Mr. Goldwasser.

“You mean someone deliberately helped them meet? But why would anyone do so?”

“To help me,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “And if I am correct in my suspicion, it is not the first time he was helping me. I’ll tell you when I find out, Glam. I am not sure yet, I am just suspecting.”

Mr. Goldwasser went in search of Aubrey Clover, and eventually found him in the empty commissary, drinking coffee that an obliging worker made especially for him because he was ever so charming, my dear, and he was so polite to me when he said that he was just dying of fatigue and needed coffee so badly... and even though it stands to reason that he would be proud because he is such an important gentleman, he was just like one of us, and he said our work was so interesting, serving so many nice people, and he was joking that I should give him a job at the commissary...

“Okay, Mr. Clover, confess,” said Mr. Goldwasser.

“Confess? Confess what?” said Aubrey with such innocence that most people would have believed it instantly, but not Mr. Goldwasser, who knew better than to fall for Aubrey’s glamour.

“You had arranged for Estella Moonshadow to meet with Julian Rivers, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Aubrey brazenly.

“You knew she would elope with him?”

“Yes,” said Aubrey.

“Did you also know that I told everyone not to tell her?”

“Yes.

“You didn’t care?”

“No.”

“You are speaking in monosyllables,” said Mr. Goldwasser.

“Because I am a little afraid of you, Mr. Goldwasser,” said Aubrey. “For all I know, it might have been a mistake on my part. But I thought she was most unsuitable for the role you devised for her. She was no star, and she would have ruined every film you would have made with her. This girl was no Estella Moonshadow, Mr. Goldwasser, and never would have become one. She was Madge Sorensen, and she would have remained Madge Sorensen, world without end, Amen.”

Mr. Goldwasser burst out laughing. “The best work you ever did, Mr. Clover. Even better than introducing Mr. Alcott to alcoholic drinks.”

Aubrey sighed with relief. He raised his cup and said, “Here’s to O. Henry and Peoria,” and sipped it gratefully.

“But what did you do, exactly?” asked Mr. Goldwasser.

“After talking to Mrs. Lewis about Miss Moonshadow, I went to the butler and requested Mrs. River’s telephone number. Then I went to find Miss Moonshadow, and simply told her that I heard she knew Julian Rivers, a dear friend of mine. She was thrilled, and asked me immediately if I knew where he was. She said she wanted to get in touch with him, but no one could tell her where he was, they did not know. Of course, I said, he and I always keep in touch, and he was making a surprise visit to his mother. I also gave her the number. The rest she did by herself, but I imagine the scenario was simple. She probably went to the library and telephoned Julian.”

“But why would Rivers be interested in her?” asked Mr. Goldwasser. “Yes, she is pretty, but she does not have the slightest knowledge of art, which is something he really cares about, she is extremely stupid, and they would have absolutely nothing in common. Don’t tell me he cares for her. Why would he bother?”

“That is just the way he is,” said Aubrey. “A troublemaker and a fool. Once he remembered who she was, I imagine he was flattered by the attention, and also was surely quite bored with his stay at his parents’ house. So he probably told her to get ready, and came to get her in the middle of the night. Such a

boring scenario... something you and I would never use. One cliché after another.”

“You are a genius,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “I wasted too much time and money on this useless creature.”

“But let’s keep it a secret,” said Aubrey. “Not even Jessica is going to like such behavior, since it would be so obvious that I have led the young woman to a fate worse than death. Rivers will never marry her, Mr. Goldwasser, and she is doomed to be the Fallen Woman... I wonder how they treat fallen women in Peoria? I admit, *The Scarlet Letter* does not follow O. Henry too well, but I had no time to concoct a better script. Anyway, what is your plan for a new star?”

“Glam is staying with the business, Mr. Clover. She decided to postpone her career change. I don’t need a new star, Praise the Lord and Hallelujah.”

“So I did the right thing,” said Aubrey. “Is she unhappy about it?”

“She did not seem to be unhappy. Of course, she may be lying to me. She can do that, she really is a great actress... but I will do everything to further her interests as we go along.”

“Don’t tell her about me, just in case, though,” said Aubrey. “I love Miss Tudor, but I suspect that if she is angry, she can be dangerous.”

“She can,” said Mr. Goldwasser proudly.

“So we will keep this little scenario between us,” said Aubrey.

“Naturally,” said Mr. Goldwasser and poured two very special drinks out of his trusty silver flask. Yes, it was early in the day, but this was surely an occasion for a celebration.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day, after lunch, Mr. Goldwasser, Aubrey Clover, and Mr. Alcott were sitting in the dining room.

“Well, Jessica and I will be leaving soon,” said Aubrey. “I wish we could see the filming of the tango, when you get to London, but even though Jessica feels that she is the habitu e and muse of the Wigwam nightclub, I am afraid we would be at the theatre...”

“Too bad,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “But I do understand. You will see the final product, of course. I do hope it will be as good as the original, spontaneous dance Glam and Alcott performed when we spiked his orange juice.”

“What music are Miss Tudor and I going to use for the tango, Mr. Goldwasser?” asked Mr. Alcott. “I don’t even remember what we danced then, I was so drunk, but I do remember enjoying myself tremendously.”

“The choreographer and I decided on ‘*La Cumparsita*,’ and he is working on it,” said Mr. Goldwasser.

“What an achievement it was that your original dance was the factor that convinced Mrs. Rivers to overcome her obsession with respectable and moral endings, and to write a romantic end for her new script,” said Aubrey. “I take some credit for it since I was instrumental in getting you drunk, Alcott.”

“But don’t forget, Mr. Clover, that Mrs. Rivers decently killed the husband first. She does not stand for divorce,” said Mr. Goldwasser. Aubrey laughed.

“Her priorities are interesting,” he said. “Until Death Do Us Part, I suppose, is sacred to her. Personally, I would prefer to live if Jessica decided to run away with a young lover... though it would be difficult to find another actress as good as Jessica. Maybe I could have persuaded the young lover to join us in plays for three; a sort of m enage   trois.” Mr. Alcott was slightly scandalized at the remark but said nothing, and Mr. Goldwasser laughed. At this minute, Shymmering wafted gently into the room.

“Hello, Shymmering,” said Mr. Alcott. “What is it?”

“First of all, sir, I would like to congratulate you on your engagement,” said Shymmering.

“How do you know about it?” asked Mr. Alcott, surprised.

“Such knowledge usually spreads quickly among the servants,” said Shymmering. “I imagine one of them was at the keyhole. Someone usually is, sir.”

“Ah, well,” said Mr. Alcott. “It only has to be a secret in Hollywood, not here. Maisie told me to be quiet about it because the ladies prefer it if the stars are single.”

“Indeed sir. And I am particularly happy about the engagement because it lessens some of the burden regarding the subject I have to bring up.”

“What is it?” asked Mr. Alcott, intrigued.

Shymmering cleared his throat in a significant manner. “Well, sir, I am afraid I must hand in my resignation.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Alcott. “You can work for a married man, can’t you? Or is it against the rules for gentlemen’s gentlemen to do so?”

“No sir, it is not against the rules. I would have been happy to stay in your employment after your marriage. However, my previous employer sent me a telegram, pleading with me to come to his aid, and I feel duty points me in that direction.”

“But you hated, him, Shymmering,” said Mr. Alcott, surprised. “He said you shimmer, remember? And he made fun of your name.”

“No sir,” said Shymmering. “The individual that made fun of my name was my temporary American employer. I worked for him for a short time after I left my English employer, for whom I had previously worked for many years. He never had any reason to use the name Shymmering, which I had adopted only after I had left him, to hide my true identity, an unfortunate necessity.”

“I see,” said Mr. Alcott, slightly confused by the information. “Why did you leave him, then, if I may ask?”

“We had a strong disagreement over the attire he planned to don at a formal event, sir, just as we came to America. My English employer was offered a diplomatic position in America,

and I went there with him. You see, sir, a certain individual from the government wanted to employ me in a delicate situation. My services were required, but of course I don't have the social background, so I can only work behind the scene. My employer is not very intelligent, if I may be so bold as to say so, but he is good-natured and comes from a very suitable background, so he could always function as a so-called 'front' while I did the actual diplomatic work."

"How did the individual in the government know you and your employer?" asked Aubrey.

"He was a school friend of my employer, sir, and I had assisted him often in both his private and public affairs. I had done much work on these lines for many years. That gentleman is not very intelligent either, I must confess. My employer and he remained friends when they left school, and shared a club in London as well, where many gentlemen of their kind find pleasant relaxation in playing billiards and darts, and also by throwing bread at each other during meals; apparently the gentlemen at the club seem to find the bread-throwing activity highly diverting."

"Are there many similar people in your government, Shymmering?" asked Mr. Goldwasser. "I mean, people who enjoy throwing bread around as a diversion?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. The present government is comprised of people of this nature, and once elected, they prefer to hire each other for various tasks since it gives them a level of comfort they could not achieve with more intelligent people. But they do need some well-informed helpers with higher mental capacity, and they are aware of that necessity. The general idea was to send my employer to America, and groom him into shape, as they said, during a minor diplomatic position. After that, they planned to send him as an ambassador to a small African nation."

"Not Borioboola-Gha, I hope?" said Aubrey, laughing.

"Yes and no sir," said Shymmering. "You are correct as to the location, though I can't imagine how you knew, but the name of that country had been changed since Mr. Charles Dickens had given it fame. The new name is *Mngangaland*. They had

changed the name because after Borioboola-Gha acquired its independence, it wished to discard the name that reminded the citizens of the shackles of Colonialism, and express their newfound freedom. Many small new nations had done so since the war, sir, which is highly confusing to cartographers, I would imagine.”

“So why did you leave your English employer, exactly? What was the piece of clothing you so much objected to?” asked Mr. Goldwasser.

“My employer insisted on wearing a purple cummerbund to a state event,” said Shymmering, shuddering slightly at the thought. “I had my disagreements with him before, mostly about wearing certain articles of clothing, and usually I had prevailed. But at that time he was so obstinate, I could not persuade him to change his mind. He insisted that the objectionable item was the latest fashion, and that wearing it gave him confidence. Naturally, my reputation demanded that I leave. I could not let people in high positions think that I had allowed my employer to wear a purple cummerbund.”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Alcott, who was not sure what a cummerbund was.

“I see,” said Aubrey quietly, musing.

“But this morning, sir, my employer sent me a long, apologetic telegram. He begs me to rejoin him in Mngangaland, since the protocol and culture simply defeat him. To begin with, he has to arrange the ceremony for harvesting the staple food of Mngangaland, which is called Mnganga-Hopo, a type of root vegetable. It is not an easy task.”

“Why would a harvest festival be so difficult to arrange?” asked Mr. Goldwasser.

“Because the ritual date for harvesting the root is the same as the opening of a new film at the cinema that was built near the royal palace. The inhabitants of Mngangaland had become addicted to three-dimensional films, and they would neglect the ritual date to watch a new film. But that is only one of the problems. There is also the issue of the small government jobs that need to be distributed among the seventy-nine sons of the

king. An overwhelming task, but it is part of my employer's diplomatic duties; he simply does not know how to begin."

"But what about your argument, and the what's-its-name, the purple thing your employer wanted to wear?" asked Mr. Alcott.

"Oh, this is all right, sir. My employer said that he had given the purple cummerbund to the twenty-seventh son of the king of Mngangaland. The prince had been to Oxford and he appreciates English attire, so I would not have to worry about it again. I regret to leave you, Mr. Alcott, but I simply cannot let Mr. Woo... I mean, my previous employer, down."

"Mr. Woo?" said Aubrey, a strange suspicion creeping into his mind. "Is that his name?"

"I am sorry, sir. That was an unfortunate slip of the tongue. I am not at liberty to reveal my employer's name at present, because of his sensitive diplomatic position which has not been as yet confirmed by the government. I do apologize."

"Of course," said Mr. Goldwasser, giving a meaningful look to Aubrey Clover. "We have no desire to embarrass your employer or the government, Shymmering. But may I ask you, where did you get the name Shymmering, and why did you wish to hide your own identity?"

"Shymmering was my mother's maiden name, sir, so I felt I was entitled to use it without the taint of deception. I wished to hide my identity because I did not want to embarrass my previous employer. I knew that the present government would eventually employ me through him; it was inevitable, and my activities in Hollywood were not necessarily something I wished to discuss with them."

"When will you be leaving, then, Shymmering?" asked Mr. Alcott.

"I would like to give two weeks' notice, sir, if that is agreeable to you, and then proceed directly to Mngangaland. I truly regret leaving you, sir, but now that I know you are engaged, I am confident that Miss Robinson, who is both highly intelligent and practical, is perfectly capable of looking after you."

"Very well," said Mr. Alcott.

“Will that be all, sir?”

“Yes, that will be all.” Shymmering blinked softly out of the room, and Aubrey said, “So that is why he seemed to be so familiar...”

“Do you know Mr. Woo?” asked Mr. Alcott, who had never read a book unless he had been told to do so. “Is he of Chinese origin?”

“Yes, both Mr. Goldwasser and I have known him well, for many years,” said Aubrey, looking at Mr. Alcott with some pity for his ignorance, which was wasted because Mr. Alcott did not notice it at all. “No, he is not Chinese. But Alcott, don’t mention it to anyone. We must respect the government’s wishes even if we are not very fond of Them.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Alcott, who had no interest whatsoever in the affair other than a mild regret over losing Shymmering. But he was not too concerned about that either, since he knew that Shymmering was right and Maisie was more than capable of looking after him. In addition, despite his helpful ways, Shymmering had always rather intimidated Mr. Alcott. Being a slave to one’s valet is never pleasant, a fact often declared by many young gentlemen, including Shymmering’s previous employer, who shall remain nameless.

A week or so later, the big white car sped toward London. Glamora and Mrs. Rivers were alone, since the rest of the people involved, including Mr. Goldwasser, Mr. Alcott, Maisie, a small band, and a filming crew went there the day before. Glamora was busily knitting.

“Look, Mrs. Rivers, I have become an expert,” she said. “Increasing, decreasing, shaping, even blocking – I can do it all now. Merry went on with my knitting education during the filming.”

Mrs. Rivers looked with interest at the elegant piece Glamora was knitting. It was made of a magnificent metallic yarn, glowing with a deep golden brown shimmer.

“You are a very talented woman, Miss Tudor,” she said with admiration. “Whatever skills you decide to pick up, you are a success.”

“I am not sure it is talent, Mrs. Rivers. I think it is rooted in deep determination. I am like a blood-hound...”

Mrs. Rivers laughed. “A blood-hound would not look too well in this colour,” she said. “What type of garment is it going to be?”

“It’s going to be a sort of a shrug. Most elegant over summer dresses, I think,” said Glamora. “This is the back. Here, look at the little sleeves I have already made, they just need to be attached. I love knitting. It’s so relaxing.”

“You could use some relaxation...” said Mrs. Rivers.

“Who couldn’t? Life is tough,” said Glamora.

“Well, sometimes good things do happen,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I was happy to hear about Miss Robinson and Mr. Alcott. She is too good for him, but I am sure that if she takes him in hand he will improve.”

“No doubt,” said Glamora. “And he is a good boy at heart, only a little susceptible where the ladies are concerned. But now he will settle down. I am so glad his infatuation with Miss Moonshadow is over.”

“I hope no one is angry with me because of Miss Moonshadow and my son,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I cannot control Julian, you know.”

“My dear Mrs. Rivers, no one is mad at you. For once, Julian did something that made everyone happy. Miss Moonshadow was most unsuitable for the part of a star, despite her inarguable good looks.”

“I did not like her looks,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Her eyes bothered me, all black and no pupils. It made her look as if she had no expression, no feelings.”

“Many people did not like her eyes. Apparently Shymmering said to Nes that her eyes are like those of a lizard...” Both ladies laughed.

“I did not think she looked like a lizard, exactly,” said Mrs. Rivers, “but her beauty lacked personality. Even with the

interesting haircut and the black and white outfits, something was missing. I do wonder what will happen to her, though. I don't believe Julian will marry her."

"Of course not," said Glamora. "But once the affair is over, she will go back to Peoria and resume her normal life. I hope she will be happy and not suffer too much from emotional consequences or regrets."

"Poor girl," said Mrs. Rivers. "I don't like to think that my son would abandon her. No, she was not good enough to fill your place... the name Estella Moonshadow was nice, though."

"Well, Jake knows how to choose names," said Glamora. "He is really a genius with the use of language. Maybe someday he will give it to another starlet, pity to waste such a good name. By the way, Maisie refuses to use the name Estella Moonshadow. She insists on calling her by her real name, Madge Sorensen. She says it suits her much better. Ah, well, now that I am staying in the business, it's all water under the bridge."

"Mrs. Lewis told me that you are not too concerned about staying in the business. Is that true, Miss Tudor?"

"That is true; I am not concerned about it. There is nothing I would not do to help Jake, in the first place, and also, my plans are not changed much. Yes, I will continue with the silly films for a while, but what of it? Jake promised that he will get me a serious film every two years or so, and I will start from there."

"You and Mr. Goldwasser work so well together," said Mrs. Rivers wistfully, thinking about her own uninteresting marriage.

"Yes, we are the best team in the world," said Glamora. "That is also why it is not so bad to stay in the business. I always have fun working with Jake."

"Miss Robinson told me the new film will be a version of the legend of Tristan and Iseult," said Mrs. Rivers.

"Yes. Jake is going to make a musical from it," said Glamora, laughing.

"Not borrowing from Wagner's opera, I hope," said Mrs. Rivers. "I adore music, as you know, but not Wagner."

"No, no. Modern songs," said Glamora. "Our audience would not appreciate any opera."

“Good,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Who is your leading man?”

“A brand new young man. His name is Turf. Jake is hesitating between Turf Johnson and Turf Gregory.”

“Nice,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Why not use a hyphenated Johnson-Gregory?”

“I asked the same question, but Jake feels too many syllables might make the name less manly,” said Glamora. “But I liked it, so he said he would think about it.”

“What’s the young man’s real name?”

“I have no idea,” said Glamora. “All I know is that he comes from Brooklyn, like Jake, but they are going to say that he comes from California, since he is the beach type, tanned and blond. But I must tell you the plot for the film. It’s insane.”

“There are a million versions to the legend,” said Mrs. Rivers.

“Yes, so I hear,” said Glamora. “Of course, Jake will use a bit from each, and then invent some. It is to be called ‘*They Loved Too Well*,’ I believe.”

“So you already know what the plot will be like?”

“Yes, to an extent. Tristan is taking Iseult to marry King Mark, acting as her guardian. On the way, Tristan and Iseult take a love potion by accident, and fall madly in love. King Mark is old enough to be her grandfather, and the marriage is a sham; she is just forced into it for political reasons. The three of them seem to like each other, but King Mark eventually listens to his evil advisors who know about the affair and want him to punish the lovers. He decides to hang Tristan and send Iseult for a life of service in a leper house, where she would undoubtedly contract the disease. She knows that her beauty, which is the root of all evil, would be destroyed by the horrible disease, so she sings a touching song about how she submits to her fate and plans to nurse the lepers faithfully until her dying day. Jake is thinking about having a troupe of dancers wear gray leper outfits with their face covered with scarves, all dancing around her as she sings, a dream-like scene, I suppose. However, she does not have to do so since Tristan manages to escape on the way to the hanging, saves Iseult, and they run away and hide in a forest. King Mark finds them when he hunts alone in the forest, to

forget his sorrows, but since he is such a kind old man, he agrees to forgive them if Tristan promises to go away forever, seek a great lady by the name of Iseult of the White Hands, and marry her. Happy ending.”

“But that is not really a happy ending. People want romance. They won’t like it if he marries another woman for convenience. They would rather he sacrificed his life for his love, won’t they?”

“This is where Jake is a genius,” said Glamora, laughing. “He said that the coincidence of the two women having the same first name, Iseult, is proof-positive that they were secretly meant to be the same woman. So Jake worked with the script writers and made them rearrange the ending. While Tristan, sad and subdued, goes to the White Hands Kingdom, wherever that is, Mark and Iseult have a heart-to-heart talk, and he gives her his trusty magical horse, and commands her to follow her love, and go to the White Hands Kingdom, where the ruler is her cousin. The horse is so fast that she can get there before Tristan does. She goes, and now we follow Tristan, as he enters into the White Hands Kingdom. He does all sort of things there, I don’t know what as yet. In the last scene, Tristan requests an audience with Iseult of the White Hands, as he had promised King Mark, intending to ask for her hand in marriage, even though he could never love her, since his heart belongs to his other Iseult. He sings an entire song about his dilemma, and then goes into the audience room, only to realize to his great joy that she is one and the same with his Great Love. They sing a song about their future life together, and the film ends.”

“The story certainly fits a musical,” said Mrs. Rivers.

“Yes, it really does, I think. Silly, but just right. Jake asked Mr. Stonor to consider writing the music, but he had not decided if he can take it up, he must see about his schedule.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Rivers, her heart skipping a beat as it always did when Denis was mentioned. They were now near London. Miss Tudor was neatly arranging her knitting in its special bag, and did not seem to notice.

The dress rehearsal at the Wigwam nightclub was arranged for the next evening, and the club was closed to the public. The street around it was cordoned, and the rather sophisticated London audience ignored the filming equipment and went about its business. The sun had set already, and the scene was to be filmed by artificial light.

Lady Aurora Fitz-Gardner was strolling in the street, alone, visibly trying to collect her troubled thoughts. She had been to her husband's memorial, and therefore was naturally too distressed to go to her hotel. Poor lady, the audience would think. All alone, and the sadness of the memorial would give anyone quite a turn, particularly such a lady as *was* a lady. She was wearing a heavy gray coat that covered her dress completely, a gray hat with one black rose, and black shoes with unusually-shaped high heels. Had Emma been at the scene, she would have immediately recognized the ridiculously expensive dancing shoes Glamora bought in Vienna, and wore when she danced the wild tango with Mr. Alcott. These shoes were about to be put to good use again.

When poor Aurora was near the entrance of the Wigwam, which she did not even notice, a man turned the corner and nearly bumped into her. Raising her eyes, she recognized the shocked, dazzled, handsome face of Nestor Chardonay. She put her hand to her heart, making it very clear that it was pounding, and the two gazed at each other without word.

Recovering himself, Nestor Chardonay said, "Aurora! What are you doing here? I thought you were in Tahiti!"

"I have been back for a year, Nestor," whispered Aurora.

"And where is Lord Arthur? What is wrong, Aurora? What happened?"

"You do not know?" said Aurora, incredulously. "Lord Arthur is no longer with us, Nestor."

"I know nothing," said Nestor Chardonay. "I have just returned from Mozambique, where I had been working since we parted. I had to complete a mission of great importance for England."

“I see,” said Aurora. “That is why I never came across you in London, nor heard from you, before I went to the country estate.”

“And Lord Arthur is dead?” asked Nestor Chardonay, sticking to the point. “Why, he was in good health, I thought.”

“He was killed while trying to save a child from an accident. A year ago exactly, Nestor. I have just come back from his memorial.”

“A noble deed, fitting for a man of Lord Arthur’s character. But oh, my poor Aurora,” said Nestor Chardonay. “Do allow an old friend to offer you something to strengthen you at this hour.” Looking around, he noticed the Wigwam entrance and the two entered.

The audience would see them sitting at a table, talking, and then the camera would point to the moon (beautifully drawn and illuminated with delicate silver mist) and then move, showing the passing of the hours. The scene then would move again, to the interior of the Wigwam.

The nightclub was almost empty. The tired band played softly, a sad and romantic tune. The clock on the wall showed the hour, which was a little after three o’clock. Aurora and Nestor were dancing, slowly, not talking to each other. Aurora, who had taken off her gray coat, of course, was wearing a black and white dress with a tight bodice and a very full, knee-length skirt, cinched with a wide black belt. The skirt was supported by fluffy net petticoats. Another couple quitted the dance floor and returned to their table, and Aurora and Nestor were the only ones left dancing. The camera zeroed on the band. The pianist looked around, and trying to liven up the scene, changed his tune and started playing “*La Cumparsita*.”

The audience, not to mention the rest of the population, would know the music. The “Cumparsita” was the most famous tango in the world, all passion and dazzle. The special dance, based on the wild tango the two of them danced when Mr. Alcott had drunk his spiked orange juice, was to indicate that passion ruled and that the lovers must stay together at whatever cost. The dance had to convey their feelings, the choreographer had done

his best, “La Cumparsita” was as magnificent as “La Cumparsita” always was, the band was excellent, and this scene was supposed to be the most exciting part of the film, full of the fireworks of desire.

Unfortunately, it was not exciting at all. Mr. Alcott and Glamora, following the prescribed choreography, were as flat and uninteresting as a middle-aged couple dancing a mild tango at someone’s twenty-fifth anniversary party. They were tame, boring, and subdued. The movements were perfect, each step was correct, but the fireworks were sadly missing. Mrs. Rivers and Maisie looked at each other, aghast. What was happening?

Mr. Goldwasser seemed worried. “Stop!” he said, and went to talk, in a whisper, to the pianist, who nodded. “We are going to try a faster pace,” Mr. Goldwasser said loudly. The dancing resumed. It was worse. It seemed rushed and without rhythm or style. Maisie hid her face in her hands in despair, and Mrs. Rivers just stared. What happened to these two superb dancers? Where was the passion, the style, the rhythm, the tension?

At this moment, the door opened and Denis Stonor walked in. He was not expected, no one even knew he is in England. Ignoring everyone’s stares, Denis strode straight to the piano, and said something to the pianist. The pianist laughed and got up, allowing Denis to sit down at the piano. Mr. Goldwasser, who was standing nearby, said nothing, and Glamora and Mr. Alcott, who had stopped dancing, also looked without saying a word. Denis smiled pleasantly, and said, looking at Mr. Goldwasser, “No, we will not have ‘La Cumparsita.’ It’s been around for too long. It had become tame and there is nothing wild about it; it’s been used in *weddings*, for heaven’s sake, Mr. Goldwasser.”

“But we had choreographed the tango for ‘*La Cumparsita*,’” said Mr. Goldwasser, who was obviously playing the devil’s advocate, if his big grin was any indication.

“As if Miss Tudor and Alcott need choreography,” says Denis contemptuously. “Not them, not if what I have heard about the original tango, which they had improvised, is true. If

anything, the choreography is cramping their style. New music and free dancing is what they need.”

Mr. Goldwasser couldn't help laughing. “Go ahead, my friend,” he says. “I am always ready to learn from the masters.”

Denis nodded and started playing the “Blue Tango,” a hit only since 1952 and still fresh. “It's written by a friend of mine,” he said, playing. “Have you ever met Leroy Anderson, Mr. Goldwasser?”

“Yes I have,” said Mr. Goldwasser. “He is a genius. Just go on playing, Mr. Stonor. Alcott, come here.” He took his silver flask from his pocket and poured a glass. “Drink it, Alcott,” he said.

Mr. Alcott hesitated. He looked at Maisie's direction, and she nodded enthusiastically. Without speaking, Mr. Alcott took the glass and drank it in one gulp. He stood quietly for a moment as the liquid burned his unaccustomed throat, and then smiled. “Let's go, Miss Tudor,” he said, took Glamora in his arms, and they started dancing. Maisie and Mrs. Rivers both sighed with relief. The dance was a wild, abandoned performance, exactly like their original tango. Mrs. Rivers watched, transfixed. Yes, that was what she wanted, that was the way they should dance. That was why she had been swept off her feet, so much so that she was willing to write the sequel, a story that stood in sharp contrast to any of her other, tame books, where every well-mannered, middle-aged heroine renounced her love and returned to the well-mannered husband, the well-regulated life, the humdrum, the drudgery, the comfort of the known world. It was that very tango that made her realize that she could break the mould and set her writing, and perhaps even herself, finally free.

She did not realize that Mr. Goldwasser had signalled the crew to film the dance. The scene required no rehearsals; it was perfection, in all its raw power. Denis played and played again, Glamora and Mr. Alcott danced like two wild panthers slithering through the forest's floor, and time stood still. Everyone who was not actively filming or playing was transfixed, until the final moment when Mr. Alcott and Glamora repeated the electrifying movement with which they had ended their original tango. Mr.

Alcott again dipped Glamora so that she bent backwards, practically doubled over, and simultaneously, Glamora lifted one perfect leg almost vertically. "Cut!" said Mr. Goldwasser, everyone applauded wildly, and Glamora bowed graciously and laughed. "Lucky this was a dress rehearsal, right, Jake?" she said. "You filmed, didn't you?"

"Yes, love, I filmed. And it was worth every extra inch of film. You had never danced so well and Alcott was superb. What a dance... it will make the film."

Denis got up and walked to Mrs. Rivers.

"Denis, what are you doing here?" she asked quietly, still under the spell of the tango.

"I decided to spend Christmas with my sister and her family," he said.

"You just came from America? Just like that?"

"Why not? I placed a trunk call, spoke to Daphne who was delighted to have me, and came. I told no one, there was no time, but since I was here, naturally I came to see you as soon as I heard that you had returned to Norton Hall. There, they told me you were in London, filming, so I came here. I was watching from a window, and then when I saw the travesty of the dance, I came in."

"And you saved the dance, Denis."

"Of course. One thing I know is music. And now, we are getting out of here. Come on, let's go."

"Where to?"

"Dinner." He went to Mr. Goldwasser, who was talking to Mr. Alcott, Maisie, and Glamora, and said, "Mr. Goldwasser, I am taking my friend here for dinner. I have a business proposition for her about some lectures."

"Just don't take her away from us for too long," said Maisie. "More scripts! I want more scripts with Mrs. Rivers! One can hardly breathe after this tango!"

Mrs. Rivers laughed and left with Denis. He drove to a small restaurant, which was almost empty, and they sat at a corner of the room. It was a pleasant, private place. She said, "I wanted to tell you about Julian. He behaved so well during Christmas, that

I thought you had completely changed him, but then he went and eloped with that little idiot, Miss Moonshadow.”

“Hermione, while I am very sorry that Julian will never grow up, and forever be a burden to you, he does not interest me at the moment. I think the time has come to make a decision. Have you thought about what you and I should do?”

“I have been thinking about it constantly. I am torn, Denis. One part of me is longing to throw all caution to the wind and just go with you, but another part is holding me back, locked into my old life. I simply can’t see my way.”

“Tell me, Hermione, would you have felt differently if you were twenty years younger?”

“Yes, I would. I would have agreed to make a fresh start with you.”

“And you would let a few years stand in your way to happiness? What difference do these years make?” said Denis.

Mrs. Rivers’ face became as white as chalk. “A few years? Just a few years, you say? Don’t you realize, Denis, that in six years I will be seventy years old! Seventy! Do you realize that? Do you?” she banged her fist on the table so hard, that her knuckles were bleeding, but she did not even feel the pain.

“Yes, of course I realize that,” said Denis. “The math is not particularly complicated.”

Mrs. Rivers sighed, the violence draining out of her soul. Suddenly noticing that her hand was hurting very much, she looked with some surprise at her wounded knuckles. “Well, surely you can see my point. I will be seventy. You will not even be fifty. What will life with you be for me, at that age?”

Denis’ face was suddenly illuminated by the smile that always miraculously transformed his sad, monkey-like face into a most attractive one. “What will life with me be for you? I will answer your question with another question. Think, Hermione. What will your life be *without* me?”

Mrs. Rivers sat very quietly, almost motionlessly. Yes, what would life be without Denis? She looked into the future, turning the possibilities in her mind, and realized that nothing but a long road of exhausting drudgery stretched ahead of her. A few more

books about the same subject she had always worked with, perhaps a couple of scripts, nothing to be terribly excited about, the usual, the ordinary. Phoebe involved with her own affairs. Julian never growing up, always creating nagging problems. George, nice, dull, friendly George, involved with his estate, his friends, his books, vaguely and politely as bored with her as she was with him. That is what it would be like without Denis. Life with Denis, as she grew older, would be devastating, painful, and unpredictable. It might tear her apart, but it would never, ever be dull.

“Life without you would be unbearable,” she said with the courage of desperation.

“So what are you sacrificing yourself to?” asked Denis. “George will allow you to divorce him. He would not care very much, and he is a decent sort. Why not marry me and be done with all the soul searching?”

“No, I cannot do that. I will not go with you openly, Denis,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I am too conventional to defy society so brazenly. I simply can’t face the ridicule; perhaps I am too proud, perhaps too foolish, but the thought of hearing everyone say that it would not last and how silly I was to leave my comfortable life and go away with a young man, like a heroine in one of my own silly books, is just too much. I cannot do it openly.”

“Then how about going with me secretly?” said Denis, unperturbed.

“You mean...”

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Marriage is nothing but a convention, and a lot less important than your true commitment to me, if you decide to go with me. Granted, it is not a perfect solution, I would have preferred it if you did marry me. But I will accept any condition to have you as my partner, even in secret, and you will still be the core of my happiness. And yes, I can arrange things so that no one will ever know; no one will even suspect.”

Mrs. Rivers was very quiet again. She was not an adventuress at heart, but her love of Denis was strong, her

marriage was over many years ago, and she knew that had George known what her plans were, he would not mind one bit and would keep her secret, perhaps even make it easier for her to hide her situation. What was to stop her other than convention? Nothing. Nothing at all.

“What is your plan?” she asked.

“It’s not what I would call a definite plan,” said Denis. “It’s more like the work of the moment, every time. When you come to Hollywood to work on a new film, we can be together for the duration of your job. When you travel to research a new book, as you always do, I can discreetly follow you and we can spend a wonderful time together in Ecuador, the Gobi Desert, or Vienna, wherever your research takes you. No one will know, I will guarantee that.”

Mrs. Rivers raised her eyes. “Very well,” she said, strangely calm. “I can do that.”

“You can?” he said, hardly believing what he heard.

“Yes, Denis, I can. And I will.”

Denis smiled. “I can’t tell you how happy I am... so I won’t try. Not now, anyway, not yet.”

“So am I,” said Mrs. Rivers. “And I can’t believe what I am doing.”

“Think of it as a plot for a new book,” said Denis. “Only this time, no renunciation scene will come into the story.”

“It does not feel real,” said Mrs. Rivers.

“I can inject a bit of reality into our scheme,” said Denis. “There really was a business proposition that I wanted to talk to you about, and I did not lie when I said that to Mr. Goldwasser. A friend in the Literature Department of a university in California asked me if I know someone who could give a series of lectures on English books during the spring. Would you like to take it up?”

“Most certainly,” said Mrs. Rivers. She knew it had to be a dream, such things did not happen to respectable married women in their sixties, but she had become a new woman and she would follow her heart. Life, this time, did not imitate art. But then again, did it ever? Mrs. Rivers was beginning to doubt it.

While the moral fibre of society was somewhat shaken by Mrs. Rivers' decision to pursue her affair with a younger man, aided and abetted by the most flamboyant, suggestive, and risqué tango ever to be danced on the silver screen, botanical events of even greater importance were taking place in Norton Hall.

This statement might suggest to some readers that we have gone gently mad, perhaps affected by the advancing years and by our need to produce more books than is good for our fragile state of mind, but we vehemently deny such allegations. We are neither very old nor fragile, mentally or physically, and in addition, our readers must remember that we had always stated that bird watchers and stamp collectors, two extremely fanatic and even dangerous groups, are as innocent little children when compared to the volcanic emotions of the plant enthusiast. When botany and horticulture invade the soul of an otherwise highly respectable human being, no one can tell how far it would take them. We have already discussed certain cases of deranged involvement in botany in a previous chapter, so there is no need to weary the reader by repeating them, but for those who doubt our word, we suggest that you just follow the proceeds of any horticultural society, manned by gentle and well-bred ladies. The stories you would find in their annals and correspondence would leave you gasping with shock and dismay.

The pale winter sun was streaming into the cactus room, competing with the excellent plant lights that were positioned over the pots. Lady Norton stood, her heart almost breaking with sorrow. The last delicate little specimen of her beloved *Echinocactus horizonthalonius* var. *Nicholii* had died. Lady Norton touched her eyes with her lace handkerchief. In addition to her sense of failure, how would Professor Buckholz-Schuller feel? And she still had to tell him about the seeds which Shymmering found in Professor Hilliard-Sabre's room. She left the room, returned to her own sitting room, and meeting the

butler on her way, asked him to tell the professor that she wished to see him for a few minutes.

Professor Buckholz-Schuller listened gravely to the tale, shaking his head with sorrow and defeat. He looked at the matchbox containing the incriminating seeds in deep sadness. "So she is a criminal," he said quietly. "We were right; she did steal the seeds."

"Why would such a distinguished scholar stoop so low?" asked Lady Norton. "She had risked her entire career on one experiment! Was the crime worth it?"

"We do not understand such a mind," said the professor. "I am so sad. I thought she was becoming my friend, and now... I see it was all a ruse..."

"Shimmering thought we should call the police," said Lady Norton. "I told him I thought it was a bad idea."

"Oh, no, not the police," said the professor. "I am not sure what to do... should we confront her with the evidence? What should we do?"

"And she is my guest, too," said Lady Norton miserably.

"It has to be faced, Lady Norton. We must speak to her."

"Very well," said Lady Norton with quiet resignation. "I'll ring Carla."

For some reason it took Carla a long time to bring the professor, and the tension in the room was mounting. Finally she returned, without the professor.

"I am sorry, my lady, but I could not find the lady right away," said Carla. "She was not in her room or anywhere in the house, and I only found her in the gardens. She said she will come directly, my lady."

"Very well," said Lady Norton, about to dismiss the maid, when suddenly she changed her mind. "Stay here until she comes, Carla, I have something to ask both of you."

At that moment, the professor came in. Lady Norton, despite her own deep sadness, noticed a look of almost exultation on Professor Hilliard-Sabre face, which surprised her, but of course she did not comment on it. Perhaps Professor Hilliard-Sabre was savouring her victory?

“Do sit down, professor,” she said. “We have something to show you,” and she nodded at Professor Buckholz-Schuller. He extended his hand with the matchbox in it, showing it to Professor Hilliard-Sabre.

“Oh, there it is,” said the professor with complete lack of concern and not a bit of guilty expression. “I was wondering if I had forgotten to bring it from London, or lost it; I was really annoyed. Where did you find it?”

Professor Buckholz-Schuller and Lady Norton looked at each other with amazement. Could this distinguished person be such a hardened criminal that she would not be troubled by the evidence for her crime? Lady Norton glanced at Carla, noting the usual vacuous look and a total lack of understanding. What was going on?”

“So you really took them?” asked Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “You really went so far?”

“Why, it was no trouble at all, my dear Professor Buckholz-Schuller. Why should it be? It’s so small, it’s not as if I had to carry a large specimen.”

“Professor Hilliard-Sabre,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller, “I am at a loss. How can you justify your actions?”

“Justify my actions? What actions?” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre, seemingly bewildered.

“Taking the seeds,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “It amounts to stealing, no matter how you look at it. I am sure Lady Norton agrees.”

“I do,” said Lady Norton. “I don’t understand why you are taking the discovery so calmly, Professor Hilliard-Sabre.”

“Stealing? Do you mean the seeds? Are you both mad? I got these seeds from the Kensington Herbarium. Just before our joint lectures, I heard from one of our colleagues in Arizona about the experiment that you were going to help Lady Norton with, raising the rare cactus, and I thought that you would be able to put a few extra seeds to good use. The herbarium people were happy to give me the seeds when I told them about the importance of the experiment. But it seems you had removed them from my room. This is all very peculiar.”

“No, it was Shymmering,” murmured Lady Norton.

“Who is Shymmering?” asked Professor Hilliard-Sabre.

“He is Mr. Alcott’s valet,” said Lady Norton.

“But why did he steal my seeds?” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre, sticking to the point.

“We thought the seeds belonged to Lady Norton,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller.

“Not before I gave them to her,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “You might as well explain. What is all this about my actions amounting to stealing, anyway?”

“We thought you stole the seeds from Lady Norton,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller.

“How? When? How was I supposed to get the seeds from Lady Norton in the first place?”

“We thought that you hired my maid, Carla, who pretended to throw out half of the seeds, but really sent them to you...”

“But I didn’t know any of your maids, lady Norton.”

At that moment, Carla interfered, deeply offended. “What is this you say, my lady? You think I stole them stupid seeds?”

“Well...” said Lady Norton.

“I never...” said Carla, extremely upset. “I give you notice right away, my lady. I don’t hold with sich goings on... I’d rather take a place at the Hogglestock Works, with Mr. Adams, than stay here and be told I am a thief...” and she marched out of the room.

Silence prevailed for a few tense seconds, and then Lady Norton said, “We were mad, Professor Hilliard-Sabre. You had this feud with Professor Buckholz-Schuller, and we thought you wanted to score some kind of victory over him.”

“So I would conspire to commit a crime with one of the maids?” asked Professor Hilliard-Sabre, looking intently at Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “You assume that one experiment would be worth it to me? You perceive me as such a reckless person?”

“I am crushed,” said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. “Crushed and humiliated. How could I suspect you, of all people, an honoured member of my own circle of scholars and a

distinguished lady as well. I will never live it down. I might as well throw everything to the winds and migrate to... to..." under the strain, he could not think of a suitable place to exile himself to, and buried his face in his hands.

"How about Tahiti?" said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. "It might be nice to throw everything to the winds and go to Tahiti."

"Whatever do you mean, Professor?" asked Professor Buckholz-Schuller, raising his head in amazement.

"I mean, this morning I received a telephone call from my department, and was told that they had given us a grant to go to Tahiti, for a purely scientific research regarding the insect that pollinates the Florida palms," said Professor Hilliard-Schuller. "I had requested it as soon as the student brought the subject up, but did not have much hope, so I did not mention it to you. They said that our joint lectures about the palms caused such interest that they would be able to give it to us, despite the usual difficulty, and they expect considerable revenue from the book we would write about our research and findings. The road is clear for such an expedition, and all that is needed is to put it together. So would you like to go?"

"You want me to come? You are you not furious at me?" asked Professor Buckholz-Schuller.

"Furious? I am thrilled. I am enchanted. No one had ever thought of me as an adventuress, ready to risk her reputation on a whim, and a criminal to boot. How exciting!"

"You like it?" asked Lady Norton, trembling, barely finding her voice.

"I do," said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. "Very much."

Lady Norton was again at a loss for words. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she remembered the yellow chiffon dress with the tiny roses that Professor Hilliard-Sabre wore for the Christmas dinner, and the overly bright lipstick as well.

"But..." said Professor Buckholz-Schuller. "My schedule..."

"Come on, Erich! Pull yourself together and start enjoying life a little!" said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. "There is more to life than ferreting in university archives, you know! Your usual work can wait, it won't go anywhere, and you can get a replacement

lecturer anytime for your courses. Let's go to Tahiti together and find the elusive insect! What an adventure, what excitement, what fun it would be!"

"Elsbeth!" said professor, and could say no more.

"Did you really think I was your enemy, Erich? Yes, I was your rival, and we had our disputes, but they were nothing personal, ever. And from the moment we met, I felt we had such a connection, such deep understanding..."

"Oh, Elspeth, I will never think it again," said the professor. "And yes, I would so much like to go to Tahiti with you; it will be an expedition and a discovery worthy of Darwin himself."

Lady Norton noticed that Professor Hilliard-Sabre gave a sidelong glance to Professor Buckholz-Schuller. As a matter of fact, it was a glance through surprisingly long lashes, which Lady Norton had not noticed before that moment.

"As for the cactus seedlings, Lady Norton, how are they doing?"

"Not well," said Lady Norton. "A few seeds sprouted, but they all died. We tried to give them the exact conditions, but it did not work. It breaks my heart."

"Well, I have a lovely surprise for you," said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. "I saw something just before your maid asked me to see you, something that really pleased me. Please come outside with me." Lady Norton suddenly remembered the mysterious look of exultation on Professor Hilliard-Sabre's face when she came into the room.

They put on their coats and went out, and Professor Hilliard-Sabre took them to the exact area under Lady Norton's window, where Carla had thrown out the original seeds. Lady Norton gasped. In the wet soil, right where the begonia bed used to be, grew a large number of magnificent young specimens of the difficult, elusive *Echinocactus horizonthalonius* var. *Nicholii*. They were strong, ugly, and highly successful, and it would be clear to any botanist that if they were allowed to remain where they were, they would soon split the stones of the foundations of Norton Hall, as was their habit when encountering any rock,

stone, or mortar, and Norton Hall would crash to the ground and be no more.

“But this is impossible,” whispered Professor Buckholz-Shculler. “They can’t grow in wet soil; they need dry conditions and they thrive only on alluvial fans composed of limestone-derived soils in the Waterman and Vekol Mountains.”

“Apparently not,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “These specimens are the most spectacular of this cactus I have ever seen. They seem to like England, and to enjoy English weather and damp soil.”

Lady Norton was so shocked by all these events that she was completely speechless and just gazed at the cacti. The cacti seemed to stare back at her. Their elongated stalk-like protuberances gently waved at her, showing off their still tiny grey-green globes, covered with a filthy yellowish wool-like substance and already ferocious spines. They were obviously quite happy just where they were, and determined to stay there at the expense of the foundations of a mere house. What is a house next to the boulders of the Waterman and Vekol Mountains?

“Lady Norton, you are the first horticulturist to have ever grown the *Echinocactus horizonthalonius* var. *Nicholii* out of its natural habitat. Should the three of us write an article about your great achievement? We do owe it to science, you know,” asked Professor Hilliard-Sabre.

“Yes, of course,” said Lady Norton. “I did not do anything, though... they just grew by themselves.”

“The plants are on your premises, Lady Norton. You had tried various ways to grow them, and you certainly deserve the credit. And in addition, you gave me a most delightful holiday. Let’s do it as soon as Erich and I come back from Tahiti.”

“I would love to do it,” said Lady Norton. “It will be an honour. And would I be able to use the material for a book I plan to write about cacti and succulents, later on? I was thinking about a book like that for the general public.”

“Of course,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “It should generate a great interest both here and in the United States, I believe, and I will put a good word for it in one of the university

presses I usually deal with. They often do horticultural books for the general public, as well as purely botanical works. They will simply snap up your book.”

“Thank you so much, Professor Hilliard-Sabre,” said Lady Norton. “It would be wonderful to be published by a university press.”

“No trouble at all,” said Professor Hilliard-Sabre. “After this interesting holiday, which gave me so much pleasure, I consider the three of us fellow conspirators... though as for the little business with the so-called stolen seeds, we don’t have to mention it to anyone, do we, Erich?” She glanced at the professor again, and smiled sweetly. Yes, Lady Norton was certain now. Professor Hilliard-Sabre was flirting most shamelessly with Professor Buckholz-Schuller... could she really? This distinguished middle-aged professor? It certainly seemed to be. And what’s more, she was taking him to Tahiti, the land of sinful romance, wasn’t she? Vague memories of the stories she heard about the painter Paul Gauguin and his illicit behaviour in Polynesia came into her mind. All this was faintly immoral and inappropriate, everything Lady Norton usually objected to, and fought against, all her life.

Lady Norton was about to do the Right Thing. She sincerely meant to stand tall and straight, put on her face-à-main, and stare the immoral woman down, making her realize how unbecoming her behaviour was for a lady and a scholar. But the virtuous intention lasted for only a mere moment, and Lady Norton did nothing of the kind. Instead, she sighed and said nothing at all. Deep in her heart Lady Norton had to make the shocking admittance that the miraculous success of the seedlings under her window, the upcoming botanical article, and the horticultural book that should be selling quite well on both sides of the Atlantic and could never be achieved without Professor Hilliard-Sabre’s help, were much more important than these vague moral issues which after all, Lady Norton pretended to herself, might be mere imagination. Lady Norton simply could not bring herself to act, since action would deprive her of horticultural fame, within her grasp for the first time in her life. She had glorious

visions of herself consorting with famous botanists in London, lecturing in Sydney, Australia, and being taken on a private tour of a Botanic Garden in New York by its famous director himself; no, she could not give such dreams up, she was only human. And so Lady Norton decided to ignore the whole thing, move on with her exciting plans while being helped by the two rather dissolute professors, and throw integrity to the winds. Yes, as we have said before, such is the power of botany.

