Prologue

Melbourne, November 1918

It was a hot night. High in the dark sky above Melbourne the stars twinkled down on the motley crowds surging back and forth across streets and pavements, but Malcolm Chandler, clutching his mother's skirt, never even looked up, though a few months before his mother had told him about the stars and pointed out the Southern Cross blazing above them, explaining that he was lucky to be able to see it at all.

'Your grandparents, in England, have never seen those special stars,' she had said. 'They have the Plough, instead. It's – it's kind o' small, made out of small little stars, but then England's quite small, too.'

It was odd, Mal had thought, how when Mammy said England was kind of small she sounded wistful, as though in her book small was best. But when his father said the same thing, the words held a sneer. Small is rotten, his voice said. Small is measly, something to despise and look down on. And Mal suspected that Bill Chandler really did think small was rotten, because Mal was small himself and sometimes Mal caught Bill looking at him with dislike, as though he wished him far away. And to be so regarded is frightening, especially when you are only five and the person

who dislikes you is a grown man, and your father into the bargain.

'You all right, son?'

Kath's voice brought Mal's thoughts back to the present, but though he tried to pause, to look up and answer Kath properly, he was unable to do so. Even as she spoke they rounded the corner of Queen Street and burst on to Little Collins Street and the noise and the crowds were such that Mal found himself being pulled away from his mother by the press of people. He whimpered, tugged desperately at her skirt, and Kath stopped, stuck a sharp elbow into the face of a man who had somehow managed to get between them, then kicked out in a manner which Mal knew she would consider unladylike later, when she thought about it, and forced her way back to her small son.

The man who had been elbowed yelped but shouldered his way past them and Kath bent and picked Mal up, settling him firmly on her left hip.

'Hang on, son, this is no time to be separated and I can see something going on ahead . . . Oh my word!'

An explosion, accompanied by a thousand brilliantly coloured stars, split the night. Mal, from his higher position, saw that someone was letting off firecrackers. Right near them a small shop, its shutters erected, a barricade of stout wooden planks nailed across them, seemed to be swaying as though it was about to fall . . . he had no idea what was happening but a skinny young man with a shock of black, frizzy hair, turned and grinned at him.

'The bloody chinks nailed their shutters up but we've broke into them any old how,' he shouted

above the din. 'Them's firecrackers a-goin' off, what the chinks save for their New Year. Jeez, how the old feller's screechin'!'

The movement of the crowd now surged Kath and Mal up on to the pavement and within a couple of feet of the small Chinese shops and Mal found himself with a ringside seat at the lively proceedings. He could see a tall Chinese in a long robe with a funny little silk cap on his head, trying to drive people away from the front of his shop. He had a long stick with a silver knob on the end and he was using it to good effect, but even so the shutters had given way at one end and people were shoving and wriggling through the gap and coming out with their arms laden with gaily coloured cylinders, things which looked like blue and orange wheels, other things shaped like cones . . . and one man had what looked like a sack laden with something heavy over one shoulder.

'Look, Mammy!' Mal squeaked. 'The chinky whacked that feller's head, *wham*, *wham*, but he didn't drop nothing, he didn't even blink! Crikey, there's a lady with a stick too.'

A tiny Chinese woman, laughing and shouting, was hitting out at the crowd with a large umbrella. Her hair had come down from the tight little bun on top of her head and hung in feathery strands round her face and her skin, more ivory than yellow, gleamed in the gaslight's glow. Mal thought she was very pretty and waved to her, but she was too busy whacking with her umbrella to wave back, though she acknowledged him with a tight little smile.

'My God . . . that isn't just high spirits and celebrations, that feller's looting,' Kath shouted, her eyes following her son's pointing finger. 'That's

thieving, that's not just taking a few firecrackers to make a good loud noise. Where's the police? Someone's going to get hurt . . . Hang on, Mal, we'd best get out o' this.'

But even Mal could see that getting out was now impossible. In the relative quiet of Queen Street they could have gone their own way but here, packed into the crowd as sardines are packed into a tin, choice was denied them. They would be carried forward at the crowd's whim whether they would or no.

Kath tried to turn and realised at once that it was not going to be possible. She sighed and hugged Mal tight, then bent her head and spoke into his ear.

'Sorry, feller, we're going up to Swanston Street whether we want to or not! Just hold tight!'

Mal would have liked to remind his mother that they had been heading for Swanston Street anyway, that they had promised Bill they would meet him outside the Town Hall at ten, but he realised it wasn't the moment. She would never hear him, and besides, he was getting caught up in the excitement of the crowd and had no wish to go tamely home. Someone near him was starting up a chorus and he raised his small, piping voice in the same tune, though the words he knew didn't seem to be quite the same as the men were singing.

I don't want to be a soldier,
I don't want to go to war,
I'd rather stay at home,
Around the streets to roam,
And live on the earnings of a high-born whore . . .

Another firecracker went off, turning the sky

above them momentarily incandescent, and Kath squeaked and then laughed.

'Well, this is a night you'll never forget, Mal! The war's over, your daddy's home, and all Melbourne is celebrating – all Australia, very like. Any moment now we'll be on Swanston Street, and then I bet we'll see a lot of folk all giving thanks for the Armistice.'

Mal wanted to say he couldn't imagine more people than there were here, but whilst he was struggling to make himself heard, the crowd surged out of the confines of Little Collins Street and on to Swanston, almost opposite the Town Hall, which was decorated with enough bunting to hide its normally solid stone façade.

The street was wide here, and Kath managed to cross it, still with Mal on her hip, and to take up her station on the broad pavement right outside the Town Hall. There, she stood Mal down and rubbed her arms ruefully.

'You're quite a weight, old feller,' she told him. 'Reckon we'll have to ask your daddy to carry you home, eh?'

Tactful for once, Mal said nothing. This was such a good evening, he didn't want to spoil it by having to think about Bill – and as for his father carrying him home, why on earth should he? The two of them seldom exchanged a word, far less a touch. *I hate him*, Mal thought automatically now. Coming back from – from wherever it was he'd been, saying now he's home we must have what he wants for dinner, getting into *my* bed with *my* mammy and making me sleep on the horrible, hard sofa, telling Mammy she's making a nancy-boy out of her son . . . The list went on and on, though Bill had only been home four or five days.

'Can you see Daddy, Mal? He's not an easy man to miss . . . what colour would you say his hair was, son?'

'Yaller,' Mal muttered. That was another sore point. Bill had looked at Mal's dark, straight hair and then at his own blond curls and at Mammy's beautiful, light-brown fall of hair and had said, resentfully, that the kid must he a changeling, with colouring which favoured neither his mother nor father.

'He's a sulky little brute, what's more,' he had growled, not bothering to keep his voice down, though he knew full well that Mal was only feet away, in the living-room, lying on the crude bed of sofa cushions which Kath had made up for her deposed son. 'Looks at me under his brows, don't answer when I speak to him . . . I can't abide a sulky kid.'

'He's not sulky, Bill,' his mother had said. 'But he doesn't know you very well, yet. He's – he's shy. After all, you're a stranger, really.'

'A stranger? I'm his pa, Goddammit!'

'Yes, but he wasn't quite a year old when you went away, love. You don't expect him to remember you, do you?'

There had been a laugh in her voice, a sort of soft, teasing sweetness which made Mal grip both hands into fists and then bite the knuckles. How *dared* she push him out of her bed and put that – that yellow-haired man in his place? How dared she laugh and tease him . . . no doubt presently she would curl round him as, until five nights ago, she had curled round Mal. Then, he supposed wistfully, she would kiss that Bill on the tickly back of the neck and laugh when he giggled and

say 'Night-night, sleep tight', just as she always had with Mal.

There was a short pause, then Bill had spoken again. 'He was a bonza kid then, Kath; what went wrong?'

There was a smooth, snuggling sound which Mal could not interpret, then his mother spoke again; soothingly, sweet and soft as honey dripping from the comb.

'The war happened, my love, and Mal had to learn to grow up with only me for company. Oh, he's been to kindergarten, has friends, plays out when he can, but he's become a bit of a loner. And I couldn't provide him with a playmate with you away now, could I?'

Mal had sat up in bed, all the hairs on the back of his neck prickling erect. She had spoken in an almost pleading tone, yet the laugh was there, the tease. He heard more rustling, then the creak of bedsprings, and then his father said, 'Oh Kath, Kath – dear Lord, I've missed this!'

This? What did he mean by 'this'?

'Me too, dearest. Oh, Bill, when you do that . . .'

The laughter had gone from his mother's voice and reappeared now, as if by magic, in his father's.

'D'you like it, girlie? Shall I do it again?'

'Oh Bill, Bill! Oh dear God . . . oh Bill!'

Mal knelt up. The beast was hurting her, he would go and fetch a knife out of the kitchen and then run into the bedroom and tell Bill to leave her alone or he'd stab him to death! That would teach him that Mal was neither a changeling nor that other thing he had been called – a nancy-boy, that was it – but a person who could look after Kath perfectly well without any help from *him*, thank you very much.

Only he hadn't moved, of course. And presently, he had pulled his blanket up, shame flooding over him in a great wave. It was no use, he was just a little boy and Bill was a big man. He couldn't do anything to save Kath, and in his heart he knew she didn't want to be saved. So he had lain down again, and presently, slept.

But right now, with the seething, chattering crowd all about him and firecrackers going off at intervals, with a long line of people with their hands clasping each other's waists so that they looked like a snake weaving up and down the middle of the road, he was in charge. His mother would look to him for protection and companionship, at least until the hated Bill turned up. Perhaps he's gone away again, Mal thought hopefully, as he scanned the crowd and didn't see a yellow head anywhere. Perhaps he's gone back to the war. Perhaps we won't ever see him again, and I can go back and sleep in my big bed tonight, and cuddle Mammy and make her laugh.

But he didn't believe it would happen, not really. His father would turn up, like the bad penny he was, and start boasting and shouting and trying to pretend he was important, when Mal knew very well that Bill was nothing.

'What does your dad do?' one of the kids in the kindergarten had asked him only the previous day. 'My dad's a tram-driver. *Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, move farther down the car, please*.'

Mal had mumbled that his father had been a soldier, that very soon he would . . . he would . . . but the kid wasn't interested. He moved off, pretending to turn the handle of an imaginary ticket-machine, shouting to imaginary passengers

to climb aboard, or mind the step, or show us your season ticket then, sport.

So Bill wasn't even any good to boast about. Fathers were supposed to go out to work and bring home presents and exciting food, they weren't supposed to hang around the flat all day and grumble about somewhere called Civvy Street where a decent bloke wasn't wanted no more. They took their sons to the beach, or to the park to play cricket or football, they didn't lounge on the sofa drinking warm beer, or go mysteriously off somewhere and return late at night, singing rude songs which made Mammy cry out to him to 'Hush, before you get us thrown out!'

'There he is! There's your daddy, Mal – see his fair head above the crowd?'

Mal pretended to look but he didn't, not really. He stared at waist-level, because all men looked the same to him then and he could pretend for a little longer that his father had gone off once more and wouldn't be returning for absolutely ages. Weeks, months – years!

Kath gave an impatient little cluck and swung him off his feet. She pointed. Coming down the road towards them was an untidy group of men, most of whom gripped a beer-bottle in one fist. They were singing, shouting, cat-calling. Half-way down the line Bill's blond head shone, unmistakable.

'See him, love? Give him a wave and a cheer . . . go on, call him – it'll please him no end.'

Obedient to the pleading in her voice Mal called, but kept his voice low; he didn't want to give the intruder into his life any false hopes, not he! War had been declared from the first moment his father had ordered him to do something – *Git your*

bleedin' fingers off that bleedin' cake, sport, or I'll teach you a lesson you won't forgit! – and Mal did not intend to go weakly giving in and making friends, just because it was Armistice Day and people were letting off firecrackers.

But Kath, who had hoisted him up so that he could see over the heads of the crowd, didn't know any of this. 'Can you see him, Mal?' she asked rather breathlessly, for her son was heavy. 'Go on, shout!'

And then it happened. A tram came down Swanston Street, ringing its bell. It was almost empty, but the driver had slowed down, presumably because of the press of people. Mal expected the men to get out of the way but suddenly someone shouted something and men who had begun shambling towards the pavement turned round again and began to charge unsteadily towards the oncoming vehicle. The tram-driver rang his bell more furiously than ever . . . then stopped, and Mal watched, awed, as the men, his father well in the lead, clambered on to the tram, pulled the conductor and the few passengers out of their seats, and lastly evicted the driver, who stood uncertainly beside his vehicle, apparently attempting to reason with Bill, who was nearest.

'Mal? What's happening, son?'

'They've stopped the tram,' Mal announced. 'Oh! Oh!'

For his father was now completely in command. He issued orders, pointing to this man, to that, and then barked a further command, bending down as he did so to grip the tram just behind its front wheels. Everyone followed suit and before Mal had done more than take in a breath the tram was lifted bodily off the rails and was crossing the

width of the road, the pavement . . . people screamed, cheered, shouted, but the tram-carriers ignored advice and recriminations alike. Using the tram like a gigantic spear, with Bill at their head, the men thundered towards the huge plate-glass window of the Electricity Company's office.

The crash was incredible, unbelievable. A thousand firecrackers could not have made such a marvellous sound and the shards of glass, erupting into the store, caught the light and twinkled like a thousand stars. Mal, in his mother's arms, screamed at the top of his voice, his hair on end, his eyes bright with excitement and pride.

'Daddy! Daddy Chandler! Bill Chandler's my daddy, he's the best man in the whole world!'

Giddy with excitement and reflected glory, he found himself on the pavement once more whilst beside him, Kath was saying flatly: 'He's drunk, the stupid wallaby! Dear God, what've we done to deserve this? What've we done? They'll make him pay, Mal, they'll make your daddy pay – don't say a word now, we've got to get out of this.'

'I'm going to wait for my dad,' Mal said in a hard, grown-up voice. 'I won't go away from here without my dad. Leave off tugging at my hand, Mammy – I'm going home with my dad.'

And presently, when Bill joined them, Mal let go of Kath and attached himself, limpet-like, to his father. Bill shouted with laughter and hoisted his small son up on to one broad shoulder and told him to 'hang on!' and then put his arm round Kath's waist and marched her off down the middle of the road to see 'What me an' the lads have done to make today a *real* night to remember!'

'They'll crucify you for this, Bill,' Kath whispered, trying to pull away. 'Don't you want a

decent job, a place of our own? You won't get it by acting in that wild way – half Melbourne must have seen what you did tonight.'

But Mal held on to his father's blond hair and felt the muscles in his father's broad shoulders move as he strode out and knew only a blinding, dizzying happiness. His father was a real man, a man who could pick up a tram and ram it through a plate-glass window and then walk down the middle of the road like a king! And when they reached home and Bill lost patience with what he called Kath's whingeing and slapped her across the face and pushed her into their bedroom, Mal quite saw that a man who could pick up a tram mustn't take any heed of a silly woman. He got into his own makeshift bed and cuddled down, planning how, when he was a man, he, too, would pick up a tram and hurl it through a window. And when he heard his mother begin to weep he thought what a pity it was that she couldn't enjoy things like he and his father could.

He did have a moment's doubt because Mammy had wept, but presently she stopped crying and gave a watery chuckle and he relaxed. It was all right, she admired his dad too, women had to pretend to disapprove of tram-throwing.

Soon, he slept and dreamed of fireworks, and fizzy lemonade, and the Southern Cross blazing down on him as he, single-handed, hurled a tram through the biggest plate-glass window in Melbourne.

One

August 1927

Tess was dreaming of the sea. She dreamed that she was running unsteadily across a long, dark-gold strand where, beyond the gentle slope of the beach, were the white horses, the tumbled grey waters, the darker line of the horizon where sea and sky met.

She was running unsteadily because in the dream she was small, very small. She had come down on to the sands by herself and she knew it was naughty, in the back of her mind the tiny voice of conscience told her she'd be sorry when They found out, but the young Tess loved the sea and the shore, was prepared to take the consequences.

She reached the breakwater and collapsed on the smooth, downward-sloping bank where the sand around the bottom had been eaten away by the restless waves. Here, the breakwater rose out of a long, deep pool, the sea-water in the pool now rising, now sinking, its reflections of the scudding grey clouds barely beginning to settle down before another wave shattered their peace. When Tess looked towards the sea she could see the waves surging into the long pool, so she must not go too close – it was dangerous. If she slid down the sand and into that water it would close over her head without a sound and she would be

drowned-dead in a very short time. Someone was always reminding her that the sea was never to be taken lightly, that though she loved to play in it, the waves were not truly her friends, and she took heed. She had been knocked over by a monstrous wave when she was even smaller than she was now, because she had run away from her daddy and paddled out, never realising the monster was lurking, waiting for someone to come within its range. It had hurt quite badly. It had pelted her with small stones and sand, as well as crushing her with the sheer weight of its water, and her gasp of outrage – for until that moment she had always thought of the sea as her friend – had nearly been her last. Water rushed into her lungs . . . then she was snatched from the wave, tipped upside down, squeezed like her bath-time sponge until all the water ran out . . . and she had laughed down into the worried face of the person who held her, and tried to kick the naughty sea.

But she had learned her lesson. Never turn your back on the sea, never let it trick you, beware of even the stillest, most tempting water when it was deeper than your small fingers. So now she sat on the hard wet sand and stared down at the goings-on of the sea-creatures in the long pool. A tiny crab scuttled, then disappeared into the sand. Transparent shrimps skated along the bottom, making little clouds rise up where they settled. Barnacles waved tiny filaments from their places on the wooden groin which stretched from the top of the beach right down to the low-water mark, so that now it was half hidden by the restless, choppy caress of the waves.

Tess looked away from the tempting water, down at her own small person. She was wearing

a candy-striped dress, white on pink, and frilly pink knickers. She couldn't see the knickers of course, but they went with the dress; Mummy would never have dreamed of putting her into the candy-striped dress without the matching knickers. And because it was a mild and windy day her short, fat legs were bare though she had white ankle socks on, and new bright-red strap shoes. Sitting on the sand, she admired them for a moment, then looked hopefully back at the water. It was no shallower, indeed it seemed to be deeper. Such cool, splashy, beautiful water! Tessie wants to paddle, her small self said suddenly. Mustn't paddle here, too dangerous, but further down, where the low-water lies . . .

She got to her feet and began to trundle down towards the sea. There should have been a low-water for paddling, but when she reached the edge of the waves she realised that the huge, shallow pools hadn't yet formed so the tide must be coming in, not going out. She had heard the remark enough times to understand its meaning vaguely. It meant she would probably not get a paddle today, because presently the waves would creep higher still up the shore, and she would have to retreat to the dry sand and the dunes above the beach.

Small Tess stood for a moment where the low-waters should have been, and pondered. She would not paddle here. If she tried, the sea would undoubtedly knock her down and probably hit her with its stones, too. But if she went up the beach again, alongside the breakwater, right up to the very top, then surely she might find a pool?

She turned round and faced up the beach once more. She trudged up the shingle bank,

uncomfortably aware that her new shoes were chock-full of sand and tiny pebbles and that her feet were uncomfortably hot, so when she reached the top of the bank it seemed only sensible to sit down on the pebbles and remove her shoes and socks. She put the socks in the shoes, feeling proud of her achievement in doing this, and stood up again, shoes in hand. Oh, the lovely feeling of the sand between her toes, the glorious coolness of bare, bare feet!

She reached the breakwater, with its dangerously deep, current-induced pool. She kept clear, but walked close enough to look into the water. At this level the water was really very deep, and it was dark and mysterious, too, the groin sewn thickly with marvellous seaweed, barnacles, limpets, and the long blue shells of mussels. She stopped and slid to a halt, sitting down so suddenly that the hard sand met her pink-clad bottom rather sharply; she chuckled, then resumed her scrutiny of the watery depths before her. All that seaweed, differently coloured, differently textured, some fat and dark, some pale and fine as hair, all moving gently and in perfect unison as, on the shoreline, the waves advanced and retreated.

And it wasn't only weed in the water, there was . . .

A voice, a cry no louder than that of a seabird, caught her attention. She turned her head and stared the way she had come earlier. She screwed up her eyes the better to see, then scowled. It was that boy! Oh, he was horrible, she really hated him, he would come running up, scatter sand all over her, tell her off, perhaps he might even smack her as Mummy wasn't there to see . . . she really hated him!

She got to her feet and as she did so the shoes and socks seemed to leap from her hand and duck-dived neatly into the deep water. Immediately she forgot all about the hated boy and moaned aloud. Her new shoes! They would be so cross, they had left her in the garden, snoozing in the hammock, they didn't know she had learned how to jump out of it without hurting herself . . . she had meant to be back before anyone returned . . . They would be so cross!

The boy shouted from behind her, his voice high, breathless.

'Hey, get away from there! The water's deep, get away . . .'

She ignored him, squatting above the water, staring down at her shoes which were moving up and down, up and down, the socks trailing from them, as though they had a life of their own. The boy could be useful – he could fish them out for her, if she kept her eyes on them and was able to tell him exactly where they were! But even as she watched the shoes she saw, out the corner of her eye, that there was something else in the long, deep pool. Something different. Not a little crab, nor a shrimp, something very much bigger, something strangely sinister . . .

She was staring at it, forgetting the shoes, when the boy grabbed her. He lifted her off her feet and turned her into his shirt front. She could feel, against her face, his heart hammering away, and she could smell the horrible flat black Pontefract cakes he was always eating. He said they were too strong for babies, only *men* could eat them – as if she were a baby! As if he were a man, come to that! She wriggled in his arms, trying to escape,

trying to explain about the shoes, trying to point . . .

He said in an oddly muffled voice, 'Don't look. You mustn't look, it's – it's awful naughty to peep. Come with me now, there's a good girl.'

'But I dropped my shoes in the water – my new shoes,' Tess wailed, and gave one last, determined wiggle. The boy teetered and half turned and Tess looked down into the water. She strained to see her shoes, but saw, instead . . .

Moving, moving, with the water. Something terrible, something horrible . . .

The small Tess clutched the boy hard, hard. The scene in front of her began to sway and dissolve and waver before her eyes. And she screamed, and screamed, and *screamed* . . .

Tess woke. Pale early sunshine flooded into her bedroom, dappling the wall by her nose with a moving picture of leaf-shadow, but she was too hot and bothered to notice. She sat up, a hand to her thundering heart. It was that beastly dream again, always pouncing on her when she least wanted or expected it – and it wasn't as though she could ever remember the bloomin' ending of it, either. At first, it was always such fun; transported back to being a very small girl again, probably aged around two or three, finding herself on a beautiful beach, and then . . .

The word 'beach' however, pushed the dream right into the very back of her mind. Tess felt a broad, contented smile spread across her face. Today was Saturday, it was the school holidays, and Daddy had said she might go with the Throwers to Sea Palling, where they would stay for a

whole glorious week in Mrs Sutcliffe's beach-bungalow.

'We'll go shrimpin', come low-tide, so bring you a flour-bag on a split cane,' Ned Thrower had instructed her. Ned was twelve, four years older than she and Janet, who were both eight and had been friends for as long as Tess could remember. But she and Janet liked Ned all right, thinking him more fun than the twins, who were always together and had no time for kids two years younger than they. 'An' bring a spade an' a bucket,' Ned had continued. 'Acos you'll need 'em, one way and t'other.'

Tess had promised to do so and now she scrambled out of bed and padded, in her striped pyjamas, on to the small, square landing. Her father slept in the room opposite her own. Tess bent and listened outside her father's door. No sound. He was, she guessed, still asleep, for she had known from the angle at which the sunshine fell on her wall that it was still very early. But today was Sea Palling day, so no time should be wasted. She had packed last night, helped – and hindered – by Janet, who was terrified that her friend might bring best clothes and ruin them, so all she had to do was wash, dress, and get some breakfast inside her. Then she could run down the lane to where the Throwers' tumbledown cottage crouched on the staithe, and make sure that Janet, too, was ready for the great adventure.

She went back into her room and poured water from the ewer into the basin with the poppies around the rim. The water gushed cold, but who cared? She was off on holiday with her best friend and that best friend's family . . . she simply couldn't wait!

*

Ten minutes later, Tess let herself out of the creaking back door, ran round the house, out of the front gate and along the lane. She adored the Throwers, from tall Bert, who was eighteen, to the baby, Podge, who was going on three, and Mr and Mrs Thrower were grand. Mr Thrower was a reed-cutter, and could be seen on icy winter mornings in his flat-bottomed boat, sculling out on to the Broad with Bert to harvest the reeds which, he was fond of telling anyone who would listen, was the only crop he knew which needed no husbanding yet repaid the harvester well.

Of course Mr Thrower did other things to make ends meet; in summer he harvested the marsh hay from the low-lying water meadows, he trudged from farm to farm doing labouring work, and he had fish traps in the Broad and snares in the woods. What was more the Thrower cottage had a very large garden which always bristled with vegetables, as well as with apple trees and fruit bushes, a rhubarb patch and a veritable forest of raspberry canes. As she ran up the path and skirted the cottage to go round the back, Tess thought of the way the boys and Janet helped with the garden. Indeed, they had been working feverishly of late to make sure that it could survive without them for the week's holiday . . . only two evenings ago she and Janet had hoed patiently between the vegetable rows and then laid cut reeds down, to keep the soil moist in the unlikely event of a rain-free week.

Tess reached the back of the cottage and saw various Throwers engaged in various pursuits. Two boys were filling a soft cloth bag with peas, another was helping Mr Thrower, who was pulling his boat ashore, and Ned was digging potatoes

and dropping them into a sack. No one took the slightest notice of Tess as she ran round to the back door, which was open, and tumbled into the huge, earth-floored room which was kitchen and living-room for a dozen lively, quarrelsome Throwers. Podge was sitting on the rag rug in a pair of trousers which were much too big for him, eating a round of bread and jam, whilst Mrs Thrower fried something in a big black pan.

'Tess, Tess!' Podge squeaked. 'We're goin' to the seaside!'

Mrs Thrower turned and grinned. 'Marnin', lovie. Hev you had breakfuss?'

'No, not yet, but it's all right,' Tess said quickly. 'I'll have brekker at home, with Daddy, when he gets up.'

'Let's save your dad the trouble, hey, since I'm a-cookin',' Mrs Thrower said amiably. 'There's fried eggs, my last year's pig-bacon, and a mess o' spuds. Here, mek yourself useful; wet the tea, my woman.'

Tess was gratified, for at home her father made alarmed noises when she suggested helping in the kitchen, though the size and blackness of the Thrower kettle, sitting on the side of the rickety range, was a trifle daunting. Nevertheless she moved the teapot as near as she could, stood on tiptoe and began to pour. It comforted her that Mrs Thrower made no move to help her, though doubtless she was keeping an eye.

Tess filled the pot, replaced the lid, then turned to the older woman. 'Done it! Where's the milk?'

'There's some in a jug, in the bucket o' water under the table,' Mrs Thrower said, beginning to dish up. 'Just enough for all, I reckon.' She raised her voice. 'Come an' get it.'

Throwers began to materialise inside the kitchen, queuing to wash their hands at the old stone sink which was so low you had to bend to it. Some clattered down the stairs, others came in from the garden. Janet, emerging from the front room with her arms full of clothing, beamed at Tess.

'Tess! I'm puttin' my clo'es in this here sack . . . Gi's a hand!'

Tess began to help whilst, behind her, the family settled themselves at the big wooden table and watched closely as their mother served the food on to cracked pottery plates. Mrs Thrower was always fair; Mr Thrower and Bert got the most, and helpings gradually diminished down to Podge, who ate his small portion from a chipped fruit dish.

Tess finished shovelling clothing into the sack and she and Janet joined the rest of the family at the table. Because the two of them were the same age, they got identical helpings; Mrs Thrower would never have under- or over-fed a guest simply because she was a guest. Besides, Tess spent so much time with Janet that Mrs Thrower had more than once remarked she was family, or as good as.

As she began to tuck into the fry-up, Tess reflected that she admired Janet's mum more than anyone else she knew; she worked incredibly hard yet she was always cheerful and always had time for her family. Mrs Thrower made willow baskets from the osiers which overhung the Broad, and she cleaned for the only two big houses within cycling distance – the Sutcliffes, who lives at Horning and had lent the seaside bungalow, and the Hunts, who lived rather nearer, at Neatishead. She

cleaned for the Delameres, too, but they scarcely counted since their house was small and compact. It didn't take her above a couple of hours a couple of times a week to 'whisk round' as she called it.

And cleaning wasn't all Mrs Thrower did; in her search for paid employment she cycled long distances, doing any work available from cooking and serving meals when the farmer's wife was away, to minding beasts grazing on the common, and people from miles around agreed that no one worked harder than Mrs Thrower. In addition she preserved and bottled quantities of the fruit and vegetables raised by her husband and made jelly from the blackberries which grew in abundance around the Broad. Most of these delicacies she sold to a grocer in North Walsham, though the Delameres often enjoyed Thrower jams and bottled raspberries in wintertime, and Tess knew that the Hunts and the Sutcliffes bought her produce, too.

'More spuds, gal Tess?' Mrs Thrower's voice broke in upon Tess's reflections and Tess, blushing, realised that she had cleared her plate in record time.

'No thanks, Mrs Thrower, that was delicious. Umm . . . if you don't mind, I think I ought to get back, I expect Daddy's up and . . .'

'You'll be wantin' your brekker,' Mr Thrower said, grinning at her. 'What a gal you are for your grub, my woman! Well, if you can get outside another meal like that, I'll tek my cap off to you!'

That made them all laugh, because Mr Thrower never removed his flat cap, not in company, at any rate. Tess suspected that he wore it in bed, though she had never been cheeky enough to ask. Certainly, his face was burned red-brown by wind

and weather and when he pushed his cap to the back of his head – as he did occasionally, when puzzled – his forehead was white as driven snow.

'No, I couldn't eat another thing, honestly,' Tess said now, wriggling on her chair. She knew better than to get down until she was told she might do so, for the Throwers, though casual in many ways, believed that children should remain at the table until given leave to go. 'Only Daddy doesn't know where I am, and . . .'

'Oh, go on with you; you can git down,' Mrs Thrower said, seeing her dilemma. 'Janet, you go along wi' Tess, see if you can help. But be back here in half an hour, no later. The carrier'll be along be then.'

'Don't forgit your bucket an' flour bag, gal,' shouted Ned as they scampered out of the back door. 'Do you'll never hev nothin' to put your shrimps in.'

Tess paused long enough to yell back, 'They're packed already, bor Ned!' before Janet had squealed 'Race you!' and they had set off, skidding on the cinder path, then erupting into the lane and pelting along it until they reached the gate of the Old House.

Peter Delamere was sitting at the kitchen table when they came in through the back door, placidly eating toast and reading a book propped against the marmalade jar. Tess thought he was the best-looking father any girl could have with his browny-gold hair and goldy-brown eyes and the neat golden moustache which tickled when he kissed her. She adored his chin, which had a deep cleft, and his neat ears and his beautifully kept hands with the golden hairs on the backs. He wasn't as tall as Uncle Phil, but he was tall enough,

and today he wore a brown-and-white checked shirt and brown corduroys, which meant he wasn't going to go into the city to work, nor was he going to play golf. He would be at home, gardening, working in the house, having his dinner out on the daisy-studded lawn, picking an apple and sharing it with the blackbird which sometimes came right into the kitchen, it was so tame.

Tess went round behind him, put her arms round his neck and squeezed, and Peter grunted, removed her arms, pulled her round and gave her a hug. Then he took another big bite out of his toast.

'Wretched child,' he said fondly. 'What sort of an hour did you get up this morning? I hope you haven't been making a nuisance of yourself down at the Throwers'. Oh, good morning, Janet.'

'Marnin',' Janet said. 'She in't never a nuisance, Mr Delamere. Mum telled her to mek the tea an' she did!'

'Well done, Mrs Thrower,' Peter said absently. 'Now I suppose you'll want some breakfast kids. Well, there's toast and coffee . . .'

'We're had a fry-up down ours,' Janet said briefly. 'We come to fetch Tess's truck an' do her jobs, if she've got any today.'

'No jobs . . . well, unless you've not made your bed, sweetheart?'

Tess, shamefaced, admitted she'd not made her bed. Peter shook his head at her, but he was laughing behind the sternness, she knew.

'Do that then, like a good girl. And tidy your room. I brought your bag down, and I've got some money for you.'

'Money? Oh Daddy, thanks . . . but what'll I want money for?'

'Ice-creams? Gingerbeer? I don't know, but I gave Mrs Thrower a bit for the boys, only I thought I'd hand you and Janet yours this morning . . .' He grinned at them both. 'Give you less time to lose it, I thought. It's two bob each, so don't spend it all at once!'

Two shillings! It sounded a great deal to both girls, Tess guessed, since she usually got tuppence on Saturday mornings and Janet, to the best of her knowledge, never received pocket money at all.

'Daddy! Thanks ever so . . . we'll be really careful, won't we, Jan? And now we'll go up and do my room.'

'Good. And Tess . . .?'

'Yes, Daddy?' Tess paused, already through the kitchen door and standing in the hall. 'What?'

'Take care of yourself. You can't swim, so don't go taking chances. The sea's a tricky old beast, though it can be great fun, of course.'

'I know,' Tess said tolerantly. 'I've been before, Daddy.'

Her father snorted. 'Once, with Uncle Phil and the cousins. But there's no one I'd rather trust you with than Bessie and Reggie Thrower. They'll keep you out of mischief.'

Tess agreed that they would and she and Janet hurried up the stairs and into her room, but her father's remark had brought the dream back to her mind – the dream and its ending which always happened off-stage, so to speak.

Now she strained after recollection, but it would not come; it never did. The dream was in some weird way secret, private, a little glimpse into the hell a very small child can uncover for itself and

then never share. And anyway, it was over. Whatever the young Tess had seen in the water, the older Tess – for was she not eight years old, now? – knew it meant nothing, was nothing to worry about. She had diffidently mentioned it once to her father, and Peter had stared at her rather blankly for a moment and had then asked her, in an oddly thin voice, just what it was she thought she'd seen in this sea-pool or whatever?

'I don't know,' Tess had admitted. 'That's what's so silly, Daddy. I never do see whatever it is I'm screaming about.'

Peter had lifted her up in the air and then lowered her into a close hug. It was a very different hug from the dream-boy's hug; there was warmth in it, and comfort, and a solid, protective strength. 'Sweetheart mine,' Peter had crooned. 'That's what's known as a nightmare; nightmares come when we've eaten the wrong sort of things or had a worrying day, but they don't have any roots in reality, none at all. Think about it. Where do you live?'

Tess had been six at the time, still very conscious of identity, time and place. She had said in a singsong: 'I'm Teresa Annabel Delamere and I live at the Old House, Deeping Lane, Barton Common, Norfolk.'

'That's it. And have I ever taken you to the seaside?'

'No, never,' Tess had said, but even as she said it a tiny shadow of doubt flitted across her mind. Never? It was easy to say, but did she really know such a thing to be true? Could she know it? In the time before memory . . .

'There you are, then. So the only time you've been to the seaside was last year, when Uncle Phil

took you and the cousins. So the nightmare has to come from that.'

'Ye-es, only the beach in the dream wasn't the same as the Yarmouth beach,' Tess said uncertainly. 'It's a darker sort of colour, and the sea's different.'

'Ah, but that's how dreams work, darling. They muddle up reality with fantasy and sometimes good people become bad and bad become good. I imagine, darling, that something in your mind remembers that trip to the seaside and muddles it up with . . . oh well, with something like everyone telling you never to play near the Broad alone, that water, any water, can be dangerous . . . that sort of thing. Does that make it clearer?'

'I don't know,' Tess had said, unhappy not to be able to assure her beloved father that she now understood perfectly what the dream – or nightmare – was all about. 'I'm not miserable in my dream, it's nice right up to the end. And Yarmouth beach was white, and steep when you got near the water, and full of people, absolutely full. But the dream-beach is empty. Almost empty.'

'Darling Tess, a beach is a beach! There's sand, sea, shingle . . . honestly, sweetheart, there's nothing real about a dream. It's just like a game of pretend, do you see? Only it's a game we can't always control, which is how nightmares happen.'

The six-year-old Tess had looked into her father's worried, loving face, and had simply wanted to take the anxiety out of his eyes. After all, she'd been dreaming the dream for a long while now, she could cope with it.

'Oh, is *that* all it is,' she had said, with a big sigh of mock relief. 'Oh well, then, I shan't worry

about it. If I dream it again I'll just make myself wake up!'

But she never mentioned the boy, because somehow it was he who made it so extremely real to her. The fact that she had recognised him, disliked him even, seemed to set the dream firmly in reality, as though it was in truth something remembered rather than something imagined.

'You take that side, gal Tess, an' I'll take this,' Janet said, bringing Tess sharply back to the present, to her sunny but dishevelled bedroom and the excitements of the day ahead. 'We'll hev it made an' the room tidy in no time, do you'll git wrong, an' Mr Delamere might stop you a-comin' alonga us.'

'He wouldn't,' Tess said stoutly, but she began to tug at the bedclothes, nevertheless. 'Once he's given his word he won't take it back.'

'Well, good,' Janet said encouragingly. 'Where's your bag?'

'Downstairs, by the front door. I'd better put my fawn dress down for washing, though it won't get done until your mum is back.'

'Your dad might get someone else in,' Janet said. 'He wou'n't do that, though, would he? My mum need the work.'

'Course he wouldn't; he's going to manage, he said he could,' Tess assured her friend. 'Good, that's done . . . let's go down and watch for the carrier!'

The carrier's cart was painted brown with a gold line round it and it was pulled by two horses, both huge beasts with polished conker-brown sides and long, flaxen tails. The cart, which was a large one, comfortably held all the Throwers and their per-

sonal possessions, though Mr Leggatt, who owned the cart, pulled a doubtful face when he saw the mountain awaiting his attention.

'Will that all goo in, along o' all them yonkers?' he said mournfully. Janet whispered to Tess that Mr Leggatt did funerals as well as trips, and left Tess to work out just what she meant for herself.

'Course, it 'ull,' Mr Thrower said heartily. 'Come on, lads, get all this here truck aboard.'

'Well, I dunno . . .' Mr Leggatt began, but was speedily forced to agree that it was possible when the boys had loaded the cart, leaving just about room for the family to squeeze in somehow.

'Up you go, mother,' Mr Thrower said encouragingly, when the children had managed to stow themselves away amongst the luggage like so many sparrows in a granary. 'I'll sit by the driver, but the kids'll find room for a littl'un in the back.'

More laughter. Reggie Thrower was a small, whippet-like man with very large hands and feet and though immensely strong, he wasn't really a match for Bessie Thrower, who was tall, broad and golden-haired, with the bluest eyes you could imagine and skin like milk. Now, she squeezed good-humouredly into the tiny space the boys budged up to make and beamed at Janet and Tess, who were perched on a cardboard box stuffed with vegetables and taking great pleasure in calling each other's attention to everything they could see from their new vantage point.

'There, off at last, eh, gals?' Mrs Thrower said. 'You comfy?'

Both girls assured her that the cardboard box was a delightful seat, and then Mrs Thrower got out a bag of small, early red apples and handed them round, to ensure some peace, she said. Cer-

tainly there was quiet whilst they munched, but then Henry kicked Ozzie and presently, Mr Thrower, who had been talking animatedly to their driver, swivelled in his seat.

'You all right at the back, there? Now what do I allus say now? Podge, he don't know nothin', he's too tiddly, but Hal, you should 'member.'

'You say *Penny to the first one to see the sea!*' the five-year-old Henry said triumphantly. 'An' you let me stand on the seat so it was all fair, an' I was fust an' all.'

'That's it. Now no talkin' nor chatterin', just you put your minds to bein' fust to see the sea.'

Tess pretended to keep a look-out over the tops of the hedges – the cart was a high one – but really she was so happy that she could not concentrate on anything for long. The sweet sunshine, the marvellous scents of summer, Janet's smooth, tanned leg pressing against hers, was a dream come true for Tess. She had been hearing about Palling and the Thrower exploits there ever since she could remember – now she was going to see for herself.

And presently Mrs Thrower delved into the blue cloth bag which shared her lap with Podge, and produced a rustling bag of sweets.

'Here y'are, kids, I brung a foo cushies. Hand 'em round and no cheatin'. It's one each an' no more; savvy?'

Tess's fingers delved into the bag as eagerly as anyone's, because Peter thought sweets were bad for her teeth so she did not see many of them. She tucked a striped humbug into her cheek and sucked ecstatically. What a wonderful day this was going to be – what a wonderful week! Despite the dream, or perhaps because of it, she loved the sea and longed to know it better. She and Janet had

found an old book, beautifully bound in dark-blue leather, on her father's study shelves, called *Flora and fauna of an East Anglian shore*, and had familiarised themselves thoroughly with the contents in anticipation of this trip. Nothing they might find would fox them, they told each other, studying the illustrations of birds, fish and beasts, all of which managed to have a Victorian look about them, which fascinated Tess almost as much as the text.

'It's like cats,' she told Janet. 'You know the cat in *Alice*? Well, it doesn't look like our cats, but it looks just like the cats in that illustrated Dickens, and like the ones in *Simple Susan* and other old books. I always wonder whether it was the cats or the artists that have changed, but this person, the one who illustrated this book, has managed to give even birds and crabs that sort of old-fashioned look.'

Janet had laughed. 'I niver noticed afore, but you're right, mor. Only I reckon we'll recognise 'em from this, even if their 'spressions are different.'

So now, perched on the cardboard box with a gentle breeze lifting her dark hair and tangling it with Janet's long, golden locks, Tess knew perfect happiness. She just knew everything was going to be wonderful – and she hoped that by the time she got back to Barton again, she would be able to swim. That, she thought, would be the best thing of all.

Because her father refused adamantly to let her go boating or sailing on the Broad until she could swim. And when the Thrower boys said they would teach her, Peter said at once that the Broad

was no place for a beginner, it was far too dangerous.

'When I can spare the time to teach you, that's another matter, and once you can swim . . . well, you can have a boat, swim from one side to the other for all I care. But until then, sweetheart, you'll stay on the bank. Is that clear?'

It had been. Now and then Tess had fretted over it, moaned to herself that it wasn't fair, and indeed until the previous summer it hadn't worried her all that much since Janet did not swim either. But last August, when the Throwers had returned from Palling, Janet had announced that she could swim.

'I'll teach you, Tess,' she had promised. 'We'll go somewhere quiet, where the water isn't too deep, and I'll teach you.'

But they'd never got round to it somehow, and besides, Peter's edict was not to be lightly disobeyed. Only it became clearer and clearer that he wasn't going to find the time to teach her.

'He's working all week, at weekends there's the garden, and things like cooking a Sunday dinner, and then there's his horrid golf . . . oh, Jan, I'm never going to get to learn,' Tess had moaned as the two of them sat astride an ancient willow which dipped down over the water and watched wistfully as the row-boat, laden with Throwers, bobbed past. 'If only I could come with you to Palling! You learned there, so perhaps I could, as well. Beaches go slower into the water than the Broad does, don't they?'

'Tha's true; I'll ask Mum,' Janet had said, and next thing Tess knew, Mrs Thrower had come visiting one evening, all dressed up in a clean cotton dress with her hair tied back and a dash of powder

on her nose, and bearded Peter in his study where he was sitting at the big desk doing sums in ledgers, or that was what Tess believed he did in there. Invited to take a seat, Mrs Thrower had made herself comfortable, cleared her throat, then told Peter straight out that it wasn't right for a child to live so near the Broad yet be unable to swim. Tess, shamelessly eavesdropping in the hall outside, had actually stopped breathing for a moment when she heard what Mrs Thrower was saying. If only her father would agree!

'You know, Mr Peter, as how I allus speaks my mind,' Mrs Thrower started. 'My Reg, he wanted to tek the girls on the water last year, but they could neither of 'em swim so he wou'n't. But now Janet swim and your Tess don't, so they still can't go reed-cuttin' wi' Reggie, nor they can't set the fish-traps, nor go babbin' for eels, and wha's more, they can't learn to sail nor to row, and they're things they should know about, livin' where we do.'

'There is a good deal in what you say, Mrs Thrower, but I'm so busy . . .' Peter began, and got no further.

'Of course, Mr Peter, but there's them as do have time. We're orf to Pallin' again come August; what's to stop us takin' Tess along? We're there a week and she's a bright 'un, your Tess. She'll come home swimmin', believe me.'

Peter laughed. It was a laugh which said Mrs Thrower was talking nonsense. Tess hissed her breath in through her teeth. She could have told her father that Mrs Thrower would not like to be laughed at, though she was always happy to be laughed with.

'In a *week*?' Peter said incredulously. 'I doubt that, but in any case . . .'

'You doubt it, do you? Would you care to put money on it?'

There was an astounded silence. Tess recognised it because Mrs Thrower's forthrightness had once more reduced her parent to speechlessness. She did hope that her friend had not gone too far, annoyed Peter. After all, it would not help if Peter decided she had better not spend so much time with the Throwers in future.

'Put money on it? I don't think . . .'

'Two bob, Mr Peter? My two bob say she'll be swimmin' in a week, your two bob say she won't.'

Peter laughed again. 'Mrs Thrower, you never fail to amaze me! But . . . do you know, you have a point? I know Tess should swim, I've felt guilty for a long while that I've not made the time to teach her . . . if you would be good enough to take her with you when you to go Sea Palling then, I'd be happy to pay for her keep – and her swimming lessons, of course. And to pay up, if you really can teach her in that time.'

From that moment, Tess knew they had won. She would go to Sea Palling, learn to swim, and the Broad would open up before her, the Promised Land.

'The sea! It's the sea, the sea, the sea! Oh, an' I want my penny, Dad!' Henry was pointing to their left to where a deep-blue line had appeared above the golden corn and Tess and Janet, jumping to their feet at the same moment, knocked into each other and overbalanced on to the assorted luggage – and also on to the assorted legs of young Throwers. There were shouts and a good deal of mild cussing, whilst Mr Thrower solemnly went

through his pockets and tried to palm young Henry off with a bent ha'penny and Mrs Thrower laughed and handed round more humbugs and told Tess that 'It won't be long now – fifteen, mebbe twenty minutes and we'll be there!'

And it wasn't even that long before they were bowling along between banks, with the gap ahead – most self-respecting Norfolk seaside places have a gap – and to each side of it the mighty, white-gold dunes tantalisingly hiding the sea.

'Yonder's the Sutcliffe place,' Ben said, pointing. 'Awright, in't it, young'uns? D'you know, Tess, there's *beds*?'

Tess opened her mouth to say of course there were, and remembered. The young Throwers did not sleep in beds, they had mattresses on the floor, big ones to be sure, and the oddest assortment of blankets, old coats and even curtains to keep them warm in winter. She supposed that Mr and Mrs Thrower had a bed, but Janet had only a thin flock mattress which was rolled up under the sofa in the front room in the daytime and produced at nights.

'And there's a bathroom,' Ben continued impressively. 'A bathroom, Tess, with a real bath!'

'Ben, Tess knows . . .' Janet said uncomfortably, but Tess leaned forward and addressed Ben directly. Ben was only seven, he didn't know that most modern houses had bathrooms. Indeed, Peter was always promising that he'd have a bath installed one day but for now they used the big tin bath before the kitchen fire.

'Gosh, a proper bathroom, in a holiday bungalow? The Sutcliffes must be very rich!'

It was the right thing to say. Mrs Thrower, who

cleaned at a couple of large houses where bathrooms were the norm, beamed at her.

'Tha's true, my woman, they're rare rich,' she said. 'Cor, I wou'n't mind livin' in this place for the rest of my days – eh, Reggie?'

'Too near the blummen sea,' Reggie said. 'That might flood.'

'Our cottage floods,' Ned pointed out truthfully. 'Many a winter flood we've had at Barton.'

'Aye, but it's good clean Broads water, not that salt stuff,' Mr Thrower said, and was howled down by the rest of the family who reminded him of the mud which the 'good, clean Broads water' brought into their home, and the stinking carcass of a dead sheep which had once come in on the flood and made their mother tearful and jumpy for days.

'Well, you may be right,' Mr Thrower conceded majestically. 'But better dead sheep than dead sailors, tha's what I say.'

'Reggie!' 'Dad!' 'Mr Thrower!' The objections came from a good few throats but before Reggie Thrower had to answer the implied criticisms, the cart jerked to a stop outside a pretty, pebble-dash-and-tile bungalow with a red-painted front door and a well-kept front garden. Mr Leggatt went to his horses' heads, Mr Thrower came round to help his wife to alight, and everyone else began to seize the baggage and hand it over the side.

'The key's in my pocket,' Mrs Thrower said, as the boys started to drag assorted boxes, bags and bundles up the garden path. 'We'll go in the back door; most of the grub's goin' to live in the kitchen, I dessay.'

'Wait'll you see our room, Tess,' Janet said, panting up the path behind her mother with a sack

over one shoulder. 'It's beautiful – there's pink curtains!'

And presently, Tess saw the room for herself and agreed with her friend that it was both beautiful and pink-curtained. There were two small beds with pink-and-white-checked counterpanes, a couple of easy chairs, even a square of carpet on the floor.

'We have to be awful careful, an' keep everythin' awful clean,' Janet warned. 'We scrub everythin' before we leave, an' Dad do the garden an' clip the hedge an' mow the lawn. One year Mum had to paint a door, 'cos one o' the boys banged into it wi' a bucket an' took the paint off. Dear Lor', but ain't it just beautiful?'

'It is beautiful, and it's bigger than our house,' Tess agreed. 'I bet your mum loves the kitchen.'

The kitchen was all fitted cupboards and a sink at waist height and shiny taps, and there was an oil stove to cook on and an enclosed stove which you lit for hot water. There was a dining-room, a living-room and a conservatory, as well as four wonderful bedrooms – they were wonderful to Janet and the boys, so Tess thought them wonderful too – and of course the bathroom.

Exploring the house, however, was not a lengthy procedure, and presently Mrs Thrower called through that dinner was ready and they hurried into the kitchen – the dining-room was for the evening meal, Janet told Tess.

Dinner was cheese sandwiches, home-made pickles and a cup of tea, with an apple to follow. As soon as the table was cleared and the plates and cutlery washed and put away, Mrs Thrower took one of the kitchen chairs out into the sunny

garden and announced that she intended to have a nap.

'No swimmin' till an hour after your grub have gone down,' she decreed. 'And then only when your dad and I are around. Off with you!'

It was the sort of command which everyone wanted to obey. Out into the sunshine, with the breeze wafting the seaside smells to their nostrils, sand underfoot, the blue sky arching above. They tore down to the gap and, amidst the sand dunes, scattered, the boys roaring as boys will, Janet and Tess stopping as soon as they reached the beach itself to shed shoes and socks, to tuck their skirts into their knickers . . . and then to run on. Tess ran with all her might, though as they neared the sea the wet, ridged sand hurt her bare feet and sent shock-waves up through her spine. But she didn't care, and as they ran full-tilt into the little waves she was conscious of a joy and a sense of well-being greater than she could remember experiencing before.

'In't it good, gal Tess?' Janet shrieked, well ahead of Tess now with the waves at knee-height, her skirt escaping from wobbly knicker elastic and dangling in the restless water. 'Isn't it the best thing you ever done?'

'Yeah, yeah, *yeah*!' Tess shouted back. She kicked spray in a dazzling, diamond arc between herself and the great yellow eye of the sun. 'I wanna swim, I wanna swim, I wanna swim!'

'We will, later, when our dinner hev gone down,' Janet said. She came back to her friend's side and suggested digging a castle or searching the shallows for sea-life – crabs, shrimps, anemones.

'We'll dig a castle,' Tess said. 'My spade's up at

the bungalow, but it doesn't matter; I can dig with my hands, like a dog.'

Both girls fell to their knees and began to excavate. And Tess glanced round the beach whenever she thought herself unobserved, and tried to see whether it was anything like the beach of her dream. It had the long wooden breakwaters all right, with deep pools beside them where the tide had gobbled the sand away. And there were dunes, which weren't in her dream, but no pebble ridge, which was. A different place, then. And she remembered Yarmouth as being very different both from this beach and from the dream-beach.

But what did it matter, after all? Tess returned all her concentration to castle manufacture and to the creation of a really deep moat and a drawbridge made out of driftwood, to a shell decoration, to battlements . . .

That night, Tess could not sleep. She was too excited. Her first swimming lesson had been a wonderful experience – Mrs Thrower, vast in a garment which she swore was a swimsuit, though it seemed every bit as voluminous as her day-dresses to Tess, had held her chin whilst Ned had told her to pretend to be a frog and Janet had sculled up and down beside her doing first one stroke and then another and begging her to 'Look at me, look at me, gal Tess!' until even her placid mother told her to 'goo tek a runnin' jump, you irritatin' little mawther!'

The lesson had ended with Mrs Thrower releasing her chin and Ned holding on to the straps of her swimsuit and saying that though she wasn't breathing right they'd soon have her frogging it

up and down, every bit as good as young Jan, there.

Tess still didn't quite understand why breathing was important, and Janet said impatiently that 'the breathin' kinda *came*, when you stopped thinkin' about it', but she felt in her bones that swimming was something she could master – and would.

Sleep, however, was another matter. This was her first night away from home, and she couldn't help worrying about her father, and missing him, too. Of course they'd been parted for a night before – often. Peter was a partner with a firm of accountants in Norwich and as such, frequently got invited to functions which, he explained, he could not refuse. Then, nice widowed Mrs Rawlings from Catfield would be fetched home with Peter in his car, and would stay with Tess until Peter returned. Once, her father had gone skiing in Scotland for a whole ten days; another time he went to Oulton Broad for their Regatta week and crewed for Uncle Phil. Tess would have liked to go along, but Peter said not yet; another year perhaps, when she was older.

'When I'm older you said I could have Janet to stay, instead of dear Rawlplug,' Tess reminded him. 'Am I older this year?' But Peter only laughed and said there was plenty of time for that.

Peter would be all right really, she knew that. He would probably enjoy a week at home without her – though he would miss her, that went without saying. Tess tried to turn over and bumped into Janet, which was something else she wasn't used to – sharing a bed. And it was only a single bed, and Janet kicked in her sleep. But I'll drop off presently, Tess assured herself. I always do at home.

But she had not realised what a noisy family the Throwers were, come bedtime. Podge and Henry, sharing the second bed in the girls' room, weren't too bad, but when the older boys came to bed they made a terrible din, and Tess lay there listening to their top-volume conversations and chuckling to herself. Boys boast and shout, but they're no better than us, really, she told herself.

And scarcely had the boys stopped thumping and calling than Mr and Mrs Thrower came along the corridor. They were noisy too, in their way. They washed in the bathroom, loudly admiring various gadgets – the real toilet-roll holder on the wall, the wrinkled glass in the window so no one could see you in your bare skin, the bright taps which gushed water when you turned them on. And they were loud in their praise for the flush lavatory. Tess agreed with them that it was a great improvement on the earth closet at home. Peter kept saying he was going to have one installed at the Old House when he had a bath put in, but he had not got round to it yet. Tess knew that Uncle Phil had two – one upstairs and one down – but she only visited the big, ugly house in Unthank Road a couple of times a year, so flushing the lavatory was still very much a novelty.

When the Throwers vacated the bathroom at last Mrs Thrower said: 'I'm just a-goin' to have a peep at the gals,' so, forewarned, Tess closed her eyes and tried to look as though she had been asleep for hours. She obviously succeeded, too, since Mrs Thrower tiptoed back to her own room and then said loudly, as though the walls were at least two foot thick, 'Fast off, the pair of 'em! They'd sleep the clock round, no error, if we 'lowed it.'

'I wou'n't mind sleepin' the clock round,' Mr Thrower said wistfully. 'Still, we'll hev a bit of a lie-in, hey old gal?'

'I'll see,' Mrs Thrower said. The bedsprings creaked. Any minute now everyone will be asleep, me as well, Tess thought hopefully, and sure enough presently echoing snores began to sound. Mr Thrower was plainly in the land of Nod, though his wife said his name crossly a couple of times before succumbing as well.

Mrs Thrower snores ladylike, Tess told herself, still awake and listening. I wonder if all ladies snore higher than men? And then Janet turned on to her back, kicking Tess in the knee as she did so, and proved that girls, too, can snore almost as deeply as men.

I'll never get to sleep, poor Tess thought, as Janet's snores, and those of the elder Throwers, began to compete for her attention. And when morning comes I'll be all stupid and dopey, and they'll think I'm ill and send me home! Oh, I must go to sleep, I must! She turned on her side, her knees caught Janet a well-deserved wallop, and Janet moaned something and turned too.

Miraculously, silence descended. The rhythmic roars which Tess had likened, in her own mind, to that of a pig being strangled, ceased. With a sigh of real thankfulness, Tess curled up, put her thumb in her mouth, and was immediately asleep.

And at some point in the night she found herself on her dream-beach in a pink-and-white-striped dress and frilly knickers, looking down into the cradling sea-water and worrying about her drowning shoes.

*

Tess awoke suddenly, as she always did from the dream, and immediately, as though she had lain here for hours working things out, she realised what she must always have known, even when she was trying to agree with Daddy that the dream simply must be pretend. She had dreamed the dream long before that first trip to the seaside with Uncle Phil. She was absolutely sure of it, now that she thought. Time, when you still aren't into double figures, takes such an age to move that you can remember what happened and when very accurately and she just knew she had been dreaming the dream long before her fifth birthday. Because it was on the day following her fifth birthday that Uncle Phil had called round, shoved her into the back of his old Morris Minor with four or five of her dreadful cousins, and driven the whole crowd of them down to Great Yarmouth, to have a day on the beach and a picnic, and afterwards to go up to the funfair and enjoy a few of the rides.

'She want the company of other kids, bor,' Uncle Phil had bawled at Peter, putting on a Norfolk accent to try to make his brother smile. 'Do my kids eat her, I'll pay you compensation, that I 'ull!'

Daddy had laughed, then, and leaned into the car and kissed Tess on the nose and told her to have a good day or he'd tan her backside for her. And, knowing she was watching, he had walked back into the house doing his Charlie Chaplin walk to make her laugh, and Uncle Phil had said that Pete had always been a card and did she, Tess, like fish and chips?

So now, Tess lay on her back with Janet's warm bulk pressed against her side and told herself that she would find out, one day, just why she dreamed

the dream. I'll find the boy, she decided, and he can tell me. Daddy won't, but that boy would.

And it was the first time, ever, that she had admitted to herself that she believed Peter knew more about her dream than he was prepared to tell.

Very early that morning Marianne Dupré had ridden her bicycle down Deeping Lane, not hurrying but enjoying the peace and quiet. She knew the lane wound down from the main road – well, as main as roads got round here – until it stopped when it met the Broad, and there were only four houses down it. One was a tied cottage where the Ropes' ploughman and his family lived, another was the Throwers' waterside cottage and the third belonged to the Beaumonts. They were brother and sister, both in their seventies. Mr William Beaumont was a botanist and Miss Ethel Beaumont was an artist, and together they wrote and illustrated books on the wildlife to be found on the Broads.

But Marianne was only interested in the fourth dwelling. She had come down Deeping Lane before the sun was up, when the Broad was covered with a gentle white mist and a gold line on the eastern horizon was the only sign that the sun was about to rise. On reaching the first dwelling she dismounted and walked slowly along, pushing her bicycle, pretending to herself that she was just admiring the countryside. When she got to the Old House she pushed her bicycle deep into the woods opposite – for all the dwellings on Deeping Lane were on the right side of the road as you came down towards the Broad; the left side was woods which gradually gave way to marsh,

to reed beds and finally to the Broad itself – and hid it in a copse of young willow trees. Then she took off her waterproof jacket, folded it and laid it on the mossy ground, sat down on it, and produced from the bag at the back of her bicycle a flask and some sandwiches.

I'm a holidaymaker who has just happened to find this remote spot, Marianne told herself. Presently, when the sun comes up, I may stroll down to the water, chat to anyone I happen to meet . . .

But she knew she wouldn't, not really. Because that might easily ruin everything.

She unscrewed the lid of her flask and was pouring herself some coffee when the child came running down the path from the Old House, then dashed down the lane towards the gleam of water which Marianne could just see through the trees. A small, dark girl, skinny and plain. Not a bit like . . . Marianne cut the thought off short; she was a stranger, a holidaymaker, she didn't know anyone here – remember?

She had drunk the first cup of coffee by the time the child came back and when the carrier's cart arrived she was cross, uncomfortable, and beginning to regret the impulse which had caused her to get up literally at the crack of dawn and arrive here so very early. After all, what had she gained? She felt like a spy, an intruder, and what was more the damp was beginning to seep insidiously through her waterproof jacket and, by the feel of it, into her very bones. No good would come of catching a chill . . . but she was stuck here, now. There were too many people about to allow her to move, because she knew very well that, if she was spotted by the child or the neighbours, she would have a great deal of explaining to do.

Peter had never pretended, he had always made his feelings clear.

'You are my Hickling Water Frolic, my shooting trip to Scotland, my fishing weekend in Wales,' he had told her. 'My darling, darling Marianne, that is all I can offer you. Is it enough?'

'It's enough,' she had whispered throatily, that first time. 'Oh my darling, darling Peter, it's enough!'

But it wasn't, of course. It hadn't been enough once she'd really fallen in love with Peter. The hunger to be with him always, to be acknowledged, had almost driven her crazy. She had plotted, planned, persuaded . . . but she had not thought of the obvious.

Until now. And because she felt that the battle was all but won, she had come extra early to the Old House, as a spy admittedly, to see the child who was so precious to her lover that he would not risk allowing her to meet his mistress. So precious, in fact, that he would not remarry, simply dismissed such an idea out of hand. Yet he loves me, Marianne told herself petulantly, as the laden carrier's cart passed her, the peasants on board laughing and shouting out as though they were unaware of their lowly status. Marianne, an aristocratic Frenchwoman to the tips of her fingers, knew peasants when she saw them and wondered, fleetingly, why Peter, who was so careful of his daughter, should let her go away for a whole week with such people. But then self-interest reasserted itself; I'm glad he's sent her away, Marianne thought, so what does it matter what these Throwers are like? I am grateful to them, peasants or no, because Peter and I have a whole week together – as well as the rest of our lives.

Marianne had not seen Tess until that morning, never clapped eyes on so much as a photograph, because Tess was always at home, so she and Peter had to meet away from the house and village. In fact she had never set foot inside the Old House. Instead, Peter arranged to meet her in pubs, small hotels, holiday cottages, cafés. Because of a plain little girl we've been forced to skulk, Marianne told herself as she packed up her picnic and prepared to wheel her bicycle across the road and up the path to the Old House. How absurd it has been, as though he were a married man with a jealous wife, instead of a widower with a small daughter who would probably love a stepmother.

And although she was sure that the farce was just about over, that her new life was about to begin, she still pretended to herself that she was a holidaymaker, approaching a house to ask the owner whether there were any hire-craft on this part of the Broad. She wheeled her bicycle across the muddy, rutted lane, up the short gravel path and round to the back door, reminding herself that it would not do to break cover now. All must be respectable, for everyone's sake. Even the child's.

Marianne propped her bicycle up against a rabbit hutch, then knocked on the back door. She desired most urgently simply to walk inside, but caution forbade it. Suppose he had a friend staying, or a housekeeper? He had never mentioned such a thing, but . . .

The door opened. Peter stood there, his light-brown hair on end, a pair of tortoiseshell spectacles perched on his nose. He was wearing an open-necked shirt and corduroy trousers and tartan bedroom slippers and he had a book in one hand, one long finger marking his place. He

looked at her almost uncomprehendingly for a moment, then said, sharply: 'Marianne! What on earth . . .?'

'My darling, are you alone?'

He nodded uncertainly, then moved aside as Marianne, seizing the opportunity, stepped into the kitchen. My kitchen, she thought wonderingly, looking round. Goodness, it needs redecorating, smartening up. But I'll do it – I'll have all the time in the world once we've sorted things out.

'Yes, I'm alone. Tess left about ten minutes ago. But I've told you never to come here, you know very well . . .'

'Peter darling, I had to come.' She kept her voice low, throbbing with passion. She put her arms round him and then stood on tiptoe to kiss the only part of his face she could reach – his strong, cleft chin – and pressed the length of her body against him in a manner she would once have considered wanton in the extreme. Only . . . she had to be wanton, if that was the only way to make him see sense! 'Why are you cross with your Marianne?'

'You know our agreement! Right from the start . . .'

'Darling, I'm having a baby.'

He stood very still. Sensing shock, fearing rejection, she pressed her cheek against his chest and kept her arms round him, but he jerked himself free and held her at arm's length, staring down into her face.

'A . . . a *what*?'

'A baby, Peter. Your baby.'

'But that's not possible! I've always taken precautions . . . we both agreed we didn't want

any sort of complications. Marianne, you must be mistaken, you must!'

She had not expected this, but she should have done so. Peter's feelings exactly mirrored her own, last week, when she had first wondered if she might be pregnant. She knew that Peter had taken precautions, but accidents do happen. She had been horrified – the very last thing she wanted was a child – but then she had realised that a baby might well be her trump card. Peter was, above everything else, a true English gentleman. He would never desert her, and judging by the ridiculous, obsessive way he loved his daughter, he would be sure to love a child which he and Marianne had made together at least as much he loved Tess.

'There's no mistake. I went and saw the doctor, he says I'm *enceinte*. Peter, I know it isn't what we wanted, what we'd planned, but – don't you think that perhaps it's for the best? You need a woman in your life, so why should that woman not be your wife, the mother of your child – children, I mean? Peter, you've told me you are a widower, it isn't as if you've a wife, living . . . you wouldn't cast me off?'

It sounded melodramatic and Marianne flinched internally, but she knew she could not bear to lose Peter. She had thought herself to be, if anything, cold, because she had come to England with one purpose in mind; to marry a rich Englishman and to make her life here, as far away from France as she could envisage going. Only a marriage such as that could make up to her for the pain of seeing her younger, plainer sister wed before her.

Because, rather later in her life than she had expected, Marianne had met and become engaged

to a rich, languid young man with a château in the Dordogne, a seaside house in the South of France and a little *pied-à-terre* in Paris. Armand Nouvel's family owned famous racehorses, made famous wines, mixed with the upper five thousand. Proud as a peacock of her conquest, Marianne had taken Armand home, introduced him to her family . . . and watched, helpless, as her plain but brilliantly clever sister, Dédé, had made it clear that she really liked the gentle, rather spineless young man. And Armand, who had seemed dazed by Marianne's beauty and wit, had simply ditched her for her wretched, wretched sister Dédé.

Even now, Marianne could remember her pain, her fury. She hadn't loved Armand, but she had wanted him! And she had not even considered Peter as a possible man-friend when they had first been introduced. He wasn't rich, or stunningly handsome, or titled, even. He was just a not-so-young man at a rather boring party who had been introduced to her, and who had made her laugh. So she eyed him covertly whilst waiting for something better to come along, and finally allowed him to dance with her because one glance at the assembled company had told her that this was a wasted evening. There were a couple of rich young men but they were with boring, po-faced English girls. She would wait until she knew rather more people before casting out any lures. She intended to make use of her advantages – her beauty, her intriguing French accent and her sharp wit. A rich, possibly titled, Englishman would show Armand that he wasn't the only pebble on the beach and would prove to that cat, Dédé, that there were better fish in the sea than ever came out of it. But she was at the party, and she was bored, and Peter

was bending his head to speak conspiratorially into her ear. The least she could do was listen.

'Why don't we go for a walk along the river bank?' Peter had said. 'I'm sure the air in here is at least twenty degrees hotter than the air outside, to say nothing of being full of cigarette smoke. Or don't you trust me?'

He had smiled lazily down at her, as though the question of any woman not trusting him was totally absurd, and indeed she had looked up at his open, friendly countenance and thought that both of them were safe enough. He's likelier to bore me than bed me, she thought. But it would be nice to get out of this hot room.

So she had smiled back and gone with him, down their host's long lawn to the river which wound its way through reeds and willow copses and meadows, where the scent of wild roses and honeysuckle was brought to them on the breeze, where the milky moonlight cast long black shadows behind them as they walked. And in the darkness beneath the willows, with starshine and moonshine and a gentle breeze their only audience, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her very nicely and just as she was about to suggest that they make their way back to the party he had begun to make love to her with such heat, such passion, that cool, self-assured, rather calculating Marianne Dupré had found herself responding – and responding with ardour and appetite, what was more.

Afterwards, she could scarcely believe the things she had done, the way she had behaved! All her plans had been whistled down the wind because a man had been sweet to her when she was unhappy, and had taken advantage of her,

and stolen her most precious possession – for Marianne prized her virginity as a highly saleable item in the marriage stakes. Armand had never come within a mile of intimacy, he had been content with her occasional kisses, and now Peter had simply taken her, as though . . . as though . . .

But her thoughts had broken down in confusion at that point, for she had lain in Peter's arms, under those willow trees, and begged him to love her, to hold her, never to let her go. And Peter had made love to her so enchantingly, and promised that they would meet often, as often as possible, and helped her to dress, and taken her back to the party as calmly as though nothing at all had happened out there in the windy darkness, far less something as world-stopping as the experience he and Marianne had shared.

He had not tried to meet her again, either. It had been Marianne who had found out where he worked, bumped into him 'by accident' in the city, suggested they might meet that evening for a meal. She had named a small hotel, he had agreed – and afterwards, when he took her up to the room he had booked, he had actually had the nerve to say he'd assumed that was what she wanted!

It was not only what she wanted, it was what she had planned, but she had no intention of admitting it. No decent man, she told Peter tearfully, would have assumed any such thing.

'I am a stranger in your land,' she said piteously, exaggerating her accent and fixing her huge, dark eyes on his face. 'I do not zeenk what you say is gentlemanly. I am nineteen . . . I know nozzing about men, only zat I badly need a friend.'

She was a good deal older than nineteen and

she had nearly snookered herself with that particular lie because he had promptly apologised and said that he was a bounder and had misread the situation. Of course he wouldn't dream of taking advantage of her – he was almost twenty years her senior, dammit – and would see her home at once, would cancel the room . . .

Afterwards, she realised that they had both been playing a part, and playing it with considerable aplomb what was more, but at the time she simply burst into tears, threw herself into his arms, and told him that she was in his hands.

'And zey are gentle, kind hands,' she said soulfully. 'You will not harm me, Peter, zat much I do know.'

He hadn't harmed her, he had given her much pleasure. But he hadn't wanted to marry her, either, and had made it clear that she could never be anything other than his mistress. And for many months, being his mistress had been so wonderful that she hadn't wanted anything more. His love-making was tender, but so satisfying that she thought about it all the time they were apart, yet when they were together, she found that she simply enjoyed his company, his sense of humour, his occasional bouts of wanting to explain something to her, even the way he drove the car. I like him as well as loving him, she realised after time had passed and her affection for him had simply deepened and strengthened. There won't ever be anyone for me but Peter, it no longer matters that he's neither rich nor handsome. He's Peter, and that's enough.

When they had sorted out their relationship into that of two people who enjoyed both each other's company and each other's love-making, they had

laughed at their early, ingenuous efforts to take control of the situation. Marianne, who had not always found it possible to laugh at herself, knew that she had Peter to thank for a new-found gift which gave her a lot of pleasure. He had told her, gently, that she must try not to take herself so seriously, and she had studied her past and realised that most of her unhappiness could have been avoided had she done just that – laughed, shrugged, moved on – instead of turning everything into a tragedy.

Yet now . . . how could she laugh if he truly meant to cast her off? But the ice which had seemed to turn Peter into a figure of stone was melting, she could see it. He stood there, staring down at her, and suddenly he took her hands and held them up, just beneath his chin.

'A baby? You're sure, Mari?'

'I'm sure,' Marianne said tremulously. She did not have to act a part now, she was truly terrified that he might continue to insist that marriage was out of the question, that a baby made no difference. 'The baby will be born in the spring, all being well.'

Peter nodded, then carried her hands to his mouth, uncurled her fingers, and kissed both her palms. Then he folded her fingers round his kisses and tilted her chin until they were looking straight into each other's faces.

'Would you like us to marry, then, Marianne? You know I can't offer you much, but what I have I'll share with you. And you must love Tess, because she's been my life now for eight years. But she needs a mother, even though she's not aware of it yet. Could you be that mother, sweetheart?'

He meant it. He would marry her, share his life with her, but if she didn't play fair, if she was a wicked stepmother rather than a loving mother to his small daughter, then he would contrive to get rid of her. She didn't know how she knew, but she was certain she was right. He wouldn't threaten, he was telling her plainly the terms on which he would marry her, and she would tell him, equally plainly, that she would do her best by the child.

'I'll try. I'll really try, Peter,' she said earnestly. 'When can I meet her?'

'When she comes back from the seaside,' Peter said unhesitatingly. 'As soon as possible, in other words. Look, Marianne, are you sure marriage is what you want?'

She could have sung for joy but she assured him, sedately, that in the circumstances marriage had to be what she wanted. He shook his head at her, pulling a rueful face.

'I know that, but is it truly what you want? If circumstances had been different . . .'

She hesitated, thinking about it. Should she tell him that the sum of all her desires was marriage to him? It might be unwise to put all her cards so plainly on the table, to give herself no possibility of an orderly and dignified retreat. Yet if she was not honest with him he might not think her commitment sufficient.

'Oh, Peter, doesn't every girl want to marry the man in her life?'

Compromise of a sort; would it be sufficient, or would he demand total capitulation, would he expect her to plead for marriage, for respectability?

They were still standing in the kitchen, with the kettle steaming on the range behind Peter and

the back door slightly ajar behind Marianne. Peter sighed and carefully took off his spectacles. He produced a small leather case and pushed the glasses down into it, then slid them into his pocket. Then he smoothed back his hair, including the lock that had dangled over his forehead. Then he took her hand and led her across the kitchen and into the small, square hallway.

'I shouldn't have asked you that, should I? After all, circumstances aren't different. You're having a baby, that's not something which can be discounted.'

'It could,' Marianne said slowly. 'There are ways . . .'

She hated saying it, feared suddenly, with a cold, deathly fear, that he would swing round, offer to pay . . . He did not. Instead he shook his head and flung open the nearest door, gesturing into the room before him.

'Living-room. Looks nice when the fire's lit, but we don't spend much time in here in summer, Tess and myself.'

Marianne looked around the large, well-proportioned room with french windows leading on to a small terrace, a huge fireplace which took up most of one wall, and comfortable, rather shabby furnishings. 'It's nice,' she said, and heard the breathlessness in her own voice and knew it was because he was showing her his home without holding anything back, without saying 'if you behave, this could be yours', even if that was what he meant.

He crossed the hall in a couple of strides and threw open another door.

'Dining-room. Used half a dozen times a year

at the most, I suppose. Tess and I eat in the kitchen, as a rule.'

Another room, as large as the first, but with two ordinary windows, curtained in red velvet. A long, dark dining-table, gleaming like still water, with a silver candelabra in the centre and a number of long-backed chairs drawn up to it.

'Not cosy,' Peter said. 'But functional.'

'Marvellous,' Marianne breathed. 'Stately, impressive – oh, Peter!'

But Peter was shutting the door, leading her across the hallway again, opening another door.

'My study.'

A smaller room this time, dominated by a large desk, the walls lined with shelving upon which stood innumerable books.

Marianne nodded. 'Not cosy, but functional,' she said. She grinned up at Peter. 'Bedrooms?'

He took the stairs two at a time, leaving her to follow more sedately. The upper landing had four doors leading off, as had the lower hall. They must be very large bedrooms, Marianne thought, but then the first door was opening and she saw that the room revealed wasn't very large at all, was, in fact, cosy.

'Tess's room,' Peter said briefly. 'Good thing she tidied round before she left.'

Marianne thought the room untidy and rather ill-planned, but dared not say so. She also saw that it was pretty, with honeysuckle wallpaper, dark-yellow curtains and a square of fudge-brown carpet on the linoleumed floor. She moved forward, to take a peep round the door, but Peter was already on his way out. He closed the door firmly, opened the next.

'Spare room. The bath's in here. I keep meaning

to make it official, but you know how it is. Tess and I manage.'

'Oh! No lavatory, either?' The words were out before she could prevent it and Marianne could have kicked herself for the implied criticism, but Peter just said, 'Been meaning to have one installed as well as a bath. I'll do it if you'd like it. Otherwise it's a chamberpot during the night and a run down to the end of the garden during the day.'

'I'd like it,' Marianne said feelingly. She had no urge for the simple life, not as regards plumbing, at any rate. 'But I could manage, I suppose.'

He nodded, then opened the third door.

'Spare room. We don't have many visitors, but when I'm away Mrs Rawlings sleeps here.'

It was a pleasant room, though it seemed chillier than the rest of the house, possibly because the walls were ice-white and the curtains and bedspread a very pale blue. But Marianne nodded approvingly. It was fine for visitors. And what she wanted to see was where Peter had slept – alone – for the last few years. She realised as the thought entered her head that she had no idea when the first Mrs Delamere had died, but there were some things, she decided, that you simply didn't ask Peter. It wasn't that he was secretive, exactly, simply that he was rather a private sort of person. He would tell you things in his own time, you couldn't hurry him.

'My room.'

He opened the door and Marianne looked almost furtively through the doorway, then heaved a sigh of relief. She did not know what she had expected, but it certainly wasn't what she saw. A beautiful room with low windows set into

the thick old walls overlooking the land and the woods beyond, a very large double bed spread with a warm, gold-coloured counterpane and curtains, a dressing-table and matching wardrobe in some very pale wood . . .

'Like it?' Peter sounded almost embarrassed, Marianne thought, as she turned to smile up at him.

'I love it! It's a beautiful room and tastefully furnished, too. I love the colour scheme, the view . . . everything, in fact.'

Peter walked into the room. He sat down on the bed and patted the counterpane beside him, inviting Marianne to follow suit. She came, and perched. He put an arm round her.

'What about this bed? Cosy, would you say?'

'I can't judge without trying it,' Marianne said demurely. 'Oh, Peter . . . no, Peter! What if . . .'

'We're alone. We're going to get married.' He put a hand around the nape of her neck, caressing the soft skin with a gentle, hypnotic movement. 'You're sure you can cope with a little girl of eight, as well as with a new baby?'

Honesty, as well as caution, forbade over-confidence here. 'I *think* I can,' Marianne said. 'I *hope* I can. But no one can foretell the future, Peter. Tess may not like me.'

'Liking has to be earned,' Peter said. 'Just as love has to be. She's a good, sensible girl, my Tess; she won't dislike you on sight, but she'll stand back a little, give you space to prove yourself. All you have to do is show her you're prepared to be a proper mother to her.'

'I'll try,' Marianne said earnestly. 'I really will try, Peter.'

'Good. Then in that case, why don't we have a kiss and a cuddle, just to show willing?'

Marianne left the house late that evening. She was extremely happy and very relieved, and she sang little French songs as she cycled along the flat country roads. She was going to be Mrs Peter Delamere, she was going to be very good indeed to her little stepdaughter, and she would be the best mother in the world to her new baby when it was born. Already she loved the house, its garden, the location. She would make changes, of course she would, starting with a bathroom. She would divide the room in two, so that the lavatory would be separate, paper the walls with suitable paper, enjoy buying the various fixtures and fittings. And then there was the kitchen. Shining cream paintwork would help and lots more working surfaces and an Aga instead of the old range. Then she would get some bright linoleum for the floor and light-coloured curtains for the windows. She had no intention of trying to run a house from a kitchen which resembled something from the dark ages!

It wasn't until she was back in Norwich, in her digs on Clarence Road overlooking the marshalling yard, that something occurred to Marianne. Peter had not once said he loved her, in fact his main preoccupation had been that she and his daughter should get on. She brooded over this for a little, but then her practical side took over. Poor Peter had been totally bowled over by the news of her pregnancy, she could scarcely expect him to behave like a lovelorn swain when bluntly told that he was about to become a father. Naturally, he had thought at once of the feelings of his small

daughter. Any decent man would have behaved just as Peter had.

Marianne had a bath, enjoying the fact that her landlady's displeasure over anyone running water after nine p.m. was no longer of any importance to her. She tipped the best part of a jar of bathsalts into the hot water and lay there, day-dreaming. A white wedding dress with lilies of the valley in her hair was essential, as was an official photographer – she would send the photographs home, the best one to Dédé – with Peter's Tess as one bridesmaid and her landlady's daughter Bertha for the other. She thought a deep, rose-pink would be nice for the bridesmaids . . . or possibly a misty blue. When the water was cold she got out, dried herself and put on her nightgown, then made herself cocoa and cut a slice of cake, and got into bed. I'm going to be a married woman, she told herself happily, snuggling down. I'm going to make Peter the happiest man on earth, and that will make me happy.

But she wished he had said, just once, that he loved her.