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Jilly Cooper was appointed OBE in the 2004 Queen's Birthday Honours List.

*By Jilly Cooper*

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# LISA AND CO

Originally published as  
LOVE AND OTHER HEARTACHES

Jilly Cooper



**CORGI BOOKS**

**LISA AND CO**  
**A CORGI BOOK : 0 552 15255 2**

Originally published in Great Britain by  
Arlington Books Ltd

PRINTING HISTORY

Arlington Books edition published 1981  
(published as LOVE AND OTHER HEARTACHES)  
Corgi edition published 1982  
Corgi edition reissued 2005

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA,  
a division of The Random House Group Ltd,  
in Australia by Random House Australia (Pty) Ltd,  
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney, NSW 2061, Australia,  
in New Zealand by Random House New Zealand Ltd,  
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand  
and in South Africa by Random House (Pty) Ltd,  
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire.

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For Rosemary Nolan with love and gratitude  
because she encouraged me to write these stories  
in the first place

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## *Introduction*

All my life I wanted to be a writer and scribbled away at short stories, plays, and the first chapters of frightful novels, but never tried very hard to get anything published. When I was twenty-nine, while employed in the publicity department of William Collins the publishers, a friend, Cherry Lewis, told me she was working on a new Odhams magazine for teenagers called *Intro*. She introduced me to the editor, Marjorie Fergusson, who asked me if I'd like to edit the fiction. She was looking for stories, she said, which were funny and realistic, and would appeal to the new, optimistic, flower-power mood of the late sixties.

At first, the only stories I could find were either too heavily romantic and humourless, or too pornographic for a teenage magazine, which still didn't allow you to mention any parts of the female anatomy between the neck and the kneecaps. We did publish, however, a lovely story by Virginia Ironside, and another by a then unknown writer called Beryl Bainbridge.

Finally, in despair of ever finding enough stories, I

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sat down and wrote one myself. For a week I bit my nails, then Marjorie Fergusson sent for me. 'You're a rotten editor,' she said, 'and this story is no good for us, but it's well written. If I were you I'd give up any ideas of editing, and concentrate on writing.'

I walked back to Collins on air. For the next year, I did very little work for either of my two jobs, but instead spent my time in office hours writing stories. The first one, *Temporary Set-Back*, was published in *Intro* in 1967. Others followed: *The Red Angora Dress*, *Christmas Stocking* and *An Uplifting Evening*. Few experiences have ever equalled the ecstasy of seeing my name in print for the first time. With *Sister To The Bride* and *May The Best Girl Win*, I even achieved the dizzy heights of *Woman's Own*. *The Square Peg*, one of my favourite stories, appeared in *Woman's Weekly*. *Petticoat* published *Lisa* and *Forsaking All Others*. *Johnnie Casanova* appeared in *19*. *Political Asylum*, written in 1968, never found a home in a magazine at all, everyone then considering it to be far too risqué and probably libellous as well.

It was on the strength of these stories, which are all gathered together in this book, that another friend, Ilsa Yardly, introduced me to Godfrey Smith, then editor of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine, who asked me to write a piece on being a young wife. As a result of this article, Harold Evans, then editor of the *Sunday Times*, gave me a column on the *Look* pages, and I was suddenly launched on a brand new journalistic career.

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This book also contains three long stories started in the sixties, which I finally finished this year. They are *Kate's Wedding*, *A Pressing Engagement* and *The Ugly Swan*.

I cannot pretend that these stories are literate. They are written purely to entertain. I have updated where possible but their mood is rooted firmly in the sixties, when we all lived it up and had a great deal more fun, I think, than people do today. It was a time before the women's movement had gained so much ascendancy, when the young were still optimistic about marriage, and believed that God was in his Heaven if all was Mr Right with the world.

*Jilly Cooper, 1981*

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### *A Pressing Engagement*

Darrell French did not look like a film director. He wore a pinstriped suit, a regimental tie, and a watch chain looped across his waistcoat. He was washing down Rennies with Perrier water, drunk straight from the bottle, and he had the most chaotic office Hester had ever seen. Books, scripts, papers, copies of *Spotlight* and *The Stage* were piled so high on his desk, it was like talking to someone over a garden wall.

‘My last PA,’ he said wearily, ‘spent all day painting her nails, talking to her girlfriends on the telephone, and screwing my most important clients. She couldn’t type, or do shorthand, or spell, or even make Nescafé. She once tried to book Nanette Newman for the lead in a war film instead of Paul Newman.’

Hester burst out laughing.

‘Believe me,’ said Darrell French, ‘it was not funny at the time.’

The telephone rang. It was several seconds before he could locate it in the débris on his desk.

‘Well, put him through . . . Hi, David, how are you . . . Bugger,’ he rattled the receiver button

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hysterically, 'you cut him off, you imbecile . . . well get him back again . . . David, yes Niven, at the South of France number . . . you'd better go through the exchange then.'

He sighed and put down the telephone receiver, staring at Hester beadily. 'As you can see, I am up the proverbial ordure creek. I'm entirely dependent on a decent PA and I'm fed up with flash, beautiful, illiterate girls who are not prepared to work, but who find the idea of movies glamorous. In the last two days, I have interviewed more than a hundred girls. You're the only one who's taken the trouble to wear a skirt.'

He looked at Hester again, taking in the round sweet face, the gently curving mouth, the shiny copper hair drawn loosely into a coil at the nape of the neck, and the skin as clear and brownly glowing as Pears' soap.

'You seem a nice girl,' he went on dubiously, 'but I could be wrong. I must also tell you that I am a happily married man with three children, for whom I have to pay nine thousand pounds a year in school fees after tax. This I am capable of doing if things are running smoothly at the office. I have never made a pass at any of my PA's.'

'You seem to have had an awful time,' said Hester sympathetically.

'I need a lot of cherishing,' said Darrell French. 'I'm off to Nairobi on Monday fortnight to make a television series of *The Grass is Singing*.'

'Doris Lessing?' asked Hester.

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‘Well, that’s a step in the right direction,’ said Darrell French. ‘Can you get away from your present job by then?’

‘Oh, yes please,’ breathed Hester.

‘Well, you’d better go and get some jabs – cholera, yellow fever, TAB – that one’s nasty, probably lay you out for twenty-four hours. Is your passport in order?’

Hester nodded incredulously. ‘Are you actually offering me the job?’

‘I am. Is a thousand enough?’

‘A year?’ asked Hester, her face falling.

Darrell French laughed. ‘No, a month. You’re not married or heavily involved or anything are you?’

Hester’s mind was spinning at the thought of so much money. She hesitated for a moment before answering – you could hardly call her involvement with Julian heavy. ‘No,’ she finally said, ‘definitely not.’

‘Good – this job is likely to take you abroad for weeks, even months on end, and husbands don’t like that very much.’

Hester tried to ring Julian from a telephone box the moment she was a safe distance from Darrell French’s office. She absolutely hated being the one to call him, particularly as he hadn’t telephoned her for over a week. But a dazzling new job was surely a legitimate excuse. It was Julian after all who had always nagged her to get out of her present job, and she could sound happy and on top of the world,

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instead of stiff and stammering as she would have done normally. Her hands grew damp on the receiver, as the number rang on and on. Julian must be out or not answering. He often switched off his telephone when he was immersed in work.

Coming out of the telephone box, Hester went straight into an off-licence and bought a bottle of Dom Perignon. Then she hailed a taxi. If she was going to be earning twelve thousand pounds a year, she could afford a few luxuries.

'I got the job,' she shouted, as she rushed into the outer office which she shared with Beverly, the Sales Director's secretary.

'Fantastic,' said Beverly, who had finished her frugal lunch of cottage cheese, flavoured with prawns, and was now stirring Sweetex with a ball-point pen into a paper cup of black coffee.

'I can't believe it,' said Hester, unpinning her hair, so it fell bronze and shining to her shoulders. 'Oodles of money, and such a sweet man, and David Niven rang up in the middle. I've bought this to celebrate.' She waved the bottle of champagne.

'I'm on a diet,' said Beverly, 'and you've got the Fisher-Holmes report to type this afternoon.'

'I don't care,' said Hester, ripping the gold paper off the top of the bottle with her fingernails, 'two weeks on Monday, I'm off to Kenya on location.'

'Blimey,' said Beverly, getting a couple of plastic mugs out of the cupboard. 'What on earth will Mr Petrie say?'

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Yes indeed, wondered Hester, what would Mr Petrie say? She had worked for him for six years, ever since she'd left her secretarial college. Although the work had been hard and often boring, she had been so fond of everyone in the office, and Mr Petrie had always looked so mortified every time she suggested she might move on, that she'd been unable to tear herself away.

Recently, however, she'd reached the end of her tether. She had been working late every night, Julian seemed to be showing less and less interest in her, and she never met any new men. Well, she'd got herself out of the rut by landing a new job. Now she had to face the awful task of telling Mr Petrie.

The cork flew out of the window, endangering the lives of two pigeons mating on the roof, and the champagne, shaken in Hester's excitement, gushed all over the faded green carpet, as she filled up the two mugs.

'To your brilliant career,' said Beverly. 'How many calories are there in champagne?'

'Hardly any,' said Hester. 'I know – I'll tell Mr Petrie I've got engaged.'

'You haven't,' said Beverly.

'I can pretend I have. Not to Julian – I'm much too superstitious to risk that, but I'll say I've had a whirlwind courtship and am suddenly going to marry someone else.'

'Dodgy,' said Beverly, 'he's bound to want to know who he is.'

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Hester had another brainwave. 'I'll say I'm going to marry Nico.'

'Who's he?'

'Nicholas Calvert – we were brought up together, he's the only platonic friend I've got.'

'Won't he mind?' asked Beverly.

'He won't know,' said Hester.

Mr Petrie had had a good lunch. His white hair was slightly ruffled, his face more magenta than ever. As a gesture to the heat of the day, he had discarded his waistcoat. When Hester brought in her shorthand book, he smiled fondly at her, as well he might. Mr Petrie's continuing existence at Bateman and Mathers, when he was well beyond retiring age, was entirely due to Hester's efficiency. All day long she was a captive audience, forced to listen to his jokes and his troubles, smiling at his dictated quips, correcting his grammar, and steering him with skilled anonymity through the day's routine. Mr Petrie only appreciated that Hester was sympathetic on the ear, and almost more delightful on the eye. He thought how particularly fetching she looked today, lushly spilling out of her new willow-green suit.

He gave her some letters. Hester reminded him he would need the draft of the Fisher-Holmes report by that evening, double-spaced so that he could tinker about with it at home. Then buoyed up by half a bottle of champagne, and doodling frantically around the spirals of her notebook, she gave in her notice.

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Mr Petrie's magenta face lost a few degrees of colour. 'Oh Hester, you can't leave me.'

'I must,' she said, going scarlet at the thumping lie, 'I'm getting married you see.'

This was a different matter altogether. Mr Petrie was a deeply sentimental man. Immediately he waddled round the desk and kissed her on the cheek. 'My dear! Congratulations! It couldn't have happened to a nicer person. And who is the very lucky young man – is it Julian?' he asked a shade doubtfully.

Hester crossed her fingers behind her back. 'Well, actually no, it's an old friend from my childhood called Nicholas Calvert. We've known each other for ages, but suddenly the whole thing gelled.'

'Splendid, splendid,' said Mr Petrie. 'I wouldn't have liked it if you'd abandoned me for another boss. And I'm so relieved this young man can support you, without your having to go on working. I always feel so sorry for poor young Mrs Davies in accounts, staggering home with all those carrier bags every evening, and then having to clean the flat and cook her husband's dinner. Now when do you want to leave us?'

Hester stepped up the doodling. 'Well, in a fortnight's time, I'm afraid, we're getting married in – er – six weeks, and I really need a month at home first to organize the wedding.'

'That's all right,' said Mr Petrie, suddenly looking doleful. 'I suppose you'd better put an advertisement in the paper – perhaps you could interview the applicants. But oh Hester, I shall miss you.'

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Fortunately for Hester, at that moment the internal telephone started ringing. It was the Managing Director wanting Mr Petrie, who promptly started to flap. 'Where's the background to the Marsh and Follifoot deal?'

'I put the memo on your desk this morning,' said Hester soothingly. 'Here it is.' She extracted it from under the *Sporting Times* and a copy of *Playboy*.

'Thank you,' said Mr Petrie, scuttling out of the office, 'I hope you're going to ask Nancy and me to the wedding.'

There were tears in Hester's eyes, as she went out of his office. 'I've done it,' she said to Beverly. 'I haven't felt such a heel since I let my brother's gerbil out of its cage when I was seven, and the cat ate it.'

'Can I be bridesmaid?' said Beverly. 'I wish you hadn't made me drink all that champagne, this letter is straight Tippex.'

Mr Petrie sent for Hester later in the afternoon and said he had just telephoned his wife, Nancy.

'I can't tell you how delighted she is, sad for me, of course, but thrilled for you. She was always saying she couldn't understand why a lovely girl like you wasn't snapped up years ago. She wants to know what your fiancé does.'

'He's a stockbroker – in the City,' said Hester, sensing trouble, but not sure from what direction.

'Splendid,' said Mr Petrie. 'Well, Nancy's got to come up to London some time for the Constable



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exhibition at the Royal Academy, and she wants us to give a little engagement party for you both at the office that day, so she can say goodbye to you.'

Hester turned as green as her suit. 'Nico's going abroad next week.'

'Well, make it the week after,' said Mr Petrie, 'it'll be your last week, so we can give you a royal send-off.'

Nico was with a client, when Hester telephoned his office. He rang back when she was in Mr Petrie's office giving him the Fisher-Holmes report and the remaining letters to sign.

'Your "fiancée's" on the 'phone,' said Beverly, popping her head round the door, with a malicious gleam in her eyes.

'Put it through here, I won't listen,' said Mr Petrie untruthfully.

'Hello, Nico,' said Hester picking up the telephone, and once again blushing scarlet.

'Hes, how nice to hear you.'

'Darling!' Hester dropped her voice an octave, 'Are we meeting up later this evening?'

Nico sounded surprised. 'Were we meant to be? I've got to drive Annabel to the airport.'

'Well, after that then, it doesn't matter how late it is.'

'Can't we make it tomorrow?' said Nico.

Hester looked at Mr Petrie's fountain pen – static over the blue writing paper. 'I do *so* want to see you, darling,' she said even more huskily.

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‘OK, I’ll drop round about eleven,’ said Nico, a little taken aback by Hester’s insistence.

‘That’ll be lovely.’ She took a deep breath, ‘And, Nico darling, I do love you.’

Nico sounded startled. ‘Hes, have you been drinking?’

‘Me too, darling. I can’t wait to see you. Bye, my angel,’ murmured Hester, and slamming down the receiver she fled out of the room.

Ah young love, thought Mr Petrie.

‘How the hell did Machiavelli do it?’ said Hester, collapsing behind her desk and putting her burning face in her hands.

‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave,’ said Beverly. ‘I must say your “fiancé” sounds delicious on the telephone.’

‘He’s infinitely too nice to get caught up in a mess like this,’ agreed Hester.

Hester bought a bottle of whisky, and sat in her empty flat, wishing Julian would ring her. She looked at his photograph on the mantelpiece: surly, hopelessly good-looking, dark eyes brooding with an intensity that he certainly didn’t feel towards her. On the table, with the top page coated in ginger cat fur, were the three copies she had typed of his latest book. It was called: *Stratification, Gender-Role Stereotyping and Sexual Behaviour Patterns Among Middle Class Siblings, with Special Reference to Canvey Island*.

Hester hadn’t understood much of it but believed

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Julian, who was senior sociology professor at London University, when he told her it was a deeply significant, seminal work. The typescript had been ready for him a week now, but she liked to keep an excuse to ring him up her sleeve, just in case she got too desperate. Now she had her new job to tell him about as well, but although she'd tried his flat several times that evening there was no answer. She had been in love with Julian for two years. On good days, she fantasized about their future together. On bad days she felt cut off from all human warmth.

Above the forest of shiny green plants on the window ledge, she watched the colour drain out of the Cambridge-blue sky, and the great plane trees round the common fill up with black shadows. It was one of those stifflingly humid nights that descend on London like a blanket. Every window was open in the flat in the hope of inducing some breeze to enter.

Instead, Hockney, Hester's ginger tomcat, pushed his way through the plants mewing disapprovingly, and landed with a heavy thud at her feet. He started to weave furrily round her bare legs, then thinking better of it, gave her a right and left on the calf with fat, unsheathed paws.

'Nasty, ungrateful creature,' chided Hester. 'I bought you a tin of salmon to celebrate. We're in the money, Hockney.'

In the kitchen, she opened the tin. Hockney, however, took a few mouthfuls, and then disdainfully scratched up all the newspaper under the plate, and wandered off into the drawing room to wash himself

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on Julian's typescript. Hester shooed him away, and shook the ginger fur off the top copy.

If Julian had had this typed professionally, she thought, it would have cost him at least two hundred and fifty pounds – his writing had been absolute murder to decipher. Then she felt guilty. Of course she had done it for love, but one needed a little love in return. She knew it was nearing the end of the university term and he must be desperately busy. Perhaps in the long summer vac, he'd have more time for her.

She looked at her watch – a quarter to eleven – Nico probably wouldn't have eaten. At least she could make him an omelette. She picked some thyme and marjoram from the window box, and went into the kitchen to chop them up.

Nico Calvert had been the school friend of her elder brother, Michael, that she had liked the best. He used to stay with them often in the holidays, and she'd had a mild crush on him, because he was clever, and quiet, and laughed easily, and never expected her to be anything she wasn't. She was also impressed by the way he didn't mind if he lost at the endless games of tennis, croquet, poker and vingt-et-un, they'd played through those long, hot summers. In a way she felt he was more of a brother to her than Michael.

Michael, who'd been back to stay with Nico's family in Somerset, had often implied that Nico was rather smart. His mother was a peer's daughter, the family seemed to own a lot of land, and after Nico

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left school, he'd been considered something of a Deb's Delight, and often appeared in the gossip columns photographed with a succession of pretty girls. But he never dropped names, or boasted about the invitations, thick as a pack of cards, on his mantelpiece.

Nor did he ever grumble that (because of the crippling estate duties when his father died) he was the first member of the family who'd seriously had to earn his own living. He was obviously miserable working as a stockbroker – it was rather like keeping a gun dog cooped up in a stuffy London bedsitter.

For the last eighteen months, since Nico had fallen in love with Annabel, Hester had seen much less of him. Annabel was a model, with infinitely more beauty than talent, who wanted to break into acting. She was enormously fancied in the market place, and, rather like Hockney, was all soft curves and melting eyes one moment, then scratching and clawing the next. She gave Nico a hard time because he wasn't rich enough to take her to nightclubs every evening, or fly her – when she felt so inclined – to exotic parties in distant corners of the world. Yet she raised hell if he looked at other women. Hester had met her twice and disliked her exceedingly. She was the sort of person who only watered plants when they were about to expire.

Nico arrived about eleven. He was wearing a yellow and white striped shirt, and had taken off his tie, and the jacket of his dark grey suit. He looked tired and very pale. Annabel must have been playing

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him up, thought Hester savagely. He was tall and rangy, with straight sandy hair, and nothing exceptional about his bony face, except freckles, a flat nose and sleepy amber eyes. Hester poured him a very stiff drink.

‘I bet you haven’t had anything to eat,’ she said.

‘I had lunch, I think,’ said Nico collapsing onto the sofa. ‘I’m not very hungry, too bloody hot.’

‘It must be hell in the City.’

‘My office is like a sauna.’

‘How’s your mother?’ asked Hester.

‘Still missing my father, but getting over it – slowly. Her real problems are financial. The farm manager’s ripping her off right, left and centre. I really ought to pack in the Stock Exchange, and go home and run things.’

‘Why don’t you?’ said Hester. ‘You always wanted to.’

‘Wouldn’t earn enough money,’ said Nico. ‘My father let things go so badly at the end, it’ll be five years before we start breaking even, and that’s dependent on good summers. I can’t see Annabel as a farmer’s wife either.’

‘She might get used to it,’ said Hester unconvincingly. ‘She’d have you.’

‘And hay fever,’ said Nico. ‘She hates the country.’

‘How is she?’ asked Hester, noticing that the little bunched lines at the corners of his eyes had deepened since they’d last met.

‘Never at her best before a flight.’

‘Where’s she gone?’

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‘Rome, modelling for *Vogue*, and auditioning for some film part.’ He looked miserably down at his glass, ‘We had a hell of a row before she left, she threw a telephone directory at me.’

‘Which one?’ said Hester.

Nico smiled slightly. ‘The E-K, at least it wasn’t Debrett’s. Fortunately she missed and smashed that Meissen bowl Mickie Middlesex gave her for Christmas, which put her in an even worse mood. We didn’t speak on the way to the airport. Then I’m sure I saw Jamie Cavendish going into the departure lounge just ahead of us.’

‘Doesn’t he have rather a nice wife?’ said Hester.

‘He’s had several,’ said Nico gloomily. ‘It doesn’t stop him running after Annabel.’

‘Might have been a coincidence,’ said Hester soothingly. ‘He was probably flying somewhere quite different.’

Nico shook his head. ‘Probably explained why she was in such a foul mood, expect she was terrified of being rumbled. Christ, I’m sorry, I must stop belly-aching.’

‘Annabelly-aching,’ said Hester, going into the kitchen. ‘Help yourself to another drink, I’m going to make you some supper.’

She broke three eggs into a bowl with cream, salt and pepper, and was just adding the herbs when Nico wandered in.

‘What was the reason for that extraordinary conversation we had on the telephone this afternoon?’ he said, stooping to rub Hockney behind the ears.

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‘I was just coming to that,’ said Hester cautiously.

As she waited for the butter to smoke in the frying pan, she told him about the new job. Nico was delighted.

‘I’ve been moaning on about my boring miseries, and you’ve been bursting with this amazing piece of news. I’m so sorry, Hes. Tell me more about it.’

‘Well, it’s going to take me abroad a lot.’

‘That’s a good thing for a start – get you away from the History Man.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call him that,’ snapped Hester, tipping the eggs into the frying pan. ‘Julian isn’t always having affairs with his students, nor any of the dons’ wives either. He just works terribly, terribly hard.’

‘Producing rubbish like that typescript next door – Julian knows as much about sexual behaviour patterns as Hockney knows about hang-gliding.’

Hester giggled. ‘Hockney’s very good at hang-gliding, you should have seen him halfway up Julian’s trouser legs when he was a kitten.’

‘How’s Julian’s marriage?’

‘He’s not living with his wife anymore, and he keeps talking about getting a divorce,’ said Hester, pulling forward the cooked edges of the omelette so that the liquid in the centre ran out into the hot fat.

Nico admired the opulent curves of her bosom and hips, and the ankles, still slender despite the punishing heat of the evening.

‘You’re a very attractive girl,’ he said, ‘totally



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wasted on Julian. Why don't you find some nice, uncomplicated chap for a change?'

'Why don't you pack in Annabel, and find *yourself* some nice, uncomplicated girl?'

'Annabel is not in the same league as Julian,' said Nico coldly, 'who is a man of deep and frequent idiocy.'

'Annabel is a four-star bitch,' snapped Hester.

For a second they glared at each other, then Nico laughed. 'You are speaking of the woman I lust after. All right, pax, let's keep off the subject of both of them.'

'All right,' muttered Hester, turning a perfect omelette onto an emerald green plate. She buttered two pieces of French bread, and put them on either side. 'There. Now eat it while it's hot.'

'Not likely to get cold in this weather,' said Nico. 'You are an angel, what it is to feel cherished.'

He took the plate into the drawing room. Hester followed with some Brie which was beginning to slide off the plate, and a bowl of greengages.

'Tell me more about the job,' said Nico, settling himself on the sofa. 'You'd better watch it, film crews get frightfully lecherous when they're abroad.' He took an unenthusiastic bite of the omelette.

'My new boss is heavily married,' explained Hester.

'Just like Julian,' said Nico. Then seeing the expression on Hester's face, 'All right, pax, pax. This really is a most delicious omelette, perhaps I am hungry after all.'

After he'd wolfed it down, and eaten the two

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slices of bread, and a large piece of Brie and five greengages, he got out his cigarette case, and offered one to Hester, who shook her head.

‘I’ve given up. I’m a slave to propaganda.’

‘Now tell me why,’ Nico said, ‘you were so amorous on the telephone this afternoon and why it was so vital that I came round this evening.’

Hester scuffed the carpet with her foot. ‘I’ve got myself into a bit of a spot, and you’re the only person who can get me out of it.’

Nico gazed at her through a haze of cigarette smoke. ‘That sounds horribly ominous.’

Blushing, she told him about pretending to be engaged in order not to hurt Mr Petrie’s feelings.

Nico grinned. ‘Bloody idiot, but typical, I’ve never forgotten you crying your eyes out when Michael ran over that weasel in the road.’

‘But that’s not all,’ she went on miserably. ‘Mr Petrie’s insisting on giving a farewell party at the office for me and my fictitious fiancé.’

Nico whistled. ‘Wow – that *is* tricky. Won’t Julian oblige?’

‘I said it was you,’ said Hester in a small voice.

‘You what!’ It was like a clap of thunder. Even Hockney jumped off Julian’s typescript.

‘I couldn’t think of anyone else, and now he wants to give the party any day in the next fortnight.’

Nico shook his head. ‘Uh-uh, you just tell him I’ve been posted to the Paris office.’

‘He caught me off guard, he already knows you’re here.’

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‘But it’s bound to leak out.’

‘It won’t – no one in the office knows anyone who knows you.’

‘Everywhere,’ said Nico, with a total lack of conceit, ‘someone knows someone who knows me.’

‘Just one evening for a couple of hours,’ pleaded Hester, ‘for the sake of our long and trouble-free friendship.’

‘No,’ said Nico. ‘I’d have to miss *The Archers* – take Hockney instead.’

But Hester sensed weakness. ‘Oh *please*.’

‘Well, I was rather good as Orsino in the school play,’ reflected Nico, ‘and the boy playing Olivia – it was Charlie Paignton-Taylor actually – wasn’t nearly as attractive as you, Hes, so I suppose I shouldn’t find it too hard to play an infatuated lover. All right, I’ll do it – just for one night, then.’

He stubbed out his cigarette, and reached for his diary. ‘Now I know why it’s called an engagement book. What about Wednesday week. We’d better have lunch that day too so you can brief me.’

Hester went over, and crouched down beside him. ‘I can’t thank you enough. You are the dearest, dearest person in the world.’

‘May I get myself another drink then?’ said Nico. ‘And then can we watch *Soap*?’

‘Oh yes please,’ said Hester, turning on the television. ‘Julian never lets me watch it, he thinks it’s too silly for words.’

‘Never send to know for whom the Bells toll,’ said

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Nico, pouring two fingers of whisky into his glass, 'Annabel says I drink too much.'

'Probably drives you to it,' said Hester. Then seeing the mutinous, bulldog expression on his face, 'Oh, sorry, pax pax.'

The temperature rocketed, London wilted. Hester spent the next twelve days working late at the office to make sure everything was in order for when she left. She trailed round the shops in her lunch hour looking for clothes for Kenya, and wondering if she really wanted to spend the next few months in a country that was probably full of snakes, and twice as hot as this. The necessary jabs made her feel awful, and almost too weak to drag herself out in the evening to catch up on old Darrell French films, which were so romantically bitter-sweet, they made her long and long for Julian. He still hadn't rung. She wished she could have a jab against him. The rest of the time was spent worrying frantically whether Hockney would survive being looked after by a girlfriend while she was away, and even worse, whether poor Nico would survive the engagement party.

The whole thing seemed to be snowballing alarmingly. Not only did everyone in the office know about her engagement, and keep bombarding her with questions, but also all the reps who called on the firm, and all Mr Petrie's numerous business cronies who rang up, seemed to have heard the good news, and were anxious to congratulate her.

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She couldn't sleep at night. She felt very pulled down.

Hester spent the morning on the day of the party avoiding the office junior, who was hawking a manilla envelope round the building in a cloak and dagger fashion, obviously collecting for Hester's leaving present. Nico met her in a nearby pub for an early lunch. He'd been playing cricket at the weekend, which had stepped up his freckles and bleached his hair.

'Are you hungry?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'Not at all.'

He bought a bottle of Muscadet and some smoked salmon sandwiches, and they took them into the park, picking up a bag of nectarines on the way. The heat was putting paid to the blossom. Every path was strewn with purple lilac and yellow laburnum petals. Reddening secretaries in bikinis stretched out on the whitening grass, office boys removed their shirts and raised spotty backs to the merciless sun. Hester, who had washed her hair that morning for the party, was wearing a pistachio-green shirt, and a rust red skirt over bare brown legs. Nico noticed how every man's head turned as she passed. They sat down under the shade of a plane tree. Beneath them the dry earth was separating and cracking from lack of rain.

'I feel so awful landing you with this evening,' sighed Hester, as she watched Nico fill up two paper cups.

'Your apologies are getting marginally more

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boring than the actual event,' said Nico. 'I'm looking forward to being engaged – rather like a public lavatory.' He handed her a cup. 'Now will you please brief me. Where are we supposed to be getting married?'

'At home,' said Hester, 'but it's only a very quiet, tiny family wedding,' she blushed furiously, 'because your father's just died.'

Nico's eyebrows shot up. 'But he died eighteen months ago.'

'I know, but it's the only excuse I could think of for not asking the entire office. Then we're going on honeymoon to Kenya – I thought I'd better stick to half truths.'

'Whereabouts in Kenya?'

'Oh, the game reserves,' said Hester airily.

'Doesn't sound very peaceful.'

Hester giggled. 'I'm game if you are. And Bev is the only person in the office who knows we're not engaged at all. You can't miss her, she's going to wear cherry-red matador pants, if she's taken off enough weight by six o'clock this evening to get into them.'

'Why are we getting married in such a hurry, you're not having a baby, are you?'

'Oh no,' said Hester, biting into a nectarine. 'That would horrify Mr Petrie. We're just terribly in "lerve", and as we've known each other for ages, there was no need for a long engagement.'

'Why aren't you writing for *Woman's Own*,' said Nico, lying back on the grass. 'I must say it's all rather erotic, like an arranged marriage,' he reached

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up and removed a lilac flower from her hair. 'I'm beginning to look at you with new eyes.'

'Don't be silly,' said Hester, blushing.

'What happens when you come back from Kenya, and everyone discovers we're not married?'

'Oh, we just say we broke it off, because we weren't suited.'

'Why not? Did you discover I was a closet queen or a secret drinker?'

'There's nothing secret about your drinking,' said Hester, filling up his paper cup. She suddenly noticed how tired and drawn he looked beneath the freckles. 'Have you heard from Annabel?'

'Only one postcard, asking me to pick up her pearls from the jewellers and not displaying any overwhelming wish that I was with her.'

It was when they were walking back to Hester's office, that the truth came out. Nigel Dempster had rung Nico the previous night to say that Annabel and Jamie Cavendish had been inseparable since they arrived in Rome, and had Nico any comment to make.

'Dempster's a mate,' said Nico, 'so he perfectly understood when I told him to go and stuff himself. I don't think he'll use the story, but if he doesn't someone else'll get onto it soon.'

'I can't bear it,' said Hester in horror. 'Oh poor Nico, Annabel's probably just bored talking Italian all the time, and hankers after some English conversation.'

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‘No-one’s ever been interested in Jamie Cavendish for his conversation,’ said Nico bitterly. ‘I’ve been trying to get her on the telephone all morning – in between discussing investments with ancient widows – but either she’s out or not answering. I’d like to jump on an aeroplane and fly to Rome, and take them both apart, but I can’t leave my unutterably bloody job at the moment.’

Hester was overwhelmed with contrition. ‘And I’m dragging you along to this awful party this evening. I’m so desperately sorry,’ and putting her arm through his, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

They were so engrossed that neither noticed a photographer, hovering inside the green curtain of a nearby weeping willow, who quickly took their picture as they passed.

Nico dropped her back at the office at half-past one, but instead of going inside, she waited five minutes then took a taxi to Piccadilly, where she bought a pale pink dress, a blue silk shirt from Turnbull and Asser, and the entire collection of Mozart’s piano concertos – none of which she could afford. She must ring her bank manager and tell him about the new job – particularly as she’d just drawn out three hundred pounds in travellers cheques.

She slunk back into the office, feeling frightfully guilty about skiving, to find the place deserted. Everyone had gone to the hairdressers, except Beverly, who was reading *Cosmopolitan*, and putting fake tan on her legs.



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‘Mr Petrie’s got enough booze to float a battleship,’ she said. ‘And at last I’m going to get a chance to have a crack at young Mr Bateman.’

‘*He’s* not coming?’ said Hester in horror. Young Mr Bateman was the Chairman’s handsome son, so terrified of being ensnared by the typists that he never patronized office parties.

‘He is, *and* Mrs Bateman,’ said Beverly gleefully. ‘They’re looking in before some dinner party. Even Miss Fishlock’s gone to the Hydro Beauty Clinic to have her legs and arms waxed. Everyone wants to wish you well, Hes.’

‘Oh shut up,’ said Hester.

Mr Petrie trotted back about three-thirty, as excited as a small boy on Christmas Eve.

‘My dear,’ he stopped at her desk, breathing brandy all over her, ‘your mother rang before lunch.’

‘But she’s abroad,’ said Hester aghast.

‘Well, evidently she and your father have been having terrible storms in the Mediterranean,’ said Mr Petrie happily, ‘and their boat ran aground. She thought you might have read about the storms in the papers, and be worried, but both your parents are fine. They’re in Cannes now, and are flying back on Sunday. I told her how absolutely delighted we all were about you and Nico.’

‘Oh no,’ said Hester, sitting down very suddenly.

‘My dear, I’m so sorry, I assumed she must know. But don’t worry, she couldn’t be more thrilled. Like me, she was a little worried it might be Julian, but

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she was simply amazed it was Nico. She told me he's an absolute charmer. She's going to ring back later.'

Hester was trapped in the office, admiring the newly waxed legs of Miss Fishlock, the head of the typing pool, when her mother rang back – obviously after a long and celebratory lunch.

'Darling, darling – crackle, crackle,' went the telephone – 'we couldn't be more thrilled, it's absolutely wonderful news – we always hoped you and Nico might finally hit it off, you were such friends when you were younger. I can't imagine anyone nicer as a son-in-law. I can't wait to ring up Elizabeth Calvert. It will cheer her up, she's been so depressed since Georgie died.'

'Oh please don't,' said Hester in panic, 'Nico hasn't told her yet, it's supposed to be a secret.'

'Mr Petrie said you were getting married in six weeks' time, darling – crackle crackle – you're not?'

'No I am not,' said Hester firmly.

'Well, that's a relief, not that it would have mattered these days, but people always count from the wedding and say "Hum", don't they? Darling, Daddy and I are also so pleased it isn't Julian, we never said anything in case you did marry him, but I didn't think he was right for you. And Daddy would have had a heart attack if you'd married a socialist.'

'He's *not*, he's a sociologist.'

'Well, it's all the same thing, dirty fingernails and disapproving of one for living in a nice house. I must ring Michael, he'll be so fascinated you're marrying Nico. Do you think he'll be best man?'

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‘Oh please don’t,’ Hester almost screamed, acutely aware of the flapping ears of Miss Fishlock, and of Beverly helpless with suppressed mirth in the corner.

‘We’re staying with the Montgomerys, they’re all thrilled,’ went on her mother. ‘And they send love, and Daddy wants a word with you too.’

Fortunately, Hester’s father, more aware of the cost of long distance telephone calls, kept it brief, but there was no doubt about how pleased he was.

Hester put down the telephone receiver, gave a whimper of terror, and rushed off and hid in the loo, which looked like a wholesale dress house with all the secretaries’ party clothes hanging up. If only she could go out to a telephone box and ring her mother back, but she didn’t know the number of the Montgomerys’ villa. She had grisly visions of them all celebrating over a bottle of Armagnac and ringing up half England.

At half-past five, feeling as if she was in a rowing boat, bucketing towards Niagara Falls, Hester changed into her new pink dress. It clung everywhere, and gave a rosy glow to her brown skin, which completely belied the churning sickness and nerves inside her.

‘Do I look fat?’ she asked Beverly, who inch by inch was easing herself into the cherry-red matador pants.

‘No, absolutely gorgeous, you’ve lost weight in the past fortnight,’ said Beverly grinning evilly. ‘Getting engaged must be such a strain.’

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‘Your fiancé won’t know where to put himself when he sees you in that dress,’ said Marie from the typing pool.

The party was being held in the Board Room. To begin with everyone stood around under the chandeliers, eyeing each other’s dresses and wondering what to say next – funny when they had no difficulty in working hours.

Mr Petrie, who had a friend who was a wine merchant, had ordered five cases of sparkling wine, and a bottle of whisky for the Board. Like an army waiting to come to the rescue, the serried ranks of bottles gleamed on the white tablecloth. Mr Petrie was soon circulating them freely, and the roar of conversation started to spread through the whole building.

Everyone in the office seemed to have contributed to the food. Miss Fishlock had cooked a whole tin of cheese straws with baker’s droop, the typing pool had filled bridge rolls with chopped-up boiled eggs and bloater paste. The Sales Department had provided two large quiches from the local delicatessen. The Managing Director had sent his secretary out to buy a tenner’s worth of smoked salmon which she had spread on slices of brown bread that were already curling up at the edges, and the packer’s wife had made a large, iced rainbow cake, across the top of which was written: ‘*Nico and Hester: All the best*’, in loopy turquoise writing.

Hester felt a great lump in her throat. ‘Oh, you are

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all angels,' she said in a shaking voice, 'I really don't deserve it. Thank you so much.'

'Don't cry,' said Beverly, 'it'll ruin your make-up. Bloody hell, Debby Austin from Accounts is wearing the same red matador pants as me – the cow! She must have seen me trying them on in the loo, yesterday.'

'Your fiancé's downstairs, Hester,' said Marie from the typing pool. 'Hasn't he got a lovely smile.'

Perhaps Annabel's rung him after all, thought Hester.

Nico was smoothing his hair in the hall mirror as she came down the stairs. 'Goodness, you look desirable,' he said. 'Like a fondant. I shan't have to act at all. How are you, my dearest darling. It seems a million hours since I saw you at lunchtime, darling, I've missed you so much, darling.'

'Don't overdo it,' hissed Hester.

'In six weeks we shall be married, darling, and you will be mine for all eternity, darling,' said Nico.

'You've been drinking,' said Hester.

'Co-rrect, but cross my heart, no-one will know but you, darling.'

And they wouldn't. Nico behaved impeccably: talking to Miss Fishlock about the fallibility of the photocopying machines, discussing the third test with Mr Bateman, telling Mr Petrie what a wonderful employer he'd been to Hester, admiring photographs of Mrs Petrie's bull terriers, and even managing to eat a piece of rainbow cake, and drink several glasses of sparkling hock, which Hester knew he detested.

He spent some minutes talking to Debby Austin

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from Accounts, and admiring her cherry-red matador pants.

‘I thought she wasn’t supposed to show that she knows we’re not engaged, but she kept winking at me,’ he muttered to Hester afterwards.

‘Shush, it’s just a nervous twitch,’ said Hester, suddenly overcome with a fearful desire to giggle.

‘Have some pilchard dip,’ said Miss Fishlock, brandishing a mangled-looking blood-red mess under Nico’s nose.

‘I won’t, thanks awfully,’ he said. ‘It looks terrific, but I must make feeble attempts to stick to my pre-wedding crash diet.’

‘*You* don’t need to lose weight,’ said Miss Fishlock skittishly.

‘I might not get into my morning coat,’ said Nico.

He’s as adaptable as a thermostat, thought Hester in passionate gratitude. Julian would never have behaved so well, even if he and Hester really had been engaged.

As everyone was trying to congratulate Hester, she found it difficult to keep as close to Nico as she would have liked. She was talking to Mrs Petrie about wedding cakes, when Nico (trapped by two of the Directors’ wives), suddenly turned round and hissed out of the corner of his mouth, ‘I’ve forgotten where I’m going for my honeymoon.’

‘The game reserves,’ hissed back Hester, ‘for six weeks.’

‘But isn’t it the rainy season?’ she heard one of the Directors’ wives saying in a perplexed voice.

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‘How’s your mother, Hester?’ asked Mrs Petrie.

‘She’s sailing in France,’ said Hester, then froze as she heard Fiona, the Managing Director’s secretary saying to Nico, ‘I hear you got Hester’s engagement ring at lunchtime today, what’s it like?’

Leaving Mrs Petrie in full flood, Hester swung round once again, brandishing her left hand, with its cracker ring of fake rubies and diamonds glittering gaudily on the third finger. ‘Isn’t it heaven,’ she gasped.

‘Lovely,’ said Fiona looking at Nico in awe, thinking he must be rich if he could afford diamonds that size.

‘But no more than you deserve, darling,’ said Nico, putting an arm round Hester’s waist.

‘Where are you going to live?’ asked Fiona.

There was a pause.

‘Well,’ said Nico. ‘Probably,’ said Hester, both at the same time. Then together they said: ‘No, you go on, darling.’

‘We’re tossing up between her flat and mine,’ said Nico eventually. ‘Mine is more central, but hers is more rural. We’ll probably live in mine during the week, and go to Hester’s for weekends.’

Two of the Directors had just joined the group, and were being introduced to Nico, when Marie from the typing pool came rushing in.

‘Look, you’re in the paper,’ she said brandishing the *Evening Post*.

‘Let’s see,’ said everyone crowding round.

Hester felt as though icicles were being slowly

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dripped down her spine. She shot an agonized look at Nico.

‘Let’s have a look,’ he said calmly.

Underneath a photograph of Nico and Hester, arm in arm, obviously returning from lunch in the park, was written: *‘While his girlfriend for the last two years, model Annabel Blair-Hopkinson, has been whooping it up in Rome, stockbroker Nico Calvert has secretly got engaged to his childhood sweetheart, Hester Milne. Neither of them was available for comment this afternoon, but Hester’s office confirmed that her boss is holding a celebration party for her and Nico this evening. What will the volatile Annabel – not renowned for the evenness of her temper – do next? Watch this space.’*

‘Oh my God,’ said Hester under her breath.

Nico’s face didn’t flicker. ‘Well, that’s nice,’ he said easily, ‘and a very good picture of you, Hes darling.’

‘Nico, it *is* you. I thought it must be. Congratulations,’ said a voice. It was young Mr Bateman, closely flanked by a large, chinless girl in a shirt-waister dress.

‘Nico, darling,’ she screamed, ‘it really *is* you. How sudden and dramatic. Have you told Annabel?’

‘Hello, Charlie, Hello Selena,’ said Nico kissing the large, chinless girl on the cheek. ‘I thought you were in the Seychelles. Have you met Hester?’

Hester nodded, utterly speechless.

‘We’re all devastated to lose you, Hester,’ said Charlie Bateman, looking at her with interest for the



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first time in six years. 'I didn't know you even knew Nico. Are you coming up to Melchester for the twelfth, Nico?'

Mercifully they were saved by a rap on the table.

Mr Petrie, wiping away rivulets of sweat and the odd tear, then launched into an emotional farewell to Hester, thanking her for six years' devoted service.

After five minutes, old Mr Bateman, who wanted his dinner in Cadogan Square said, 'That's enough, Cyril.'

But Mr Petrie, not to be deflected, soldiered on for another five minutes. Hester didn't take in a word he was saying. All she could think about was what the hell was Annabel going to say to poor Nico when she read the piece in the paper.

At last when Mr Petrie asked everyone to raise their glasses to Hester and Nico, she was still so stunned with horror, that she raised her glass and drunk a toast to herself.

Worse was to come. A large pile of presents was unearthed from under the white tablecloth. It included a set of saucepans from Accounts, coffee cups from the warehouse, a picnic basket from the sales force, a painted cock from the General Trading Company from Mr and Mrs Petrie, and four beautiful, fluffy towels from the typing pool.

'I thought mushroom went with everything,' explained Miss Fishlock.

'You see we all love you, Hester,' said Mr Petrie.

Hester burst into tears. 'I can't bear it,' she sobbed. 'You've all been so kind, you don't realize . . .'

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‘Shut up,’ interrupted Nico icily, so only she could hear, ‘you can’t back down now.’

He handed her his red silk handkerchief, and realizing she was quite incapable of saying anything, made a short speech. He thanked Mr Petrie for the party, and everyone else for their presents and their cooking and finally he thanked them all for the present of Hester, who he knew would make him very happy.

Everyone was surging forward to kiss Hester now, and clap Nico on the back.

‘I think we’ll push off,’ Hester heard Nico say in an undertone to Mr and Mrs Petrie, ‘it’s all been marvellous, but rather a strain for Hes.’

‘Quite understood, it’s been pretty tear-jerking for all of us,’ said Mr Petrie, his face shining like a Dutch cheese.

‘See you all tomorrow, thank you so much,’ stammered Hester.

While two of the sales reps helped Nico down to his car with the presents, she had time to nip into her office and collect the wrapped-up Turnbull and Asser shirt and the Mozart piano concertos.

Outside the heat hit her like a furnace.

‘Don’t say anything,’ said Nico, as she got into the car beside him. ‘They’re watching from the window.’

He drove for half a mile, then pulled up. For a minute he stared at her, his amber eyes suddenly narrowed to slits; then he proceeded to laugh until he cried. ‘What a glorious, glorious cock-up,’ he gasped finally.

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‘But it’s awful,’ said Hester, appalled. ‘Young Mr Bateman and the piece in the *Evening Post*.’

Nico wiped his eyes.

‘It really doesn’t matter,’ he said. ‘They were all so sweet, let’s go out and get absolutely smashed.’

A pink evening sun glittered behind the plane trees, as he drove her across London to Chelsea. Every so often he started to laugh again. Hester was faintly relieved by his reaction, but wondered how much was due to the drink he had consumed. He took her to a very pretty restaurant, where they dined outside under a dense canopy of dark green vine leaves. Vases of pink snapdragons stood on the pale green tablecloths. Was it Hester’s imagination or did a lot of the diners look up and nudge each other as she and Nico came in?

‘Congratulations, Mr Calvert,’ said the head waiter, ‘congratulations, Miss Milne. I saw the article in the evening paper. This must be a very special evening for you both. I hope you will accept a bottle of champagne on the house.’

Hester shot an anguished look at Nico.

‘That’d be great,’ said Nico, smiling broadly. ‘Thanks, Eduardo. All this free loading’s wonderful,’ he added to Hester, as they sat down at their table. ‘With any luck we can live in the lap of luxury for the rest of our lives.’

Within the next few minutes, four people came up and congratulated him.

‘Do you come here a lot with Annabel?’ said Hester miserably, as the last one drifted off.

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‘I used to come here a lot before I met her,’ said Nico. ‘But she doesn’t like it much, not noisy enough, nor full enough of smart people to shriek at.’

As Hester seemed quite incapable of making a decision, he ordered asparagus and poached salmon for both of them, and a bottle of Sancerre to follow the champagne.

‘Nico,’ she said desperately when the waiter had gone, ‘you must let me pay tonight.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, I’m having a wonderful time.’

‘In five days time,’ she persisted, ‘I’ll be on a plane to Kenya, and you’ve got to stay here and face the music.’

Nico shrugged his shoulders. ‘You know what London’s like, they’ll have forgotten in a few days.’

‘Your optimism is truly record breaking,’ said Hester gloomily.

After they’d drunk the bottle of champagne, however, she began to cheer up. She still felt close to tears, and bitterly, bitterly ashamed of herself but Nico was so nice to dine out with. He listened to what she said, and put himself out to amuse her, instead of yawning and staring at other women, and becoming irritated like Julian did if she didn’t immediately get the gist of some abstruse sociological argument.

Even so she jumped out of her skin every time a dark girl came into the room. ‘I keep thinking it might be Annabel.’

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Nico laughed. 'You're more frightened of her than I am. It's amazing,' he went on, managing to talk and eat asparagus at great speed at the same time, 'how every single person at that party said how pleased they were you weren't marrying Julian.'

'I don't want to talk about Julian,' said Hester. She was horrified that she hadn't even wondered yet what his reaction would be to the piece in the *Evening Post*.

'I do though,' said Nico. 'It's high time someone talked some sense into your head.'

'He's just working terribly hard at the moment,' muttered Hester. 'He gets so stuck into things, he can't think of anything else.'

'Are you sure it's work he's stuck into?' said Nico drily.

'Of course, at least when he does turn up, it's so wonderful,' she stammered. 'I feel as though I'd been given the kiss of life, or a Leonardo of my very own.'

'Go on,' said Nico gently, 'you ought to talk about him to someone.'

Hester knew she had drunk too much, but under Nico's kind, exceptionally friendly gaze, she felt her resolve weakening. 'I want to touch him all the time when I'm with him,' she said. 'But he doesn't like it, he even thinks holding hands in the street is risqué.'

'That's probably because he's married,' said Nico. 'More married than you think. Married people are completely ruthless about maintaining the status

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quo. As long as their own marriage isn't endangered, they don't mind who they hurt.'

'And Julian m-makes me feel so . . .' began Hester.

'What?' said Nico.

'Hopeless in bed.' She *must* be drunk. She'd never discussed this with anyone, even with Beverly. 'He says I'm boring and unimaginative. I've read millions of sex books, but I don't really get enough practice to apply them. When we do go to bed, I'm so nervous I can't relax.'

Her voice was trembling. With one hand she was nervously opening and shutting the mouth of a snapdragon.

'Have you ever been to bed with anyone else?' asked Nico.

'Once or twice – but they were only odd scuffles after parties. They left me feeling awful afterwards. I think you have to be in love for it to work.'

Nico picked up her other hand, examining the engagement ring, and the pink, very clean, shell-like nails. Then he turned it over and kissed the palm slowly. 'You're such a nice girl, Hes. Life would be so much simpler if I loved you and not Annabel.'

'And I you, and not Julian,' said Hester sadly.

They found that neither of them had much in the way of appetite. They left their salmon virtually untouched, but got a doggy bag and took the rest home for Hockney. They did, however, finish the bottle of Sancerre, and two large brandies each. They left abruptly, with Nico overtipping.

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Outside the sun had set, and the street lamps were lighting up the new, pale buff leaves on the plane trees. As they got into the car, Hester unearthed her carrier bag.

‘These are for you, for being so good to me, Nico.’

She gave him the blue silk Turnbull and Asser shirt, and the Mozart piano concertos.

Nico was appalled. ‘*Darling!* I don’t need presents like this.’

‘Yes, you do, you’ve risked the most precious thing in your life for me.’

‘Give them to Julian.’

She shook her head. ‘Julian prefers Wagner, and he looks hell in blue.’

Hester lay back in the car, seeing London through a haze of alcohol. The pink and white chestnut trees were covered in candles, the laburnum and the wisteria had candles hanging down – the whole world’s lit up, she thought dreamily.

It was ten minutes before she realized Nico was driving to his flat in Kensington, rather than taking her home. ‘I ought to go back to Putney, it must be terribly late.’

‘I want to play my records first,’ said Nico.

He parked the car under a huge chestnut tree in the square.

Hester loved Nico’s flat. It was shabby, and the curtains and chair covers, in soft faded colours, were practically falling to pieces, but it was terribly

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comfortable, and overflowing with records, books and pictures. Over the fireplace, there was a painting of the house in Somerset, square and Queen Anne with its russet walls, and sweeping green lawns. On the desk was a picture of Bentley, Nico's beloved black labrador, whom he saw most weekends, but refused to keep in London.

'It looks quite tidy,' said Nico, 'Mrs Harris must have been. I'm going to have a pee, get a bottle of wine out of the fridge.'

Despite the suffocating heat of the night, Hester was assailed by a fit of shivering. She went to the window, breathing in the heady smell of lilac and wallflowers from the garden outside. Turning, she saw Nico's large double bed through a door on the right. It somehow seemed to have assumed a tangible presence, like a great grisly bear waiting to pounce on her. Don't be ridiculous, she told herself furiously, Nico loves Annabel.

In the kitchen, Mrs Harris had left a note on the draining board, '*Your lady rang, can you ring her, very urgent,*' followed by a Rome telephone number which seemed to go on for ever. Hester suppressed a terrible urge to tear it up into little bits and swallow it like a spy. Instead, she got the wine out of the fridge.

'There's a message to ring Annabel,' she said, as Nico came out of the bathroom.

'Thanks,' he said, and taking the bit of paper picked up the telephone and started to dial.

Hester retired to the loo. She was amazed that after all the drinking and emotion she still looked



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so pretty. I hate Annabel, she thought savagely. She lingered, washing her hands and combing her hair, as long as possible. She put on some scent, then washed it off again, thinking it too much of a deliberate come-on. Get a grip on yourself, she thought for the umpteenth time that evening.

Back in the sitting room, she found Nico lounging against the wall, his face in shadow, still letting the number ring. Hester sat down on the corner of the sofa at the other end of the room, to keep a distance between herself and the conversation.

Nico dropped the telephone back on the hook. 'Why are you hiding over there?' he said. 'To pay me back for ringing Annabel? You can ring Julian if you like.'

'Don't be so utterly bloody.'

Hester got to her feet and went over to the window once more. She wished the trembling would stop. She watched a shooting star careering across the indigo sky, then realized it was an aeroplane. Perhaps it was Annabel on her way home.

Suddenly the room was flooded with Mozart. Hester didn't move, she only knew the music seemed to be expressing all the loneliness and longing inside her.

'Hes,' said Nico softly, 'stop sulking,' and he crossed the room and took her in his arms. He looked at her for a second, as if he was trying to memorize every curve and line of her face. She could smell the faint lemon tang of his aftershave. Then he kissed her very gently.

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‘You’ve cleaned your teeth,’ she muttered. ‘That’s not fair.’

Then he kissed her much harder – and almost before she knew it they were in bed. And she never dreamed in a million years that anyone could be so tender and skilled, and unshymaking, and utterly dedicated to giving her pleasure. It was like hearing the ‘Merry Peasant’ strummed out for years on an out-of-tune, upright piano, then suddenly having it played by Arthur Rubenstein on a Bechstein.

Afterwards, she mumbled, ‘But you’re absolutely brilliant.’

‘Plenty of practice,’ he said, kissing her on the shoulder. ‘Annabel is extremely demanding, but I don’t want to talk about Annabel. God, you’re so warm and sweet, and you’ve got such a lovely cushiony body.’

‘Julian says I’m too fat.’

‘Julian ought to be horsewhipped,’ he said roughly, ‘and you should have him for slander – you’re utterly adorable in bed.’

‘I don’t want to talk about Julian,’ whispered Hester.

Nico lay back and reached for a cigarette. A match flickered in the dark like a firefly. He settled her into the crook of his arm. Hester thought she had never been so comfortable in her life. She was just drifting off to sleep, when a terrible thought struck her. ‘Nico, I must go home.’

‘Don’t be stupid, the night’ – he looked at his watch – ‘or rather the day, is still young. If you want

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to change, I'll drive you over to your flat before work tomorrow morning.'

With his left hand he began to stroke her left breast, and she felt her resolution weaken. Then she said, 'I must go back, I haven't fed Hockney.'

There was a long, long pause.

'Bugger Hockney,' said Nico.

'You needn't get up, I'll get a taxi,' said Hester, as she'd always done with Julian.

'No, you won't, I'll drive you home.'

Outside, the roof of the car was covered in white chestnut blossom – like confetti, thought Hester. The sky was already lightening to a cool, clear turquoise, as they drove through the deserted streets. Nico's hand rested on her bare thigh, in a comforting gesture of companionship. He didn't kiss her when they got back to the flat. She was relieved: her mouth tasted like a parrot's cage. But he broke a branch off the white lilac tree in the next door garden and gave it to her.

'Little Hester,' he said, running his finger lingeringly down her cheek, 'whoever would have thought it? Go and get some sleep. I'll ring you in the morning.'

Hockney, torn between rage and relief that she had finally come back, attacked her ankles viciously.

'I've got some real salmon for you tonight,' she said, reproachfully unwrapping the tinfoil, 'and all you can do is abuse me.'

Hockney went on mewling piteously until she put the fish down on the floor. Then after one sniff, he

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shot her a dirty look, and wandered off on stiff, furry, orange plus fours into the bedroom.

‘And I came all the way back for you,’ Hester called after him indignantly. ‘Nico’s right, you’re a pig, Hockney.’

She bashed the stem of the white lilac, and put it in a vase by her bed, breathing in the soft, heady smell. Then she lay down and gazed at the ceiling. ‘I am not at all drunk,’ she said out loud, ‘just totally intoxicated.’ When Hockney climbed onto her stomach, and started kneading it with open claws, she didn’t even notice.

She woke with an absolutely bone-crushing hang-over. It took her a long time to get up and bath, and reach the office. She travelled two stops beyond her station on the tube, bought four bunches of pink snapdragons at the barrow for Mr Petrie, and when she passed a man in the street playing ‘Green-sleeves’ on the flute, she put two pounds into his cloth cap.

‘You’ve got your shirt on the wrong way round,’ said Beverly as she wandered into the office. ‘It’s supposed to be lucky. You’re going to need it, people have been ringing up to congratulate you all morning.’

For the next half an hour, various members of the staff trooped into the office to tell her how much they liked Nico. He rang during the coffee break.

‘How are you?’ she asked, suddenly overwhelmed with shyness.

‘Well, if you pour two bottles of Sancerre on top

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of a bottle of Dom Perignon, on top of four glasses of Asti Spumante, on top of at least half a bottle of whisky, on top of half a bottle of Muscadet drunk yesterday lunchtime, you can't expect to feel like a mountain stream in the morning. Added to that, my telephone has been ringing since seven o'clock this morning. Apart from four of our national newspapers, the calls included my mother, my grandmother, and three aunts, all of whom seem delighted, and a couple of friends eking out a living as photographers, who want to take your picture. Everyone has been telling me what a lovely girl you are, Hester, and how relieved they are I've finally ditched Annabel. How are you?'

'All right,' said Hester truthfully, but next moment she knew she wasn't, as Nico went on:

'And as the *coup de grâce*, Annabel has just telephoned breathing fire, having been informed by a dozen of her best friends, as well as her mother and her two stepmothers, that you and I are shortly to be married. She's flying home this morning. And guess who's got to meet her at London Airport at half-past twelve? It is no longer a question of my giving up the City, the City will give up me, if I don't spend a bit more time there.'

'Oh Nico,' said Hester, horrified, 'I'm so, so sorry.'

'So you should be, I'll ring you later.'

Hester sat down at her desk, feeling ludicrously depressed. Stop it, she told herself in a rage, don't be so wet, you've got your lovely new job to

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look forward to on Monday. You'll feel better once you're out of England. But all she could think about was poor Nico having to face up to Annabel's fury, and even worse, of them both making up afterwards.

At eleven-thirty, the telephone stopped ringing for a second and Marie from the typing pool came in with an envelope delivered by hand and typed rather badly.

Opening it, Hester read, '*Dear Miss Milne, I saw the report of your engagement in the paper last night. While I must congratulate you, and wish you every happiness, I did stipulate at the interview that I was not interested in anyone with emotional ties, so I am afraid I have filled your job, and am no longer in need of your services. Yours sincerely, Darrell French.*'

I can't bear it, whimpered Hester. She ran out to a telephone box, and tried to ring Darrell French to explain, but the number was permanently engaged – probably David Niven ringing from the South of France, she thought miserably. Then she remembered the fortune she had spent in the last fortnight on the expectation of her fat new salary. She felt as though the Hoover bag containing her life was suddenly exploding. She went back to the office, put her head on the desk, and fell into a short, miserable sleep. She was woken by the telephone. It was Julian. He had seen the engagement in the paper, or rather his secretary had drawn his attention to it. Surely there was some mistake.

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‘Yes,’ said Hester wearily, there was a colossal mistake.

Could they have lunch, asked Julian.

‘He’s taking me to the Etoile,’ said Hester in awe, as she put down the telephone.

‘He’s never taken you anywhere that grand before,’ said Beverly. ‘The bait must have been taken.’

‘“Bate” is the operative word,’ said Hester. ‘Annabel’s flying home in a rage to have it out with poor Nico.’

For the first time since she’d known him, Julian was waiting for her at the restaurant. As always, determined to repudiate any suggestion of academic stuffiness, he was wearing a black shirt, tight white trousers, a gold necklace, and several pints of Aramis. He was immersed in a weighty tome entitled: *Gender Role Stereotypes: A Reappraisal*, and drinking a glass of Chambery. His spectacular good looks were further enhanced by a mahogany suntan. Hester thought she’d never seen him look more devastating.

‘You’ve been away,’ she said, sliding into the seat beside him.

He nodded. ‘I went to a conference on World Poverty in Florida, and then on to a seminar in San Francisco, where I delivered two papers.’

‘Like a paper boy,’ said Hester, giggling nervously. Julian frowned.

‘Did people like them?’ asked Hester hastily.

‘They were not unwell received,’ said Julian,

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'I felt I had to get away from London. It's very invigorating to spend a few days mixing with the top minds in one's own field.'

Nico has hayfields, Hester was alarmed to find herself thinking. She must concentrate. Just as Julian was about to launch into a detailed description of his trip, she said, 'Can I have a very large gin and tonic, please.'

Julian looked alarmed. 'But you don't believe in drinking at lunchtime.'

'Co-rrection, Buster,' she replied quite amiably, 'it's *you* who don't believe in my drinking at lunchtime.'

I really must stop being lippy, she thought, and as Julian summoned the waiter and ordered the gin and tonic, she concentrated on his beauty. He had washed his hair for her, it was still wet at the back. Aware of her scrutiny, Julian explained that he'd been swimming before they met. Nuts, thought Hester, he'd never achieve those uniformly wind-swept waves without the aid of a hairdryer.

'How's my typescript getting on?' he asked.

'I finished it nearly a fortnight ago, I tried to ring you. I was a bit nervous of sending it by post.'

'Quite right,' said Julian. 'Much too precious. I'm sorry I didn't have time to tell you I was going away. I was rushed off my feet before I left. I sent you a postcard from Florida.'

'I haven't got it yet,' said Hester sweetly, then drained half her gin and tonic in one gulp.

Julian was beginning to look at her with some



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alarm. 'What are you going to eat?' he asked. 'It's so hot, I don't feel like much.'

Hester was not going to fall for that old trick. So often in the past, Julian had told her he wasn't hungry, and she'd frugally asked for grapefruit and a plain omelette, to find that he'd suddenly recovered his appetite, and ordered smoked salmon and a huge steak.

'I'd like a large Dover sole and a tomato salad,' she said.

By the time Julian had finished describing even the most minor triumphs of his trip to America, their food had arrived. First Julian sent back the wine because it wasn't chilled enough, and then he summoned the waiter. 'These quenelles are very disappointing,' he said, 'I don't think you've added enough seasoning. I'll have cold salmon instead.'

Hester blushed scarlet and helped herself liberally to tartar sauce. It's sacrilege to complain here, she thought furiously, when they do everything so perfectly. He's just pig-ignorant and showing off.

'Not too much tartar sauce,' chided Julian. 'You've managed to shed some weight since I last saw you. We don't want you gaining it too soon. Perhaps I should go away more often,' he added playfully, 'and make you lose your appetite.'

'Absolutely heavenly sole,' said Hester defiantly to the waiter, when he returned with Julian's cold salmon, 'and wonderful tomato salad, and spiffing tartar sauce.'

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The waiter gave he an almost imperceptible wink. 'Thank you, Madam,' he said solemnly.

'Now,' said Julian, 'what's all this nonsense in the paper last night?'

Hester told him. Julian was horrified. 'That doddering old ruin, who's been exploiting you for the last six years! And you didn't have the guts to tell him why you were leaving.'

'It wasn't anything to do with guts,' protested Hester, 'I just love Mr Petrie, and I didn't want to hurt him.'

'And Nico Calvert went along with this charade. I suppose it's the sort of silly idiot, ragging-in-the-dormitory, practical joke he would appreciate – talk about delayed adolescence.'

'Nico has been wonderful,' snapped Hester, 'and behaved like a perfect gentleman throughout.'

'Meaning I wouldn't,' said Julian nettled.

'No, no,' said Hester hastily, 'I'm sorry, Julian.'

'What happens if your new boss gets to hear of this?'

'He has,' said Hester sadly. 'He sent me round a letter this morning, saying the job has gone to someone else.'

'How old are you, Hester?'

'Twenty-six.' He ought to know, she thought, irritated.

'You're very infantile for twenty-six.'

She didn't need *him* to tell her.

'I realize you're a caring and concerned person, but to fabricate such lies. You obviously consider

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Nico has been very supportive, but he's merely encouraged you in your duplicity. You deserved to lose that job. What did your mother say when Mr Petrie told her?

'She was absolutely delighted,' said Hester. 'She adores Nico.'

'Naturally,' sneered Julian, 'one would expect her to be heavily into endogamy.'

Hester bit her lip. She was not going to give Julian the opportunity to put her down by asking him what 'endogamy' meant. He was lecturing her on and on now. She found it very hard to concentrate. She suddenly thought what a common voice he had, a sort of ironed-out Birmingham with American overtones, then felt appallingly ashamed of herself for being such a raging snob.

The richness of the fish, the oil from the salad, and the tartar sauce, were beginning to make her feel sick. She took a slug of white wine, and felt the sweat rising under her hair. She still had three-quarters of the sole to get through. Julian, who'd nearly finished his salmon, disapproved strongly of waste, but even more of doggy bags.

At the next table, a blond man had taken the hand of a beautiful girl sitting beside him. They both looked so besottedly in love. Hester found her thoughts straying to Nico, and how he was getting on. Had Annabel drawn first blood yet? Perhaps they were already making it up in Nico's double bed? She was filled with a pain so intense it astonished her.

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‘I think it was just as well your job didn’t come off,’ Julian was saying, ‘I’m not sure you have the moral fibre to withstand entire film crews abroad and, although I admire Darrell French’s work, as a director he lacks seriousness. One can’t make films just to entertain these days.’

He took her hand. ‘If you had the right person to guide you, Hester, I think you could grow into a beautiful human being.’

‘I could hardly grow into a beautiful carthorse.’

Julian frowned, but was not to be deflected. ‘You would find the field of sociology very rewarding. I have more paperwork than I can handle at the moment, I need to be released from all the trivial pressures of everyday life, in order to get on with my next book.’

‘What’s it going to be called this time?’ asked Hester, her heart sinking.

‘A short but telling title: *Whence Sisterhood?* The male can no longer bury his head in the sand where the women’s movement is concerned. This should be my most meaningful work to date. I didn’t tell you before, because I needed the space to think, but my divorce has come through. I realize that’ll be a great relief to you.’

Hester put her knife and fork together. ‘What are you trying to say, Julian?’

‘That you should move in with me, then we could extend the parameters of our relationship. You can sub-let your flat – that should give us two hundred and forty pounds a month, and you can help me with

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all my research, and, if need be, do extra typing for some of the other professors.'

Hester was absolutely speechless. Julian, she thought, wants a housekeeper and a free secretary.

'I appreciate this is a shock for you,' said Julian smugly. 'When you've wanted something as much as I know you've wanted this, you can't assimilate it straight away.'

'I'd like some fresh air,' said Hester. 'I'm terribly sorry,' she added to the waiter, who was ruefully shaking his head over her hardly touched plate. 'it was lovely, but the weather's too hot,' and she fled out of the restaurant. Outside a white hot sun blazed relentlessly out of a white hot sky. Julian walked her back to the office, wheeling his bicycle, and talking and talking, little of which Hester took in. The pavement scorched her feet through her soles.

Outside her office, she turned to him, looking at his face as carefully as Nico had studied hers last night. 'Julian, will you kiss me?' she said, adding '*Please*,' as he hesitated.

Rather reluctantly, he put his arms round her. She could feel the bar of the bicycle against her stomach, the oily chain against her leg. His kiss was as perfunctory as the 'Thank You' stamped at the bottom of a supermarket tag. She drew away from him.

'I'm sorry, Julian,' she said sadly. 'But I can't move in with you, because I don't love you anymore.'

Julian looked thunderstruck. 'Oh c'mon, I know exactly how much you feel about me. You're just

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erecting defensive barriers, because I didn't get in touch with you for a few days. Believe me, I had some thinking to do myself, some very real conflicts had to be resolved. I didn't know if I was ready for a caring and committed relationship again.'

'Also,' said Hester, 'I don't think you'd make a very good stepfather for Hockney.'

Julian was furious. 'You've been seeing far too much of Nico Calvert recently,' he said, 'I can detect the flip, ridiculously trivializing influence. You are down and out, Hester, with no job, no fiancé, and when Annabel gets back from Rome, and makes absolute mincemeat of you, you'll be a laughing stock. I don't want you to see any more of Nico, and I expect you round at my flat at eight o'clock tonight with the typescript.'

'Taxi,' screamed Hester, seeing an orange *For Hire* sign approaching like an angel of mercy. She tore across the road, narrowly avoiding a car coming in the opposite direction and leapt frantically into the waiting cab.

She only had enough money to take her to Putney Hospital, and had to walk home across the common. A heat haze shimmered above the bleached grass. Every tree was a boiling, midgy, ebony cauldron of shadow. Dried-out pink blossom rained down from the chestnut trees. Hester just made it home in time, and threw up all the wine and the Dover sole.

Hockney was totally unsympathetic as she cleaned her teeth, mewing round her legs and leading her

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huffily into the kitchen, where last night's salmon was buzzing with flies.

'You wouldn't have enjoyed moving in with Julian,' said Hester, throwing the salmon into the dustbin. 'He'd never have let you shed hairs on *Whence Sisterhood?*'

She gave him some Kit-e-Kat, the smell of which made her feel sick again. She went next door and rung the office.

'I'm sorry, Mr Petrie, I've got a blinding headache. I'll come in at crack of dawn tomorrow and clear all my work up.'

Immediately she put the telephone down, it rang again. She snatched it up, praying it was Nico, but it was the *Daily Mail*.

'Wrong number,' she screamed slamming down the receiver, then she took it off the hook. In her bedroom, she found the lilac branch Nico had broken off for her last night already dropping white petals all over her bedside table.

'This place is a tip,' she said, and settled down to clean the flat from top to toe, crying great tearing sobs as she worked, until her hair was dark with sweat, and her face streaked with dust. When at last she was finished she collapsed onto her bed.

'I'm a stupid idiot,' she said to herself, 'falling in love with someone I know as well as my old teddy bear,' and the tears spilled over and she started to cry again.

She was interrupted by the doorbell. She didn't answer it, probably some rotten journalist. But

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whoever it was, was leaning on the bell. She put on a huge pair of dark glasses, and went to answer the door.

To her amazement it was Nico, also wearing dark glasses, which he took off at once. 'Where the hell have you been, I've been ringing you all afternoon? The office said you'd gone home.'

'How was Annabel?' she asked quickly.

'Fine. Everything's sorted out there.'

Hester felt the tears welling up again. 'I'm so pleased,' she said in a frozen voice. 'We'd better have a drink to celebrate.'

He followed her into the drawing room. 'Why are you wearing those ridiculous dark glasses?'

'I'm hungover,' she muttered.

Despite her frantic protests, he whipped them off. 'Darling,' he said in horror, 'what's the matter?'

'I had lunch with Julian.'

The amber eyes hardened. 'If that bastard's been bullying you.'

'No, no, he asked me to move in with him.'

His hand tightened on her arm so sharply that she winced. 'He what?'

'He wants me to sub-let this flat and move in with him.'

'And what did you say?'

'Nico, please, you're hurting me,' she cried out. 'I suddenly found I didn't want to move in with him at all.'

'The Past-History Man,' said Nico with a grin.

Rubbing her arm, she went over to the window,



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and started frantically removing dead leaves from one of the geraniums. Some of the pale red petals fell onto the window sill. She noticed they were heart-shaped. 'I'm terribly pleased everything's all right between you and Annabel,' she mumbled. 'Did she give you hell?'

'Appalling at first. It seems my stock, like yours, has rocketed during our twenty-four hour engagement. She's decided she wants to marry me, but first I've got to ring up the *Evening Post*, and get them to print a retraction of last night's piece, and then put an announcement of our engagement in the *Times*.'

So that's that, thought Hester dully. Out loud she said, 'I'll get us a drink.'

'So I drafted the announcement,' went on Nico, 'I thought you might like to look at it.'

'I'm sure you'll be terribly happy,' said Hester in a choked voice.

'I know I will,' said Nico, 'I've never been so happy.'

He got a piece of paper out of his pocket, and handed it to Hester, 'Go on, read it.'

I can't bear to, she thought in agony. Then she remembered how angelic Nico had been to her, not only over the engagement party, but also during the time when there had been a very real prospect of his losing Annabel. It was so churlish not to share in his happiness.

She forced herself to look at the piece of paper. The first words were a mist of tears, then she read, '*The engagement is announced between Nicholas*

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*Gerald Christopher, elder son of the Hon. Mrs Gerald Calvert, and the late Mr Gerald Calvert of Penhaldren Hall, Somerset, and Hester Jane,* she read on incredulously, *'only daughter of Mr and Mrs Anthony Milne, of Lime Tree House, Chichester, Sussex.'*

Her lip began to tremble. 'I don't understand,' she whispered.

'I absolutely adored being engaged to you,' said Nico softly. 'But I'd much rather we were married.'

'We can't,' she said in a stifled voice. 'I've compromised you.'

'I know you have, and I couldn't be more delighted.' He took her by the shoulders, gently turning her round to face him, and her heart failed.

'Annabel went on and on and on, yakking and yakking. I suddenly thought, "you're in the wrong pen, mate, you'd better hop out at once, and go back to where you belong."''

He looked into her red, swollen eyes, 'I adore you. Hes, you look like one of the piglets on the farm, and you're the most lovely and familiar thing I've ever held in my arms.'

'It was the same with me,' she muttered damply into his shirt. 'Julian was rabbiting on and on, and he was so pompous and conceited, and he could never have been as fantastic as you were last night.'

'Which part of last night?'

'That was this morning,' said Hester. 'I mean at the party, and then when Marie rolled up with that thing in the paper—'

'I behaved well,' said Nico stroking her hair,

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‘because I didn’t give a bugger. I think I’ve been in love with you since you were a little schoolgirl with pigtails. Annabel was just a hiatus.’

‘Oh, that’s such a very kind thing to say,’ said Hester going very pink in the face.

‘Darling, I’m not railroading you, am I?’ he said suddenly. ‘You do feel the same about me, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ sighed Hester, ‘I so liked being engaged to you last night, I’ve been having the most awful withdrawal symptoms ever since,’ and she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him until both their hearts were hammering.

‘Just one more thing before we get down to more serious matters,’ said Nico, ‘do you mind terribly if I chuck in stockbroking and take you back to Somerset to run the farm? It’ll be a hell of a struggle at first, but if I’ve got you with me, I know I can do it.’

‘As long as Hockney can come too,’ said Hester.

‘Won’t he chase sheep,’ said Nico, going towards the bedroom.

‘No,’ said Hester following him. ‘And he’ll be awfully supportive, and caring and concerned and meaningful about keeping the rats down too.’