



*The Archers  
Intervene*  
*a new story of the Ambridge Road*

GEOFFREY WEBB and  
EDWARD J. MASON

'The Archers', most famous of all B.B.C. serials, has brought the life of the English countryside, realistically and convincingly, to millions of listeners. The fortunes of the Archer family and their neighbours, the problems and joys of rural life, are followed as eagerly as though the characters are relatives and friends of those for whose entertainment they have been created.

Geoffrey Webb and Edward Mason, scriptwriters of the series, have written a story about Ambridge and its people which will delight both those who already know the Archers and those who have never heard the programme. Harry Lane's stubborn persistence in training his daughter Barbara to be a champion horsewoman and his neglect of his farm in order to buy better and still better horses for her is not merely a matter of concern for his creditors but one that affects the happiness of his wife and friends. In such a closely-knit community it is felt that it is up to everyone to help in some way, whether in bringing sympathy and womanly advice to Madge Lane—as Doris Archer does, or in showing Harry that he is behaving foolishly whilst still helping him out of a tight spot, as Dan Archer does. And, of course, the older people always have plenty to do in smoothing the course of the youngsters' love affairs—particularly that of Barbara Lane and Jimmy Bryant. The Ambridge folk are a true mirror of the English way of life and of those unobtrusive but powerful English qualities of kindness, simplicity and neighbourly understanding.

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This novel about the Archer family, known to millions through B.B.C. serials, tells of new events at Ambridge. Harry Lane is determined to make his daughter, Barbara, a champion horsewoman and neglects his farm. Dan and Doris Archer come to the help of the Lane family and smooth the course of love for the younger people in the village.

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THE ARCHERS OF AMBRIDGE

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## ONE

"GLAD YOU CAME, LOVE?" Dan Archer glanced at his wife and tipped back his best trilby, relaxing, enjoying himself in spite of the corner of his mind that continually went over the things at Brookfield Farm which might have been done today and would certainly have to be done tomorrow. "Grand day for the show, eh?"

Doris nodded. She was watching a big grey horse taking the last two fences in the open jumping class. They were fairly close together, and for a big horse it was a difficult moment.

A gasp and a burst of applause came from the crowd as the horse brushed the last fence and cleared. The rider sprawled forward on her mount's neck, nearly off, but recovered and cantered the mare happily out of the ring.

"It's that young Simpson girl from near Hollerton," Doris said, joining the applause. "She didn't do badly. Only four faults."

"Still leaves Barbara Lane the winner," Dan commented. "You've got to be good to take points off that young lady. Now, how about a bit of grub, Doris? Where's Walter and Mrs. Perkins?"

"Dunno. They went off on their own."

As a metallic, disembodied voice announced the winners of the last event over the public address system—Barbara Lane, first, on Tantrum, runner up,

Betty Simpson on Grey Moon—Doris got up from her rignside seat, careful not to disarrange the folded rug over the car's headlamp which had provided her with a comfortable back rest all day, and busied herself at the car luggage boot.

The black circle of spectators around the arena was in benign mood. The day promised well from the start and the mellow autumn sunshine that warmed them later in the afternoon added an unwonted air of gaiety to the show.

Borchester Horse Show, held by tradition in the long meadow between the London road and the river on the outskirts of town, was the last of the season for miles around—one last day for a competitor to vindicate a summer's faith in a mount that had not performed too well, or to snatch a pound or two in prize money from opposition, the strength of which one had learned only too intimately in the past few months.

To the wisecres who thought they could forecast every result each event was a foregone conclusion—and none would admit there had been surprises. But to the majority of people it was a day out, a chance to watch relatives and friends ride, to gossip with acquaintances from neighbouring villages, to nod wisely about the harvest and wonder about the winter. There was an intermingling of friends and families, an interchange of gossip, prejudices and humour from Nettlebourne and Penny Hasset, Hollerton and Felpersham, Welverton and Ambridge.

“Here, Dan, you get the thermos opened.”

"All right." Dan eyed the package Doris was unwrapping. "What's the pie, love?"

"Egg and bacon."

"That's the ticket."

A hoarse shout of greeting came from the other side of the car, and over the bonnet Dan saw the weather-beaten face of Walter Gabriel grinning at him.

"Gussed you'd browbeat your staff into doin' your milkin' for you 'sarternoon," Walter croaked. "Bin lookin' for yer all around the place."

"I've heard that one before. The beer tent's the only place you've been, Walter Gabriel," Doris said. "Trust Walter to smell food as soon as it's unwrapped. Where's Mrs. P.?"

"I'm here."

The lugubrious Cockney woman, whom the Ambridge people had taken to their hearts, came round the back of the car, smartly turned out in her best coat and skirt and wearing the green felt hat that she kept for occasions.

"Want any help, dear?"

"No, thanks. It's all done." Doris offered them thick, wedge-shaped slices of egg and bacon pie. Walter stretched out a predatory hand. "Not that one, Walter—that's the biggest. That's Dan's."

Dan squatted down on the running board of the car and munched his pie, looking round at the crowd. Seemed like everybody had nothing to do this time of year, he thought. Still, they'd been lucky. An early harvest and winter nigh on them. Probably a hard

winter too, after a good summer. Folk deserved a bit of relaxation. And he wanted to see Christine ride—and win, maybe.

“Reckon your Chris’ll ’ave her work cut out to better yon Barbara Lane,” Walter’s croaking voice cut across his thoughts.

“Eh? Oh, ay. Maybe,” Dan said.

“Gettin’ more of a little champion every season, young Barbara is,” Walter commented, his mouth full of pie. He took a swig of tea from the thermos top in his hand, swallowed noisily and bit deep into the pie again. “Aah! Nowt like it. Best bit o’ pie I’ve had come Christmas, Doris. As I were saying, young Chris ain’t going to have no walk over. She’s up agin someone who does know how to handle a ’oss.”

“Just you wait and see, Walter!”

Christine Archer’s young voice startled them all. None of them had noticed her quiet approach over the grass with Paul Johnson, son of Borchester’s most prosperous agricultural contractor.

Walter slopped half his tea down his waistcoat and spluttered fragments of egg and bacon to four points of the compass.

“Gorlucus, girl, you near had me chokin’ meself!”

“Serves you right for belittling my riding,” she laughed. “Lucky for me I’ve no illusions about Barbara. If I could ride as well as she can, I’d be jolly pleased. But then, I haven’t Harry Lane for a father—thank goodness.”

“You’re certainly lucky there,” Paul Johnson said drily.

"D'you think if I'd treated you right you could be as good as she is, Christine?" Dan smiled.

"Treated! Driven, you mean." Christine took the beakers of tea her mother handed her and passed one to Paul.

"Go on with you. Harry Lane's no slave driver," Dan said. "He just wants the lass to get on—same as she wants to get on herself."

Doris exchanged a glance with Mrs. Perkins.

"Seen Madge Lane here today, Mrs. P?"

Mrs. Perkins shook her head.

"Nor did I expect to," she added. "Don't get around much these days."

"I . . . just thought she might be here to see her daughter ride as it's the last of the season. She usually does." Even as she said it, Doris realised it was months since she had seen Harry and Madge Lane out together. Things weren't too smooth at the Lane's farm, of that she was sure. Not since Harry started paying more attention to horses than farming—and his wife.

The warning bell rang for another ring event. Quickly Christine put her tea down on the running board and dashed off. Paul rose, calling to her to wait.

"Got to get Midnight ready," she called back over her shoulder. "I'll be in the ring in fifteen minutes."

Paul Johnson gulped his tea and raced to catch her up, taking her arm to guide her through the maze of guy-ropes between two marquees.

"Proper attentive he is these days, that Paul," Mrs. Perkins observed. "D'you think——?"

"There's some talk that Christine and Paul might go into partnership at the riding stables, and he's a nice boy," Doris said in a tone that implied she wasn't prepared to discuss the matter any further.

Mrs. Perkins shrugged her shoulders and turned her head away discreetly while she dislodged a piece of bacon from between two teeth.

"I was just wonderin'," she said, the operation over.

The loudspeakers announced the start of a junior event and Dan stood up on the running board to watch.

"Kids, ain't it, Dan?" Walter grunted.

"Ay."

"Reckon that ain't my line." Walter shuffled his feet and moved a couple of yards in the direction of one of the nearby marquees.

"More pie, Walter?" Doris asked.

"Er—no, thankee, me dear. Very nice it were, though." He shuffled again and glanced over his shoulder towards the ring. "You know, I were just wonderin' if there wasn't maybe somethin' I could do for Christine. Give her a hand with her girth strap, or summat, y'know."

"She knows how to look after herself," Dan said with a grin.

"Still, I'd like to see her win." Walter rubbed his hand thoughtfully over his bristly chin. "Specially after what I said to upset 'er just now. Reckon I'll just slip along and see if there ain't summat I can do." He turned and stamped purposefully across the grass towards the marquees.

Mrs. Perkins gave a snort.

"You know where he's going, don't you?"

"Ay," said Dan. "The beer tent."

"Course he is." Mrs. Perkins brushed some crumbs of pie disapprovingly off her skirt. "Why couldn't he say so . . . the old fool!"

The show was nearly at its end and the beer tent, in consequence, was full. Farmers whom Walter knew both well and only by sight were there, weatherbeaten, loud-voiced and making a day of it. Thick wreaths of grey tobacco smoke drifted up to the roof of the marquee and a heavy smell of beer and bodies hit Walter as he eased his way through the crowd to the bar and its burden of warm, wet glasses.

Before he had time to catch the bartender's eye a half-pint mug of bitter was thrust into his hand.

"Here y'are, Walter. Just got this up myself. I'll get another. You're the very man I've been wanting to see."

The speaker was a wiry, blond, weather-reddened man, with a penetrating cheerful voice, cheerful by nature and also because it was tempered with some steady drinking over the past couple of hours.

"Harry Lane! Glad to see you, Harry . . . and ta. I nods at you." Walter took a deep swig at the bitter and glanced along the bar at the men with whom Harry had been drinking. They were strangers to Walter, but he reckoned he knew the type. 'Oss copers, he told himself, 'oss copers for a cert.

"Walter, I want you to do something for me." Harry

put an affectionate hand on the old farmer's shoulder.

"Oh, ay?" Walter drained his half pint and signalled to the barman. "Summat legal?"

Harry gave a guffaw.

"You know me, Walter. Never done a dishonest thing in me life!"

Which was probably true, Walter thought, depending on how you looked at honest.

"This is something that'll suit you down to the ground, Walter. And I'll pay you for it."

The barman came up and Walter raised two fingers to him.

"Two 'alves!" he bawled above the noise. He was interested. "Ay. And what is it, Harry?"

"Just a small job. Well, not so small maybe."

"Ay, but . . . let's have some idea of what it's about."

"How are you fixed for time?"

"All right, but . . ."

The barman slid two bitters across the sodden trestle tables towards them. Harry Lane banged some loose change down and slapped Walter's shoulder.

"This is mine, Walter—I'll do it. And I just want a word with my pals here."

Walter, glancing at his second glass of beer, decided there was no point in protesting that it was his round. He drank deeply at the slightly cloudy liquid and considered Harry's companions again. No doubt about it—'oss copers. Now what could Harry want with Walter? He'd done odd jobs for him before, bit of



carpentry now and then, but . . .

A burst of applause filtered through the walls of the marquee and Harry Lane, with a final word to his friends, moved off to the entrance. Walter swallowed the rest of his beer and went after him.

"Harry . . . that job you was talkin' about!"

"Talk to you about it later. It's all right." Harry pressed through the crowd, out into the open air and got himself a place by the ringside. "Talk to you later, Walter. Barbara's in this event and I want to see her. It means a lot to both of us. She's got to win."

## TWO

DAN ARCHER COULD SENSE the tension in Harry Lane. He noticed the man's eyes were fixed on the entrance to the arena from the collecting ring. His face was flushed and he was breathing heavily. There was a sort of eagerness in the tight smile on his lips.

"This'll be a competition between Christine and Barbara, I reckon, Harry," Dan smiled.

Harry nodded briefly. Dan got the impression he was not listening. He became so absorbed in studying the tight lines on Harry's face that he hardly noticed the first four competitors go round. He had a confused memory of a bay coming to grief at the road barrier and Jim Bedridge's hunter, usually as game as you find 'em, steadfastly refusing the in and out. Another bay, ridden by a girl he didn't know, was over the triple bar before he recovered from his preoccupation with the intensity of Harry Lane's interest in what was going on in the ring and he had to ask Doris what was happening. She looked surprised and a little hurt that he was not taking more interest in an event in which his own daughter was riding, but he did elicit the information that so far there was nothing better than eight faults.

The strange girl with her bay left the ring and Christine, entering on Midnight, cantered over to the judges and saluted from the saddle. On the starting bell

she brought Midnight neatly round and thrust her at the first fence.

The horse cleared it with room to spare, but landed badly and the crowd gave a sympathetic murmur. An instinctive communion with her mount told Christine to let the horse recover itself and Midnight was back in her stride in time to get a good run up to the brushwood and take it easily.

"Phew!" Dan whistled. "Those two'll have to steady down better than that."

They did. A light rein curbed the eagerness of the horse and it settled to an even pace, not particularly fast but sufficiently controlled to bring it smoothly to its take-off point for every jump. Midnight did not even falter at the triple.

"She's going to do a clear round!" Doris cried.

"Still got those last two," Dan grunted. Already they had spelt disappointment for many competitors who eased up and allowed their concentration to waver after the more difficult fences. The coal-black mare made a bad approach to the brushwood—the last fence but one. Christine had to heave her in and Midnight came almost back on her haunches close under the fence, hesitated, for a second seemed motionless, then reared up and was over. Doris's nails were digging into her palms as the horse shortened its pace and went for the wall. Midnight's belly seemed to scrape the top, and a back hoof struck one of the top bricks a glancing blow, but she did it.

"A clear round!" Dan shouted, above the suppressed

"Oooh!" and surge of applause around the ring. "Good old Chris! If your lass gets a clear run too, Harry, they'll have to have a jump off."

Again Harry did nothing more than nod and keep his eyes fixed on the way in from the collecting ring. The faint smile had gone from his lips.

Following Christine was a chestnut owned by Colonel Fotherby of Brittenham and ridden by his daughter, a young girl without much experience. The crowd barely noticed her round after she had faulted at the first two jumps and refused the third.

Barbara Lane, fair-haired, slightly built, pretty and very much a favourite among the crowd, was into the ring without allowing a decent interval for Miss Fotherby's red-faced exit.

A round of applause greeted Barbara's entrance. Already she had carried off many events. Even strangers, who had never seen her before, were aware by now that unless she had phenomenal bad luck she was certain to win the cup for the best individual performance of the show. She sat her mount lightly and easily. Her small, firm hands held the reins in a way that made show jumping appear easy, and she seemed to impart this air of casual expertise to the horse itself—a showy creature with a proud little head betraying the Arab in him.

Dan knew the horse. Tartuffe. It had done well during the season and confounded the critics, Dan included. Dan *knew* it was too small for show jumping and would never amount to anything, yet half a dozen times during the season he had to eat his words.

"Barbara looks fine, Harry. Wish I could say the same for the hoss. Want a level half crown that my daughter beats yours?" Dan cocked his eye in the other man's direction, anticipating the ready "You're on" in reply. Harry's lips moved slightly but no sound came and his intense gaze never left the little horse moving up to its first jump.

It was impossible to miss Barbara Lane's confidence as she set her horse at the jumps. The girl seemed to instil in her horse something the others hadn't got. Hurdles, fences, stiles, walls—all were taken with ease and assurance and the crowd were delighted. Another clear round seemed a certainty. Only the last two fences remained and Barbara was too old a hand at the game to let the horse fail on those.

She sailed over one and put Tartuffe at the other. Dan was already anticipating the jump-off between Christine and Barbara when a deep sigh of disappointment went up from the crowd. Something—no one will ever know what—got into the horse's mind and a couple of yards from the last fence its hooves refused to leave the ground and it slid to an undignified standstill. He refused once more, but Barbara, still outwardly cool and unruffled, put him at it the third time and took him over effortlessly.

"Bad luck, Barbara!" Dan called, magnanimous in the knowledge that Christine had won the event. Both Dan and Doris saw Harry Lane silently turn away and push through the crowd and caught a glimpse of the livid disappointment and anger in his face.

"What's up with him?" Doris asked. "That girl of his has won the cup anyhow."

"Took it proper bad, ain't he?" Walter Gabriel wheezed. "Dammit, the lass 'as got to make a mistake sometimes."

"It wasn't Barby," Dan said. "It was the horse. I always said it would let her down."

Little more was said until Christine and Paul joined them. Christine, flushed with success, listened to a laboured account from Walter of how Harry Lane had reacted.

"I think I know what the trouble is, Dad," she said.

"Ay?"

"I only hope he doesn't take it out of Barbara because . . . because he hasn't got what he wanted."

"Oh, he'd never do that, Chris, surely." Doris unconsciously echoed her husband's verdict. "It wasn't Barbara made a mistake. Her horse just refused to jump. It happens to anybody."

"Especially on a nag like Tartuffe," put in Paul. "What the devil did Harry Lane expect?"

Around the show field spectators were packing up ready to leave. Dan wedged Doris's two large shopping baskets that served as picnic hampers into the boot and made a mental note that Paul certainly knew something about horses.

"You say you know what the trouble is with Harry Lane, Chris?"

"Yes, Dad." Christine looked seriously at the group over the travelling rug she was folding. "This show was

Barbara's last chance to make the necessary hundred and fifty pounds Tartuffe's got to have won to allow it to qualify for the big show at Harringay. As it is, she'll have to do another season now."

"Like that, is it?" Dan pursed his lips and nodded slowly.

"What a shame," Doris said. "What a shame. Poor girl. You mean your win just now spoiled everything for her?"

A snorting croak came from Walter.

"Spoiled everything for 'Arry Lane, yer mean. He's the one what's gripin'."

"Ay." Dan fumbled in his pocket for the ignition key to his car. "Ay, it's Harry who's most upset—and maybe it's all for the best."

The others looked at him in surprise.

"For the best?" Doris echoed.

Dan opened the car door and began easing himself into the driving seat.

"Better go and get Midnight into the horse-box, Chris. I'll be round in a minute."

"Okay, Dad, but what d'you mean by 'all for the best'?"

"I reckon Harry Lane's at the crossroads. Maybe this failure of Barbara's has come just in time. P'raps Harry'll begin to see it isn't so easy to make your daughter into a riding star. P'raps he'll have the sense now to chuck up the idea. It's time he got his feet back on the earth and stuck to farming. After all, that's his job . . . that's what keeps him and his family in food and clothes."

"Perhaps you're right, Dad. I hope so." Christine gave a wan smile. "You know, till you said that, I was beginning to wish I'd never won that competition."

Dan gave his daughter's arm an affectionate squeeze.

"You run along and look after Midnight. You rode well and deserved to win." His expression changed suddenly as he caught sight of Harry Lane leaving the beer tent with the two men Walter had seen him with earlier in the afternoon. He knew them—a couple of horse dealers that he would never choose to do business with himself. Harry Lane was talking confidentially with the men, almost too confidentially.

"Looks like I started hoping a bit early," Dan grunted. "If Harry Lane isn't doing more horse business, I'll eat my hat. I'm afraid it's going to take more than Barbara's not qualifying for Haringay to get a bit of sense into that head of his."



## THREE

THE WELCOMING TANG OF FRIED BACON greeted Dan Archer as he let himself into the kitchen at Brookfield Farm and sniffed hungrily. The sharp nip of the late September morning had given him an even better appetite than usual. Busy at the stove, Doris did not look round from spooning hot fat over three eggs in the frying-pan.

"Christine's had hers and gone," she said. "Wanted to make an early start and get her horses done. She's going in to market with Paul Johnson."

"Right."

Dan sifted through the letters lying by his plate. Two circulars, one advertising a potato harvester that he looked at with envy and interest until he saw the price. A rapid and subconscious calculation convinced him that it was sounder economically to do it his own way—even though it was always a nuisance getting the labour to pick 'em up. He wondered how many women in the village he could depend on this year to give a hand—and how much they'd want. He tried to remember where he'd seen television aerials sprout up recently. They were the sort who were willing to work to get the money to pay off the instalments on the set.

"Sit yourself down and get on with it." Doris slid a piping hot plate of bacon and eggs on to the table. "What time are you leaving for Borchester?"

"Be getting there around eleven I reckon." He sliced the bulging yolk of an egg and watched the yellow flow slide towards a piece of bread he had put in to sop up the grease. "I want to slip up to Fairbrother's and have a word with Phil about the turkeys for Christmas."

"In that case I'll come up with you and you can drop me at Madge Lane's." Doris sat down at the table and started pouring out the tea. "There's something I want to talk to her about."

"Keeping an eye on her, eh?"

Since Borchester Show Harry and Madge Lane had barely entered Dan's mind. He had been too occupied with his work. But now he had a sudden recollection of Harry's face when Barbara's horse refused at the last fence. He knew Harry's temper. That incident wouldn't help to improve relations at home.

"I want to get her to make something for me for the W.I.," Doris said. "And you can pick me up again after you've seen Phil. I'm coming into Borchester with you."

Dan chuckled.

"To keep an eye on me too?"

"To do some shopping," Doris said primly. "I thought I might get some drying-up cloths at Partridge's."

Partridges . . . Dan remembered the covey of Frenchmen he had seen that morning down by the low meadow. He must remember to tell Tom Forrest and ask him whether they really did chase off the English or whether it was just another old wives' tale. And could a wounded Frenchman really cut off its scent? The dogs

had a devil of a job to find 'em. Maybe they kept running. French partridge do run. . . .

"Dan," Doris looked thoughtfully across the table. "D'you think there's anything we could do about Madge and Harry?"

"Do about 'em?" He wiped a trickle of bacon fat from his chin. "Do what?"

"I know things aren't going well up there."

"There's nothing for us to do, love. Harry's the only one who can do anything. He ought to stop fooling around with horses and get on with his proper job."

"He won't do that . . . yet." Doris reached across to fill up Dan's cup. "But I feel sort of responsible for Madge."

"You mean, because of Alice Harper?"

"Yes. I've done what I could . . . helping in little ways. But now I feel . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, thinking of the day when Alice Harper died. Alice had been her friend since the day she came up to work at the Manor, and the friendship had gone on after they'd both married. Doris glanced across at her husband and a wave of gratitude and affection spread round her heart. She'd been lucky. But Alice . . . she'd had no more children after Madge. Then her husband, Fred, had been in that rail accident when the express hit the local train at Hollerton. Madge was fourteen at the time and Fred didn't leave much. Bad luck seemed to be stalking them. Two years later the doctors found Alice had a growth that they could do nothing about and within the twelve-

month she was gone. At the time Harry Lane had started courting Madge and Alice wasn't happy about it. Harry hadn't his own farm then. He was working for his father, and Harry was considered a bit of a rip. Keep an eye on my Madge, Alice had said, practically her last words, and Doris had promised. . . .

Dan's voice broke in on her thoughts, "Better get moving, love."

"Eh? . . . what? Oh . . . oh, yes."

Dan was on his feet. He slid an arm round her shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

"Shouldn't fuss yourself too much on Madge's account," he said. "Harry Lane's not all bad. Just a bit bone-headed sometimes. And if he goes too far—well, there's ways of bringing a man to his senses. Now, get yourself ready and we'll be off."

Dan dropped Doris at the gate to Harry Lane's farm and she saw Madge's lean face at the kitchen window. She waved and the younger woman came out to meet her. Her movements were slow, lethargic. Her clothes, though they were clean, looked as though they had been put on without care or thought.

And she was such a bonny girl, thought Doris. . . .

"Nice of you to come over," Madge said, showing her into the kitchen.

Everything was tidy and looked-after, but even in the house itself Doris sensed the same lack of interest. She sat down by the fire.

"Dan's gone up to Fairbrother's to see Phil. We're

on our way to market, so I thought . . .”

Barbara Lane came in through the back door and her prettiness took Doris's breath away. She was a blonde edition of Alice Harper—the clean, fresh Alice when she first came in service as chambermaid at the Manor. Her skin had a healthy golden tan after a summer spent almost entirely in the open air. And the blue of her jumper and the dungarees tucked into her riding boots was picked up by the clear blue of her eyes.

“Hello, Auntie Doris!” Her slim boyish figure moved quickly across the room and she gave Doris a light duty kiss on the cheek. “Seen the saddle soap, Mum?”

“I think there's some in the cupboard under the stairs.” The weariness in Madge's voice contrasted sharply with the eager freshness in Barbara's. The girl went briskly out of the kitchen into the passage.

“She's looking fine,” Doris said.

Madge nodded.

“I'm sure she's grown during this summer too,” Doris went on.

“Don't we know it,” Madge said with a one-sided smile. “Every season means a new outfit for her. D'you know what it costs to dress Barbara for the ring? Over fifty pounds. New jacket, new jodhpurs, new boots . . . every season. Every season!” Bitterness crept into her voice. She plucked at the skirt she was wearing. “I've had this for six years.”

Doris sympathised. “I know what it was like when Phil and Chris were still growing.”

“Barbara still has to have ordinary clothes as well,”

Madge almost snapped. "Harry says she must be turned out smart for the ring, but she's getting in with folk who've more money than we have and she's got to be turned out right to mix with them too. Harry says . . ."

She stopped abruptly as Barbara appeared in the doorway from the passage. She had a tin of saddle soap in her hand.

"Found it in the end," she said cheerfully. There was a smudge of dust on one of her cheeks. "It'd fallen down behind the brushes, but I got it!"

She was out of the kitchen again and had her hand on the latch of the back door when the knock came. The speed with which the door was opened obviously startled the caller, a young man, tall, slim-built, with a pleasant face verging on good looks. He blinked twice, recovered from his surprise and smiled.

"Good morning. I'm Jimmy Bryant. I've come to see your father. You're—you're Barbara Lane, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Madge and Doris exchanged a quick glance, both conscious of the nervous hesitation in Barbara's voice.

"I've seen you ride, often," the young man went on. "It . . . it was shocking bad luck for you when Tartuffe refused at Borchester Show."

There was a pause. When Barbara spoke again the nervousness had gone. Her tone was almost brusque.

"You want to see my father? He's in the stables." Barbara glanced back over her shoulder at her mother and Doris, then went out into the yard. They heard

her say, "You know where the stables are? I'll show you."

"Who's he?" Doris asked.

"Something to do with the accountants Harry deals with, I think. Come to talk money I suppose. I don't know. Harry doesn't tell me much." She sat down wearily at the table.

Doris felt that Madge wanted to talk, but something was holding her back, just as Doris found it difficult to make an opening in the conversation that might reveal what had aged Madge from comparative youth to middle age in a matter of months. But the opportunity never came and Doris found herself prattling on about the Women's Institute and repeating all the current local trivialities until she heard a car pulling up in the road.

"That'll be Dan," she said, and got up with some relief. "You wouldn't like to come into Borchester with us, Madge?"

"There's plenty to do here," was the flat reply. "Thanks all the same, though."

"And, Madge . . . if there's anything . . ."

Madge gave a grateful smile and touched Doris's hand.

"I know. Thanks, Mrs. Archer, but we're all right," she said, adding, almost under her breath, "for the time."

Doris noticed Dan taking more than usual interest in the glimpses they had of the Lanes' farm as they drove towards Borchester. At intervals he gave a disapproving

shake of his head and clicked his tongue.

"He's not putting the time in, Doris. Look at that hay. Should have been in weeks ago," he said. "Did Madge have anything to say?"

"No—except that Barbara was costing them a lot in clothes and riding gear." Doris was studying the shopping list she'd taken from her bag. "As if ordinary things didn't make a big enough hole in your weekly budget as it is."

Dan laughed.

"Weekly budget! That's something Harry's never heard of. Hand to mouth is his motto these days. What's he got coming in? Whatever it is it isn't as much as he could have—can't be. Not as much as he needs to carry on the way he does. Beer alone's enough to make his profit look silly."

"Everything's very neat and clean in the house." Doris thought for a few moments. "But there's an atmosphere. Didn't someone say something once about . . . about 'the troubled air'?"

Dan shrugged, his attention divided between driving and studying Harry's land.

"Anyhow, that's just what it was like there, in the kitchen," Doris went on. "Troubled. And there's going to be no change in Harry's ways, like you hoped. Madge said something about him looking out for a better horse for Barbara. Going to pay anything up to £300 for it, too, Madge says."

Dan's grunt might have meant anything.

Blamed fool, he thought to himself. Where's the cash



coming from? And if the man's got it, why doesn't he give a thought to paying off a bit of what he owes? Best part of two years now that Harry owed him for the work he'd done. True he'd never asked for it, hadn't needed it. But if he'd got the money there . . .

"Didn't see Harry, I suppose?" Dan asked, suddenly.

"No, but I'll tell you who I did see."

"Ay?"

"A young fellow called Jimmy Bryant. D'you know him? Nice-looking lad."

"Works for Matling and Collinward. They're accountants for the hire-purchase firm Harry's had some stuff through."

"He met young Barbara for the first time. She answered the door to him." Doris smiled comfortably and settled herself more firmly down into the seat. "I think he was a bit smitten with her."

Jimmy Bryant visiting Harry, eh? Dan thrust out his lower lip and looked pensive. And what would he be after? . . . as if he didn't know. Unless Harry did a quick deal with a few of the gimcrack horses he bought for Barbara to school up so he could realise a tenner or so on each, they'd be sending someone more senior than Mr. Jimmy Bryant out to see him.

Dan changed down before the junction of the Ambridge road with the main Borchester route and grated his gears. A wave of annoyance swept over him. If there was one thing upset him it was seeing good farming land getting second grade treatment. Farms were there to produce . . . and what did Harry get

out of his blasted horses that was of use to anybody but himself? The keep those horses took deprived Harry of half a dozen cows and the three thousand gallons of milk a year at least he'd get out of 'em. And milk was money—real money and regular.

He let the clutch in fiercely after they had turned on to the main road.

"Tscha!" He spat out his irritation so sharply that Doris gave him a reproving look.

"No need for you to take other people's worries so much to heart," she remarked mildly. "If Harry Lane's set on making a fool of himself, let him. Madge is the only one who'll really suffer, and I'll look after her."

They were late arriving at the market and Dan had to park the car round at the back of the Town Hall. He and Doris walked through the crowded streets to the market place nodding and throwing greetings to the people they knew. From ahead came the plaintive music of penned animals, a thick murmur of voices, the falsetto yelps of drovers and the plausible, vocally tired gratings of the vendors of household goods, enamel pans, tin kettles and plastic trays.

They found Chris and Paul Johnson leaning against the galvanised rails of the cattle auction ring, listening to the unbroken monotony of the auctioneer and the periodic flat smack of his ash walking-stick that he used for a hammer on the gnarled rail of the dais.

"Done any business?" Dan asked them in greeting.

Christine grinned cheerfully.

"Not a thing," she said. "We've been miking—and watching. It's been interesting."

Doris looked round the familiar market scene.

"Doesn't seem very different from any other day," she commented with a sniff.

"That's what you think, Mum. But just you keep your eyes on the sweet shop next to the Mason's Arms."

Christine had barely finished speaking when Doris gave a murmur of surprise.

"Well, I'll be . . .! I told you, Dan, didn't I?"

"Told me what?" Dan's eyes followed the direction in which the others were looking. "Oh!"

Out of the sweet shop, with Jimmy Bryant's hand on her elbow to guide her through the throng of people, came Barbara Lane. She was laughing.

"Hm. Seems like young Jimmy's a quick worker," Dan said.

The artificial marigold in Doris's hat fluttered with excitement as she stood on tiptoe to follow the progress of the young couple.

"They only met for the first time this morning. I was there—with Madge. And I said to Dan . . ."

Christine winked at Paul Johnson.

"Trust Mum to smell a romance before it's ever happened."

"He's a nice-looking chap and she's a right pretty girl," Doris protested. "Why should anybody be surprised if they liked each other?"

"Ever seen Barbara Lane out with a fellow before?"

And looking as though she was enjoying it?" Christine asked.

Dan scratched the short cropped hair at the back of his neck.

"Certainly the first time I've seen it. Always struck me as a girl who had no interest in the opposite sex whatever."

"D'you speak from experience, Dad?"

"Christine, don't be rude." Doris bridled slightly. "As if your father ever thought of girls."

Dan gave a deep rumbling chuckle, and began moving towards the pig pens.

"Don't get the chance—or the time, love." He winked broadly at Paul Johnson whose usually amiable face had an aggressive set to it. "Wonder what Harry'll say if someone's come along at last to take Barbara's mind off her blessed horses? He'd be in queer street if he lost his future champion rider."

Paul Johnson eased himself away from the rails and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. Over his shoulder he took a last look at Barbara and Jimmy disappearing out of the market in the direction of the quiet streets.

"That would be the best thing that could happen to him!"

The vindictiveness, bordering on hate, that coloured his words made the three Archers look at him in surprise.

There was an awkward pause until Christine asked, "What have you got against Harry Lane, Paul?"

Paul's eyes looked past them all, cold and without expression. Then the mood seemed to leave him. His face relaxed and he twisted his mouth into a familiar, ironical smile.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he said.

Christine, who knew him better than Dan and Doris, turned away with the feeling that she had been rebuffed. Paul's quick assumption of a bland mask had not fooled her, but she knew it was pointless to question him further. Yet she was not satisfied.

## FOUR

"BIT TOO CREAKY IN THE JOINTS to do much riding these days, m'boy."

Arthur Lawson-Hope, still looked upon as squire by the Ambridge villagers, addressed his words with philosophical good humour to Paul Johnson in reply to the younger man's enquiry as to why he was on foot for the opening meet of the Ambridge hounds. But the old Squire's eyes had a hungry look as they watched Reggie Trentham, the new master, dividing his time between pack, followers and whip, nudging his big chestnut gelding among the crowd assembled on the village green. The start of a new tradition, Lawson-Hope thought. There would be no more opening meets at the Manor now that he'd left and that doctor chap had turned the place into a glorified psychiatric ward.

"Shaping quite well, young Trentham," the old Squire commented, half to himself. "Couldn't have found a better man for the job round here . . . so long as he keeps his temper."

"Sorry, sir?" Paul Johnson leant down from his horse to try and pick up the old man's mumbled words.

"Nothing, nothing. Just thinking aloud." The Squire sniffed appreciatively at the air. "Perfect day. Trentham tells me you're drawing Long Spinney first. Think he's right. If there's nothing there he can move over to Hollow Mount. Bound to find there. The stoppers

have been round. Gunner Jones was telling me . . .”

The Squire rambled on, his still keen sight taking in every detail of the meet—commenting silently on the turn-outs, the horses, and reliving in his thoughts the runs that in his earlier days had made hunting history in the district. He was still talking when Jack Archer, with a tray of drinks in his hands, pushed his way through the crowd of villagers collected in front of the Bull.

“With Mr. Trentham’s compliments, sir.” Jack held the tray out and the old man, hesitating for a moment to conquer the slight tremor that passed through his hand, took one of the glasses gratefully.

“Thank you, Jack. My word, you’re looking warm, m’lad.”

Jack grinned as he passed the tray up to Paul Johnson.

“Doing a fair bit of business, sir. Pity we can’t have a meet every day. Never seen the Bull so full.”

“Splendid. Splendid.” The Squire’s glass was at his lips when he let out a hiss of disapproval. “Why in Heaven’s name doesn’t the man get that girl a decent horse?”

Paul followed the direction of Lawson-Hope’s gaze. Harry Lane was just riding across the green with Barbara. Both of them had the smartness and confident seat that only experience could breed, but no one could fail to notice the difference in the two horses. Harry’s mount was strong, steady, deep-chested. It looked every inch a hunter with a big heart. Barbara’s, even though her radiantly pretty face and slim upright back

drew attention first, was a lean, sway-backed nondescript thing that good grooming and careful handling could not disguise. As it neared the other horses, it pulled restlessly at the bit and danced with irritation rather than spirit.

"I know that brute," Paul Johnson said. "I've seen it before. I'll swear it's a rudgel. Just the sort of nag he'd give Barbara. Trust him not to take it on himself."

He turned his horse and, excusing himself from the Squire, moved over towards Barbara. She raised a hand and waved, a warm smile lighting her face. Pleased, he waved back and almost at once realised that her greeting was not for him, but for someone in the crowd of foot followers. In a second or two he picked out the grinning, admiring face of Jimmy Bryant, acknowledging the greeting he had taken for himself.

"Hard luck old man!" There was a mocking edge on Christine's voice as she reined Midnight up alongside. "I saw it all."

Paul tried to look woebegone.

"Losing my grip. Getting old, Chris, that's my trouble. I should have stayed with the Squire. At least I felt like a boy next to him."

"Seen Percy Hammond yet?"

"No. I'll buttonhole him later—after he's seen what Lucifer can do today."

Christine ran a professional eye over Paul's mount.

"Not looking too bad. I think you should make a sale."

"More chance than Harry Lane has with his brute," Paul said. "And I know Percy better than he does."



"You don't mean to say Percy Hammond's interested in Barbara's horror?" Christine's brow creased into a puzzled frown.

"He's not blind, duckie." Paul gave a snort of laughter. "No, no, I mean the horse Harry's riding himself."

"He wants to sell?"

"Course he does."

"How do you know?"

"I know a lot about Harry Lane."

"Do tell." But Christine knew she would not get any more from Paul than he had given some while past at Borchester market . . . and she noticed the same hardness in his voice.

"By the way, Chris, while we're out keep an eye on Lady Burrissen," Paul said as the hounds moved off.

"Scandal?" Christine's eyebrows went up.

"No. I'm interested in the horse she's riding."

"To buy?"

"Maybe . . . and I've seen Harry Lane give a couple of pretty sharp glances at it. I've an idea he's interested too."

Hounds and riders bunched and jostled as they came from the expanse of the green into the village street and trotted towards Long Spinney. Behind them churned bicycles, jeeps, landrovers, cars, pedestrians and even a few young mothers pushing their prams, caught up more by accident in the course of their morning's shopping than any desire to go foot following the Ambridge Hunt. Harry Lane was exchanging

pleasantries with a local farmer, smartly turned out in his black jacket and cap.

"You think we won't find in Long Spinney, George? All right, we'll see. Anyhow, it don't matter. I can take Reggie Trentham where we will. I'll guarantee there's a couple o' foxes in the cover near my sugar beet."

Paul and Chris exchanged glances.

"Lucky farmer who can afford to encourage foxes for the hunt's benefit," Paul said out of the corner of his mouth.

Christine shrugged her shoulders.

"What d'you expect. . . .?"

She heard a motor-cycle approaching up the road, humming like an angry hornet above the sound of hooves and chatter. She could not see it because of the corner ahead, but eased Midnight cautiously into the grass verge.

The machine, ridden by a youth with long dun-coloured strands of hair streaming out behind him in the wind, swept round the bend with its footrest almost scraping the road. Luckily for the youth with his soiled leather jerkin and streaming hair, Reggie and the whip had the hounds well into the verge. Christine had a fleeting impression of a startled white face as the motor-cyclist swept by, then the machine bucked the bridge over the stream, zig-zagged crazily among the first few followers behind the pack, turned into the side road leading to Hollerton and tore away, exhaust roaring.

"Damn fool," snapped Paul.

Barbara Lane's mount reared up, forelegs threshing, and swung round looming over a woman with her pram. Barbara yanked at its head and it came down within inches of the frightened mother, snorted, pranced and reared again.

People and horses blocked Christine's view. Barbara seemed to disappear and the next thing she saw was the startled horse plunging back riderless on to the road.

"She's off, Paul!"

Almost in the same second Paul spurred forward, made a lucky grab and held on, teeth grinding, to the loose rein of Barbara's mount. It was hard mouthed and he had to use unusual force to get it under control one-handed.

"Well done, Paul!" Christine rode over and nudged Midnight in so that between them they had the frightened animal sandwiched. Nevertheless she had time to notice Jimmy Bryant racing along the roadside to find Barbara, his face white with anxiety.

At the same moment, Harry Lane rode up, his eyes angry.

"That's no way to hold a horse," he snapped at Paul. "D'you want to ruin it's mouth?"

"Okay. Take the damn thing."

Paul Johnson's eyes bored into Lane's, icily disdainful. He tossed the reins across to Harry and watched with a tight, bitter smile at the trouble he had to control the horse. "Nothing could ruin it, Harry. It's already ruined—as the mug you sell it to will find out soon enough."

Harry Lane's head came round sharply. His mouth was ugly.

"You trying to teach me my business?"

"Your business, Lane, is something I don't know anything about—and wouldn't want to."

Christine turned and followed Paul away, her cheeks a fiery pink. Barbara, cool as ever, was coming back to collect her horse, attended by a perturbed Jimmy, and Christine managed to smile and call out "All right?" as she passed.

"Yes, thanks," Barbara called over to her. "And thanks for stopping Mandrake, Paul."

Paul waved an 'it's nothing' hand to her and forged on ahead of Christine. His jaw was set and his mouth a thin line, and again she wondered what smouldering hate for Harry Lane gnawed away at him. Looking back, she saw Barbara remounting and Jimmy Bryant reaching up to press her hand to reassure himself that she was all right. Barbara gave a quick accepting nod and Jimmy laughed, not at Barbara, but at some comment Harry Lane made. Jimmy threw a remark back at him and brought a gust of laughter from Harry.

"There were people who said Harry would throw Jimmy out on his ear if he showed any interest in Barbara," Christine said, her voice still rather edgy because she did not understand Paul's attitude. "They seem to be getting on all right."

"Lane accepts Jimmy Bryant," was the young man's laconic reply. "He has to."

Ambridge agreed it was the finest opening meet there

had been for many years. Two kills and three fine long runs—the last not ending until the hounds had lost the fox, the Master had lost the hounds, the field had lost the Master, and Jeremy Davidson lost his new National Health top set when he took a spill in Belston Brook. Neither Christine nor Paul enjoyed it, but it would have been difficult if not impossible for either to have explained why.

That evening the bar of the Bull was nearly empty. Whether it was that most of the regulars had exhausted themselves following the hunt, or that there was a popular programme on the television, trade was so slack in contrast to the morning rush that Mrs. Perkins—helping out with the faintly sniffy air of disapproval she reserved for all pubs—was able to sit behind the bar doing her knitting while Peggy darned some of the children's socks.

Jack, the other side of the bar, was chatting idly to his father, Walter Gabriel and Simon Cooper.

"Never saw anything like it this morning, Dad," Jack said. "You should have been down here."

"Ay. No time though." Dan stuffed the bowl of his pipe to his satisfaction and offered his pouch to Walter.

"No, ta, Dan," Walter croaked. "Can't afford it."

"Eh? First time I've heard you say you can't afford to smoke my baccy," Dan laughed.

"He's giving it up," Mrs. Perkins informed them from over the bar. "I've told him he's got to—or stop grumbling about the cost of things."

"The day Walter stops grumblin' the world'll stop turnin'." Simon fished his darts from his breast pocket, straightened the flights and rubbed the points up on the stone of the hearth. "I'll take you on, Walter—unless Gaffer and Jack'ud like to make a four?"

Dan shook his head. "Not stopping," he said. "Got to go and get on with me booking. If I don't get at it when I'm in the mood I let it slide for weeks. Blessed stuff soon piles up. Shouldn't be surprised if I have to get meself a secretary before long."

The bar door swung open and a chilly draught swept across the room. Harry Lane, his cheeks flushed, strode in followed by the two men that Dan and Walter had seen with him a few weeks ago at Borchester Horse Show. Harry greeted them briefly while the two men moved over to the far end of the bar.

"Barbara all right, Harry?" asked Dan. "Hear she took a toss this morning."

"It was nothing. Some young fool on a motor-bike who should've known better." Harry signalled an acknowledgment for the drink one of the men ordered him. "Didn't upset her though."

"Not got 'er with yer tonight?" Walter said, a wicked gleam in his eye. "Breakin' the rule of a lifetime, eh?"

Dan tried to smother his smile and look grave.

"Losing her, that's what you're doing, Harry," he said. "That young feller—what's his name—Jimmy Bryant—he's taking her mind off horses. Have to watch out, you know."

"Oh, yes?" For a fleeting moment Harry's expression was serious, but he shrugged it off, withdrew a hand from his fob pocket and made a flamboyant gesture. "Nothing'll take her mind off the horse I'm getting her tomorrow. Saw it this morning and there'll be nothing—or no one—to stop my lass going to the top with it. I know her. I know what she can do . . . and with this horse . . . I know what I'm doing."

The farmer's assurance was so marked that neither Dan nor Walter felt they could legitimately carry on with their leg-pulling. Simon shaped up to the dart-board, squinted fiercely along his dart, and placed it within a quarter inch of the bull. Muttering something about jammy flukes, Walter placed a dart right alongside it. By the time Dan and Jack were called in to settle the argument as to who was nearer the bull, Harry was deep in hushed conversation with the men who came in with him. So wrapped up was he that he did not pass his usual flirtatious remarks to Peggy. Ten minutes later the trio drank up and were gone.

"I wonder what those two sharks are unloading on Harry now?" Jack said. "Something more for Barbara to break her heart over, I'll bet."

"Reckon that Harry Lane's what the copers round 'ere 'ave been prayin' for," Walter observed. "Do better out of 'im than you an' me does on the three draws."

"Beats me 'ow 'e finds time for 'osses an' farmin'," Simon said.

"Beats me what he does for money," was Jack's com-

ment. "He always seems to have some, but where does it come from?"

"Out of other people's pockets." Dan set his empty mug on the bar and made for the door. "And by that I mean keeping out of their pockets what he owes 'em. If he buys young Barbara the sort of horse she ought to have it's going to be a long time before the people he owes see the colour of their money again. . . . Good-night all."

The cutting frost in the air made Dan turn up his collar and he walked briskly over to his car. The dark shapes of the houses silhouetted against the night sky brooded serenely and unchanging . . . unchanging Ambridge, where families grew up, met their fortunes and troubles, passed on and made way for new generations. Nothing very momentous ever happened under those old roofs, nothing the world would remember for more than a day or so, yet all the time in those unchanging shapes, people were planning, hoping, laughing or . . . or making fools of themselves like Harry Lane in some pub, listening to the persuasive talk of sharp horse dealers, dreaming of watching the riding star he seemed determined to nurture make her bow at Harringay. . . .

Driving slowly along the narrow road to Brookfield his thoughts rambled on to Madge and what Doris had said about her apparent unhappiness.

What bug was it got into a man and made him throw aside everything that was once important to him? Wife,



land . . . and, if he wasn't careful soon, friends? Dan was irritated that he could not wholly condemn Harry Lane. He'd been a real hardworking, sensible farmer up to a few years ago. He liked the man, even though he thought he was becoming a fool, even though he was owed money by him and the possibility of getting it back in cash looked every day more remote.

An owl swooped across the road in front of his bonnet. For a moment he thought he was going to hit it, but with a beat of its short, powerful wings it soared up and was lost in the dark branches of a tree overhanging the road.

Maybe Harry was like that, attracted by the bright lights that were beginning more and more to surround his daughter, courting disaster and yet maybe knowing what he was doing and getting something out of life that was important to him. And who was Dan to criticise?

"If only he's got enough sense not to let his farm go down," he muttered aloud. "You can't find excuses for that."

He eased the car round a long bend by the willow beds, cutting the corner on the right side, and cursed as he had to pull the car sharply back into the middle of the road. His lights glinted on the reflectors and windscreen of a small car parked half on the grass verge.

"Damnfool place to park!" he ejaculated and glared fiercely at the two white, startled faces lit by his headlights shining through the windscreen of the other car. His irritation gave place to surprise as he recognised

them. Then he was past and they were enveloped in darkness again.

"Well, I'm blessed . . .!" he chuckled. "So that's where Barbara was, after all—with young Bryant. And we thought we were pulling Harry's leg!"

His mind went back to the Barbara of a year or two ago. Then there seemed to be only two places for her—alive, sparkling, keen, in the saddle in the show ring, or pale, listless, tired and mute standing in pub passages. He supposed they'd seen her other places too—must have done—but it was strange how that picture of her stayed in his mind. Barby, almost asleep on her feet, shoved in some odd corner of a pub ante-room or passage, waiting for Harry to finish his convivialities at some port of call on the way back from a show . . . hours after the girl had ridden, rubbed down and boxed the horses and developed a healthy tiredness from a day in the saddle. Sometimes they'd said 'it isn't good enough' . . . but no one had ever done anything about it.

Now things were different. Barbara was growing up, developing a mind of her own and learning to look after herself. And good luck to her. If that young fellow could make her happy . . .

He ran the car into the garage and flung a couple of sacks over the bonnet against the frost. The kitchen door opened when he was half-way across the yard.

"That you, Dan?"

"Ay, love."

"Tom was on the phone a few minutes ago," Doris

said. "He's had a go at those partridges you told him about and he's going to drop a couple in—just to say thank you, he said."

"Good."

Dan settled himself in the smooth, worn, wooden armchair by the blazing fire and started to take off his boots. He was smiling.

"You look very cheerful," his wife said. "How many did you have at the Bull?"

"A couple, that's all." He eased one of his boots over his heel. "Harry Lane was in, without Barbara. She's got her head on young Bryant's shoulder in his car down by the willows!"

"No!"

"Ay. And I've made up my mind about something. I'm going to see Harry and tell him it's time he settled up with me. If things are going the way I think they are, I'd better move quick. I don't like it, but . . . I think I'd better."

He dropped his boot on the floor by the fender and reached for his slippers.

"P'raps you had," Doris said thoughtfully. "But be careful how you go about it, Dan. Madge is worried enough as it is. I saw her again today. She looked dreadful."

## FIVE

STOOPED, GNARLED, ANCIENT, Mattie Troach reminded Christine of the illustrations she had in a well-remembered book as a child. In the dim interior of the smithy, with Mattie stooped over his anvil or his fire, it was easy to imagine him as one of the goblins terrifyingly depicted in her volume of Scandinavian legends—those misshapen, hunched little men with large hammers who forged chains and drove her head under the bedclothes at night when, as an eight or nine year old, she chose to think about them. She remembered, too—irrelevantly—a picture of a large black eagle in flight clutching in its talons a flaxen-haired girl in a blue dress who was herself clutching a golden casket. Christine couldn't remember why.

Usually she was less fanciful and took pleasure in watching the craftsman at work, admiring his deft mastery of the glowing iron, the practised eye that allowed him to work to fine limits, the tools that use and custom fitted into his hand as naturally as though he'd been born with them.

"I envy you your job today, Mattie," Christine held her hands out to the forge. "It's bitter outside."

"Ay, cosy enough here though. Remember how you and Master Phil used to come down when you was kids to roast pig potatoes in the ashes?"

"Do I?" Christine reached for the worn handle of the bellows and pulled it down, sending a gentle draught

into the heart of the glowing fire. "And I remember getting a spark in my eye too."

"Your mother didn't let you come in for a week or two after that." Mattie plunged the finished horse-shoe into a trough of black water. A noisy hiss of bubbles and steam rose up, spread and vanished in the hot air near the roof. "But she couldn't keep you away for long."

The bellows roared again under Mattie's hand, spreading the comforting warmth of the forge fire. Christine thought of Simon and Len Thomas, bent double out in her father's fields, pulling and topping mangolds. She knew from experience that in bitter weather like this, after pulling the first half dozen, fingers and hands went numb and, no matter how one dressed, somehow the wind always found those sensitive parts in the small of the back. Simon and Len would be grateful for some of the warmth she was getting now.

The blacksmith drew the red-hot metal from the forge and put it back on the anvil. Ringing blows filled the smithy with familiar music and Midnight, waiting by the half-door, chewed on her bit and tranquilly watched the shaping of her new shoe.

"Had young Barbara Lane down here t'other day." Mattie lifted Midnight's leg and applied the shoe, viewing it to satisfy himself that it would sit true on hoof and ground. "Don't often come 'erself, she don't."

"What horse did she bring in? The rudge that threw her?"

“Ay. Seems her Dad’s found a customer for it.” The flatness of his tone implied that he was not prepared to pass any opinion on the deal. “Might have been a nasty accident when that motor-bike came by. Anybody but her might’ve taken a bad toss, but young Barby knows how to manage a ’oss.”

She has to, Christine thought, with her father bringing home for her to school wrong uns that Christine and Paul wouldn’t give stable room to.

Thought of Paul made her look at her watch. She had arranged to meet him at Brookfield at eleven—in twenty minutes time. With a tinge of regret she realised she could ill afford the time to gossip with Mattie. As convincingly as she could she made her excuses to buy a few things she didn’t really want and left him to get on with the job. By the time she returned from the post office Midnight was ready.

She rode back by the road, pressing Midnight along although she was not yet accustomed to her new shoes. Paul would be waiting. They were due at somewhere—she didn’t know where—at a quarter to twelve. Paul hadn’t been very explicit on the phone, but she sensed a ‘must’ in his voice. The church clock, its doleful bell carrying on the frosty air, was striking the hour when she reached the gate to the yard at Brookfield, and Paul was walking out to meet her, urging her to get a move on.

“All right, all right.” Christine led Midnight towards the stables. “What’s the rush?”

“I said be ready at eleven,” Paul harped on. “The horse-box was here five minutes ago.”

"I was here at eleven. You heard the clock yourself. Anyway, where are we going in such a hurry?"

Paul helped her to unharness Midnight and propelled her across the yard. "We're going to see a horse—and p'raps even buy it."

She was bundled hastily into the car and her head jerked back as Paul got away in a hurry, the gravel churning up from his rear wheels.

"Where are we going, Paul?"

"Lady Burrisdén's."

"Ah . . . social, eh?"

"Business."

"But . . . d'you need me?" Christine lurched against Paul's shoulder as he sped round a bend. "And if you go like this you'll have the horse-box over before we reach Henwood Hall." The car slowed down. "That's better. I don't want to die yet—even if it's for Lady Burrisdén."

"You remember yesterday I told you to keep an eye on that horse she was riding at the opening meet?" Paul said.

"I do. And I did."

"Like it?"

"Seemed all right to me. I saw it take three or four fences beautifully."

"Just what I thought." Paul glanced at his watch. The road stretched straight ahead of them and the speedometer needle crept up again.

Christine looked puzzled.

"But—you're not thinking of buying it, are you, Paul?"

The young man nodded.

"But why? D'you need it?"

He shrugged.

"I don't get it," Christine said. "All this mystery. Racing like mad to keep an appointment we're going to be early for anyhow, and all to buy a horse we don't want. I don't get it."

Because Paul didn't enlighten her further, she lapsed into silence, trying to calculate how much it would cost to get the stables she and Grace once owned going again, and developed along the lines Paul seemed to want. She concluded there was a deuce of a lot she still had to learn.

Some minutes later Paul pulled up in the drive of Henwood Hall, a large red-brick Georgian house surrounded by rhododendrons that, when they were in flower, attracted many visitors at sixpence a head and swelled the coffers of the British Legion, Boy Scouts, Choral Society, or whatever local organisation happened to be in favour with the lady of the Hall at the time.

"I'm not coming in," Christine said.

"Why not?"

Christine gave a smile full of malice.

"You'll do much better on your own . . . get a lower price. I'd only detract from your charm."

For a moment Paul took her seriously, then laughed.

"Okay. Have it your own way."

Christine watched his lithe figure stride across the gravel drive and spring easily up the steps to the front



door. In a couple of minutes he was inside and Christine settled down for a long wait. She was surprised to see Paul coming round the side of the house after a little while, with a groom leading the horse Lady Burrissen had ridden at the opening meet of the Ambridge Hunt. She clambered out of the car and lowered the ramp of the horse-box.

"Deal's done," Paul said briefly. "He's mine."

The horse was coaxed in, the box closed, the groom sent away satisfied with his two half-crowns and they were moving slowly down the drive towards the main gate.

"Why didn't Lady Burrissen come out?" Christine asked. "High hat?"

"Not a bit of it. She's charming—and you know it. Matter of fact I never saw her. She's indisposed. Touch of flu, I believe. But I'd done most of the talking on the phone this morning. It was just a question of agreeing to her price and handing over the cheque."

"And how much did you pay for the horse?"

"Two-fifty."

"Two hundred and fifty guineas?" Christine gave a low whistle of astonishment and came up stiff-backed at Paul's casual nod. "Are you mad, Paul?"

"Maybe."

"But what d'you want the brute for?"

"Good jumpers are always a worthwhile buy." Paul swung the car wide in the drive to get a clear run round the curve that led to the main gates. A muttered exclamation of annoyance broke from his lips as

he stamped on his brakes and swerved to his near side again.

Another vehicle—a shabby blue Austin truck cheaply converted into a horse-box—was approaching from the road. At the wheel was Harry Lane. Paul recovered, grinned and waved affably to him.

“Hello there, Harry ”

Harry got out of his truck and came over to the driving window of Paul’s car, his eyes suspicious and his gaze straying to the horse-box behind the car.

“What are you doing here, Harry?” Paul’s tone was taunting.

“What are you?”

“Buying horses. Just been in to see her ladyship and complete the deal over Jellicoe. Got her in the box now.”

“You bought her?” Anger and disbelief came into Harry Lane’s eyes.

“Just done the deal, I tell you.”

“But——” Lane’s face flushed and his hands gripped the window-frame of Paul’s car. “You knew I wanted that horse—and you knew why.”

“Too bad, old man. Early birds, you know.”

“You knew I wanted that horse.” Harry’s hands trembled under the grip he exerted on the car door.

“No reason why you shouldn’t have him either.” Paul looked at him sardonically, his head on one side. “You can have him for three-fifty.”

Christine gasped, but it was obvious for that moment, as far as the two men were concerned, she did not

exist. Uncertainty hovered over Harry Lane. His eyes—greedy, not disappointed—looked from the horse-box to Paul and back to the box again.

“Three hundred and fifty smackers and the horse is yours, Harry,” Paul said quietly. “Beautiful horse. Superb jumper.”

A harsh growl of disgust rattled in the stocky, fair-haired man’s throat. He turned on his heel and got back into his truck, slamming the door. His gears grated and Christine could see his mouth framing curses as he tried to find reverse. Then the lever went home and the car lurched back. There was another grinding of cogs and the ramshackle vehicle nosed round on to the road, heading for Ambridge and leaving a thick cloud of blue oily smoke on the air.

For a moment Paul Johnson sat laughing silently, his gloved hands beating a triumphant tattoo on the steering wheel.

“Why did you do that, Paul?” Christine asked, eyes narrowed.

“What?”

“You know what I mean. Why did you buy that horse? You knew Harry Lane was after it, didn’t you?”

“And if I did?” Paul turned and regarded her coolly. Christine gave an irritated toss of her head.

“I didn’t expect that sort of behaviour from you,” she said. “It’s cheap. Childish.”

Paul Johnson groaned.

“Oh, lor’ . . . a moral lecture now I suppose.” He

set the car in motion and turned on to the Ambridge road. "All right, let's have it."

But Christine held her peace until they were in the main street of the village.

"You can put me down now," she said. "I'll walk from here."

"But, Christine——"

"I'll walk from here, thank you." Her hand went for the door-handle but Paul stretched across in front of her and held it.

"Christine, don't be an ass!"

"I don't like the way you behaved to Harry. If you can give me a good explanation, then maybe I'll think differently. But as it is . . . Paul—why did you do it?"

Paul stared ahead of him through the windscreen and said nothing.

"Did you do it deliberately to put one over on him? Did you? Because you're very shortsighted if you think you're hurting him. You're not. It's Barbara who's going to suffer. Harry wanted that horse for her. I know that. Mum said that he was looking for a good mount for her. And you heard he was after Jellicoe." Christine shook her head sadly. "I thought you were more intelligent than that, Paul."

She waited for a moment for him to defend himself, but, eyes averted, jaw set, he maintained an obstinate silence. She brushed his arm aside and got out of the car.

"I suppose it wasn't to hurt Barbara, was it?"

Jealously she slammed the door, without waiting for

his reply. She paused a moment but Paul did not move to restrain her, so she walked slowly away. She heard the car start up and the swish of tyres as it drove off. She wanted to turn and see if Paul looked back, but fought against it and, stifling a sob, stepped out unhappily in the direction of Brookfield.

## SIX

AFTERNOON MILKING WAS FINISHED AT BROOKFIELD. The lids were on the churns, the cooler cleaned and the rest of the tackle washed down ready to go in the steriliser. Dan took a last look round the dairy and turned off the taps. Outside in the yard he could hear the rhythmic scrape of Simon's fork clearing up the sour-smelling cow-dung and dumping it on the heap in the corner. The clank of buckets and squalling of pigs further off told him that Len Thomas was already feeding them.

"See to the steriliser when you've done that, Simon. I'll do the poultry."

"Righto, Gaffer."

Precious little daylight this time of year to do all the jobs there were to do, Dan reflected, as he moved round the hen battery house collecting the eggs and replenishing the troughs. He paused before a cage, scratching the back of his head thoughtfully and considered the bird inside. *No blessed eggs again, You're not earning your keep, my lady. I can see you ending up on somebody's dinner table this Christmas.*

When he got back into the barn with his feeding buckets he set them down carefully, filled his pipe and stood contemplating his corn bins for a long time. For days part of his mind had been occupied with how he could best get about persuading Harry Lane to part with the money he owed him. Often—as now—he found

himself pausing to think about it. But today there was a difference. He was beginning to get an idea. If Harry had threshed out his barley . . .

Footsteps behind him made him turn. Len Thomas, tall, dark, still looking a little on the thin side despite the heavy leather jerkin he wore, let his buckets fall with a clatter and beat himself with his arms.

"Cold, Len?"

"Haven't warmed up from being on the tractor, Mr. Archer. Wind's cutting."

"How much did you get done?"

"Managed to get opened up on Five Acre. Slow work, though. Ground's heavy for the plough." The young Welshman glanced round, picked up a bucket and moved over to the bins. "Done the turkeys yet?"

"No. Matter of fact I haven't."

"Okay." Len's bucket scooped into the bin, then he straightened and looked around for a few moments, chewing his lower lip in thought. "Have to be getting some more barley thrashed out, shan't we?"

"We'll have to get some from somewhere, Len, lad." A slow smile broke over Dan's face. "And I think I know where."

Next day he drove to Harry Lane's farm. Harry was in the stableyard, mucking out his ramshackle old loose-box. He greeted Dan enthusiastically, his face glowing with cold and cheerfulness.

"How are you, Dan boy?"

"You look pleased with yourself, Harry." Dan

wondered whether Harry's cheerfulness was real or feigned. He looked convincing enough. "Come into a fortune?"

Harry gave a snort of laughter and propped his fork against the side of the horse-box.

"A fortune? Me? Those sort of things don't happen around here. But I've had a bit of luck. A real bit of luck, and I tell you, Dan, I don't understand it."

"No?" Maybe I'm in luck too, Dan thought. P'raps my instinct has sent me over here at the right time. "What's happened?"

Harry took Dan affably by the arm and led him by the stables to the fence bounding a field of sugar beet. He pointed across the long spread of frost-rimmed leaves to the next field. In the distance Dan saw a horse, a light chestnut with a powerful but easy style, being ridden by Barbara.

"Know what horse that is, Dan?"

"Can't say I do . . . not from this distance," Dan said. "Looks all right, though."

"I'll say it's all right. And it's extraordinary too."

"Not bought it, have you?" Dan pursed his lips at Harry's nod. His instinct hadn't worked soon enough.

"That horse, Dan, belonged to Lady Burrisdén. Remember it? Rode it last season herself. Took it out for the opening meet at Ambridge and now—it's mine!"

"What's so extraordinary about that?" Dan asked. "D'you mean she gave it to you?"

"Gave it to me!" Harry bent nearly double and



slapped his thighs with amusement. "That wouldn't have been extraordinary. That'd've bin a ruddy miracle. No, Dan, that horse was bought from her by Paul Johnson."

Dan looked puzzled. He remembered something about Doris saying Chris had quarrelled with Paul over paying two hundred and fifty guineas for the horse. He hadn't listened very attentively at the time, but now . . .

"I bought it from Paul this morning," Harry ran his thick, capable hands through his fair hair and watched Barbara head the chestnut across the field back towards the farmhouse. "He came over and offered it to me at two hundred and fifty guineas . . . which I know was the price he paid for it."

Dan's eyebrows arched in surprise. He seemed to remember what upset Christine was Paul telling Harry he could have it for three-fifty. He grunted. Never could understand how the minds of these horsey blokes worked.

"You know, I always thought young Johnson didn't like me," Harry said. "Just shows you never can tell."

"I suppose the horse is all right?" Dan asked doubtfully.

Harry's tone held the ring of conviction.

"I know that horse, Dan. I've watched it. I know it's history from the day it was foaled. There's nothing wrong with that horse at all. That's why it's extraordinary that Paul Johnson sold it without making a penny profit—unless he paid less than two-fifty for it in

the first place, and I had it from the groom over at Henwood Hall that two-fifty was the price. What d'you make of it?"

"Dunno, I'm sure," Dan said, pulling at his chin and looking gloomy. "You think it's worth all that money?"

"With that horse, Dan, Barbara'll go to the top." Again the conviction was in Harry Lane's voice. "No more of your small stuff this next season. We're going for the big shows, Dan—the place where the real money is. And if Barby doesn't pull enough with that horse to qualify it for Harringay before the season's half over, I'll eat my hat. I've got it all planned, Dan. I know what I'm doing. She's going into the class shows . . . not a fault anywhere . . . rigged out like a queen . . . like she'll need to be. . . ."

"Like she deserves, maybe," Dan could not resist putting in.

"You're right. Like she deserves." Harry echoed Dan's words without feeling, his thoughts away in the future. "Got a new horse-box coming along too. Bought a truck that Walter Gabriel's going to fit out with a new body. Everything's going to be smack on this season, Dan."

"A new horse-box, eh? What's wrong with the old un?"

"Look at it, man, look at it."

Dan's gaze brooded on the ramshackle truck standing in the yard. He had to admit Barbara deserved better than that. The trouble was the girl was good—probably good enough, given the right horses, to climb

to the heights Harry dreamed of. But it took money—more than Harry had got, Dan was prepared to swear, and more than he'd ever have if he allowed his farm to go down much further. Harry used to be such a damn good worker, too. Funny how it got you when you were bitten by the horse bug.

"How's the work, Harry?" Dan turned and began walking back to the stables without looking at the man. "About time those mangolds were out and clamped, isn't it?"

"I'll get around to it. There's a lot to do."

"By golly, ay. Ploughing—carting the muck out—I'm all behind meself. Trying to get a bit of wheat in but I dunno that it'll get going in this blessed weather."

They talked generally for a couple of minutes longer until Dan was given the opening he needed. He faced Harry directly.

"S'pose you haven't got a bit of barley for feed you could lend me, Harry?"

"Barley!"

"I'd like to borrow a bit. A couple of ton would do."

Dan saw it had gone home. Harry kept smiling but a new, defensive hardness came into his eyes and the lines of his face. He was perfectly aware what Dan meant in this context by 'lend' and 'borrow'.

"I—er—haven't had it threshed out yet, Dan. One of the jobs we didn't get time for." Harry's gaze dropped and he became preoccupied with the toe of his

boot tracing a pattern on the ground. "I'd have liked to help you out if I could. I owe you a bit of cash, y'see."

"That's right," Dan said.

Harry was silent and Dan did nothing to help him out of the embarrassment he was plainly showing.

"Tell you what, Dan," the younger man said after a while. "I've got a horse in the stables—only picked it up last week. I've great hopes for it. Barbara's been working on it and she says it's got plenty there. She——"

Dan shook his head.

"Sorry, Harry," he said. "I don't want a horse."

"This one's good, Dan. Come and have a look at it."

Dan felt irritation rising in him.

"I don't want a damn horse, Harry," he said brusquely. "I'd take some barley off you if you'd got it threshed." He put a match to his pipe, got it going again, then said, almost casually, "In lieu of that the cash'll do."

The cards were on the table now and Harry looked flustered. For a moment Dan was sorry for him, but then he heard a faint whinny from the stable and thought of the two hundred and fifty guineas Harry had paid out that morning to Paul Johnson.

A clatter of machinery from the far end of the yard made both men turn. Jacob, Harry's chief farm hand, was bringing a muckspreader out from the shed and heading it for the main gate. Dan remembered Harry buying the spreader last year and envying him at the time. The paint was still showing some of its original

fresh colour and he felt the same tinge of envy. At Brookfield with that machine . . .

As if Harry Lane were reading his thoughts, the offer came.

"You said you were behind with your muck, Dan. How about taking my spreader? That'd just about square us up, eh?"

"You mean it?" Dan asked incredulously. Harry nodded and he made a quick calculation. "Ay, that'd square it."

"Jacob! Here a minute." Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Harry Lane was calling across the yard. "Mr. Archer's having that muck-spreader. I've sold it to him. I want you to take it down to Brookfield. Today suit you, Dan?"

Dan nodded. He was watching Jacob closely. The hand said nothing and for a moment, Dan thought he could not have heard. Then the workman nodded curtly and turned to go back to the tractor. As he went Dan caught the words he mumbled half under his breath—something to the effect that it was bad enough to have a master who did no work on his farm without losing machines. Only Jacob expressed it more colourfully and concisely.

"You going to be able to manage without it, Harry?" Dan watched Jacob manœuvring the spreader into a corner of the yard out of the way.

"Course I'll manage. Did without it all right before I got it, didn't I?"

Maybe you put your hands to a fork yourself then,

thought Dan. Jacob's expression and sullen departure had disturbed him. He realised the unhappy atmosphere Doris spoke about after her talk with Madge was spreading further than the farmhouse itself.

From the track alongside the mangold field Barbara called her father. Dan did not quite catch what she said, but Harry, interest immediately aroused, started off in her direction.

"Squares us up, eh, Dan?" he tossed over his shoulder.

"Yes." A momentary doubt clouded Dan's mind and he called after the retreating figure. "Harry, by the way—I suppose everything's straight about that spreader?"

"Sure, sure." By this time Harry was vaulting over the fence and striding to join Barbara. "Everything's in order."

When Dan left the yard he feigned a sudden interest in the guttering on the Lane farmhouse to avoid meeting Jacob's eye and in consequence nearly bumped into Madge Lane who was standing near his car, hat on and shopping-basket on her arm.

"Good lor', Madge. Didn't see you! Sorry!"

Madge gave him a faint smile, pleasure at seeing Dan lighting up her weary face.

"Are you going back to Brookfield, Dan?"

"Give you a lift, eh? Of course. Where are you going? Ambridge?"

She nodded slowly. Her husband was leading the new hunter in through the yard gate with Barbara still mounted, and she half raised her hand in a farewell wave

to them, but both were too absorbed in the horse to notice.

Not wanting to be asked why he'd seen Harry, Dan kept to general topics as they drove towards the village—how he'd have to get Simon on the hedging before the frost made the wood too brittle; an old recipe Doris had found for parsnip wine; what a blessing gum-boots were in muddy weather; the best treatment for chilblains; the gossip as to why Nellie Broadrigs was rushed off to hospital suddenly. But getting only monosyllabic answers, he soon lapsed into silence. Occasionally he gave a sideways glance at Madge, sitting round-shouldered, her hands listlessly clasping the handle of the shopping-basket on her knee. When she reached for a handkerchief from her pocket he saw those hands were trembling.

"Er . . . how's Harry been?" he asked suddenly, embarrassed by the silence.

She hesitated a moment before she spoke.

"He's all right."

Dan wondered if it was his imagination that heard a faint extra emphasis on her first word.

They were approaching the fork which, if he went right, would bring him into Ambridge by the shorter road, skirting Brookfield. He was slowing when Madge blew her nose. A tear ran down her cheek and she brushed it away quickly, but not soon enough for Dan to miss it.

He headed the car round to the left and continued along the road to Brookfield.

"I think you'd better forget Ambridge and come back and have a cup o' tea with Doris . . . don't you?" he said, and although Madge, still with her handkerchief to her face, shook her head violently, he insisted, "I think you better, you know. Can't go into the village looking . . . feeling like that."

"I'd like to have come before," Madge sniffed and hurriedly wiped her nose. "But I didn't feel it was fair to burden Doris with my troubles."

"You're always welcome, Madge. Always." Dan put his hand gently on hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Doris is very fond of you. We both are . . . and we're always ready to help, if we can."

Before the heaped-up kitchen fire, with a cup of tea and a slice of Doris's best currant cake, Madge relaxed and some of the colour came back into her pale cheeks. Tactfully, after the first few minutes, Dan withdrew into the front room to do some paper work and left the two women alone.

It was not long before Madge, responding to the sympathy of the older woman, gave voice to the anxieties besetting her, wearing her down and making her look old before her time.

"Harry spends so little time on the farm now. Things just don't get done, and Jacob and Vic Tubbs are getting fed up. Maybe Harry sees it, I don't know. But he shuts his eyes to it. I know they're discontented, though. I hear more than Harry thinks. And without the farm paying——"

"Isn't it?" asked Doris.



"I don't see how it can, do you? But I don't know for certain." Madge accepted some more tea from Doris. "Harry tells me nothing. He never told me much, but since he saw this future for Barbara in the show ring—since she, and the horses, have become so important—he's thought I've been trying to stop him doing what he wants and . . . there've been rows and now, well, he tells me nothing." She stared out of the window, her face clouded. "I'd hoped that when Barbara didn't get her qualifying money at the end of this season, Harry would give up the idea, but he's just plunging in deeper. You knew that?"

"I'd heard," said Doris.

"Then I thought maybe Jimmy Bryant would make Barbara more interested in . . . in other things than horses. He's a nice boy—the right sort for her."

"She's seeing quite a lot of him, isn't she?"

"She was."

"But nothing's gone wrong, has it? They haven't quarrelled or something?" Doris looked genuinely upset.

"No, nothing like that. Just that now Barbara's got this new horse—Jellicoe—she seems to have caught a new ambition from Harry. I heard her telling Jimmy on the phone this morning that she couldn't see him this week and didn't know when she'd be able to again . . . she was so busy."

Despair seemed to settle back on Madge and she sat staring into her lap. Doris got up from her chair and stood in front of the fire, looking down at her.

"I'm sorry about that, Madge, really sorry." She paused, then drawing a deep breath, she said, "Would it help, d'you think if I had a talk with Harry?"

The younger woman shook her head, not looking up.

"It's no use talking to him, Doris. His mind's all set."

"But couldn't you try, Madge? Couldn't you make him see reason, show him that . . . that he may be ruining everything—the lives of all of you? After all, you are his wife."

"Wife!" For the first time bitterness came into Madge's voice. "I'm married to him, yes. But *wife* . . .!"

Suddenly she buried her head in her hands and sobbed. Instinctively Doris's arms went round her slim body.

"What am I to do, Doris? What am I to do?"

Stroking back Madge's dark hair with her comforting, motherly hand, Doris realised that she felt utterly helpless. What could she do? What could anybody do when two people had grown so far apart?

## SEVEN

THE OVER-RICH AROMA OF SPICES, fruit and spirits hung heavy in the air in the kitchen of Brookfield Farm, heralding the approach of Christmas. Saucers, cups, dishes, screws of greaseproof paper, each of which had held some tasty ingredient, were scattered over the large deal table and the draining board. The large, flowered china basin Doris had thoughtfully salvaged four years ago from their last washstand before it was sent to the sales, stood on one end of the table full to the brim with the rich mixture of Christmas pudding.

Doris Archer's face was flushed and glowing. Even with two hands plying the wooden spoon, the work made her hot and breathless. She paused in her stirring, blinked to clear her eyes of the rum fumes rising from the mixture, reached for a blanched almond and popped it in her mouth. It was the one indulgence she allowed herself during this annual ceremony. She always prepared a few too many almonds so she could nibble at them while she was mixing the pudding.

A light knock sounded on the back door. She was beginning to recognise it now. Madge. She had called often since the day she broke down. Doris was pleased that Madge took some comfort from dropping in for a cup of tea but was annoyed with herself for feeling so powerless to do anything to help her. Madge had said little about how things were at home since that day, but

now, when Doris opened the door to her, she could see she was upset.

"Come in, dear," Doris wiped her hands on her apron and then used it to remove a few smears of pudding mixture from the door-handle. "Just in the middle of making my Christmas pud. You're in time to stir and have a wish."

"I've got plenty of wishes." Madge went to the window and stood looking out on the strip of garden with its empty beds and the fields beyond the low wall. "Plenty of wishes, but not the ones anybody takes any notice of."

"What is it, Madge?" Doris asked. "Trouble again?"

"He's so rude to me, Doris! I can't open my mouth without him going at me, telling me to mind my own business."

"P'raps Harry's worried about something," Doris ventured.

"He should be worried, but he isn't. That's where the trouble starts." Madge left the window and paced angrily up and down the kitchen. "If he worried a bit about the farm and made some money instead of trying to cut expenses there'd be some sense in it . . . some hope."

"Is it like that?"

"So much needs doing, Doris. The ceiling's going over the sink. There's a tile off the roof and the water comes in, dripping on my head while I'm washing up. There's new saucepans needed, but you can't buy saucepans with curses. But Barbara gets her new outfit,

the horse gets new tackle. I just get—nothing . . . nothing . . .”

“But surely he must see——”

“I never see him but at bedtime when he’s three part cut,” Madge interrupted her, the pent-up grievances she had kept to herself for so long flooding out of her. “I’ve even had to be deceitful and say nothing about the cash I get at the door for eggs and milk and so on. I’ve got to get a bit extra from somewhere. But Barbara gets her outfit . . .”

Doris put a comforting arm round the unhappy woman’s shoulders and led her to a chair by the table.

“Now, Madge, you mustn’t start feeling bitter against Barbara. It isn’t her doing.”

“I know, I know. That’s what I keep telling myself. But he’ll break us all up, Doris, going on as he is. He’ll take everything from me. God knows I see little enough of her, she’s out with him two or three days every week, hunting. Then in summer it’s the shows.” Madge got control of herself and appealed to Doris. “What would you do if you knew there’d soon be next to nothing for us to live on and your husband spent two hundred and fifty guineas on a new horse?”

“I’d be mad at him,” Doris said. “I expect you were too, but you’ve had time enough to get over that now.”

“Yes, but he’s bought another horse this morning—for Barbara.”

“Another?” Doris echoed with a gasp of astonished dismay. “Not at two hundred and fifty guineas?”

“No. Only eighty this time. Only eighty!” Madge

spread her hands helplessly. "I have to hear all about this from our hand, Jacob. Harry tells him, but not me. Jacob doesn't like what he's heard any more than I do. He's fed up with Harry leaving everything to him all the time and you can't blame him."

Doris did not know what to say. Absently she picked up the spoon, but the mixture was stiff and did not yield to her half-hearted pressure.

"It's . . . it's getting that lonely, Doris." As though conscious of the tremor in her voice Madge got up quickly and started buttoning her coat. She went on in a flat voice. "Barbara doesn't know how things are. Nothing happens in front of her to let her know Harry and me aren't happy."

I wonder, thought Doris.

"If only I felt I was of some use." The other woman pulled at her hat, picked up her bag and made ready to go. "I—I think I'll lose him."

The fixed look in her eyes made Doris think quickly. She couldn't let her go away from Brookfield in that frame of mind. If only Dan were here—he'd say something sensible, practical, but Dan was out shooting over at Fairbrother's.

Madge was practically at the door before Doris called her back.

"Madge . . . wait!" Doris held out the wooden spoon to her. "You haven't stirred the pudding. You haven't made your wish. Maybe luck'll come."

Madge hesitated and turned her drawn face to the light. The hunger of frustration and loneliness was in

every shadow, and the droop of hopelessness was in the line of her shoulders. Doris moved quickly across the kitchen and held on to Madge's arm.

"Don't go yet, dear, please. I want to talk to you. I think I know how you might make things come right . . ."

Walter Gabriel tucked a cold beef sandwich into the corner of his mouth and leant over to whisper to Dan.

"Tryin' to do it as good as the old Squire did, ain't he?"

Dan nodded, warming his hands round a mug of tea.

A knot of men—mostly Ambridge farmers—were grouped around the tailboard of Fairbrother's farm truck, where it had been pulled into a gateway off the road, helping themselves from the hamper of sandwiches, hay box of tea and crates of beer. Fairbrother himself moved freely among them, pressing them to eat and drink, before going into deep discussion with Tom Forrest as to how they were going to shoot for the rest of the afternoon. A dozen guns were neatly stacked along the side of the truck, and the bulging bags on the men's backs showed that they had had a good morning.

"Reckon he'll ask us along Boxing Day as well as today, Dan?" Walter asked.

"Be thankful for what invitations you get," Dan grinned. His gaze travelled around the group. "Funny the ideas some folks have about what to wear for shooting."

There were breeches and leggings, plus fours and

boots, trousers and gaiters, tweed jackets, wind-cheaters, leather jerkins and—in Harry Lane's case—a parka. Headgear was more conservative, mostly caps, although there was a trilby or two.

"Every chap to his taste," Walter said, raising a bottle of beer to his lips. "Chief thing is to have summat as'll keep the cold out and not make you sweat too much when you're walkin' up."

When they moved off again Tom took them round by Holland's Dip and stationed Dan, Walter and Harry Lane there.

"Goin' round by the stream, Dan," Tom explained. "Going to try and push them two big coveys of Frenchmen round into the roots."

While he waited by a clump of elders, Dan could not prevent his mind turning to Harry Lane, standing within thirty yards of him, idly flicking the safety catch of his gun back and forth with his thumb. It had been a good day and Dan was enjoying himself. He did not want to be distracted but could not prevent himself worrying about a man who seemed determined to slide into bankruptcy quicker than a partridge was up and over.

Two hundred and fifty on Jellicoe, eighty guineas on another horse, his muck-spreader handed over as if he had a dozen others he could call on—it didn't make sense.

Dan moved restlessly from one foot to the other, looked to see that Walter was on the alert, tucked his gun butt more firmly under his armpit and allowed his sidelong glance to stray back to Harry.



Perhaps he ought to have a talk to the chap. It was time somebody did. A word in his ear now without mincing matters too much might make all the difference. Not unfriendly—just straight. There'd be an opportunity while they were going round. He made up his mind to have a go at him while they were walking to their next stand.

“Hey up!” Walter grated in the same second that Tom Forrest's whistle came shrilly across the stream. There were three or four distant shots and a brace of partridge fell out from the covey, wings folded and lifeless. The others came on fast and low.

Left to right, Dan thought. It would be. Just the shot where his swing was never quite smooth.

The bird he selected fell to Walter's barrel and with a smothered “Blast!” he changed his aim and fired. The gun came through smoothly and, even in the split second before he anticipated the steep banking of the covey and took a high one going away fast with his choke, Dan had a chance to marvel at his performance. It was perfect co-ordination of hand and eye, smooth, unhurried, masterly—the sort of thing he had been trying to achieve for a lifetime, a text-book double that he had brought off once and would probably never do again this side of the grave.

The partridge went through the poplars and down into the roots and Dan, trying not to look pleased with himself, glanced over towards Harry. He was stamping and shaking his gun in disgust.

“Had the bloody thing on ‘safe’, Dan,” he shouted.

The second covey came nowhere near the three men when they were put up. When Tom's whistle called them in for the final shoot over the roots, Dan jockeyed for an opportunity to talk to Harry—now he was away from home and horses and beer. As they came together Walter was stumping through the ploughed field twenty yards ahead of them, but before Dan could speak Harry was calling after Walter.

"How's that horse-box of mine coming along, Walter?"

"Fair."

"What d'you mean fair?"

Walter stopped and waited for Harry and Dan to join him.

"Look, 'Arry, that there chassis you bought ain't bad, but then again, t'ain't good. Mind you, I ain't saying I can't fix a box on it that'll do you proud, but wi' the height it is and wi' the chassis members it's got, it's got to be a solider job than what I thought would first do. And that's goin' to mean more timber, more time and more cash."

"What horse-box is this, Harry?" Dan asked.

"New one I'm getting Walter to knock up. Picked up a chassis cheap. Just the job. That old 'un had everybody laughing at the better shows."

Dan let Harry and Walter, talking technical details about the horse-box, go ahead of him. He felt anger mounting. So the fool laid out money on a useless damfool thing like that.

The sport was fast and furious when they went

through the roots, but Dan's earlier enjoyment had gone, partly because he felt certain he could never repeat the miraculous double which was the high spot of his day. But far more distressing was the thought of a good chap going wrong.

Dan was tired, wet and hungry when he got back to Brookfield. A rich smell of cooked meat came from the stove where Doris was busy getting his tea, a smell as welcome and intriguing as was the scent that kept Lass, his Welsh Collie, snuffling at the bag on the hook in the passage that held a brace of partridge and a hare. Pulling up his soaking trouser ends, wet from the walk through the roots, Dan unlaced his muddy boots . . . but he still wasn't free from Harry Lane.

As Doris cooked she recounted the visit she had had from Madge earlier in the day. When at last she got to the point of asking him what he thought Madge should do about it all, he suddenly realised he had had enough of the Lanes for one day.

"Do about it?" he said roughly. "Let her do what she likes, I'd say. And the same goes for Harry too. Let 'em work things out for themselves. They can see how they're making their bed, so they know how it'll be when they lie in it."

Doris was puzzled for a moment, then realised that her husband was tired.

"P'raps that's what it'll come to, Dan," she said gently. "But it wasn't what I told Madge. I think there's a chance for them yet."

Dan muttered irritably as his fingers slipped in the

mud on the boot he was trying to ease off his foot.

"Madge and I had a really serious talk in the end and . . ." Doris paused for a moment, smiled knowingly to herself, then went on, "We women know a thing or two about men, you know."

If she was expecting her husband to rise to the tone of mystery she tried to get into her voice, she was disappointed. He was wrestling with a muddy knot in the lace of his other boot and gave no indication of having heard a word.

## EIGHT

THE DAYS LEADING UP TO CHRISTMAS in Ambridge were something of a ritual period in which a routine of social visits, carol singing, extra stocks in the Bull, decorations in the church and every home were intermingled with the last pressing needs of business in a pattern which was as familiar as the sepia picture of the 'Stag at Bay' hanging over Walter Gabriel's bed.

It was a period when the seasonal demands of business conspired to prevent people getting down to the more agreeable task of providing for their own enjoyment. Feathers flew and tickled the nostrils as the last of the turkeys, geese, ducks and humble cocks and hens were killed, plucked, dressed and despatched to the local shops. The bottles of home-made wine were pored over, tested, tasted and counted; the crates and barrels from the local were lined up beside them and calculations made as to how it would all last. There were last-minute scares for muscatels, chestnuts, sausage meat and crackers, and farmers with dairy herds scratched their heads and pondered which of their men they would ask to come in for milking over the holidays. Inevitably an arty-crafty type in long haircut, duffle coat and suède shoes would appear out of the blue and ask where he could buy a sucking pig. There were—as always—rumours that there was no proprietary Scotch

to be had, and you had to take the brewers' bulk stuff. The farmer's list of Christmas cards was exceeded only by the quarter's bills he had to pay. There were pigs up to bacon weight and problems of getting them to the factory before Christmas or feeding them unnecessarily over the holiday.

These matters were so regular that unconsciously they became routine. It was partly routine, therefore, that brought Christine Archer and Paul Johnson to Walter's house with a few branches of holly and mistletoe in the back of the car. No one was sure when the habit had started, but it was now an established and unquestioned right that the Archer children collected what traditional evergreens there were on the farm, distributed them to the Borchester shops and kept the proceeds. What they did not sell they gave to their friends. For as long as she could remember, Christine had shared the job with her brother Phil. This year was different. He was not there. Since they went around last year, laughing, joking, bantering, he had been through bachelordom, marriage and widowerhood. It was natural that Christine's thoughts should turn to Walter, himself a widower, with a courting son in the regular Air Force who showed little or no inclination to come home.

They found Walter showing off to Barbara Lane, the horse-box he had been working on in his spare time, prior to handing it over to her on behalf of her father. Christine was honest enough to admit to herself how pretty the other girl looked, and human enough to feel

jealous and guarded, not wanting to share Paul with anybody.

"'Eere y'are, me old beauties," Walter called. "Come'n take a look at some real craftsmanship. Bit of all right, eh?"

"Not bad at all, Walter," Paul agreed.

"What do you think about it, Barbara?" Christine noticed the slim girl looked particularly attractive in her well-cut riding jacket and jodhpurs with a white scarf loosely knotted round her slender neck. "D'you think it's good enough for Jellicoe?"

There was something in Christine's inflection that made the girl's cheeks turn pink, and Paul Johnson shot an amused glance at her.

"How's Jellicoe shaping, by the way?" he asked.

"Fine. I couldn't ask for a better horse," Barbara said, and added tartly, "That's why Daddy thinks he should have a horse-box worthy of him. He deserves it."

The exchange of smiles between Paul and Barbara made Christine turn abruptly to Walter.

"We've brought you some holly and mistletoe, Walter," she said. "It's a present."

"Why, bless you, gel! That were a proper Christmas thought."

Christine ducked into the car, annoyed with herself for betraying her fears in her tone to Barbara. But why did Paul let Harry have Jellicoe at the price he paid? He had never explained except to say he did it to please Christine. More likely he did it to please Barbara. . . .

The spine of a holly leaf pricked her finger and she yelped. She allowed Walter to help her and stood watching Paul and Barbara talking and laughing over by the horse-box. Seeing them together she realised suddenly that Paul was more handsome than she had considered him before and there was something in the way that his tall clean-built figure leant intimately towards Barbara that caused a flutter in her heart.

"This calls for a drink!" Walter's lined, stubbly face appeared over an armful of holly. "Come on inside. I got summat there to warm us up."

The old rascal kicked his back door open and led the way into his kitchen.

"Drop o' sloe gin, me beauties! 'Ow'd that go down, eh?"

"Nothing better," Paul said. "Eh, Barbara?"

"I don't think I've ever had it," the girl said. "Is it very strong?"

"My sloe-gin wouldn't hurt a babby." Walter threw the holly and mistletoe down in a corner and took a bottle from a cupboard in the sideboard. "Made it meself, so I should know."

He poured liberal shots of the rich, claret-coloured liquid into each glass and when each of them had taken one, raised his own in a toast.

"'Ere's to Christmas, 'osses and ussen," he said and drained his glass at a gulp. "Aa-a-ah! Good stuff, eh?"

The bland, sweet spirit with its subtle lingering tinge of bitterness slid warmly down Christine's throat. Barbara, she noticed, after taking a tentative sip, took a



larger mouthful and was savouring the flavour by rolling it round her tongue.

"It's good!" she said.

"Top 'em up!" Walter sloshed gin liberally into all their glasses. "Never get nowt like this in a pub."

Already a flush was creeping into Barbara's cheeks and her eyes were sparkling.

"Seen Jimmy Bryant lately?" Christine asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

"Not for ages," Barbara said gaily. "Been too busy. He did ring me up last week, but I told him I hadn't time to go out, what with everything."

"Poor old Jimmy," Paul said with mock condolence. "Matter of fact I saw him in Hollerton t'other day and he was looking thin as a ghost, pining away."

Barbara laughed.

"I don't believe that," she said. "And anyhow . . . isn't it right and proper that a man should have to wait and . . . and . . . something . . . I forget what. Poets and all that!"

She laughed again, the gin taking quick action because she was unaccustomed to any form of alcohol.

"Absolutely right, my dear," Paul said, amused at her obviously mounting gaiety. "Absolutely right. Let 'em wait."

"Sometimes you can let them wait too long—and it isn't always easy to find another," Christine said. "Or maybe you haven't found it that way, Barbara."

Christine could have kicked herself. She saw a momentary hurt flash into the girl's eyes and knew that

again her tone had expressed the very feeling of jealousy she was fighting to avoid.

"Women, women!" Walter carolled, the Christmas spirit getting into him. "Let's drink to 'em!"

He drained his glass again and started on another round with the bottle.

"Oh no, not for me, Walter!" Barbara said.

Before she could draw her glass away he had poured another shot into it. Christine got her hand over the top of her glass ahead of Walter and managed to make her refusal effective. She too was already feeling the insidious grip of the spirit. Walter was in fine fettle, childishly anxious to see that they had a good time, and more than delighted that they found so agreeable the result of his hours of labour pricking sloes with a pickle fork and the subsequent bottle shaking, examination and clarifying. But presently Christine took him on one side and spoke to him quietly.

"You're a wicked old man, Walter. Barbara's getting tight."

The farmer gave a phlegmy chuckle.

"Got to 'appen to the best on us sometime or another. My old grannie used to say 'them what don't drink liquor can't never learn to 'old it'. Summat in that, y'know. And this young 'un 'ere won't come to no 'arm."

Nevertheless, within a few minutes, Barbara, prattling shrilly to Paul, swayed unsteadily and clasped his arm for support. To help her keep her balance Paul put his arm firmly round her waist and kept it there.

"Paul, I think it's time we got Barbara home," said Christine, feeling like a school matron. "She's not fit to drive her horse-box. You'll have to do it. I'll go over to Brookfield and get my motor-scooter. We can load it on to the truck and use it to come back on."

With the motor-scooter aboard and the three of them in the cab of the new horse-box, Christine sat in moody silence looking out at the passing countryside while Paul and Barbara sang popular songs and carols.

She was thankful to arrive at Lane's farm and waited in the cab while Paul half carried the now giggling Barbara to the back door. She saw him open the door and Barbara start to go in. Then something stopped the girl and she came back to fling her arms round his neck and cling to him, her lips moving close to his ear. Paul laughed and gave her a lingering kiss on the cheek, waved to her as she went into the house, and came over to the back of the horse-box.

Only when she heard the scooter engine start did Christine get out of the cab. Her eyes were hard and her mouth in a straight line when she mounted the pillion.

"A bit lit, our Barbara," Paul called back over his shoulder. "But she held it pretty well."

Christine made no comment throughout the journey back to Brookfield. They dismounted at the gate and she brushed past Paul to take the handlebars of the scooter and wheel it into the shed.

"What's up, Chris? You peevd because Barbara hung herself round my neck?" Paul asked, following her

into the shed and watching her pull it up on its stand. "D'you know what Barbara said when she did it? She said 'Thank you for looking after me and bringing me home, Jimmy, darling,' Jimmy, she called me!"

Christine walked briskly out of the shed, waited for him to move before closing the wooden doors, turned the key in the lock and headed for the house.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Paul called after her.

She went swiftly into the house and slammed the door behind.

Christmas Day was fine. The sun filtered through the winter mist as though determined to be present for the festivities. Everybody contrived to look happy, whatever problems beset them before and awaited them after the day of days. Old sores were forgotten or covered up, children thought their presents the best they had ever had, and quite the best in the village. . . . Boxing Day was time enough for jealousies and tears over mechanical wonders that suddenly stopped working.

Perhaps the happiest man in Ambridge on Christmas morning was the vicar. A sincere and gentle man, he forgot the heartaches he often suffered when he looked at the handful of people in the pews on an ordinary Sunday. The full church on Christmas Day compensated for all that. They might not be regular in their worshipping habits—Carol Grey there, and John Tregorran beside her, the Trenthams from the Country

Club, Jack and Peggy Archer, even the Fairbrothers, though they had been more frequently at morning service since September. He understood why they did not always have the chance or the inclination to come into his church—when the season was at its height, when other non-churchgoers needed physical comforts providing, when farming had first call, when the markets of the country had to be supplied and the weather had stolen a day from the working week. He understood and, in his understanding, he knew God forgave them. Wasn't that the meaning of the blessing he conferred on the bent heads this Christmas morning?

The pleasure experienced by the vicar radiated out to his congregation and throughout the day, through the turkey dinners and the toasts in wine and beer and cordials, through the sing-songs and the games and the dancing, and families were united in a more acute consciousness of the bond that held them together.

At Brookfield only for one short moment did a sadness break through the happiness. That was when Dan, as a final toast, drank quietly to "Absent friends".

The glasses went up all round the table. Then Doris and Dan, remembering, looked at Phil. His face was drawn and the sparkle of tears showed in his eyes. It would have been Grace's first Christmas at Brookfield as an Archer, but tragedy had robbed them.

"Phil, I——" Dan started.

"It's all right, Dad," Phil forced a smile on to his lips and raised his glass. "To absent friends."

The moment was past and the joyous spirit of Christmas came back to the farmhouse.

In another house, standing lonely in its acres of cultivated land—not cultivated with the thoroughness that would have appealed to Dan and Phil—the same spirit was also present, the more welcome because it was unexpected. Madge and Harry Lane, with their daughter Barbara, were sitting round the fire, their dinner eaten and cleared away. Madge was looking as she had looked a year ago. Her cheeks seemed to have filled out, her smile had restored some of its original confidence. She was happy because the day had passed without her husband getting short-tempered, without the cost of things intruding into every thought.

“That was a damn good meal, Madge,” Harry said comfortably, pouring another glass of port for her and refilling his own. “Thanks. I enjoyed it.”

“So did I, Mum.” Barbara got up from her seat and kissed her mother on the cheek. “Bless you.”

“Well—it’s Christmas,” Madge began. She had a sudden overwhelming feeling of hope, remembering past years when the pattern of her Christmases had been as set and established as the rest of Ambridge. Harry put out his hand and took hers off the arm of her chair where it was lying and held it.

Barbara gave a little gasp of laughter.

“That’s just like the picture on the Christmas card Jimmy sent me,” she said and bounced out of her chair

to get it from the collection propped up on the mantelpiece. "Did you see it, Dad?"

"Ay, I saw it," her father grinned. "And I saw the message inside."

Barbara pouted.

"You've no business to read that. It was private."

"Your own fault for putting it up on the mantelpiece. Anyhow, you wanted me to see what he said, didn't you?"

Barbara indignantly drew herself to her full height, her young well-formed breasts pressing out against the fine wool of the green dress moulded close round her boyish figure.

"After all," Harry went on, enjoying her embarrassment. "What girl doesn't want the world to know she's a boy after her? And will you see him if he comes over next week like he suggests?"

"That's none of your business, Dad!"

"Don't tease her, Harry," Madge put in with a smile. "When you're Barbara's age, it's part of the fun keeping your boy friend guessing."

"Oooh! You're as bad as Dad, Mum!" the girl cried. "I'm not putting up with any more of this. Just when I was thinking how nice it was to have heard from Jimmy. Now you've made it all seem sort of silly."

With a whirl of her skirt she ran to the door.

"Where are you off to?" Harry said. "To write him a letter telling him your parents don't understand you?"

The door opened and shut very quickly.

Madge caught her husband's eye.

"Now you've upset her. You don't know how sensitive girls of her age are about those sort of things," she said.

"Mean to say you went on the same when I was courting you?" Harry said disbelievingly.

"You know I did . . . or . . ."

Harry took a sip at his port.

"Well, go on," he said.

"I just wondered if you remembered those days? Do you?"

"Course I do."

He rose from his chair, took up the fire tongs and lit a cigarette from a glowing coal. When he sat down again it was on the arm of Madge's chair.

She looked up at him fondly and smoothed the rough tweed of his jacket with her hand.

"Harry, we've had differences these last few weeks. It's probably my fault. I'm too nosey about things, but it's—it's just because I want to know things are all right. I'm sorry. I don't mean to upset you."

Harry nodded and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"T'isn't only you, Madge. You know my temper. It's when things aren't going as well as I'd planned that I get het up. Things outside, you know."

"I know."

She strained up in her chair and brushed her husband's lips with her own.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispered.

Harry tumbled her hair with a clumsy gesture of affection.



"You're daft!"

He got up from the arm and for a moment disappointment widened Madge's eyes, only to be banished a moment later when he said gruffly, "Ay, you're daft, Madge, love. Here, shift over a bit. There's room for the two of us in that chair!"

## NINE

JIMMY BRYANT GAZED MOODILY out of his office window at the grey gloom of the February scene, pencil poised over the column of figures in a ledger on the desk before him.

He was in love—and found it a wearing business. He counted himself lucky if Barbara agreed to meet him more than once a week, but what really exasperated him was the fact that, however affectionate and responsive she might grow to be towards the end of an evening at the pictures or just driving round in his car, Barbara did not seem to give a thought to him during the interval between their weekly meetings.

Still fresh in his memory was the embarrassing visit he had to pay to Harry Lane's shortly after Christmas. The head of the firm had told him to see that Harry paid up at least one outstanding payment on the muck-spreader he was buying through them on hire purchase. He had got the money after Harry tried every line of talk to put him off, but only when Madge Lane had inadvertently come on the scene and let drop that she knew he had some money put by for Barbara's new riding kit. Harry Lane hadn't liked it, and made little effort to control his tongue in front of Jimmy. That had made it even more embarrassing because he was sure Madge Lane had only been acting for the best—but he vowed there and then that he would never speak to

Barbara like that when they were married. Yet when he told Barbara he had been up to the farm, but hadn't seen her, she accepted the news with a casualness that left him wondering whether she felt it mattered at all if she ever saw him again.

Two short sharp spurts on the buzzer scattered his thoughts and summoned him to the presence of Mr. Collinwood in his equally dark but more comfortably furnished office.

"Bryant, Harry Lane of Ambridge has defaulted again on his payment this month."

"Yes, sir. I know. That makes three outstanding."

"He's not going to be overdue any longer." Mr. Collinwood tossed a sheaf of papers which detailed the Harry Lane case into his 'pending' tray and slapped his hand down on the desk. "We've been very lenient, but he's reached the end of his rope . . . our rope. Now, you're a capable chap, Bryant. I want you to go out to Ambridge. Either get the cash or bring the muck-spreader in. You may have a tussle, but we've been lenient too long."

Jimmy cleared his throat.

"I . . . er . . . I believe Mr. Lane's a bit pressed for cash these days," he said cautiously.

"I dare say, but I'm afraid we mustn't let sentiment enter into this," Mr. Collinwood said fixing Jimmy with a businessman's eye.

Jimmy reddened. It seemed as though Mr. Collinwood had been reading his thoughts.

"No, no, of course not," he managed to say.

"Right. Off you go. You're a capable chap, Bryant, and I shall expect you to come back either with the cash—all the cash up to date—or the muck-spreader itself."

Jimmy left the office in a schizophrenic upheaval. One side of him was champing to get to Ambridge as quickly as he could on the off-chance of seeing Barbara, the other was feeling sick at the thought of dealing with and ruthlessly administering justice to her father. He blessed and cursed Mr. Collinwood in the same breath and continued to do so all the way to Ambridge.

Madge answered the door to his knock, looking more weary and drawn than she had on his previous visit.

"Hello, Mrs. Lane. I suppose your husband isn't in?"

Madge shook her head.

Good!

"Er . . . when d'you expect him back? It's rather important."

"I don't know," Madge said, standing back to allow him to come in. "He went off with a horse, but I don't know why or where. You're welcome to come in and wait for him."

"Well—I don't know. I—oh, what about Barbara? Is she around?"

"Ambridge, I think. I don't know." Madge's voice was flat, as though she found his questions wearying. "She might be anywhere."

Jimmy thought quickly.

"Look, Mrs. Lane, I've—er—one or two things to do in the district. I wonder if I might come in for a

minute and write a note for your husband. It really is important that I see him."

"Of course."

She led him into the parlour and watched him while he sat at the round table with the red plush cloth and took some paper from his brief-case.

"It's about money, I suppose?" Madge said after he had started writing.

"Well—er—in a way. It's to do with the muck-spreader he's getting—he got through us," Jimmy said guardedly. "Just a formality, sort of."

"Oh. That'll be the muck-spreader he gave to Dan Archer," Madge said.

"Gave?" Jimmy fought to keep any surprise or apprehension out of his voice. "Just recently was that?"

"About a couple of months ago. Three, maybe."

Holy smoke, thought Jimmy. Now the fat's right in the fire. Two or three months ago . . . so the last time I came over to see Harry Lane, he'd parted with the damn thing already . . . and not his to give. If the firm knew this they'd be on him like a ton of bricks. Oh hell, why was the man such a fool?

To hide his agitation he wrote a longer note than he intended, picking his phrases carefully . . . *'glad to get this matter settled amicably. My firm, I'm sorry to say, insist on immediate payment and have sent me to collect, so you'll appreciate it puts me in a very awkward position if I have to go back without it . . .'*

He signed it carefully in his neat handwriting and read

it through. He had made no mention of the fact he knew what had happened to the muck-spreader and suddenly realised he should have done. If Lane came back soon, he could get the machine from Dan Archer and no one need be embarrassed on that score. As an intimate friendly note, man to man, he added his secret knowledge in a postscript, and with a smile at Madge that made him look happier than he felt, slid the note into an envelope and sealed it. The less Mrs. Lane knew about all this the better, he felt.

He drove round and round the village, wasting time and searching for Barbara, but it was obviously to be one of those days. A large helping of steak and kidney pie followed by stewed apples and custard in the Bull dining-room did not manage to lessen his disappointment. A phone call to the Lane Farm added genuine concern to it. Madge told him that Harry had phoned saying he would not be back until late in the afternoon.

"Did you say I'd been looking for him?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes," Madge said, her voice flattened even more by the telephone. "Yes, I told him."

Hanging up, Jimmy wandered aimlessly out of the Bull. Mr. Collinwood had been emphatic that he was to come back with the goods in some tangible form. Should he go to Dan Archer and demand the muck-spreader, or should he wait to give Harry Lane a chance to clear the mess up, he wondered.

"Good lor', Jimmy, got the sack?"

He looked round to see Christine and Paul Johnson,

head on one side, regarding him quizzically.

"Oh, hullo," he managed to grin. "Not yet, but I may have tomorrow. You've not seen Harry Lane, I suppose?"

Perhaps it was Christine's sympathetic greeting or Paul Johnson's immediate reaction to the sound of the man's name that decided Jimmy to unburden himself. He told them in strictest confidence about Harry's failure to pay and the illegal transfer of the muck-spreader to Dan Archer.

"That's why I'm telling you, Christine," Jimmy said. "I don't want to put your father in a spot."

"Thanks, Jimmy. Poor old Dad. He's going to be mad."

"What the heck am I to do?" Jimmy spread his hands helplessly. "I've got a feeling Harry Lane may have been tipped off by his wife and he'll keep out of my way until I get fed up with waiting."

"I'm sure Madge wouldn't do a thing like that," Christine said.

"That household's capable of anything," Paul cut in. "There's only one person there whose word is law, and that's Harry. Madge'll say and do what he wants. He doesn't give a damn for anybody but himself. And here's my advice to you Jimmy—clamp down on him. Don't stand any half measures. Go and collect your muck-spreader and let Harry Lane get out of his own mess."

Christine looked at him sharply, partly because she heard the vindictiveness in Paul's voice again and partly because of her father.

"Dad's using that muck-spreader, Paul. He needs it."

"Maybe he does. But three months ago he didn't have it—and if he's not careful he'll find himself involved in a bad smell over the whole business. Isn't that right, Jimmy?"

Reluctantly Jimmy had to admit that it was.

"I'll give Harry Lane another chance. I'll phone again and tell his wife that it's more important than she probably realises that I see him this afternoon and—well, if he's not there, I'll go over to Brookfield. I'll have done all I can, won't I?"

He addressed his last question to Christine, appealing to her.

"I suppose so," she said. "At any rate it'll make Paul happy. Mercy and Harry Lane don't go together in his mind."

Jimmy left them to go to the phone-box and heard them as they went into the Bull bickering coldly.

"Why d'you dislike Harry Lane so?" Jimmy heard Christine ask Paul.

"Is Barbara your bosom pal?" was Paul's ironic retort.

Of course, Harry Lane was out. With a sigh Jimmy replaced the receiver and set out for Brookfield.

"The devil he has!" was Dan's immediate comment on hearing the details. Annoyance crossed his face for an instant and Jimmy felt a stab of fear in his stomach. He wondered what he would do if Dan refused to part with the muck-spreader. Then came the sudden surprise of Dan's chuckle.



"Might have known there was a catch in it somewhere!" Dan said, grudgingly amiable. "Trust Harry Lane to do the unexpected. I should be cursing him, but . . . dammit there's something likable about the man."

Jimmy laughed nervously, uncertain whether he shared Dan's liking. So far as he was concerned the only good thing about Harry Lane was the fact he had fathered Barbara—and that had produced so far only a very remote happiness.

"'Course, Harry's gone against his contract doing this, I suppose?"

"Very much so," Jimmy agreed. "Strictly speaking, the law . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes," Dan said easily. "The law . . . but we don't want to go to all that trouble, do we? Now, supposing I pay up the outstanding amount, that'll mean your boss is satisfied and Harry still keeps the muck-spreader that he's . . . er . . . that he's asked me to give storage space to, and everybody's happy, eh?"

Jimmy pretended to consider the idea for a moment, relief flooding over him that he was going to be able to settle the matter without offending anyone.

"Yes, that seems to be the answer," he said at last with a smile at the farmer.

He told Dan the amount of cash that was due, and with a wince Dan took him into the house. Money and receipt changed hands over a cup of tea Doris made.

"Now does that clear the whole thing up?" Dan asked.

"Except for the final payment," Jimmy said, looking up from counting the notes.

"That's something you and me are going to see Harry paying himself," Dan grunted, walking with him to the gate.

Outside Walter's unkempt garden fence stood a horse-box and Jimmy felt his heart leap when Barbara emerged from behind it, her father following her.

"Barbara!" Jimmy shouted and started impulsively towards her. "Hey, Barbara!"

The girl saw him, gave a quick smile and waved.

As he joined Barbara and took her hands in his in greeting he saw Dan take Harry on one side and start talking, Dan's face grim and Harry listening intently.

"You're looking grand," he said, taking in eagerly the clear blue eyes and the gentle curves of the girl's lips. "I looked everywhere for you. Had to come over on business. Called at your place and searched all Ambridge, but—where've you been?"

"Selling a horse," she said simply and unemotionally.

"Oh. Well . . . jolly nice to see you, anyhow," Jimmy stammered. He realised suddenly that Barbara was looking at him with a warmth that he had so often hoped for but never imagined he would see. "Oh, Barbara . . . I've missed you like hell. I do, all the time. It's been a foul day till now. But it's all right now. Look, couldn't we meet before next Thursday? I mean——"

A heavy hand on his shoulder spun him round and he found himself looking into Harry Lane's angry face, thrust close to his own.

"What the hell d'you mean by telling the whole damn village about my private business?" Harry snarled.

"I . . . I beg your pardon!"

"You damn well will, young man, if I have anything to do with it. Dan Archer's told me how you came to him demanding the muck-spreader. God Almighty, haven't you any nous? Why couldn't you wait till I got back? I told my wife I'd be home this afternoon. Why didn't you wait?"

Jimmy swallowed hard, anger mounting in him.

"I have a job to do. You were behind on your payments and my firm said——"

"Your firm said get the money!" Harry Lane let Jimmy's shoulder go and his hand fumbled in his breast pocket. He pulled out a thick wad of pound notes and flung them angrily down at Jimmy's feet. "Well, there's your money! There's your money and more. Sort it out for yourself—and next time don't go running round the place like an hysterical girl telling everybody my private business!"

Stunned, Jimmy looked at the spread of notes on the ground stirring in the breeze.

"You had no right to part with that muck-spreader before it was out of covenant, Mr. Lane," Jimmy protested. "I . . . I was doing all I could to help."

"Doing all you could to help me look a fool." Harry took his daughter's arm and led her away. "Come on,

Barbara. Let's see Walter and get this horse-box fixed, then we can get home."

"But, wait . . . Barbara, what about what I was saying . . . about . . ." Jimmy stumbled over his words and then gave up trying. The warmth that had been in Barbara's eyes before Harry Lane broke in on the scene was gone.

A week later, when he had no news from Barbara but heard that foot and mouth disease had hit Brookfield Farm like a bombshell, Jimmy began to wonder if he had a jinx.

## TEN

AMBRIDGE HUNT BALL was one of the social events of the year. Barbara, relenting a little in her attitude towards Jimmy, sent him a note of invitation. But Jimmy had already accepted an invitation to dine with a visiting uncle and as this uncle, well placed in the accountancy world, had the pull which could alter and improve Jimmy's future in a way he could never achieve on his own, there was no question of the young man backing out. It was to all intents a command appearance and Jimmy had been rehearsing several carefully phrased and pointed snatches of conversation which would perhaps encourage the old man to introduce him into a new firm at a higher and more lucrative grade.

"It's for us, Barbara, darling, that I'm refusing your invitation," he said as he sealed up the letter he had written her. And he added with some sadistic pleasure, "And maybe now you'll know what it's like not to get what you want every time!"

Madge Lane had a new dress for the occasion and when she got into the car with her husband and daughter to go to the ball, she prayed to herself that the evening would pass without any bickering. The brief, sentimental renaissance of hope that had come to her at Christmas had been short-lived. Horses, Barbara and her future, and "What business is it of yours?" had become the normal topics of conversation.

Sitting in the back of the car she felt a wave of envy and pride when she saw Barbara's fair hair glowing against the lights of oncoming cars. The youthful confident poise of the girl's neck and shoulders made her think of the days when she, after the death of her mother, had walked up the aisle with Harry Lane, sure she could make him a good wife and manage his wilful but exuberant nature into being one of the most respected farmers in the district. But she had failed. She, alone in the back seat of the car, was the odd number in this trio.

They could hear the band as they went up the steps of Borchester Town Hall and Madge felt an uncomfortable shyness. Harry and Barbara were greeted by a number of people who were complete strangers to her, but who would, she knew, give her the feeling by their talk and manner that she did not belong. Useless to tell herself that Harry belonged as little as she did. He had the advantage of knowing about horses.

Seeing Christine and Paul Johnson at a table, Madge hurried thankfully over to them, and Barbara, seeing her go, touched her father on the shoulder and drew him away from an acquaintance to follow her.

Already the hall was full of noise. The band blared out a quickstep and at once two young men, one in hunting pink, came to ask Barbara for a dance.

"This is going to be a rowdy evening," Paul said. "I can see it coming. Chris, if we are going to have a dance d'you think we might have it now?"

"And get it over?" Christine said coolly. From the

floor she saw Harry Lane go off to the bar and leave Madge sitting alone. "He might at least have asked her to have one dance."

"That boor? Not him."

"I wish you'd tell me what this stupid feud you have against Harry is about," Chris said, sidestepping quickly to avoid an overboisterous pair of youngsters from Borchester. "And if you'd look where you're supposed to be leading me, instead of glowering at Harry Lane, it would be more comfortable."

"I can see this is going to be more than a rowdy evening," Paul said half-seriously. "It's going to be hell."

After Barbara had danced with Paul in the course of many other eager partners and Paul had danced a duty dance with Madge Lane, Harry Lane put in an appearance again, leaving the bar to hear the horn competition. Madge saw at once he was in a mood for trouble. He wanted to know why she was sitting like a wet blanket. Why she didn't mix with people? Was she too timid? Hadn't she got anything worth while to say?

Christine exchanged a glance with Paul, glad that Barbara was over the other side of the hall among a group of young men. Paul's mouth was set in a hard line and he gazed stonily away from Madge and her husband.

Harry kept up a continuous stream of criticism, cloaked in anecdotes, ostensibly told to Chris and Paul, of what life was like at home with a wife who knew nothing about horses and therefore thought his interest

was a waste of time. He was not directly abusive and told his stories with an over-jovial grin on his face as though he were just pulling Madge's leg, but to the young pair it was profoundly uncomfortable. The barbs were there under the jocular banter.

At last Paul half rose from his seat, his face white with anger. Madge gave him an appealing look to keep out of it and spoke quietly to her husband.

"Harry," she said. "I've a shocking bad headache. D'you think——"

"Haven't you got any aspirin? Headache! It's a damn stupid time to get one!" Harry retorted.

By this time Paul was round the table and towering over Harry.

"Listen, Harry, maybe it's none of my business, but I don't like men who are rude to their wives in public. I don't like men who are rude at all, but when they're so damned ill-mannered that they have to try and pick a domestic squabble at a dance, then I get mad. Now, either pull yourself together and shut up, or go home. It's time you learnt to hold your drink."

Paul spoke quietly and with such emphasis that Harry looked at him in astonishment. It was as though he had no idea he had been unpleasant. He struggled to his feet and swayed slightly.

"But——" he started. "What the heck——"

"You heard what I said, Harry. Now pull yourself together. Your daughter's coming over. You don't want her to be involved in this, do you? Your wife's said she has a headache. She wants to go home. If



you're anything of a gentleman, you'll do as she asks and take her home."

"Paul's right, Harry." Madge got up and shot Paul a quick glance of understanding. "I have got a headache. Please take me home."

"But—there's Barbara," Harry said thickly.

"You needn't worry. She'll be looked after," Paul said. He did not relax until Madge and Harry left the hall, then he plumped down in his chair, sighed with relief and looked across at Christine. "I think I handled that pretty well, don't you?"

"I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself," Christine said coldly. "You have the nerve to tell Harry off in front of his wife in public and expect me to be pleased?"

"But the man was behaving abominably. You heard what he said to Madge!"

"He may have behaved abominably. But that's no reason why you should imitate him. You only made things worse!" Christine was warming to her indignation and Paul's wide-eyed, open-mouthed reception of what she was saying only served to make her more indignant. "Anybody with any sense would either have kept quiet or made a reasonable excuse and gone away. But no, you have to be in on it, with both feet, just because you've got some grudge against him."

Christine got up from the table, snatched up her bag and started to walk away. Paul, shaking his head as if he had been doused with cold water, bounded after her.

"Christine!"

"Go away."

"But he was a boor—impossible . . ."

"So were you. Go away."

She saw the Fairbrothers in a corner of the hall, caught Helen's eye and went over to join them. Fairbrother wanted to talk about how her father was managing at Brookfield after having his stock destroyed by foot and mouth disease. Although she was aware the farm was going through a crisis and that it was a worrying time for each and every member of the family, tonight she did not want to be reminded of it. When she saw Paul and Barbara waltzing together, she decided she had had enough. The evening was a flop, and she was partly responsible for it. She waited till the waltz was over, excused herself from the Fairbrothers, went round the hall by way of the bar and had the satisfaction of seeing Paul, his face drawn and his eyes flicking right and left for a way of escape from Mrs. Gregson, a widow in the district who was notorious for her determination never to let a man go once she had him in conversation.

The night was mild and by the time she reached Brookfield Christine was feeling contrite that she had been just as guilty of making a scene as Paul.

The clock in the hall chimed one. Pulling back the curtains of the kitchen window she stared out at the fields. The trees were like frail wrought-iron candelabra, the tip of each branch carrying its delicately grey-green candle-like bud. The grass, streaked with tree

shadows, gleamed as though the frost was still there. It was a perfect night, too perfect to go to bed, too perfect to go to bed with your conscience uneasy.

She made a sudden decision. If she were to walk over to Lane's Farm she would arrive just about the time Paul and Barbara would be likely to get back from the hall. She would apologise and all would be well again. She went quietly upstairs and slipped into something more practical for country walks.

Half an hour's steady walking brought her in sight of the farmhouse. No lights showed, but she was able to pick out the dark bulk of a car on the roadside near the yard gate.

A sharp pang of jealousy stabbed her, but as she neared the car and saw it was not Paul's she chided herself. Curiosity getting the better of her, she bent down and looked into it.

With a squawk of alarm she stepped back, frightened by the pale face that peered earnestly out at her. She was ready to turn and run, then a familiar voice came from the car.

"Gosh, I thought you were Barbara for a minute."

"Jimmy Bryant!" Chris gasped with relief. "I . . . I didn't expect to see you."

"Didn't expect to see you either. What's happened? The car broken down?"

Christine felt confused for the moment. She asked herself what she *was* doing at Harry's farm at this hour of the morning.

"I . . . Oh, it's silly, Jimmy. You'll think I'm

daft, but I had a bit of a row with Paul and he's bringing Barbara home and as I'd left the dance early, I thought I'd come over here and—and have a word with him."

Jimmy opened the car door.

"Better get in and sit down," he said. "We're both being a bit daft, I think. I finished dinner with an uncle of mine—rather important dinner—and I thought I'd come over and see if—well, if I could see Barbara."

Christine laughed and got in the car beside him.

"Thanks, Jimmy. As we may have to wait for another couple of hours, it's probably a good idea," she said.

The full implication of what a two hour wait might mean where Paul and Barbara were concerned struck them both simultaneously, and while they both wrestled with their inner emotions they sought refuge in small talk.

Eventually Paul's car arrived. As if by mutual agreement, they sat silently watching it pull to a standstill ahead of them, waiting for what seemed an age before anyone got out. At last Paul emerged and hurried round to open the door for Barbara who straightened her hair and wrapped her evening coat around her before coming toward's Jimmy's car.

"It is Jimmy's car," they heard her say. "What on earth——"

Jimmy was the first out.

"Hello, Barbara!"

"Jimmy, are you mad? What are you doing waiting here?"

"Just thought I'd like to drive over and see you."

Christine could see Paul Johnson straining his eyes into the car and felt the moment had come to make her presence known. She got out.

The new arrivals stared and Christine, in spite of the half-light, had a feeling that Barbara's eyes narrowed.

"Oh, hello, Christine," she said, clipping her words and turning to Jimmy. "Well, it was nice of you, Jimmy, to come over. I'm quite all right. Paul looked after me. And now I'm going to bed." She turned and went towards the house. "Good-night, Paul."

"Good-night, Barbara." Paul Johnson did not look at her as she went. His eyes were fixed on Christine.

"Barbara!" Jimmy was away to try and stop her before she got indoors.

"So this was why you left the dance early, eh?" Paul asked.

"What d'you mean? I came here, Paul, to see you. To say——"

Suddenly the ridiculousness of the situation struck her. Paul was actually jealous of her now—and Barbara had just shut the door in Jimmy's face. She laughed out loud and without another word Paul swung round and clambered into his car. The night air vibrated as he revved up his engine and sped off.

Jimmy joined her, looking crestfallen.

"I say—that was a bit of a boner, wasn't it?" he said, glumly. "Barbara thought you and I——"

"So did Paul," Christine laughed. "And don't worry, Jimmy. It's probably the best thing that ever happened for you and me. You'll see why next time you meet

Barbara, I'll bet you. Now you can be an angel and run me back home."

Dubious and with an anxious glance at Christine, Jimmy started up his car and headed for Brookfield.

The quiet of the spring night descended again on the countryside, but sleep did not come to all its inhabitants. In the front bedroom in Harry Lane's farmhouse, Madge lay awake, her mind restless, even though she had heard her daughter creep softly up the stairs and close the door of her room with a faint click. Sleep was not for Madge that night. The worries of the past few months raced round in her mind, and her heart sank with the memory of her husband's behaviour at the dance. Tears filled her eyes, but no sob was in her throat. They were the tears of grief, of knowing failure, of a dread of the future. Lying on her back, listening to the heavy breathing of her husband beside her, she pressed her hands against the still soft dome of her womb and bit her lips to force back a moan of despair and fear. . . .

## ELEVEN

PAUL AND CHRISTINE TALKED ON THE PHONE the following morning and shared apologies, but to Barbara and Jimmy love was still very young and easily bruised. It took three sheets of office foolscap and a good deal of office time for Jimmy to write a lucid defence of why he was at the farm in the first place and how Christine came to be in the car with him. His industry brought its reward. Three days later his office phone rang and a shy, rather breathless Barbara said she was sorry she'd been rather stupid and, yes, she would meet him but it would have to be later than he asked because she was riding in a point-to-point at Butterson, and by the time she'd got the horses back and stabled. . . . He would understand, wouldn't he?

Jimmy not only understood. He was in raptures, and when he hung up for several minutes he lay back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling, a star-spangled grin wreathed across his face.

If time spread itself for Jimmy, the hours sped by for Barbara, and it was the day of the point-to-point before she knew it. Jimmy, in the rush and devotion to her work, was forgotten.

At Butterson Harry Lane showed little interest in the earlier races. He hardly bothered to come out of the beer tent to watch. He stayed close to the bar until

it was time for the adjacent hunt's ladies' race, when he hurried outside.

For this ladies' event, which drew the crack horses and riders for miles around, he was one of a dozen shrewd spectators who positioned themselves on a mound near the finish from which they could see three quarters of the course. It never crossed Barbara's mind that he might have come round to the lines to help her with the horses. He never had. Always she had been brought up on his policy of, "If she's going to learn she'll have to get on with it herself." It was a policy which had proved valuable for Barbara. She had learnt. It was also a convenient let-out for Harry, and left him free to mix with his pals and take the congratulations for her many successes.

Harry's eyes were critical when the horses lined for the start. The horse-dealer beside him gave him a nudge.

"Looks in fair shape," he said. "Very fair."

"Jellicoe?"

"S'right." There was a pause. "Barbara too."

"She's courting," Harry laughed. "Off and on. Suits her."

"Get you three hundred tomorrow for Jellicoe."

"Dare say you could, but I'm not interested." A contented smile appeared at the corners of Harry's mouth. "That horse is going with Barbara to the top—where they both belong."

It was a good start. They all went for the first fence in a bunch, Barbara in the thick of them. A couple fell. Others lost ground on the sharp left-hand turn that



took them over the second and into the heavy ploughed field. Over the hedge at the other side of the ploughed field was a gruelling uphill climb to the fourth, another sharp left turn where the riders disappeared from sight in a headlong run down a dip and up the other side, took a ditch and had three comfortable fences in a straight run down a gentle slope for home. The open race called for twice round this course—a severe enough test for any horse and rider.

“She’ll be in the first three,” Harry said, as the horses disappeared into the dip on the first circuit.

“Got any money on her?” the dealer asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I’m on Silver Tail. It’ll win, I know—but Barby’ll be second or third.”

At the end of the first circuit Silver Tail, a big bay ridden by Valerie Trentham, led by half a dozen lengths a bunch of horses in which Jellicoe was still going strong. Only the stayers were still with her by the time they had crossed the ploughed field and started the uphill climb—a grey called Badger Patch, Jellicoe and a big-boned chestnut ridden by a wiry young farmer from Welverton. Coming in for home Valerie lengthened her lead. Jellicoe and Badger Patch had the crowd roaring in a tussle for second place. Barbara lost ground on the last jump, having to take it outside Badger Patch. Flushed, eyes sparkling with excitement, lips drawn back over her white, bright-clenched teeth, she crouched low and gave Jellicoe his head. He responded magnificently, but was still half a length behind Badger Patch when they passed the post.

It was well after five before Barbara had boxed the horses and was ready to go home. She had enjoyed her day. A pleasant physical weariness was in her limbs and she allowed herself to relax and give her first real thought of the day to Jimmy. She determined she would not keep him waiting as she had done in the past and, satisfied that everything was in order for the horses, she set off with jaunty step to the place where she knew she would find her father. It took her ten minutes to coax him out of the bar away from the men she had come to associate with him.

"Better watch that tendency of Jellicoe's to pull off right," Harry said when they were under way in the horse-box. "Lost a bit of ground with him taking you wide. You'll probably have to keep the left rein on him a bit harder. Might be important when you're jumping against the clock in the ring."

"I can cure him of that," Barbara said confidently, and went on at some length to enumerate all Jellicoe's good points. "He's wonderful, Dad," she finished up. "Wonderful."

"Had an offer of three hundred for him this afternoon," Harry said.

"You're not going to . . ." Barbara's face dropped. "You wouldn't sell him now, would you?"

Harry laughed at her immediate distress.

"You bet I won't. You and Jellicoe belong together like old and mild. Which reminds me . . ."

He braked slowly and was about to pull the horse-box off the road on to the gravel parking space in front of a

low, colour-washed pub where already two other horse-boxes were drawn up.

"Oh, Dad, must we stop?" Barbara said. "I've a date tonight with Jimmy. I promised him I'd be there on time."

Harry screwed up his eyes and regarded his daughter seriously, grimaced, let in the clutch again and eased the truck back on to the road.

"Trying to reform me?" He ran his tongue between his lips.

"You know I'm not. It's just that . . . well, if I make a promise, I do try to keep it."

Five miles and three pubs further on Harry said, "This is all very well, but it's in those pubs I do a lot of business. I may be missing something."

"I know, Dad, but tonight's an exception."

"It's going to be no exception at the Rose and Crown at Cleverton," Harry said emphatically. "There I have got some business to do. I'll only be a couple of minutes. I've to see Lenny Fairfax about something."

There was only one car outside the Rose and Crown, and through the lighted window of the bar Barbara could see a pair of shoulders in loud checks leaning over the counter and the laughing face framed with a frizz of blonde curls of Maudie, the barmaid who kept a number of the locals in regular attendance.

"Couple of minutes," Harry repeated as he left the truck.

Barbara settled herself more comfortably in her seat and, resting her head against the structure of the cab,

closed her eyes and tried to doze. Twenty minutes later she left the horse-box and went into the brightly-lit bar and, blinking against the light, found her father leaning leisurely against the counter in close conversation with Maudie.

"Dad, you've had twenty minutes."

"Barbara!" Harry's voice was full of contrition. "My dear, I'm sorry. I was talking and . . . Look, give me a couple more minutes."

"No, Dad, I've got a date and I'm going to keep it."

The bar door swung open and a group of men came in. Harry's face lit up.

"Charlie!" he cried. "And Fred! Not seen you for days."

The newcomers crowded round him, and only with difficulty could Barbara get to his side and pull at his sleeve.

"Look, Dad, you're going to get caught up here. I know. So d'you mind if I take the horses back and leave you to get home under your own steam?"

"Mind?" Harry turned his attention to her for a moment, collected his wits and considered what she had said. "No, no, course I don't mind. Go ahead."

As she turned at the door to wave good-bye to him she just caught the glance he threw at Maudie and the grin they exchanged. She went back to the truck feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable.

She hurried through feeding and bedding down the horses when she got back to the farm, skipping nothing that had to be done, but wasting no time. She had

changed and was on her way down the stairs when Jimmy knocked at the door.

Her mother was sewing by the kitchen table under the light. She kissed her a quick good-night.

"Shan't be late, Mum—and Dad'll find his own way back. Don't worry. He was at the Rose and Crown and someone'll give him a lift for sure."

Jimmy stared at her with undisguised approval when she came out of the house, taking in the attractive line of her body and the translucent gleam of her hair which she had left loose to fall in soft waves around the clear-cut line of her face.

"You look terrific," he said and she was pleased because she knew he meant it.

They went into Borchester for a meal and later, at the top of a range of hills overlooking the valley to the south of the town, Jimmy parked the car in a gap in the trees where they could look out of the falling landscape into a blackness that seemed infinite. He put his arm round her and she rested her head on his shoulder.

She felt peaceful and relaxed. When he kissed her she responded with warmth but without passion. She didn't want anything to happen that would disturb her peace or threaten the calm friendly intimacy that seemed to be with them in the car.

"Tired?" Jimmy took her hand and put a gentle lingering kiss in the palm.

"Mm. A bit. Been a long day. But it's nice here. What've you been doing?"

"Nothing much. Same as usual—except I wrote a

letter to Uncle Edward. Remember he was the bloke I met the night you invited me to the Hunt Ball? You see—if I got a better job . . . one that had real prospects, I wondered if, maybe . . .” The words stopped and his mouth went dry. He smoothed his hand round the back of Barbara’s neck and let his fingers slide up into her hair. “Oh, Barbara, I’m very, very fond of you.” His fingers gripped her head and turned her face to him.

“No, Jimmy. Don’t. Don’t make me move. I was so cosy and . . . just go on talking. I liked it.”

“Nothing more to say,” Jimmy said after a moment’s thought. He gave a quiet chuckle. “I’m frustrated! But I understand—and I shan’t get wild or anything!” He gave an exaggerated shiver when she nuzzled his ear. “If you do that again I’ll have to take back all I said,” he laughed.

“You’re nice,” Barbara rested her cool brow in the hollow below his cheek-bone. “You’re very nice, Jimmy. Now take me home!”

She sat up brightly, smoothed the folds out of her dress over her knees and turned her sparkling blue eyes on him. She was a very young girl again—a young girl in whom tinder for the fires of emotion were laid but still unlit. For a full minute Jimmy sat looking at her and doubt flooded into his mind, but by the time he found the starter button he was reassured.

“Okay, I’ll take you home,” he said huskily and his hands, when he put them on the wheel, were trembling.

All the way back, with the wind sporting in her hair,

Barbara talked about her father and about her future. The eager sincerity in her voice struck a sobering shaft of realisation into Jimmy's mind. However attractive Barbara might be, however much more responsive and friendly she might become each time they went out together, it was going to be a battle to win her. He was only one of the contestants for her heart, and he was a late starter. Horses and a career were already well established in her life and in her capacity for loving.

She would not let him get out of the car at the farm. She kissed him gratefully, but rather perfunctorily, through the window, then more or less shooed him away when he showed signs of trying to delay her for a few precious moments more.

She stood watching the tail lights of the car disappear before she went in and felt a mixture of sorrow and irritation when she thought of the yearning hunger in Jimmy's eyes. It was a pity men had to be so—so soft sometimes, and so one-track-minded. Still Jimmy *was* nice, so much nicer than any of the other young men she'd ever met.

Madge was up when she came into the kitchen although it was well after eleven.

"Isn't Dad back yet, Mum?"

"No."

"Oh lor', I suppose I shouldn't have left him. P'raps he hasn't been able to get a lift."

"I doubt if it's that. Did you have a good time?"

"Lovely, thanks."

"Good. Well, it's late. You better get to bed. I'm

going. I'm not waiting up any longer. The farm'll have to look after itself, I suppose, as usual."

Barbara followed her mother upstairs, noting the slow and cumbersome way she mounted each step. At Madge's door, she embraced her and felt her mother's fingers press into her arms lingeringly and possessively, as if she were clinging to her for assurance.

"Get some sleep, Mum. You look awfully tired. Done up."

Normally sleep came so quickly, so soundly to Barbara. But tonight it eluded her. Her thoughts strayed over the evening, the point-to-point and Jellicoe's tendency to pull at the jumps. She imagined her father leaving the pub, perhaps a bit under the weather, walking along the road, a car coming along, Harry hailing it, lurching a little, and the driver not seeing him. . . .

As the hours passed, her fears and fantasies grew. She heard a creak of bed springs from the room next door and wondered if her father had come in unheard. But her imagination had painted lurid accidents for him to be involved in and she could not be certain he was home. . . .

Ignoring her slippers she crept along the passage and quietly opened the door of her parents' bedroom. She heard someone stir and her mother's voice, wearily enquiring:

"Harry?"

"It's me, Mum. Isn't Dad back?"

"No."



"But it's so late. Oh Mum, d'you suppose he's all right?"

There was a rustle of bedclothes and Madge raised herself on one elbow. She reached for the alarm clock by the bedside and peered at the phosphorescent figures.

"It's after four, Barby love. You must go back to bed and get some sleep."

"But Dad——"

"Come here and give me a kiss. You needn't worry about him." A break came into Madge's voice as her daughter bent over to kiss her. "It's—it's not the first time it's happened . . . when he's been drinking at the Rose and Crown."

## TWELVE

DAN ARCHER WAS ANGRY. He crashed through his gears with unwonted carelessness and, knuckles whitening with the grip he had on the steering wheel, sent his car churning along the village street through the twilight of a mid-April evening.

He was not normally an irate man. He had an equable temperament, and his moods were in tempo with the land on which he worked. Conscious of his own foibles and failings and mellowed by middle age, he made plenty of allowances for other people.

"Except when they overstep the mark," he muttered to himself, playing heavy-handed on the horn and swinging the car round the bend by Mattie Troach's smithy. "The blamed fool's gone too far this time."

Ten minutes earlier, when he was having a drink with his two sons in the Bull, he was in a much more satisfied frame of mind. He had taken Phil down there as a gesture of goodwill and thanks for his advice, and as they arrived Jack came in from Carol Gray's market garden, picking the grime from under his nails with a pen-knife.

"Foot and mouth's a nasty sock in the teeth for anybody," Jack said, after hearing what they had been up to. He dropped a sly wink at his brother. "It isn't that that's ageing Dad, though, is it? It's the thoughts of what can go wrong with those blessed broilers."

"Nervous as a ballerina on a first night," Phil grinned.

Life had not been easy for Dan since foot and mouth disease hit Brookfield. He was suddenly—almost overnight—without stock, without the means of livelihood. Of course there was compensation for the stock that by law had to be destroyed, but recovery was not as simple as that. His whole system of farming was broken down and, of more immediate concern, the regular income he depended on from the sale of his milk ceased with the slaughtering of his cattle. The need for ready cash and a look at what Phil had already done in that line at Fairbrother's made him decide to convert his cow house into a broiler house and try raising poultry up to twelve weeks old for the table.

It was new ground for him, and after the set-back of foot and mouth he was naturally cautious—so much so that he had again asked Phil to look over his stock. At Brookfield after tea Phil looked at the birds, ran a knowledgeable eye over the converted broiler house, checked the temperature and ventilation inside and examined his father's feeding charts. What he had to say was reassuring and Dan, relieved at least of a small part of his worries, took him to the Bull for a drink.

It was when Jack and Phil went out the back somewhere that Dan had the casual conversation with Jacob Dale, one of Harry Lane's men, that angered him and blighted his evening.

"Reckon you had a bit o' bad luck, Mr. Archer, losing them Shorthorns," the hand said.

"Ay. Could happen to anybody, though, I suppose.

How've things been with Harry?" Dan asked.

"Took some pigs over to Hollerton Market yesterday."

"The ready cash'll come in handy, I expect," Dan said ruefully. "He's lucky to have some pigs to sell! More than I have."

"More than he has, too, I reckon, if the truth were told." Jacob moved along the bar closer to Dan and dropped his voice. "Gaffer had them pigs ready to go off yesterday mornin', but when he goes out to load 'em there's one of 'em lying dead. He didn't say nowt to me about it. He just buried it in the muck heap and took the rest of 'em off to market."

Dan whistled. Jacob caught his eye and Dan knew the same thoughts were going through both their heads.

If there was a risk that pig of Harry's had died of swine fever, he should never have moved the others because if they were infected they could spread the disease round the country. He should notify the police and the vet, not try to hide the carcass under a muck heap.

"Daft trick," Dan said.

"Dirty trick," grunted Jacob. "Must have needed the money, I reckon."

"Your gaffer at home this evening?" Dan asked after a moment.

"He were there when I come away," Jacob said. "Patching up the kitchen roof. Bit late to my way of thinkin' now the rains is stopping. Still, that's him. Leaves things to the last moment then sets to and sweats

his guts out gettin' a job done. Trouble is he ain't allus there to do it, like the other day when he were due to do morning milkin' and he didn't turn up, so Mrs. Lane has to come and get me up when it weren't my shift. Don't reckon he come home at all that night if you ask me."

Thinking about all he had to put up with himself in the past month or two, Dan felt the indignation welling up in him again. As he swung the car into Harry Lane's yard he told himself he would be fair and give Harry a chance to make his excuses. But he knew there were no reasonable ones that could be offered and, catching sight of Harry on the short ladder against the kitchen wall, could not stop himself blurting out the reason for his visit.

"What was up with that pig you buried, Harry?"

The fair-haired man stopped trying to straighten the slates. He looked sharply at Dan and came down the ladder.

"What do you know about that?" he asked.

"What did that pig die of, Harry?" Dan met his gaze and Harry shifted uneasily. "Couldn't have been swine fever, could it?"

"No." Harry snapped emphatically.

"How d'you know? Had the vet over?"

"No, I haven't—and what the hell business is it of yours?" Harry picked up a fork, strode across the yard and plunged it into the muck heap. "It wasn't swine fever. Come and look for yourself, then maybe you'll be satisfied."

"I'd have to have the vet along to be sure—just as I think you ought to. Look, man, be reasonable. Do the right thing. It may save a lot of cash for someone—and it may save a lot of trouble for you."

Harry left the fork sticking in the muck and turned slowly to face Dan. His mouth was a thin line and his pale eyes with their fair lashes were like ice.

"So that's it—threatening me, eh?"

"Just advising you," Dan said quietly.

"What about those other baconers of mine? I've twenty of 'em here—just about ready for the bacon factory and if I can't move 'em . . ." His voice rose and there was a hint of panic in it. "All very fine for you to come and make trouble, Dan, when you've nothing to lose. Taking out your own losses on me, eh?"

"Don't be a fool, Harry," Dan said, controlling his exasperation and smarting under the man's final taunt. "If I wanted to make trouble, I wouldn't have come here myself. I'd have gone straight to the police. I'm not one for spreading tales."

Harry considered what he had said for a moment or two, then thrust his hands deep into his breeches pockets.

"All right, I'll have the vet up, if it'll make you happy. But as for tales—you may not spread 'em, Dan, but somebody does. Who told you about that pig?"

"Never you mind. I knew about it. That's enough."

"No, it's not enough. Someone told you, and I've a

fair idea who it was." He was angry again. "Okay, I know how to deal with him."

Dan was going to carry on the argument, but suddenly he felt he had had enough of the man for one evening. Without another word he got back into his car and drove away.

A low pre-war two-seater sports car came towards him from the Borchester road, and Jimmy Bryant waved as he nipped by. Answering the wave, Dan ran his tongue pensively over his teeth. Wonder if that young man realises what sort of a background Barbara Lane comes from, he thought . . . and how much of her father is he going to find in the character of that, so far, unspoiled young miss. That pretty face, those saucer blue eyes and that beguiling blonde poll might easily hide a toughness that would need a fairly thick-skinned and independent male to live with it—and from what he had seen Jimmy Bryant didn't appear to be cast in that mould.

To Jimmy, Barbara presented a different picture. Pretty, blonde, blue-eyed, certainly, but in a way which transformed his world into a hazy glow and gave him a delicious pain in his chest which he hoped he would never lose. What Dan estimated as toughness Jimmy saw as the spur which drove him on to battle, filling him with a resolve to combat that other love Barbara felt for her horses and riding, the love that he must force into second place by sheer strength of personality.

When she slipped out of the door and into the car

with him, his resolve collapsed. She was wonderful; whatever she asked he couldn't refuse.

"What movie are we going to?" she asked.

Jimmy sought out her hand from the folds of her coat and held it.

"Matter of fact, I thought we might give the movies a miss and do the same as we did the other night. Have some supper and then drive for a bit. Suit you?"

"All right."

At supper he ordered a bottle of wine—a white hock that would make a slight deficit in his weekly budget—and saw to it that his personality exerted itself enough to persuade her to have two glasses out of it. Throughout the meal he tried to resist the temptation to sit just gazing at her and kept up a steady flow of conversation, telling her about the other inmates in his office and making her, under the influence of the wine, laugh till tears came to her eyes and so far forget herself as to mop them away with her napkin.

Later Barbara made no protest when Jimmy sped the car along the same route they had taken after the point-to-point and gave him a quick, secret smile when he pulled up in the same clearing in the trees that overlooked the valley.

"The stars look brighter tonight," she said.

"They are. I ordered them specially for you."

He offered her a cigarette which she refused and took one himself and lit it. Out of the corner of his eye he was pleased to see a puzzled disappointment settle in her face.



"Barbara," he said, exhaling a column of smoke that mushroomed against the windscreen. "I want to have a serious talk with you."

"Couldn't you do it with your arm round me and my head on your shoulder?" she said.

He laughed and pulled her close against him. Again the scent of her hair tried to weaken him, but he drew deeply at his cigarette and fixed his mind on what he was determined to say.

"Barbara, I do seriously want to talk seriously . . ."

"Seriously?"

He snorted with laughter, choked over his cigarette and threw it out of the open window.

"Oh, darling Barbara!"

His arms were round her and his mouth found hers. Her fingers stroked his hair and tightened on his neck as the kiss sent a quivering thrill through her tensing body.

"Darling, darling Barbara," Jimmy whispered through the fine golden hair that tumbled over her ear.

"Nice Jimmy," she whispered back.

A little while later she broke from his encircling arms and pushed him away from her.

"You said you wanted to talk seriously," she said evenly. "What about?"

Jimmy thrust back his tousled hair from his forehead and puffed out his cheeks. For a moment he was nonplussed. She had been in his arms, responding to his passion, then as suddenly she was gone, sitting primly, almost stiffly by his side.

"It was about us," he said eventually. "About the

future. You remember I told you I had dinner with an uncle of mine? I've written to him and asked him if he can put me on to a better job. One that'll mean I'll be earning enough to . . . to . . ."

"To what?"

"Barbara . . . would you . . . d'you think there's any chance of you ever feeling like marrying me?"

He waited in a desperate sort of limbo for her to reply. The seconds ticked away noisily on the dashboard clock, each one seeming like an age.

"I don't know," she said.

"If I thought you might feel like it, it would . . . sort of, mean so much, darling. Give me confidence to get on and make something of myself that you'd be proud of. You do like me a bit?"

"Yes."

He found the directness of her answers somewhat disconcerting. He felt that behind the slowness of their coming there must be cool and rapid calculation where he was being weighed up against Jellicoe. But when she turned to him after another silence and looked at him, he saw that she was different, that her eyes carried an expression he had never seen in them before—a tenderness that drew him forward to rest his head against her breast while his eyes misted over with emotion.

"Yes, I do like you, Jimmy," she whispered, caressing his cheek with cool fingers. "But . . . about marriage . . . I don't know. I've never thought about it before, you see. I think . . . perhaps . . ."

Jimmy raised his head and kissed her chin.

"You think it might be a good idea?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes wide as they gazed thoughtfully across the vast darkness of the valley.

"It might, but I don't know, Jimmy. I promise you that's the truth. I don't know. I'll have to think about it . . . very carefully."

His lips pressed hungrily on hers, but she eased him gently but firmly away.

"No, Jimmy. No more now. Let's drive some more . . . please."

Jimmy hesitated, then grinned happily.

"Whatever'll make you happy, darling," he said, slightly punch-drunk with the success he had had in his battle for supremacy in Barbara's divided affections.

## THIRTEEN

DAN ARCHER WAS USING SHEEP HURDLES to block gaps in the hedge of a field of spring wheat flanking the road before bringing his flock in to graze. He straightened at the sound of approaching footsteps, easing the stiffness out of his back.

"Mornin', Jacob!" He nodded to Jacob Dale trudging along the road.

"Mornin', Mr. Archer." Jacob looked sullen.

"How's the gaffer, Jacob?"

"Harry Lane? Don't work for 'im no more, Mr. Archer. He sacked me—day afore yesterday."

Dan's jaw sagged. The unexpected from Harry Lane was in the normal run of things, but to get rid of the man who virtually ran his farm . . . "What did he do that for, Jacob?"

"He didn't like me tellin' of him buryin' that there pig."

Dan felt guilty. He never considered what consequences might come out of his self-righteous visit to Harry—certainly not the possibility that Jacob might be sacked. "I'm sorry, Jacob. I feel I'm responsible in a way."

Jacob moved off the road on to the grass verge closer to Dan and pushed his frayed cap on to the back of his head.

"I ain't sorry," he said. "Some ways I'm glad it

happened." He jerked his head in the direction of Harry Lane's farm. "Wasn't run right."

"No?" Dan said, knowing what was coming.

"I don't mind working for a chap as pitches in himself. If you see your gaffer scawtin' his guts out, stands to reason you has a go yourself. A gaffer's job's to be there, ain't it? He used to work like a madman a few year ago. He never ought to muck off like he do now and leave it all to us. It's still got to be done—and 'tis comin' to be our responsibility, not his. And he's s'posed to be gaffer."

"Ay. I've seen it coming for some time, I'm afraid."

Dan nodded. "What about his other chap? He's staying on with Mr. Lane?"

"Oh, ay. He's got kids," Jacob said simply. "I ain't none but the missus."

Dan plucked a twig out of the hedge and chewed it. Jacob was a good worker—and they were hard to come by, like gold. But with Simon and Len Thomas, he was paying out something like a thousand odd in wages a year already and only getting six hundred odd for himself.

"Not got a job yet yourself, Jacob?"

"No, Mr. Archer. But I ain't worry'."

"No." Worth is weight in gold, Dan knew. "Try Jim Evans. He's looking for a new cowman."

"Thankee, Mr. Archer. I'll probably go over and see 'im." Jacob readjusted his cap and was turning to go when a deep rumbling chuckle came up from his stomach. "'As it's funny side, this 'as, Mr. Archer!"

"Ay?"

"You went up and saw Mister Lane and he 'ad to 'ave that pig dug out. Vet came to see it and it weren't swine fever after all. Summat wi' the liver."

"I'm very glad to hear it." Dan felt the corners of his mouth turning up and bit on the twig to try and stop them. "Might have been serious otherwise."

Dan watched the stocky, bow-legged, departing figure of Jacob, imagining his enjoyment at Harry's discomfort in the presence of the vet. Vetty Wise was well named and wouldn't be blind to the fact that Harry should have called him a day or two earlier. In spite of a feeling that through his haste he had been troublesome, Dan's sympathies were not with Harry. They were firstly with that quiet, conscientious craftsman, Jacob. Secondly with the vet, who still had his living to earn. With a quiet smile he turned back to his sheep hurdles.

Harry Lane saw Jacob's departure only as a stumbling-block to his plans. The importance of the coming show season occupied his whole thinking, and the chief sufferer for any mishap that took place outside the stables was his wife.

Harry's temper grew shorter, and irritants like bills, or delay in getting a meal when he was in a hurry made him flare up. When Madge asked who was going to do the work on the farm now he was short of a hand, he clattered his spoon on to his plate and glared angrily.

"There's Joe and the new hand."

"I'm sorry," Madge said, anxious to avoid a row over her incautious query. "I didn't know you'd got someone to take Jacob's place."

"I haven't. But I shall."

"I see." Madge started to clear the pots off the table and carry them to the sink. "Let's hope he'll be as good as Jacob."

"I'll get someone. Leave that to me." Harry got up from the table and dragged his chair moodily back to its position against the wall. "I've got to get someone. Nothing's going to interfere with Barbara's season. She'll ride Jellicoe at the four major shows. She'll get her qualifying money on Jellicoe for Harringay—and there's always Downside as a second string."

Madge, whose life was dull, watched the grey streaks of fat smear and run under the hot tap as she carried out her dullest job of all—washing up. She knew that it irritated him to see her washing up under the running tap instead of filling the basin, but in the last few months she had ceased to care—or derived some satisfaction from provoking him.

"And what," she asked drily, "do we live on in the meantime?"

"Are you starving then?" Harry asked harshly.

"No, but I just like to know," she said.

"Look." Harry came across the kitchen and stood beside her. "We'll go on the same as we've done before. Neither you nor Barbara nor me have felt the pinch yet—and there's no reason why we should. I'll look after things. You can leave that to me."

Madge left the knives and forks on the draining-board and faced her husband.

"All very well for now," she said calmly. "But what about when there are four of us?"

Harry stood looking at her with blank eyes.

"I'm going to have a baby, Harry."

He nodded, discomfited, worried, calculating.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Nothing is going to interfere with Barbara's future," Harry said flatly. "I don't care what's going to happen, nothing's going to alter that. I've got it planned."

She recoiled.

"A fine time to spring the news on me," he snorted.

"Is that all you have to say?" She twisted the tea-cloth in her hands, searching her husband's face for some kindling instinct rising within him.

"A fine time to happen," he repeated. "When did you know?"

"About two or three months ago."

"Why the devil didn't you say so then?"

Madge found it impossible to explain. She could not put words to the emotional stresses and strains that had made an old woman of her before her time. She wanted to say something but all she saw was his broad back as he stood, shoulders braced and feet apart, looking down at the floor.

Presently he turned and looked at her without affection.

"If I thought it was anybody else's I'd be mad, but I know it isn't. You've had a child before. Having



another won't do you any harm. I'll look after it. But you won't change my ideas. Nothing alters what I've got planned. I know what I'm doing." He moved abruptly to the door. "Go ahead. Have the kid. Probably do you good. It'll give you something to think about outside me. But remember, for the time being, Barbara comes first."

Stunned, desperate, she stood mutely by the kitchen table long after Harry had gone. Tears coursed down her cheeks, but the hurt within her was unrelieved. She was barely aware of Barbara coming in and only made a belated attempt to hide her unhappiness when she felt her daughter's arms round her shoulders.

"Mum! What's the matter? Has Dad . . .?"

"I'm sorry, Barby," Madge fumbled in her apron pocket for a handkerchief. "I didn't mean you to see me like this, but I couldn't help it. Yes, it's something your Dad said . . . something I told him rather and he . . . he . . ."

Sobs choked back the words and she rested her head against her daughter's shoulder, defeated and too much in despair to care who saw her weep.

"Mum . . . poor Mum. Tell me what happened. Look, I know things haven't been too good between you and Dad," Barbara said and hurried on when she saw the look of startled bewilderment in her mother's eyes. "I know you've tried to keep things from me, but I'm not blind. I'm not completely insensitive. I've been worried. I knew things weren't right. What happened just now?"

Madge told her. The girl was taken aback.

"But, Mother, it's so late . . . I mean you're so old . . ."

The unhappy woman turned her head away and her shoulders drooped, all hope of understanding gone.

"I mean . . . I'm sorry, Mum. I didn't mean it like that," Barbara stammered awkwardly. "I just never thought. And really . . . I'm glad."

"Thank you, Barby." Madge managed to force a smile and blew her nose. "I'm silly. I get upset so easily. You mustn't take any notice. Just forget it."

Barbara took a tea-towel and helped with the washing up. They worked in awkward silence for a while until Madge, with an effort, tried to make conversation.

"When are you seeing Jimmy again? He seems a nice sort of lad."

"He is, Mum." Barbara dried three forks and dropped them noisily into the cutlery box. "Matter of fact he asked me a few days ago if I'd marry him. I didn't say I would. I said I'd think about it."

"He seems a nice lad," Madge said again. "And that's important . . . to get a nice fellow, a kind man . . ."

She grovelled in the bottom of the bowl to find the washing up mop. Barbara saw her eyes were again filling with tears and moved close to her, putting her arm round her waist.

"He is nice, Mum, but I wouldn't do anything you didn't want, that would make you unhappy."

Madge straightened her back, her hands gripping the edge of the sink.

"Now, Barby, you must do what you want. I don't come into it. If you want to marry him and you think he's the right man . . . that's important, my dear, to make sure you get the right man . . ." She faltered, looked pathetically at her daughter as if she expected her to laugh. "I'm being silly, aren't I?"

Barbara, near tears herself, sucked in and bit her lower lip as she shook her head emphatically.

"I am, but p'raps it doesn't matter for once. I mean what I say, however silly it sounds. You get the right man, Barby, and you can be very happy, but if you don't . . . well, you're old enough to know your own mind. You're not a child any longer. You've seen plenty of what goes on, mixing with the people you know . . . but think carefully before you do anything rash . . . I mean, before you . . ."

A pudding plate half dried in one hand and the tea-cloth in the other, Barbara leant forward impulsively and kissed her mother.

"I know what you mean, Mum . . . and don't worry. It's all right. I haven't quite made up my mind about Jimmy yet, but I have nearly."

They finished the washing up before Harry came back into the kitchen. Seeing Barbara, he at once turned his attention to her.

"Better get Jellicoe out this afternoon, Barbara," he said. "Give him a pipe opener and then take him over a few jumps. Seemed to me he was a bit sluggish this morning."

"All right, Dad," Barbara said automatically.

"And afterwards you better give Downside a work out. D'you know, I've been thinking—with any luck, if you can teach the brute to take the walls as well as he does the fences there's no reason why you shouldn't have both of 'em to ride at Harringay this year."

"If I'm still riding then," Barbara said quietly.

"Eh?" Harry looked at her blankly. "What d'you mean? Get on with you. Jellicoe will qualify this season easy as pie."

"I wasn't meaning that, Dad," Barbara went on, her voice still low. "I meant if I rode at all."

"What's to stop you?" Harry looked quickly from Barbara to Madge, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. "What've you been telling the kid, Madge?"

He took a step forward but Barbara was equally quick in moving between him and her mother, as if to protect her from possible attack.

"Mum hasn't said anything to me," she said firmly. "I just might get married . . . and then I might not feel like going on riding."

"I've never heard such damn nonsense," Harry snapped. "You can't stop now. I've got everything planned. Next year you're going to——"

"What I do next year depends on what Jimmy says," she retorted as she swept past him to the phone in the hall, picked up the receiver and asked for a number.

"When did this damn nonsense get into her head?" Harry demanded roughly.

"I don't know . . . if it is nonsense, Harry. I only heard just now that she and Jimmy Bryant might get wed."

Harry swore openly. He seized his wife by the shoulder and spun her round from the sink.

"It's your doing!" he said. "You've been working for this. You've been seeing to it that it'd happen all along, filling the girl's head with a lot of romantic tommyrot, trying to get her away from what I've got planned for her!"

"No, Harry, I've done nothing," Madge said calmly. "What Barbara does is of her own choosing."

He growled angrily, and was about to say something more when he heard Barbara's voice from the hall, speaking seriously, earnestly.

"Jimmy . . . yes, it's me . . . I'm fine, thanks . . . look, Jimmy . . . yes, I know it's difficult to talk in the office, but just listen. It's important. Look, I've thought it over and . . . and I've decided—I would like to marry you . . . yes, I'm quite certain, you silly! I said I would like to marry you!"

Harry Lane swung round on his wife, but she met his look of hate with calm, triumphant eyes.

## FOURTEEN

FOR WEEKS THE CHATTER OF MOWERS, the metallic clang of hay-rakes, the unhurried plod of heavy draught horses, carting their loads to Dutch barns and ricks, filled the Ambridge air from morning till late in the mellow summer evenings.

Haymaking time was a busy time, involving a certain amount of mental as well as physical strain. Hay was valuable and casual labour was scarce. No matter how promising the weather forecast, there was always the risk of unexpected storms. This year's hay crop ruined or spoiled by rain to such an extent that its value as fodder was decreased could mean an additional financial burden to be borne next year, when the farmer would find it necessary to buy in feed.

So, with one eye on the skies and the other on the future, Ambridge farmers mowed, raked, tossed and carted through the latter half of June and well into July, and only when the ricks were thatched and the Dutch barns full did they pause to allow themselves a little relaxation.

Perhaps the founders of the Hannerstone Horse Show—many of them hardworking farmers themselves—were aware of this easing of the tension once the hay was in when they picked their date for the show during the third week in July. Time after haymaking was measured as "so long before, or so long after Hanner-

stone" and it took a major crisis in family or farming to stop the community having their day out at the show.

It was also a date for Harry and Barbara Lane. So far it had been a busy season, taking the horses round the shows. Barbara had successes both with Jellicoe and Downside, and they were sufficient to make Harry put into the deeper recesses of his mind the memory of hay still lying in his fields, browned and rotting; there was no time for haymaking when Barbara had to be taken to shows. Shoved firmly to the back of his mind was also the scene when he heard both about Madge's pregnancy and Barbara's agreeing to marry Jimmy. The more successes Barbara had during the season the more convinced Harry became that she would not choose love before a career. She was still a kid. Didn't know her own mind. Plenty of time for marriage when she'd met a few more people and could pick and choose somebody who'd be a credit to her. . . .

Barbara and Harry passed Brookfield in the horse-box as Dan, Doris and Phil were waving off Chris and Paul, promising to look them up when they got to the show later on.

"No Madge again," Doris commented to her husband.

"Maybe she's not feeling up to it," Dan said. He did not want other people's domestic acrimony to spoil the day. "After all, how far's she gone now?"

"Not yet six, I think. That couldn't be any reason for her staying at home."

"Maybe not. Anyhow, what Madge chooses to do—

or what Harry chooses for her—isn't our business. If she comes for advice from you, or wants to have a chat about something, that's all right—but why she's not going to Hannerstone is no concern of ours, Doris, love."

Doris could not dismiss it so lightly from her mind. An hour and a half later she was still brooding on the lack of understanding in men about 'those things' until the crowds pouring into the gates of Hannerstone Show distracted her attention and made her decide that maybe Dan was right. It would be silly to let gloomy thoughts cloud the occasion.

The sun blazed down as they parked their car in a narrow space near the ring.

There was little doubt that, whatever the situation at home, it was having no effect on Barbara's riding. She won with comfortable ease the first event in which they saw her ride, and her success continued throughout the day, even in the hunt event in which Christine was riding and which the Archers looked on as a certainty for the family.

They expressed their disappointment openly when Christine came to join them, but the girl was not depressed.

"Barbara took the event hands down, Dad, and she deserved to," she said cheerfully.

Paul Johnson, by her side, shook his head in bewilderment.

"Don't know what's got into Christine," he said. "I thought Barbara was a rival. Now it seems she's the sweetest girl in the world."



"She is," Christine said emphatically. "D'you know, Mum, I'd have done worse than I did in dressage if it hadn't been for Barbara. She knows old Simpkins, one of the judges, and gave me some tips on what he liked and what he didn't. I think it was jolly decent. She needn't have said a word about it."

"That was very kind," Doris said. "Very kind."

"I think anybody who can afford to do something like that is a pretty good scout—and I told her so afterwards," Christine went on enthusiastically.

"And now she's putting Jimmy Bryant's nose out of joint by going so far as to handmaid the girl for her next event," Paul said with irony in his voice. "Women are unpredictable."

It seemed that nothing could stop Barbara that day. Again, confidently and united to her mount as if she had never ridden any other horse, she and Jellicoe won the applause of every spectator at the show—and the loudest applause came from the beer tent where Harry Lane boasted to all around him that Jellicoe's winnings were now at the figure when three more wins would qualify him for Harringay and there were two more major shows before then. It was a walk-over for Barbara. It was what he'd always said would happen. It was great news. It called for a drink . . . a lot of drinks.

It called, in fact, for so many drinks that when most people were packing up and preparing to go home, Jimmy Bryant hurried over to Dan Archer, his face grim with worry.

"What's up, Jimmy?"

"It's Harry Lane—he's sloshed . . . practically out."

"It's happened again, Dad," said Phil.

"Trouble is," Jimmy said, "he thinks he can drive the horse-box back and he's not fit to. I'm certainly not going to let her go with him as he is."

"I should think not."

"Anyhow, Mr. Archer," Jimmy said, "Barbara's agreed to let me take her father back in my car . . . and she wondered if you could possibly drive the horse-box for her?"

Dan pushed back his hat and scratched his head, considering.

"Ay. Don't see why not," he said at length. "You can drive your mother back, Phil."

"Course, Dad."

Dan and Jimmy found Chris and Paul with Barbara. The young girl was white and drawn after the strain of the day's competitions and the latest worry over Harry.

"Don't worry, Barby. We'll look after things," Dan said.

She smiled her thanks.

"And we'll look after your father," Jimmy said. "You'll give me a hand to get him into my car, will you, Paul?"

Paul hesitated a moment then gave a grim smile.

"Sure, I'll help you."

The two young men went off, and a minute or two later reappeared with Harry and without ceremony bundled him on to the narrow back seat of Jimmy's

sports car. Paul Johnson wiped his hands on his trouser legs afterwards as if he had been handling something distasteful to him.

"Everything set," Jimmy said as he came up. "I'll push off."

"I'm coming with you," Barbara said quickly. "Uncle would you mind? I . . . I think I'd better."

"'Course not, my dear," Dan said. "I can manage a horse-box on my own, I reckon!"

"I told Barbara I was going with you," Christine told her father when the others had gone. "She said she wanted to be with Jimmy and her father in the car. I think she was a bit afraid that Harry might start something with Jimmy . . . a scrap or something . . . because he wants to marry her."

"Doubt if Harry Lane will be able to start anything with anybody for quite a while yet," Dan grunted.

He drove the horse-box slowly. The engine, though sweeter sounding than Harry's previous truck, was tired and rough, and he found the clutch pedal difficult to manipulate, with its short thrust and savage action. Typical of Harry's usual purchases, he thought. Cheap and shoddy and never anything but a doctored-up job that would probably cost him more in the end than if he'd spent real money on a decent job in the first place.

By Tatsleigh the traffic was thinning and Dan thought with relief that he would soon be turning on to the quiet route to Ambridge where he would be able to hold the crown of the road without much fear of inconveniencing other motorists. But before they reached the top of the

rise he was cursing again. The engine started missing, spitting black gobs of smoke from the exhaust.

On the level, going through Tatsleigh village, the coughing stopped and Dan did a quick mental look ahead at the rise and fall of the road for the next six miles. There was no serious climb before Ambridge. With luck they'd pull through if he nursed the truck along without too much pressure.

But the luck wasn't there. A mile outside Tatsfield the truck gave a short volley of muffled explosions from the exhaust and came to a standstill.

Dan sat motionless, grinding his teeth.

"Petrol, d'you think, Dad?" Christine asked tentatively.

Dan shook his head and pointed to the gauge. It showed half full.

"Dirty carburettor, maybe, then?"

Dan took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. He sat back, smacked his hands together and relaxed.

"I don't give a damn what it is, Chris, I'm not dirtying my hands over it," he said and indicated the village behind them with his thumb. "There's a garage in Tatsleigh. Nip back and get someone—and tell 'em Harry Lane's paying for it!"

Christine grinned as she opened the cab door and clambered out.

"That's the spirit, Dad!"

A faint whinny came from inside the horse-box.

"All right, love, I'll have a look at Jellicoe," Dan said, easing himself out of the driving seat. "You get moving."

Jellicoe was restless and Dan decided there was no point in keeping him cooped up. They might be stuck there for hours. Talking quietly to it, he led it out of the box and tethered it to a telegraph pole so that it could crop the grass verge.

Satisfied that the tether was not long enough to allow the horse to get into trouble in the shallow ditch or barbed wire fence running along the other side, Dan filled his pipe and settled down on the verge to enjoy the evening sun.

His pipe had gone out and he was half asleep by the time Chris came back with a sandy-haired youth in a blue overall and oil smudges on his brow and cheeks. Rousing himself he explained the symptoms of the truck's ailment to the mechanic and watched him dismantle the carburettor after several futile attempts to restart the engine.

"Rusty tank," the young man said shortly, showing Dan the sediment in the palm of his hand after he had unscrewed the base of the float chamber. "Flaking off in the tank. Often does with these old jobs."

After siphoning some petrol from the tank and washing out the carburettor and filter as best he could, he reassembled the carburettor, climbed into the cab and pressed the starter button. The engine turned noisily, came to life for a few seconds and died again.

"She'll fire, anyhow," the mechanic grinned. "Just a question of getting the petrol flow through again now. You'll be okay."

Dan nodded his thanks and grinned at the thought of

Harry being charged for a job he could easily have done himself.

"You can put Jellicoe back in the box, Chris," he said, listening to the engine churning under the impetus of the starter motor but refusing to spark. The mechanic advanced the ignition and tugged at the loop of wire that served for a choke.

Again the engine came to life and, ramming his foot up and down on the accelerator, the young man managed to catch the revs and keep the crank turning. Smoke billowed out from the exhaust trained to emit its fumes to the side of the road between the front and rear wheels. A muffled explosion in the silence sent a stinking oily cloud round Dan and he heard the mechanic speed the engine up again sharply. The next moment there was a crack like a pistol shot as the engine back-fired, and simultaneous with the shout of triumph from the mechanic, "That's cleared 'er!" he heard Christine's shrill cry of fright.

Like shadows through the smoke he saw her struggling to hold Jellicoe who, near the lowered tail-board of the box was rearing up in panic after the back-fire. Christine caught her foot under the tail-board and fell. He jumped forward but had to duck to avoid Jellicoe's hooves flaying past his head. His wild grab at the loose halter failed and the horse bolted at the barbed wire fence.

With a groan of horror he saw the beast catch its fetlock on the top strand of wire and lunge down, crumpling the fence. Neighing with pain and fright it

struggled to raise itself, the barbs tearing at its flanks.

"Stop that ruddy engine!" Dan yelled.

He reached the horse as it clambered up, grabbing the tethering rope before it had time to turn and bolt into the field. Firmly and coolly, uttering commands and reassurance, he managed to get it under control and clear of the wire.

Christine was soon beside him, looking at the torn skin and angry laceration where the barbed wire had caught it.

"Oh, gosh," she whispered. "Jellicoe! Poor Jellicoe."

The mechanic stood by helplessly while they brought the horse out of the field and held it, talking and patting it till it's quivering flesh calmed down.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, guv. Didn't know . . ."

"Wasn't your fault, lad," Dan said. "No one's to blame for this except the man who owns this horse—and that blasted truck."

"Anything I can do?" he looked at the wounds Jellicoe had received and shook his head sadly. "Too bad, too bad."

"Nothing you can do, son," Dan said. "But you can do something, Chris. You can go back with this chap to the garage and phone the vet. Try and get him over here at once, and if you can't, ask him what's best to do—wait here or take the horse back to Harry Lane's place."

Christine was away quickly, white-faced and anxious. It was only after she had gone that Dan thought of what Barbara was going to feel about this accident.

He grimaced, and smoothed the sweating horse's neck.

"There's going to be hell bursting out over this, Jellicoe," he said. "Real unhappy hell."



## FIFTEEN

WHEN DAN AND CHRISTINE reached the Lane's Farm Madge was pottering about the flower garden with a Dutch hoe. She took the news about Jellicoe calmly, and at Dan's cautious enquiry about Harry indicated that he was upstairs 'sleeping it off'.

Barbara, Dan was thankful to find, was not at the farm. She had gone with Jimmy into the village to get some aspirin for her father. Christine busied herself getting Jellicoe into the stable.

"'Fraid Barby's going to take this hard," Dan said.

"You're not to blame, Dan. There's only one person who has to answer for it—him." Madge jerked her head up at the front bedroom where Harry was sleeping sprawled across the counterpane, breathing noisily through loose lips, his collar undone and his boots unlaced.

Anxiously Christine came out to join them at the sound of the vet's car coming into the yard. Close behind it, swinging in through the gates in a flurry of dust, was Jimmy's sports car.

"Something's wrong!" Barbara was out of the car and hurrying across the yard almost before it stopped. Her glance took in rapidly the serious expressions of the group. "It's Jellicoe! I know it!"

Dan jerked his head to Chris and she led Mr. Wise, the veterinary surgeon, away to the stables. Barbara

made to go with them, but Dan caught her arm and held her back.

"No, wait, love. Wait till you've heard what happened. It's not all that serious. At least, I don't think it is. Mr. Wise'll soon tell us."

He explained briefly to the girl what had happened—the breakdown, the backfire and the sudden lunge of Jellicoe on to the barbed wire fence. The lines of concern deepened in her face and without another word she broke from his grasp and ran to the stable.

"You've nothing to blame yourself for, Dan," Madge said. "Thanks for breaking it to her like you did. She's a good girl. She won't hold it against you."

Madge went indoors to see if Harry showed any signs of recovery. Dan and Jimmy, drawn like a magnet to the stable door, were met on the threshold by Christine.

"Don't go in for a minute," she said quietly. "Give 'em room to work."

"What does Wise say?" asked her father.

She shrugged noncommittally.

"Barbara's going to need you now, Jimmy," she said. "She's very shaken. I've told her it isn't serious, but I don't feel too happy about Jellicoe. I can tell by Mr. Wise's face that he isn't either. If the verdict's bad, Barbara'll take it hard. So give her some comfort and attention. You know what I mean. . . ."

"I do—and I wish she'd let me," Jimmy said wryly. "Nothing I'd like better than to feel I was sort of—useful to her sometimes, but she's very independent."

"She's very unhappy at the moment."

"I don't doubt." Jimmy gave a sad smile. "But Jellicoe's a horse. I'm just a man. Sometimes I wish I'd been born with four legs and a mane."

"But you're engaged, you and Barbara, aren't you?" Christine said, puzzled.

"We're engaged—for what it means," Jimmy fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes. "Sometimes I wonder if she ever remembers . . . if she ever really thinks about me."

"Once she's got this Harringay business settled she'll be all right," Christine consoled him. "That's an all-absorbing objective at the moment. When she gets there . . . if she ever does . . ." She glanced anxiously towards the stable, wishing the vet would come out and tell them his opinion. "She'll have more time to think of other things."

"Maybe," Jimmy lit a cigarette and drew thoughtfully on it. "Maybe she'll even get to the point of saying *when* she'll marry me. It would be a comfort to know something really definite."

A loud, angry voice came from the farmhouse. Madge, appearing at the kitchen door, was pushed roughly aside by Harry Lane, who lurched out into the yard.

"What's happened to the horse?" he demanded thickly. His face with white under it's tan and the veins in his cheek and across the bridge of his nose stood out livid against his colouring. "What the hell's happened?"

"There's been some trouble, Harry," Dan said. "That blessed truck of yours broke down and——"

"The horse! What's happened to the horse?"

"Wise is in with it now. You better wait, like the rest of us, till he's found out what the damage is. It may not be serious."

Harry tried to push Dan out of his way, but the older farmer caught him by the shoulders and pushed him back against the wall.

"Listen, Harry, you just stay here and do as you're told. You're going to wait here and listen to what I say."

Firmly and without sparing any detail of what he thought of Harry's behaviour and his truck, Dan went once more over the accident. The flush heightened on Harry's cheeks as he listened.

"If that horse is maimed," he snarled. "You'll pay for it, Dan Archer!"

"Best thing you can do, Mr. Lane, is put your head under the pump," Jimmy said coldly. "You don't know what you're saying."

"What the hell business is it of yours?" Harry fixed the young man with angry eyes. "What're you doing here, anyway?"

"Jimmy brought you back from the show in his car," Dan said quietly. "If you'd been fool enough to try and drive that truck yourself, that horse wouldn't just have been hurt. Barbara, you and Jellicoe might well have been dead. Now, pull yourself together, Harry. You've got a lot to be thankful for."

"Thankful! Hah!"

Wise came out of the stable, his arm paternally

round Barbara's shoulders. Harry broke from Dan's grip and staggered towards them.

"Well, what's he like?"

The vet picked his words carefully, glancing now and then at Barbara.

"Most of the lacerations aren't serious," he said. "But I'm afraid old Jellicoe's snagged a tendon in his front right leg."

"But he'll be all right for jumping, won't he?" Barbara clutched appealingly at the vet's arm, her big blue eyes glazed with anxiety. "He's not ruined?"

"He'll be all right unless you get appalling bad luck, but it'll take time," Wise said kindly, understanding her concern. "I'd say he'll probably be laid up for about six weeks."

"Six weeks!" Harry's voice rose to a bellow. "Don't be a damn fool. That horse has got to be jumping again in three weeks."

The vet shook his head.

"But six weeks," Barbara echoed. "That means I'll miss the Queen's County at Parkleigh. He must be better before then."

"He damn well will be," Harry shouted.

The vet began to lose patience.

"You can force that horse to jump if you want to, Harry Lane, if you want to put him off jumping for life. Otherwise you wait until he's fit. If you want to use him in three weeks don't expect me to take responsibility."

"Bit strung up, both of 'em," Dan explained, walking

over to Wise's car with him. "Only natural. Harry's carrying a fair load as well and that doesn't help matters. He'll see sense when he's sobered up."

"That's why I gave it him straight," Wise said. "Time somebody did. Tell Barbara I'll be over again tomorrow. It's bad luck, but it could have happened to anyone."

When Dan returned to the yard Harry advanced to meet him, his shoulders hunched forward and his lower lip thrust out pugnaciously.

"It's your doing," he growled. "You've had it in for me, Dan Archer. I don't need telling."

Dan sighed hopelessly and walked past the man to have a final word with Barbara, being comforted by her mother at the kitchen door. He heard Harry shambling after him.

"I haven't finished yet, Dan Archer. You've had it in for me since you lost your cattle. You thought you'd get me in the dirt over that pig, but you didn't so you take my hand away from me."

Dan spun round in amazement.

"I did what?"

"It was through you Jacob left me."

"You sacked Jacob yourself. He told me. And what the heck should I want to take Jacob away from you for? You need two Jacobs with things as they are here. But you sacked him. You can't pin that on me." Dan turned back to Barbara. "You know how sorry I am about this, Barbara. But Chris and I couldn't help it."

Barbara nodded against her mother's bosom.

"Of course she understand, Dan," Madge said. "And

Harry'll be sorry tomorrow for what he's been saying."

"Like hell I will," Harry snorted. "I know what I'm doing. I know who's for me and who's against me."

Dan signalled to Christine to come with him out of the yard. Turning, Harry caught sight of Jimmy Bryant.

"And what the heck are you doing here?" he snarled, moving threateningly towards the young man. Jimmy looked at him with cold distaste and stood his ground. "You're another of 'em . . . coming here to take what you can get and sticking your nose into my business."

"That's not true, Mr. Lane," Jimmy said, unruffled. "I came here because I like Barbara—because I love her."

Harry swung round on his heels, throwing his arms wide and glowering at Dan, Chris and Jimmy in turn.

"Get out, the lot of you!"

"We're getting, Harry," Dan said in a level voice. "We're getting as soon as we can. Come on, Chris. You'll be all right, Madge?"

She nodded calmly.

"He doesn't frighten me any more," she said.

Dan and Chris reached the yard gate. Jimmy Bryant was still by the farmhouse door, fists clenched, facing Harry. Harry stood swaying slightly, watching him, waiting for him to make a move in his direction.

"Come on, Jimmy," Dan called. "You can run us back to Brookfield. We've got no transport."

The young man hesitated, then when Barbara looked up and whispered huskily, "Go, Jimmy, it'll be best," he came reluctantly to join them.

"It wasn't our fault, Dad. It wasn't," Christine burst out once they were in the car. "He's . . . he's a brute! And the things he said to you, Dad . . . about Jellicoe, about Jacob!"

"He'll have forgotten all about it by tomorrow," Dan chuckled, allowing good sense to dispel the smart of Harry's unjust accusations.

"I don't know why you didn't hit him, Dad."

"I felt like hitting him myself," Jimmy said.

"Harry Lane was in a violent mood and violence doesn't do any good under those circumstances," Dan said. "As the drink wears off he'll calm down and everything'll come back to normal. If I'd hit him that might have given rise to real hate. Mightn't do me any harm, but there's other people—Madge for one. She'd be the sufferer."

"What about Barbara?" Jimmy said, defensively. "If Harry Lane's allowed to have free rein like this all the time, he's going to . . . to wreck her and me if he can. I know he'd like to."

Dan took out his pipe and stuck it in his mouth. His pouch was empty, but he found comfort in chewing on the familiar stem.

"Now don't you start jumping to conclusions, young fellow, or you'll make things worse than they are. And as for Harry Lane having a free rein—well, there'll come a time when he has to be pulled in a bit maybe.



When that time comes, someone'll do it, more than likely. But not till the time comes."

And though Dan did not add any more to what he had said, the quiet, affirmative way in which he had spoken told the two young people that, for all his apparent phlegmatic acceptance of Harry Lane's failings, he would not let things get too far out of hand and that somewhere he had the means for checking them—when the time came.

## SIXTEEN

THE CRICKET MATCH between Ambridge and Borchester Old Boys, which took place annually towards the end of August on the village green, was by tradition the occasion for a lot of banter and boasting on behalf of the respective teams by people who normally did not concern themselves overmuch with cricket. It was one of those fixtures that was played out in a spirit of slap-happy good humour and in consequence was all the more entertaining to watch. The Old Boys had no illusions about their prowess as cricketers but were prepared to make exhibitions of themselves on any Saturday afternoon to gather a pound or two in the collecting boxes travelling round the boundary to contribute to a local charity they regularly supported.

By the time Christine got to the village green in the middle of the afternoon, Ambridge were down to their last two men for eighty-seven runs. Her face was composed and a faint smile played round the corners of her mouth. She sat down on the grass away from the main knot of spectators on the boundary line and watched Paul Johnson, fielding at mid-off, come sprinting towards her after a ball that her brother Jack, who had thirty-one to his credit, nicked past him to snatch a hurried single. Paul plugged it accurately back to the wicket-keeper. The bails flew up, but Charlie Wain-

wright, wheezing hard down the pitch, had his bat outstretched and just over the crease.

While the wickets were being straightened Paul gave Christine a brief wave and mouthed, "You're late."

The next ball whipped past Wainwright's ponderous bat and spreadeagled the stumps. Ambridge were out for their eighty-eight. Lazy and unprejudiced applause spattered around the boundary and the players moved off the field to the benches ranged outside the old loft and stables of the Bull, which served the local team as a pavilion.

After a couple of minutes Paul, his old school blazer over his shoulders and a white silk square loosely tucked into the open neck of his shirt, walked over to meet Christine.

"You're a fine one," he said, taking her arm.

"I'm sorry. I had things to do." She looked up into his face, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. "I've got good news, Paul. The vet came this afternoon and Jellicoe'll be ready for full active service next week!"

She expected some sort of taunt from him. He did not seem to want to understand her motives in helping Barbara so much in the weeks since Jellicoe's accident. Perhaps he was concerned over their own business up at Grey Gables, which she had to admit she'd neglected once or twice to help Barbara. But it was useless to explain to him she owed it to the other girl because she felt responsible in some degree for the accident. Useless to explain that once she accepted she could never better Barbara as a horsewoman she would do all she could to

help her win and not be a dog in the manger about it. She did not regret for one moment having acted as a self-appointed handmaiden to Barbara during the busy weeks of August when the girl was riding Downside, her second horse, in every approved show within reasonable distance of Ambridge. Neither did she regret helping Barbara with the slow and patient exercising of Jellicoe as his wound healed. But Paul would not understand.

Now, instead of some sarcastic remark about her former jealousy of Barbara, he said in a flat voice that lacked interest, "Really? Fine. I guess that means I'll see even less of you."

"Barbara's in heaven, Paul."

"And Harry Lane'll be off on another bender, I suppose, to tell the world how glad he is and how he nursed the brute back to health with his own fair hands. Tschal!" He spat out his displeasure.

Christine freed her arm from his and moved away from him.

"Come off it, Paul. I get tired of you growling and spitting every time you mention Harry Lane's name. Once and for all, what is it you've got against him?" She looked at him seriously. "After all, Dad's got more reason to dislike Harry Lane from the way he's behaved lately than you have, but he doesn't go about griping and groaning about him. Just why is it you hate him?"

Paul sucked in his lips and kicked peevishly at a dandelion root.

"I don't like Harry Lane, that's all."

"But for what reason? You can't just fix a hate on someone for nothing. It must be because he's done something to you."

"He's done nothing to me," Paul said, his voice still flat.

"Paul, you're sure it's nothing to do with Barbara?"

"Nothing at all."

"You swear that?"

"Listen, Chris, I wouldn't have anything to do with anything that came out of the Lane stable if my life depended on it," he said, irritably. "Does that satisfy you?"

"It doesn't explain why you don't like Harry Lane."

Paul turned to her, took her by the shoulders and stared for a moment at her rounded, open, healthy face.

"One day I'll tell you, Chris."

"So there is something?"

He nodded.

"One day I'll tell you, perhaps—if I have to. But till then, just forget about it, will you? Lay off probing and prying, because you'll never find out—till the time comes." Paul saw the Ambridge team taking the field and switched on an easy smile to cover his seriousness. "Got to go and see the batting order. Watch out for some fireworks!"

*When the time comes. . . .* Walking over to a bench near the boundary, Christine remembered her father using the same words after the Hannerstone accident and he used the same serious tone of voice. What was it

that Paul and her father knew about Harry? Why were they so sure they could make him change his ways if they were driven to confront him?

She wearied of speculating and settled down on the bench with Mrs. Perkins and Peggy. A sudden shout of " 'Owzat!" and a quick burst of clapping told her the first Old Boys wicket had gone down. She applauded vigorously when Paul sauntered from the pavilion, his bat at the slope over his shoulder and a wide smile on his face. She was also conscious of a rapid exchange of significant glances between Mrs. Perkins and Peggy.

"He's promised us some fireworks," she explained, feeling her cheeks colouring up. "The Old Boys go in for brighter cricket."

Phil sent down a medium fast ball slightly to the off-side and Paul bounced out of the crease to swipe it. He missed and a laugh filtered through the spectators.

He took the next ball in the same way and this time contacted, lofting the leather high and fast to the deep mid-field and had the spectators lifting their feet as it whistled along the ground over the boundary.

The next ball smacked Paul hard against his ankle as it passed. He gave a yelp and clowned his agony. The spectators loved it. His ankle forgotten, Paul was out of his crease again for the next ball. He took it full toss with a clean, resounding crack. It was a six all the way—straight into the road.

It was bad luck for Jimmy Bryant that he happened to be passing at the time in his red sports car. Everybody heard the clonk as the ball struck metal and splinters

of glass flew up and flashed in the sunlight.

Christine went over to the now stationary car. The driving mirror on the nearside wing, which had taken the full impact of the flying ball, was bent sideways and the dull gilt of the metal showed where the glass should have been. Jimmy fished the ball off the grass verge and slung it back to a nearby fielder, waving aside Paul's shouted apology.

"Lucky it wasn't your windscreen, Jimmy," Christine commented.

"Yeh." Jimmy climbed back into the car. He seemed unconcerned, as though his mind was on other things. "Any idea if Barbara's home?"

"She was—and very happy. Jellicoe's just had his clearance from the vet. He'll be show jumping next week."

Christine was sure that Jimmy's face fell.

"Hope she is there," he said, starting up the engine. "Got something very important to tell her."

"Good news?"

"Well . . ." Jimmy hesitated. "Yes, in a way . . . but it's going to be difficult. . . ."

"I hope everything goes all right then." Christine nodded at the broken driving mirror. "No seven years bad luck or anything."

The young man grimaced and drove away.

Jimmy found Barbara alone in the stables rubbing down Jellicoe after trying him over a few jumps. The girl showed surprise when he came in, but did not stop

her work, leaning over to give him her cheek to kiss.

"Must get this done. Can't afford to take the slightest risk now. Jellicoe's fit again. The vet said so!" she explained. "What've you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been to see my uncle today," Jimmy said. "I haven't said anything to you about it before, because I wanted to make sure everything was . . . sort of in the bag before I told you."

"About what?" Barbara hissed softly through her teeth, brushing down Jellicoe's silky coat.

"Listen, you've got to stop that, Barbara." He stepped forward quickly and pulled her away from the horse. "I'm not going to talk to you while half your attention's with that blessed horse. This is serious. Very serious."

She looked at him gravely for a few seconds, broke away from him to throw a rug over Jellicoe's back and then came back to him, letting him take her in his arms and pressing herself close to him. He kissed her eagerly, savouring the scent of her hair and the firmness of her young body.

"Barbara, I've got something important to tell you."

"So've I."

"What's yours?"

"With Jellicoe fit and two county shows still to do, he ought to make his qualifying money easily."

His body stiffened and he eased her away from him, holding her at arms length, his hands round her slim waist.



"What I've got to say is a damn sight more important than horses and horse shows," Jimmy said firmly. "Barbara—are you fond of me? Really fond?"

"Of course. We're engaged aren't we?"

"And you want to marry me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

She pouted thoughtfully. Jimmy tightened his grip on her waist and gave her an impatient shake.

"Now look, darling, it's no good saying you don't know, because the time's come when you've jolly well got to say yes or no to a date I give you."

Her eyes widened at the firmness in his tone.

"This afternoon when I saw my uncle," he went on, "it was to make final arrangements for a new job. My uncle has a brother who's going out to New Zealand to go into partnership with his cousin. They're both accountants, and there's a big opening for them there. I can go with them, into a better job than I've got now and with the possibility of a partnership, too, in a short while after I've proved myself. Now—I want to take that job, but only on one condition . . ."

"Yes?"

"I want you to come out there with me as a wife."

There was a moment's pause. Barbara's lips framed a word, then relaxed as if she had changed her mind.

"I shall have to leave in about four weeks time—mid September—so we'll have time to have a honeymoon and—and everything. But I've got to let my uncle

know what my final decision is in a day or two—a week at the most.”

Barbara moistened her lips with her tongue. She looked quickly from side to side like a hunted animal. There was a tremor in her voice when she spoke.

“I thought you said you’d already decided about . . . about taking the job.”

“I meant the job was there, waiting for me to say yes or no—and I’m not saying yes unless you agree to marry me before we go. Look, darling, this job of mine is for life. I know you’ve got your career ahead of you, too. But yours is only short term—isn’t it? A few years as a star rider and then . . .” he hesitated, fumbling for words, put off by the blank look in her eyes. “Look, if you stay here, and I go to New Zealand, it’ll be three years at least before I can get back. What’s going to happen to us in that time? . . . I want you, darling, more than anyone and if you’ll just say we can get married now, in the next month, I know we can be happy together. So—what’s it to be? My job or yours?”

She stared at him, mouth open and lower lip quivering. Suddenly she flung herself against him, burying her head against his chest.

“Oh, Jimmy darling, you know I’m fond of you. You know I want to marry you, but . . . oh, gosh . . .” She felt in his breast pocket for his handkerchief. “What can I do, Jimmy? What about Dad?”

“I thought you told him months ago that you might not go through the season.”

"I did . . . but I never thought . . . I never thought anything like this would happen to—to stop me going on till I'd ridden at Harringay. I know you think that's awful, but—it's the truth. And now, how can I answer, Jimmy? Dad's been so low since Jellicoe was hurt. He'd got everything planned . . ."

Jimmy heaved his shoulders in irritation.

"But damn it—this is our life we're talking about, not your father's. Can't you plan for yourself too?"

"No, Jimmy, not yet." Eyes misting with tears, she looked up at him. "There's one thing you've forgotten. I'm not twenty-one. Whatever we decide, Daddy's got to give his consent. I think he would, but . . . oh, Jimmy, give me a little time to think about this . . . to talk to Dad, will you?"

Reluctantly he had to agree. He cosied her to him, not wanting to let her go.

"All right, darling," he whispered. "But I must know in a week. I must."

Footsteps in the yard separated them. Barbara listened for a second then quickly straightened her hair.

"It's Dad. You go now, darling. Maybe I can talk to him now. But you'd better go and leave me to do it alone."

She picked up her grooming brush and started to pull the rug off Jellicoe. Jimmy gave her a light kiss on the lips and stepped out into the yard. Barbara heard his cool greeting to her father and the curt grunt he got in return. Heart pounding against her ribs, she resumed her grooming.

"What's he here for?" Harry Lane grumbled as he came into the stable. It was obvious from the way he ran his hands over Jellicoe, testing the traces of scar on the horse's skin, that he did not expect an answer. "You should get twenty-five quid in prize money at the County. That'll leave you ten to get at Bochester Horse Show. Everything'll be all right. You happy now, old girl?"

Barbara did not speak.

"What's up? That young ass been annoying you?"

The hiss of air through Barbara's teeth was cut off short.

"No, Dad."

She stopped grooming and the words tumbled out incoherently, in her anxiety to tell the whole story. She kept her eyes averted until the moment when she said Jimmy insisted they should marry before the end of the season, then she glanced up.

She thought her father was going to take the news calmly. He stood for a while looking at her, one eyebrow higher than the other and mouth pursed, giving no indication what he was feeling. Then he swore, a violent oath that made her take a step backwards.

"So you want to run out on me now, do you? After all I've done for you?" he snapped. "Good God, girl, d'you realise I've given best part of six years building you up to what you are now, and you want to throw it all up for—for a ruddy little figuring machine."

"I love Jimmy," Barbara said, paling.

"Maybe you do and I can't stop you. But marriage is

different. That's in my hands and while it is you'll damn well do as *I* want—is that understood? I'm not throwing up what I've worked for just to please some cuckoo fancy that's got into your head, understand?"

Barbara turned and walked quickly out of the stable, trembling with unhappiness and anger. Her father had never spoken to her like that before. The shock gave place to a feeling of despair. For the first time she realised how much he was changing. In the stable she'd seen in his face something new—something cruel and fearful.

## SEVENTEEN

IF MADGE LANE had different ideas from her husband's on the future of Barbara and Jimmy she kept them to herself. Outwardly, as she grew heavier with child, she seemed to build around her a protective barrier of numbed calmness that gave no indication of what she was really thinking.

It was a surprise to Doris Archer, therefore, calling in to see her on the morning of the county show, to find Madge herself had decided to go.

"I don't want there to be any trouble like there was before, Doris. He doesn't want me to go, I know that, but I'm going—just to keep an eye on him." She slotted a freshly-wrapped parcel of sandwiches into the picnic basket. "Aren't you going yourself, then?"

"We never seem to have the chance," Doris said. "Dan can never get away. Too much harvesting to be done."

"Wish I had a man who put his farm first." Madge pulled the corners of her mouth down. "But here horses come first."

"How's he been these last few weeks?" Doris asked.

Madge shrugged and kept her eyes on her work.

"Has . . . is he interested in the baby?"

"I told you," Madge said drily. "Horses come first."

There was a fashionable atmosphere about the show. It was a social gathering as well as an agricultural

fixture, and established riding stars were among the competitors, which made a win by an aspiring amateur take on a greater significance.

Madge stuck to Harry's side, following him on a round of the stands and nodding self-consciously to the people he greeted in passing—people from all levels of the rural community. She could sense his irritation when she clung by him, walking heavily and looking dowdily shapeless in her maternity dress. Several times he left her, but relentlessly she caught him up and for the first half hour managed to steer him past the beer tents, enduring his curt suggestions that she should leave him alone.

She held on to his trail until well into the afternoon, when they both watched an eliminating event in which Barbara rode, and shared his excited enthusiasm when her daughter took points off a couple of riders whose names were already nationally known.

"She's got 'em licked!" Harry crowed. "They can't touch her! I knew it!"

"Let's go and congratulate her," Madge suggested.

"Time for that later—when she's won the open."

"I think Barby would like us to go, Harry," Madge persisted. "Everybody likes a bit of praise. Come and say you're pleased. It'll make her even more confident."

Harry could not get round the logic of Madge's idea and, walking briskly so that she had difficulty in keeping up with him, led the way back to the horse lines.

Christine, who again had come along to help Barbara,

greeted them with a grin that was broad enough to have been worn by her if she had won the event herself. She had Jellicoe's head harness in her hands and, squatting comfortably on the ramp of the horse-box, was giving it an extra polish. Barbara looked over Jellicoe's back, smiling happily and smoothing down the horse's coat.

"It was Jellicoe who did it, Dad! He never missed a trick!"

"Nice work. He's back in form. Win the open now and you can take Borchester as a holiday. You'll only need another tenner out of it." Her father gave her an encouraging smile and turned to go. The smile faded, to be replaced by a scowl at the sight of Jimmy Bryant approaching. "What the heck's he here for?"

"Jimmy!" Barbara was round Jellicoe and running to meet him, her arms outstretched.

Jimmy took her in his arms and kissed her lightly. He was smiling but his eyes were troubled.

"Barby, darling, I only came in for a minute. I'm on my way north, on a job. But the week's up, you know." His voice was very serious. "I must have an answer."

"Oh, Jimmy . . . now? It's—it's so difficult. My mind's all centred round the show and . . . couldn't we talk about it later?"

He shook his head emphatically.

"Shan't be able to see you again today. I'm staying the night up there. Got to. So—please, Barby—will you come abroad with me? Can we get married and go off to the new job? What did your father say when you told him about it?"



"He—he didn't like the idea much, and . . ." she hesitated, then whispered unhappily, "You'll have to talk to him. Ask him. It's—it's in his hands."

"Right, I will."

His arm round Barbara's waist, he walked over to the silent group by Jellicoe. Madge and Christine gave him smiles of welcome, but Harry Lane continued to regard him with a cold, hostile stare.

"Mr. Lane——" Jimmy began, but Harry cut him off with an abrupt wave of his hand.

"I know what you're after," Harry snapped. "And the answer's 'No!'"

"But——"

"Barbara's told me you've got a new job and you want her to go to New Zealand as your wife. No!"

Jimmy thrust out his jaw.

"That wasn't what I asked her," he said. "I said that if she would marry me, I'd take the job. Otherwise, I'd stay here. I'm going to marry Barbara, anyway, but I wanted to do it now."

"So you're going to marry Barbara, are you? Who said so?" Harry rapped.

"I said so, Mr. Lane. And Barbara's said so too."

"We'll see about that."

"Harry!" Madge put out her hand.

"You keep out of this, Madge." Harry brushed her away and directed his attention to Jimmy. "Listen, you—I've been wanting to say this for a long time. I've had enough from you, coming here and thinking you can do what you like about my daughter. Barbara's not ready

for marriage yet. Barbara'll marry when I say she can—and who I say she can. At present she does what I tell her.”

Christine uttered a protest. Madge cut in on her.

“Barbara's eighteen. She's old enough to make up her own mind,” she said. “You can't dictate to her what she does with her life.”

Harry whirled angrily from Christine to Madge.

“I said you keep out of this—the both of you!”

“Seems to me that you should hear what Barbara has to say about this herself, Mr. Lane,” Jimmy said, his voice charged with pent-up anger. “Barbara—you're going to marry me, aren't you?”

All eyes turned to the girl, standing by her horse, miserably twisting the loose end of the tethering rope in her fingers. She said nothing.

“Barbara, you heard,” Jimmy said. “You want to, don't you? For God's sake tell your father!”

As though stunned, Barbara nodded faintly.

“Quit bullying her,” Harry Lane said. “Quit making a nuisance of yourself and clear out. D'you hear me?”

“Not till I've got her answer.”

“You've got her answer. It's no—same as mine.”

Eyes blazing, Madge pulled her husband round to face her.

“That's not what Barbara said. You can't do this to her. She's got to be free to choose!”

“Shut up!”

“I won't. You've had your way all along, now it's time Barbara——”

"I said shut up!" The menace in his voice killed the words on her lips and she shrank back. Harry turned back to Jimmy. "You heard me. Clear out."

Jimmy's fists came up. Harry took him by the shoulder and spun him round, but the young man broke away and squared up to him again.

"Go, Jimmy. Please go!"

The half-strangled cry came from Barbara. One look at the girl's face and he unclenched his fists, letting his shoulders sag and his hands drop helplessly to his sides.

"All right, Barbara. For you I'll go. But we'll see each other again and get this straightened out, come what may."

Harry watched his retreating figure with a grim smile on his lips, then he turned to Madge.

"When I tell you to keep out of something—keep out! Understand?"

With a withering glance at her husband, Madge clambered heavily into the horse-box. At the far end—as far into the box as she could get, Barbara was on her knees in the straw, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Pull yourself together, girl," Harry's voice came gruffly from the ramp.

"I'll . . . I'll be all right. Just . . . just go away and leave me alone," Barbara muttered.

Christine stood aside and let Harry pass and march determinedly towards the beer tent flanking the grandstand. Whatever it was that Paul Johnson had against Harry Lane, she could appreciate more readily now that it was possible to hate the man.

The warning for competitors to prepare themselves for the open jumping sent Christine to join Barbara and her mother. Madge was down beside the girl in the straw, cradling her shoulders against her bosom.

"Time to get ready, Barby," Chris said quietly.

"That's right, lovie," Madge said. "Come on. Jimmy'll come back, don't you worry."

A shudder passed through the girl. She raised her head and closed her eyes wearily.

"It wasn't that, Mum. Not Jimmy. It was Dad and . . . and the way he spoke. It . . . it . . ." She shook her head slowly from side to side. "It—it was just like at home."

Flinching under the words, Madge hugged the unhappy girl closer to her. Christine glanced at her watch. Barely minutes to go before the competitors would be called to the collecting ring.

"You must get ready, Barby," she urged.

Between them Madge and Chris got the girl tidied up. Tenderly Madge dabbed the smudges from her cheeks and combed back the fair hair as she had done when her daughter was a child.

By the time Christine had got Jellicoe ready and Barbara was mounted she was more composed and outwardly as calm and immaculate as she always was. But as she rode round the ring and set Jellicoe at the first jump, both Christine and Madge knew that the events of the last few minutes had spoilt her chances. The early assurance was gone. She seemed to have lost the rhythm and sense of timing of her mount. Her round

ended in silence with a dozen faults marked up against her, and she rode out of the ring in a dazed, faraway manner.

Looking along the line of ringside spectators Christine saw Harry, his mouth hard, turn to push his way angrily through the crowd and disappear into the beer tent. That was the last they saw of him until the show was finished and Barbara was apathetically getting Jellicoe into the box for the journey home.

Harry Lane had not a word of comment to make when he climbed into the cab beside them. He sat sullenly at the wheel of the truck and no one seeing the staring blankness of his eyes could have guessed the tempo of the violent and embittered thoughts racing through his head.

## EIGHTEEN

"I NEED A DRINK."

Harry spoke for the first time after they had covered twenty-five uncomfortable miles from the show to the outskirts of Hollerton. He pulled the horse-box up outside the public bar of a large red-brick pub, which rated itself as an hotel and sported coloured fairy lights round the railing fringing the car park and gardens.

Christine eased herself further along the seat with a sigh of relief as he got out, then noticed with surprise that Madge, who throughout the journey had had her arm round Barbara and encouraged her to lean against her, was getting out too.

"Shan't be long, Barby dear," Madge said. "I'm just going in to see he doesn't stay too long."

Barbara nodded and slumped back in the seat, her face upturned till her head rested against the rough wood of the structure of the cab.

"All right?" Christine asked.

Again the girl nodded, her eyes closed, and gave a deep sigh of exhaustion.

"You go with Mum. Have a drink," she murmured. "I'll wait here."

"Don't want one, thanks."

Madge was close behind her husband when he went into the bar, and it was only when he let the door swing back on her that he realised she had followed him.

"What're you coming in for?"

"I'm thirsty. I thought I'd like something."

"Yeh?" He cocked a disbelieving eyebrow. "Yeh?"

A dark young man with a lean rickety face and wearing a loose, grubby pullover came forward to serve them.

"Pint o' bitter," Harry said, and to Madge, "And you?"

"Nothing . . . I mean . . . oh, a—a pineapple juice."

Her husband's lips curled.

"Because you were thirsty, eh? Don't give me that. I know why you're here. Hey, barman!" he called after the youth. "Changed my mind. Forget that bitter. Make it a stout—and a double gin!" He met Madge's worried glance with a sardonic grin. "Go well together. Especially when you're being rushed."

He tipped the gin into the stout, drained it before Madge had sipped down half her pineapple juice and asked the barman to repeat his own order. The cold, humourless half-smile never left his face. He downed the second drink, picked up his change and moved for the door.

"Satisfied?" he asked Madge. She did not reply but followed him quietly out to the truck.

At two more pubs on the route, Harry and Madge repeated their performance, and Christine could tell by his driving, his thick, "For God's sake!" when Madge lowered herself wearily from the cab at the third halt, that the drink he was taking was beginning to have effect. It was with considerable relief that she saw the

light over the main door of the Bull growing brighter as they approached and recognised her father's car and Phil's farm truck parked in front of the pub.

"Could you put me down here, Mr. Lane? I'd like to see Dad."

"Sure!" Harry brought the horsebox to a halt. "Stopping here anyway. Thought you were nigh on home, didn't you, Madge, eh? But you forgot the Bull . . . the ruddy ole Bull!"

He swayed as he turned with mock courtesy to give Christine a hand down from the high step. She heard Madge's long-suffering grunt as she stirred herself once again.

"Why don't you come in too, Barby?" Chris said. "Do you good to have a drop of brandy or something after . . ." She checked herself from making a direct reference to the earlier part of the day. "Come on."

"She's all right where she is," Harry said.

"You come too, Barby," Madge was saying at the other side of the truck. "It'll be better."

There was a pleading in the woman's voice that struck home to the girl and with a muttered agreement she roused herself and began to straighten her hair.

The comforting sound of friendly voices, her father's among them, drove some of the melancholia out of Christine, and she was smiling when she led Barbara and Madge into the bar.

"Well!" said Dan, "this is a surprise! Don't think I've ever seen you in here before, Barbara. How did it go today?"



Christine gave him a quick warning glance and jerked her head meaningly towards Harry, who was already at the bar ordering straight gin for himself.

"What'll you drink, Mrs. Lane?" Phil said, getting up. Madge shook her head.

"I only came in because . . . because I thought Barbara was very tired and she might have something."

"A brandy for her, Phil," Christine put in quietly. "She needs a stimulant."

Edging in to the bar beside Harry, Phil gave his order to Peggy and turned to the farmer.

"How'd the day go, Harry?"

With a sullen grunt Harry drained his gin and pushed it towards Peggy for a refill.

"Not your usual tippie, is it, Harry?" Phil saw the pallor underlying the man's weathered skin and knew he had been drinking hard. He shot a quick, cautionary glance at Peggy and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. When he returned with his drinks to Dan and the others, he saw that Barbara was almost asleep. "Seems a pity to wake her. Who'd like a brandy. You, Madge?"

A grating croak came from near the fireplace.

"Spare brandy, Phil?" Walter Gabriel shuffled over, hand outstretched. "Never drink the stuff, but reckon I could oblige! Brandy, eh? What's this? Celebrating?" He raised his voice and called across the bar, "Barby must ha' done it, Harry, eh?"

They saw Harry's back stiffen. He gulped down his drink and slapped the glass down on the counter with

such force that the stem shattered and splinters tinkled on the bar top and floor. The sudden crash quietened all voices and everyone in the room heard Harry's dry-throated "Gin!" to Peggy.

"Do you think you really want another, Harry?" Peggy hesitated.

"I know what I'm doing. I said gin."

Peggy looked helplessly at her in-laws. Simultaneously Dan and Phil shook their heads.

"I don't think you better, Harry," Peggy said. "You've had enough for tonight, haven't you?"

Harry slapped his open palm down on the bar among the broken glass. A spurt of blood coloured the ball of his thumb.

"I said——" he shouted.

"Now then, now then, what's the trouble?" Jack came in from the living quarters.

"I think Harry's had enough," Peggy explained.

"If Peg said you've had enough, Harry, that's it. She's the boss."

Harry shouldered his way to the centre of the room, cursing wildly.

"Hey, lay off that there talk, 'Arry," Walter croaked sharply. "There's ladies 'ere."

"Ladies!" Harry's head dropped low between his shoulders and he moved heavily towards Madge and Barbara. "Ladies! Trouble-makers. Yes, you! I'm looking at you, Madge!"

"Lay off, Harry." Phil rose and stood with his father. "That's enough."

"It's your fault, you damned interfering busybody!" The drunken farmer, his eyes blazing dangerously, thrust a stubby, bloodstained finger at his wife. "It's your fault Barbara failed today! Pushing your nose in where it doesn't belong. If you'd kept your place that young whelp wouldn't have upset her. She'd have ridden as she always rides—but you have to bitch it all up, you . . . !"

Everyone in the bar was struck silent by the violent outburst, and Barbara's voice rang shrill in the tense atmosphere.

"That's not true! You're not to speak to Mum like that. It was all *your* fault and you know it. You're—you're a coward, a dirty coward, to put the blame on her!"

Harry's head went back as if she had struck him. The fire went out of his eyes and his mouth fell open. For two or three seconds he remained fixed, then some devil inside him made him laugh. He slapped his thighs and doubled himself up with loud, brash, bellowing laughter, that stopped as suddenly as it began.

His mouth a hard, cruel line, his breath coming short and heavy, his brows low on his eyes, he looked slowly round the bar.

"You see how it is?" Bitter scorn put a hard edge on his voice. "Who's for me? I ask you, who's for me? Not a damn one of you—and least of all those two in the corner." He made a heavy sweeping gesture towards Madge and Barbara. "All right. I'm through. I'm through, d'you see? Now, who wants to buy a horse?"

Barbara's involuntary gasp brought a malicious grin to his face. "A fine horse. It's outside. Two hundred and fifty I paid for it. Qualifying money nearly all earned. *Nearly!* Now, who'll make a bid?"

He rocked back on his heels and glared round at the unmoving figures in the room.

"Nobody? No? Not enough for you? I know! It's never enough. Whatever you do, it's never enough. Eh, Madge? All right! Tell you what I'll do!" The grin on his face disappeared and, coldly, he jerked his thumb at his discomfited wife. "Tell you what! I'll throw her in too. She's well fitted out, but she don't need me . . . and I don't need her. Now—any bids!"

An angry murmur surged round the room. Heavily, awkwardly, Madge got to her feet. Her face was blanched with humiliation, but her eyes were hard.

"You're coming home, Harry. You've said enough. You're making a fool of yourself, and me."

Harry turned and looked at her coldly. Then, with as much emotion as he would show to a recalcitrant sow, he struck her across the face with the back of his hand.

Dan steadied her as she reeled back. Everybody in the bar closed in angrily on Harry, but Phil was the quickest of the lot. A couple of quick strides and he sank his left deep into the man's belly and as he doubled up flashed a right uppercut to his jaw.

Harry's head shot up, his body arched back like a bow and he crumpled inert to the floor.

Embarrassed and shocked by his instinctive action, Phil stood humbly before Madge.

"I'm sorry, Madge. I—I had a lovely wife myself less than a year ago. Some folks don't realise they're lucky. I—I couldn't stand it. Sorry, but he had it coming to him." Rubbing the knuckles of his right hand he turned to his father and said quietly, "Take Madge and Barbara home, Dad. Jack and I'll see to Harry and the horse-box."

## NINETEEN

FOR THE SAKE OF EVERYBODY CONCERNED, Ambridge wanted to forget the episode in the Bull, but the next day Christine saw Jimmy Bryant driving through the village. Although he was past her before he saw her, he braked and reversed back. There was despair and disillusionment in his solemn face.

"Thought I better stop and say good-bye," he said flatly. "Probably shan't see you again."

He held out his hand to her. She did not take it. Instead she stared at him wide-eyed.

"Good-bye? What do you mean?"

"I've decided to go to New Zealand. At least it's more or less been decided for me. I can get a job there, and—well, it'll probably take my mind off things."

"Have you just come from seeing Barbara?"

"Yes."

"Won't Harry let you get married?"

Jimmy hesitated for a minute before he said bitterly, "Nothing to do with him. I didn't even see him. It's Barbara. She told me about the barney and how her father's cracked up. She says she can't leave him now. She feels—it's her—no, our fault—and she's let him down." He gave an exclamation of disgust. "Let him down!"

"Why does that stop you getting married?"

"Because she says she must go on riding, for his sake."

She thinks it's the only thing that'll pull him out of the state he's in now. So—what can I do? She's under age. I've got this offer of a job. I've got to tell them yes or no. They've given me a few days' grace for a decision already. Well, now they can have it. So—good-bye."

"I think you're mad, Jimmy. Mad!"

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and slipped the car into gear and drove off fast.

It was the first news Ambridge received that Harry had cracked up. Nobody saw very much of the Lanes for several days, but rumours emanating from their farm hands and neighbours finally impelled Doris, out of a sense of duty sharpened by a healthy curiosity, to pay Madge a visit.

"I only saw Harry through the window," she reported when she got back to Brookfield. But he's a changed man. Mind, I've no sympathy for him. It's Madge and Barbara I'm worried about—and our Phil. If I thought he'd done him a permanent injury . . ." and her voice trailed off as the full implication of what she was saying heightened her anxiety for her son. She spread her hands helplessly. "Harry's saying that everybody's against him. Something's happened to that man. The balloon's pricked or something. He was slumped down in the chair in the parlour like an idiot. He hadn't shaved and he looked terrible—broken. It's a dreadful state to be in. It's a dreadful state for Madge and Barbara to have to live in. They've got the future to think about, even if Harry says he's through with everything."

"Is that what he's saying?" Dan said, eyebrows raised. "About time. He's had his run with horses—and maybe learnt his lesson now."

"You don't understand." Doris clicked her tongue impatiently. "It's not just horses. It's everything. Farming—everything. He's just . . . given up."

Dan nodded over an inner thought.

"Seems like history does repeat itself," he said.

"What d'you mean, Dad?" Christine asked, but her father merely rubbed his fingers along his chin and kept his counsel. "Look, Dad, you've always said that you'd do something about Harry Lane when the time came. Surely the time's come, hasn't it?"

"I know, love," he said, then added rather shamefacedly, "Trouble is, now it comes to the point, what I could say to the man seems—well—a bit slight. I don't think it's got the weight to pull him round. Maybe I should have had a go at him sooner."

Christine turned away, disappointment in her face. She looked appealingly at her mother, saw that her eyes were full of doubt, and muttered, "Oh, what's the use?"

"It's the way Barbara feels about it all, Dan," Doris said in troubled tones. "She blames herself for her father being as he is. She blames herself!"

"Damn nonsense!" Dan exploded.

Christine caught his eye and her expression told him she reproved him for his apparent inaction. The mood of angry frustration was still with her when, a day or two later, she told Paul Johnson about her last sad meeting with Jimmy Bryant.



"Ah, well," Paul said, "maybe it's all for the best."

Christine rounded on him.

"All for the best! That's all you've ever said about the Lanes. Anything to keep away from them. Why? What's Barbara done to you? Why should she be run down, just because her father's not come up to scratch?"

Paul looked at her seriously for a moment.

"It's just that very reason that makes the whole family suspect," he said, levelly. "There's bad stock there!"

"Harry's father was all right," Christine protested. "Dad's always said so. He was his friend."

"Maybe. And maybe Barbara's all right, too. But there's a chance she may be like Harry—only it hasn't shown yet."

"I'll swear she's not," Christine said, hotly defending her. "Madge is all right too. There's bad in most families, but that doesn't make every member of it tainted. Yet you had your knife into Harry long before anyone could say he was going to get as he is now."

Paul leant back against the Brookfield front gatepost, pulled Christine alongside him and put his arm round her waist.

"Listen, duckie. I do know something about Harry Lane . . . something I—and my family—can never forgive him for."

"Tell me."

"Harry's father may have been all right. But Harry's Uncle George, his father's brother, was a bad type. He was crazy with money. He ran up debts with my father that nearly gave the old man a nervous breakdown. My

father was one of the old school of businessmen who gave credit easily—too easily, and most times his trust was honoured. But Harry's uncle was one of the defaulters."

"And that's what you hold against Harry—George's nephew? Practically no relation? I've never heard anything so unreasonable." Christine pulled away from his encircling arm and regarded him coldly.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. Come back here. That's only part of the background."

"I'll stay where I am," Christine said. "Go on."

"One of George's other habits was to go after the girls in a big way—and he picked on one who happened to be working as parlourmaid for us. Jenny Lenthorpe, her name was. A pretty girl, about twenty-two at the time, I think. I'm not sure of the dates. My father told me the story. I wasn't even born. Anyhow, apparently George made Jenny pregnant, was all for letting things slide, but my father, who had principles about these things, got George to the altar and Jenny and he were spliced—only just in time." Paul fumbled for a cigarette. "This isn't a funny story. Jenny died giving birth to a daughter—and George beat it, leaving my family literally holding the baby. Jenny'd had the child at our house because in the rush of everything and George being the feckless rat he was, nothing had been done about setting up a home."

Paul stopped and regarded Christine quizzically.

"Still wondering where Harry comes in in all this, I suppose?" he said.

"No. I'll take your word for it the detail's important. Go on."

"George disappeared. No one—even your Dad's pal, brother Fred—knew where he'd gone. It turned out he skipped abroad and stayed there till he died twenty-odd years ago. He never did a thing about his child, never paid a penny for its upkeep or anything. Fred did what he could, but mostly my parents shouldered the burden. The girl—Phyllis, they christened her—is now married to a postman and lives in Martlesham, and is, I believe, quite happy." Paul took a deep breath. "Now we come to the important part. I've told you Harry's father, Fred, sent what he could spare—a bit of pocket money, increasing it when things improved. Then Fred died in—oh, thirty-eight or thirty-nine or thereabouts. He left all he had to Harry—including an agreement with him that on Phyllis's twenty-first birthday five hundred pounds was to be paid to her, either out of the capital he left or out of Harry's pocket if he was doing well." Paul flicked his cigarette aside with an impatient gesture. "Harry did well. Any farmer worth his salt did during the war . . . but that five hundred pounds was never paid to the girl."

"What!"

"It was never paid, Chris. I know that for a fact. My father had a scene with Harry about it—many scenes, but he never stumped up."

"Wasn't there any document to say it had to be paid?" Christine gasped.

"You know how farmers are. They begrudge legal

fees. A word's enough. A gentlemen's agreement—especially between father and son. That's all Fred made with Harry. My father knew about it. Phyllis knew about it. But Harry wasn't a gentleman . . . never has been."

"Then why hasn't this girl—Phyllis—done anything about it?"

"She's like her mother was. Easy-going, hating trouble. She'd met her postman by then and she was content to have him alone. The five hundred wasn't all that important if it was going to mean unpleasantness—and no doubt Phyllis didn't hold the Lanes in very high repute after her father's behaviour. So there it is. The money's never been paid, and now you know why I—why we Johnsons—don't care all that much for Harry Lane."

Christine came up on her toes, wound her arms round his neck and impulsively kissed him.

"I couldn't help wondering—and being jealous," she murmured.

He responded with alarming warmth, but somehow she felt safe. When he said, "Suppose we go and have a meal somewhere?" she gave him an affectionate smile and started for the house.

"I'll be a minute or two," she called back. "I've one or two things to do."

Her father was at the roll-top desk, puzzling over the details in a buff coloured form, and only glanced up when she came in.

"Dad."

"Ay?"

"Dad, did you know about Jenny Lenthorpe and Phyllis?"

Her father laboriously filled in some figures on the form, then turned and looked at her, sitting back in his chair.

"Ay," he said slowly. "What about 'em?"

"You know the whole story? About Harry Lane's uncle, and why he got married and how he went off immediately after his daughter was born and how Harry's father helped out and . . . and the five hundred pounds?"

"Ay. I know all that, Chris. Why?"

There was disappointment in the girl's face.

"It doesn't put Harry Lane in a very good light, does it?" Christine came close and put her hand on his shoulder. "Dad, it's Barbara I'm thinking about. If you could remind Harry. If you could point out what he's doing—what he's done . . ."

"How d'you mean, love?"

"He's been a crook!" Christine burst out indignantly. "He's no better than a thief. That five hundred pounds isn't his!"

"Eh? Who said he was?"

"Oh, Dad! You said you knew all about it. I don't understand how men's minds work. They forgive; they condone things that I think are terrible——"

"Here, take it easy, Chris. Don't get excited."

"I can't help it, Dad. That five hundred pounds is Phyllis's money, not his!" Christine banged her hand on his desk to emphasise her point.

Dan scratched his head.

"I don't know what you're driving at. Fred Lane saw to it that the girl was to get five hundred when she was twenty-one and left it to Harry to give to her after he died. What's wrong with that?"

Christine's voice rose to a wail.

"She never got it. That's what I'm trying to tell you! She never got the money!"

"What?" Dan sat up as if he had been shot. "Who told you that?"

"Paul. Just now. Outside. You can check with him if you like. But I know he's telling the truth!"

"Well, I'll be . . ." Dan's breath came out as a long, low hiss between his teeth. He threw his pen into the rack at the base of the ink-pot and his eyes narrowed. "So she never got it, eh? Right. Thanks, Chris. Thanks for telling me."

He got up slowly and went along the passage, reaching for his hat as he passed the kitchen door.

"Where are you going?" Doris asked suspiciously. "Skittling again?"

"Harry Lane's," he said. "Bit o' business, that's all."

"What about supper? I've got pigeons in the oven."

"I won't be long. Half an hour, no more."

As he shut the door he smiled to himself, in spite of the serious thoughts going through his mind. Trust old Doris not to ask questions at the wrong moment. . . .

He hoped he would be back in half an hour.

## TWENTY

MADGE LANE ANSWERED DAN'S KNOCK.

"Harry home?" he asked.

"Yes." She stepped back to let him into the house, scanning his face anxiously. "It's good of you to call, Dan."

"This—er—this isn't a social visit, Madge." He put his hat on the kitchen table. The silence in the house was a tangible thing. "I've got a bit of business with Harry."

"He's in there—in the sitting-room." She indicated the door along the passage. "He's been there nearly all the time since. . . . Oh, Dan, I'm sorry about that night!"

"Don't apologise, Madge. I'm sorry about it too—for you and Barbara. Where is Barby, by the way?"

"Upstairs." Madge went over to the mantelpiece and straightened some envelopes. "She won't forget Jimmy. She's past crying, but that doesn't mean she's forgotten." She turned from the mantelpiece and sighed wearily. "Dan, they both asked too much of her. It wasn't fair. Harry should have let her go, but Jimmy asked too much, making her feel that if she didn't marry him immediately she'd spoil his chances."

"Is that what he did?"

"That's how it seemed to her. I don't reckon that was what Jimmy meant, but—she's not experienced,

Dan. She's little more than a child in some things and she didn't want to hurt anybody. That's why it was so hard for her to say no to Jimmy—but what could she do? She'd seen how Harry was." Wearily Madge pressed the palms of her hands against her brow. "I think she was afraid for me, too."

"Go up to her. Stay with her. Tell her it's going to be all right—and keep her upstairs for a while." Dan saw a muscle twitching in her cheek and tried to get an extra warmth in his tone to reassure her. "I'm only going to talk to Harry—about business."

She moved quickly over to him.

"He doesn't know what he's been doing. Don't fight with him," she begged.

"I'm not a fighting man, Madge—not that sort of fighting. That's not my way of doing things." He guided her to the stairs. "Now—upstairs with you. Barbara'll be better with company."

She went and Dan carried on along the passage. Harry was sitting in the front room slumped in an arm-chair, his legs stretched out, his feet in the grate. A few old newspapers were strewn round his chair, open at photographs of Barbara at various shows over the years.

"Want a word with you, Harry."

The unshaven farmer's eyes opened and glanced sideways.

"I've nothing to say to you, Dan Archer."

Dan was not looking forward to his session and the blunt truculence in Harry's voice grated on him. Seating



himself on an upright chair in the corner by the fireplace where he could see the other man's face, he studied him for a long while, rubbing his hands slowly over his knees.

"What's been getting at you, Harry?"

"Everybody."

"Me included, I suppose?"

"You included."

Dan heaved a deep sigh. The tactful approach was going to be a waste of time.

"It's about time you finished this display of self pity," he snapped and was encouraged to see that Harry's fingers, which had been hanging limp nearly touching the carpet, suddenly clenched. "There's one or two things you've got to face up to, Harry. First, the payments I made on *your* muck-spreader. You passed it over to me to clear what you owed me. I've paid those instalments, Harry. You owe me for 'em."

"Is that all you've come for?" Harry sat more upright in his chair. His tone was relieved, as though he'd expected something more. "You'll have it, if that's what's worrying you."

"When?"

"End o' the month." Harry looked shifty.

"I'll have it now. I don't trust you."

Sullen anger generated in Harry's eyes and Dan pressed on, sparing him nothing.

"Neither does any other man in this district. You'll find 'em all on your neck unless you clear the mess up, Harry. And it's a mess of your own making."

Harry got up from his chair, blundering and angry, but Dan carried on relentlessly.

"I'm not concerned with what happens to you, Harry. You can rot for all I care. That's your affair. But there's not a living soul in this village who's going to stand by and see you carry on in the same way as your Uncle George did."

"What d'you mean?" Harry looked startled.

"You know! I'll come back to him later. Do you realise what your fool behaviour over this farm and your horses has led to? Your daughter's upstairs, breaking her heart."

Upstairs in Barbara's room, with the curtains drawn and her daughter sleeping the sleep of emotional exhaustion, Madge heard the rise and fall of the men's voices in the room below. Gently she released her hand from Barbara's and tiptoed over to the window and looked out over the fields that had given them their living for so many years, recalling the past when, unquestioning and knowing her rôle in life, she thought she was happy.

Now the questioning had begun she was not sure of anything. A stirring in her womb brought tears to her eyes. She should be happy now as only a woman can be, but pure feeling was gone. Only cold thought asked what was to become of her, what was to become of them. The protective structure of a home and marriage seemed to have collapsed around her.

"Jimmy!"

Barbara stirred in her sleep and moaned. Madge crossed to the bed and passed her cool fingers across the girl's forehead.

And downstairs the men's voices still rumbled on.

Harry Lane was standing by the window, but Dan roughly grabbed his shoulder and spun him round.

"You've got the face to tell me you never paid that girl her money because things were bad for you at the time?" Dan towered over the younger man prodding him forcibly in the chest. "You know damn well things were never better for you then. You used that money to further this fool career you'd planned for Barbara—not because *she* wanted it, but because your vanity drove you to it."

Harry Lane opened his mouth to speak but the steady cataloguing of his deficiencies left him with nothing to say. Defeat was inevitable.

"Your father was my friend, Harry," Dan said. "He was a straight, decent, honest man who asked no more from his life than he knew he was capable of getting on his own score. I've watched you since you were a lad and I thought you were going to be like him. But you're not your father's son, Harry. You've shown yourself these last few years to be the same rotten stock as your Uncle George. Maybe that doesn't worry you. Maybe you admired him because he went around running up debts, ruining women's lives and running away from his responsibilities when things got difficult. If that's what you admire, then I've been wasting my time talking to you."

He paused and his heart cheered when he saw the man slowly shake his head and the defiance go out of his stance.

"I've stood up for you many times when others were saying you were rotten to the core, Harry. I had faith in you because I knew your father. But when I learnt about the way you'd treated Phyllis, then I joined the rest of 'em. You were rotten after all. I didn't come here because I wanted to help you. I came here because of your wife and daughter, because Doris feels a responsibility for Madge—and neither Doris nor I try to get out of our responsibilities however unpleasant they may be. Now—you've got several things to face up to, and the first of 'em is your debt to Phyllis. That money's got to be found and paid over to her."

"But . . ." Harry Lane's shoulders dropped and he spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "How can I? Where's the money coming from?"

"You've got a horse in that stable out there that's worth two hundred and fifty guineas—more if it gets its qualifying money."

"I can't do that. It's Barbara's horse. It's hers!"

"All right, it's Barbara's horse. I'll accept that. It's healthier. So what's left, Harry?" Dan pointed with a thick forefinger out of the window at the rolling fields surrounding the house. "Work. Plain solid hard work—out there. The heart's got to be put back into the land, Harry, and from what you get out of it, you're going to pay off your debts—to Phyllis, to me and all the others you owe. Horses you can leave to Barbara—if

she wants to go on. She'll be living her own life from now. You've lost her, as you've lost Madge. But you can win 'em back, if you want to—out there by the sweat of your guts!"

Dan turned to the door, his face lined with strain. A final look at the fair-haired man still staring out of the window told the old farmer that a lot of what he had said struck home—hard.

"It's up to you now, Harry," he said from the door. "It's your choice."

He let himself out quietly without disturbing Madge. Back at Brookfield, Doris put his meal before him and stirred a fresh pot of tea.

"Half an hour, you said, Dan. It's been an hour and a half!" she grumbled cheerfully.

"Took a bit longer than I thought," Dan smiled. "Still, it's a useful bit of business done, I think. Farming business, you know!"

Doris gave her husband a look of warm affection and, bending over the back of his chair, pressed her cheek against his.

"Thanks, Dan," she said quietly. "Even if it's just for Madge's sake."

## TWENTY-ONE

IT WAS TIME for Borchester Horse Show again. Little had changed in twelve months. The long meadow between the river and the London road filled up quickly with cars and horse-boxes, manufacturers' vans rushing overdue exhibits to the stands and throngs of farming folk intent on having a day out.

As usual, the atmosphere was light-hearted, except perhaps among a few competitors who felt they had a great deal at stake. Here and there along the line of horse-boxes and in the collecting ring there were a few knots of people more busy than others, their over-zealous, last minute activity betraying the mounting tension within them.

Christine and Paul, helping Barbara to get Jellicoe ready for the big open jumping competition, shared the sense of importance that was attached to the day. Barbara was still thirty-five pounds short of the necessary prize money for Jellicoe to qualify for the Horse of the Year competition at Harringay. The show was her last chance of the season, and she was up against stiff opposition—some riders whose names were already nationally known, others who had achieved what they were aiming for earlier in the season and would approach the event not caring about the result, bringing with them a relaxed confidence that could easily mean victory. Fifty pounds first prize, thirty-five second.

"Whatever happens, Paul," Christine muttered, checking for the fifth time Jellicoe's girth strap, "we mustn't show we're as nervous as Barbara is. If we don't bolster her up she may get stage fright."

"At least Harry isn't here to make her worse," Paul said.

"Now Paul, drop it. All that's past."

Barbara came running back from the secretary's tent. Her eyes were sparkling and there was a glow of colour in her cheeks.

"Just heard some good news," she said breathlessly. "Monica Philbeach has scratched. They had trouble on the road and she won't be here in time! I know I shouldn't be bitchy, but that's a bit of opposition I can well do without."

Christine stuck her thumb happily up in the air for Paul alone to see and held out Barbara's riding jacket for her to put on.

Followed by wishes for good luck, Barbara rode Jellicoe over to the collecting ring. She waved cheerfully to Paul and Christine and they made their way to the rail to watch the competition.

Perhaps the gods had not been satisfactorily propitiated by the other competitors, or their eye was caught by the gleam of sunlight on the golden wave of hair sweeping tidily round at the base of Barbara's riding cap and they singled her out for special favour, for it seemed the girl could do no wrong on her first round. She was the third rider into the ring and the only one of them to come back with a clear round.

There were fifteen more riders yet to go and Chris and Paul found their excitement mounting when one out of the next half dozen had fewer than three faults.

"Let's go over to the collecting ring and take Jellicoe off her so she can rest," Chris said, hot with excitement. "I'm praying there won't be a jump-off but there's bound to be with Paddy Riordan still to ride."

Barbara let them take over Jellicoe, grateful yet enjoying the frank admiration in Christine's eyes.

"Go on, kid," Paul said to her. "Go and relax. You've got it in the bag." He watched Barbara stroll over to the rail and, hand absently stroking Jellicoe's neck, looked across the horse's back at Chris. "There's one thing I'll say for Harry. Whatever else he may slip up on, he certainly had an eye for a natural winner when he decided to launch Barbara on her riding career."

"Praise for Harry Lane from you?" Christine's eyes widened. "This really is a day. The exceptional's happening all right."

Paul aimed a friendly cuff at her and as she ducked caught her, pulled her round Jellicoe's rump and gave her an affectionate squeeze.

"I have at least one nice side to my nature, you know," he said. "Even if you don't see it very often."

Paddy Riordan went into the ring on the big, solid dapple grey that had carried him to success in so many competitions—a horse whose zest for jumping was always heightened by Paddy's yelled falsetto "Yipe, ye heathen!" to the great delight of the crowd. Without



any vocal encouragement the grey was a foot clear of every jump, fast, nonchalant, buoyant, and, grinning wide-mouthed, Paddy patted the horse out of the ring to applause that was thunderous even in the open air.

Barbara's lips tightened. She looked back over her shoulder to Paul and Chris and gave a worried shake of her head. Christine hastened to her side.

"You probably can't match that, Barbara, but don't let competition nerves put you off. A second'll do."

In a few minutes Christine's heart sank a little, although she kept repeating assurances to Barbara of her confidence. There were two more clear rounds—Jim Lakeman from Bradbury Heath on Tinker Bell always in the last half dozen in regional shows—and an unknown quantity, Virginia Golden riding a compact bay with a lot of Arab in him.

"A jump-off between the four of 'em," Paul muttered in Christine's ear, running an appraising eye over the remaining competitors and watching the jumps being raised. "Barbara'll have to fight for her money now. This'll show whether she's the pro Harry—we—think she is. Real competition stuff!"

Barbara was first in. Tensed, paler than usual, she went through the starting gate and let Jellicoe find his own pace. The horse performed magnificently—clearing the brush, the triple and the in and out. He touched the road barrier but it did not fall, cleared the wall easily and was left with the five-barred gate to finish.

Jellicoe missed his pace completely. Barbara, by this

time too nervous to gather him, sent up a prayer and hoped for the best. His front hooves brought the gate down with a resounding clatter, his haunches dropped as he picked his way through and a groan of disappointment for their local favourite broke from the crowd.

Four faults.

Paddy leant over long enough to say, "Bad luck, kid," to Barbara as she came out, then the grey galloped into the ring like an arrow from a bow. It was a rip-roaring round from the start, a gambling display of expertise that appealed to horse, rider and observer. The grey was not named Buccaneer for nothing. At the triple Paddy—quite unnecessarily, but realising the value of showmanship—let out his renowned, "Yipe, ye heathen!" and the automatic, delighted murmuration of the crowd broke in a storm of wild applause as he tore hell-for-leather out of the ring.

A brilliant performance and a clear round.

Christine clenched Paul's hand tight, her nails biting into his palm.

"Paul—would it be wrong to pray?"

He smiled down at her.

"T'isn't for you, is it?" Secretly he crossed his fingers in his trousers pocket. "Try anything."

The occasion proved too much for Virginia Golden. Her horse refused the first fence and flunked at the second.

Eliminated.

There was still Jim Lakeman—steady, reliable, stolid, competent. Tinker Bell could not have been

less aptly named but was a horse who could get there—eventually.

“Why the hell doesn’t he put a spark of life in it?” Paul broke out fiercely. His arms were round both girls and he felt them shrinking closer to him as, machine-like, relentless, Tinker Bell rhythmically took one jump after another.

In the in and out the horse actually stopped on four stiff legs, considered, and unaccountably leapt like a jack-in-the-box straight out of the enclosure.

“He doesn’t ruddy well deserve it,” Paul groaned, closing his eyes hopelessly. “Somebody ought to strike him dead.”

An “ooh!” from the crowd snapped his eyes open again and he was in time to see four wooden blocks drop from the wall, dislodged by Tinker Bell’s rear hooves. There was only an inch in it at the gate but she did not recover and the gate came down too.

“It’s Barby! She’s second! She’s done it, Paul!”

Christine, her face flushed with excitement and joy, flung her arms round Paul’s neck and kissed him. “Oh, it’s wonderful!”

“The victory or the kiss?” Paul asked.

Barbara was already astride Jellicoe, ranging up beside Paddy Riordan to ride out and collect her award.

## TWENTY-TWO

AS SHE RODE OUT OF THE ARENA, Barbara was feeling proud. Her heart pounded and, patting Jellicoe on his rippling neck, she whispered, "Bless you, you old darling."

It was then that her glance caught a grinning, happy face in the crowd round the collecting ring. An arm waved frantically to catch her attention. She gasped and headed Jellicoe over to Chris and Paul.

"Look after Jellicoe for me," she said breathlessly, sliding down off her horse's back. "I've got to go and— and see someone."

She ran across the grass. A figure ducked under the ropes and started running towards her.

"Jimmy!"

His arms were round her, his lips seeking hers and she clung to him moaning with happiness.

"Oh Barby, darling, it's so good to be back with you again." Jimmy raised her face to look at her, tears sparkling as readily in his own eyes as hers. "So good."

"But I thought you'd gone to New Zealand. You said . . ."

"I couldn't, Barby—not without you." He held her very close. "I realised I'd only be running away like a spoiled baby, because things hadn't worked out the way I wanted them to."

Barbara looked up at him, her eyes filled with tenderness. By now they were away from the noise and shifting crowds.

"I couldn't do anything other than I did," she said quietly. "There was Dad and . . . everything."

"I understood that after I'd thought a bit," Jimmy said. "I was being terribly selfish. I was asking you to give up everything for me. Then I saw sense—saw you'd be losing far more than me. So I gave up something instead. I love you. I'm not going to New Zealand. I've a more important job to do here—looking after you. You see . . ."

Whatever Jimmy was going to say was lost for all time. Barbara's arms were up round his neck and her lips stopped him. From that moment words were unnecessary.

It was the first time for many years that Dan and Doris Archer had not been to Borchester Horse Show. Although Dan protested that the harvest was not finished and although Doris made a great show of detailing all the preserves she had to put down and both went to great lengths to convince their unbelieving family how busy they were, there was a tacit, unspoken agreement between them that on the important day they would look up Harry and Madge Lane.

The excuse was that Doris wanted to take Madge a fine wool shawl she had kept since her own had need of it. Dan readily agreed to take his wife over. He had barely seen Harry since his stormy interview and

wanted to see if there was solid foundation for village rumour and gossip.

They found Madge in the yard, a small pail of chicken pellets in her hand. She looked well, her face full but free from strain.

"My goodness, Madge, you oughtn't to be doing that," Doris said. "You shouldn't be working, surely?"

"Why not?" Madge smiled. "Better working than waiting. Doctor said I could go on right to the end. I'm not all that old, you know!"

From the nearby field came the sound of a combine. Slowly they strolled over to the fence, Doris and Madge talking babies, Dan ruminating to himself on the changed atmosphere around the place. The yard had the untidiness of any farmyard, but it was an orderly sort of muddle.

A quiet smile turned up the corners of Dan's mouth. Marvellous machines, combines, yet they still needed the attention of a conscientious bloke. He'd heard that on the continent there were still places where they harvested with a crooked stick and scythe or sickle. . . . There was a lot to be said for that, too, if it kept a chap's back bent to his proper job. It was good to think that a combine, a modern contraption working on contract, still needed a man's attention. Almost unconsciously he bent down, picked up a handful of the cool, friable soil and rolled it through his fingers, eyes on the grey, wet patch of shirt sticking to Harry Lane's sweating shoulder-blades and middle of his back as he

followed the combine through. . . . Ay, a man had to keep in touch with his living.

"We've been lucky with the weather," Madge said. "We've been very lucky."

Her frank eyes told Doris and Dan she was referring to more than the weather.

"I'm glad," Doris said.

Harry looked up from his work and saw them at the fence. He grinned and waved across. Not wanting to appear too interested, Dan gave him a casual acknowledgment and turned away. He noticed immediately that Madge was standing rigid, her hands pressed hard against her apron. A faint groan escaped her lips.

Dan's glance met the satisfied, warm, maternal gaze of his wife and he jerked his head in the direction of the house. Doris nodded with the air of one who had seen it all before and took Madge's arm.

"Better come inside, Madge."

Madge shook her head.

"I'm all right. Harry'll look after me."

"Harry!" Dan yelled across the field. "It's time!"

The fair-haired farmer looked up, took in the situation, exchanged a few quick words with the men on the combine and hurried across the stubble towards them. Dan saw the genuine concern on his face as he vaulted the fence and put his arm comfortingly round his wife's waist. Relaxed and at peace, she leant against him and let him walk her gently towards the house.

"We'll phone the doctor," Doris said.

Harry shot them a grateful glance over his shoulder

and took Madge into the house. Dan and Doris paused for a moment, regarding each other in a wise, triumphant fashion.

"She'll be all right." There was certainty in Doris's tone.

"Ay," Dan nodded. "Harry too, I reckon."

They linked arms and followed the couple tranquilly into the house, the steady beat of the combine harvester thrumming in their ears. Dan lingered on the threshold and looked back.

"Boy or girl, no matter which," he said with quiet confidence, "they'll have a good farm waiting for 'em."

He enjoyed helping his wife get ready the hot water.



## THE AUTHORS

EDWARD J. MASON was born and educated in Birmingham. He worked as Marketing Secretary for Cadbury's until, after a number of successes with revue lyrics and radio serials, he decided to make writing a full-time occupation.

GEOFFREY WEBB was born in Dursley, Gloucestershire, and began his writing career on a weekly paper there where he gathered his knowledge of farming communities. He collaborated with Edward J. Mason on the *Dick Barton* serial which first brought them prominently into the public eye.

The first instalment of *The Archers* was broadcast on January 1st, 1951. The programme received the *Daily Mail* National Radio Award in 1953 and again in 1954. It is now estimated that ten million people listen to the adventures of the Ambridge folk every day.

