



***MARGARET
PEDLER***

***THE HOUSE
OF DREAMS-
COME-TRUE***



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Margaret Pedler

The House of Dreams-Come-True

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CHAPTER I—THE WANDER-FEVER

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THE great spaces of the hall seemed to slope away into impenetrable gloom; velvet darkness deepening imperceptibly into sable density of panelled wall; huge, smoke-blackened beams, stretching wide arms across the roof, showing only as a dim lattice-work of ebony, fretting the shadowy twilight overhead.

At the furthest end, like a giant golden eye winking sleepily through the dark, smouldered a fire of logs, and near this, in the luminous circle of its warmth, a man and woman were seated at a table lit by tall wax candles in branched candlesticks. With its twinkling points of light, and the fire's red glow quivering across its shining surface, the table gleamed out like a jewel in a sombre setting—a vivid splash of light in the grey immensity of dusk-enfolded hall.

Dinner was evidently just over, for the candlelight shone softly on satin-skinned fruit, while wonderful gold-veined glass flecked the dark pool of polished mahogany with delicate lines and ripples of opalescent colour.

A silence had fallen on the two who had been dining. They had been gay enough together throughout the course of the meal, but, now that the servants had brought coffee and withdrawn, it seemed as though the stillness—that queer, ghostly, memory-haunted stillness which lurks in the dim, disused recesses of a place—had crept out from the four corners of the hall and were stealing upon them, little by little, as the tide encroaches on the shore, till it had lapped them round in a curious atmosphere of oppression.

The woman acknowledged it by a restless twist of her slim shoulders. She was quite young—not more than twenty—and as she glanced half-enquiringly at the man seated opposite her there was sufficiency of likeness between the two to warrant the assumption that they were father and daughter.

In each there was the same intelligent, wide brow, the same straight nose with sensitively cut nostrils—though a smaller and daintier affair in the feminine edition, and barred across the top by a little string of golden freckles—and, above all, the same determined, pointed chin with the contradictory cleft in it that charmed away its obstinacy.

But here the likeness ended. It was from someone other than the dark-browed man with his dreaming, poet's eyes—which were neither purple nor grey, but a mixture of the two—that Jean Peterson had inherited her beech-leaf brown hair, tinged with warm red where the light glinted on it, and her vivid hazel eyes—eyes that were sometimes golden like the heart of a topaz and sometimes clear and still and brown like the waters of some quiet pool cradled among the rocks of a moorland stream.

They were like that now—clear and wide-open, with a certain pensive, half-humorous questioning in them.

“Well?” she said, at last breaking the long silence. “What is it?”

The man looked across at her, smiling a little.

“Why should it be—anything?” he demanded.

She laughed amusedly.

“Oh, Glyn dear”—she never made use of the conventional address of “father.” Glyn Peterson would have

disliked it intensely if she had—"Oh, Glyn dear, I haven't been your daughter for the last twenty years without learning to divine when you are cudgelling your brains as to the prettiest method of introducing a disagreeable topic."

Peterson grinned a little. He tossed the end of his cigarette into the fire and lit a fresh one before replying.

"On this occasion," he observed at last, slowly, "the topic is not necessarily a disagreeable one. Jean"—his quizzical glance raked her face suddenly—"how would you like to go to England?"

"To England?"

Her tone held the same incredulous excitement that anyone unexpectedly invited to week-end at El Dorado might be expected to evince.

"*England!* Glyn, do you really mean to take me there at last?"

"You'd like to go then?" A keen observer might have noticed a shade of relief pass over Peterson's face.

"Like it? It's the one thing above all others that I've longed for. It seems so ridiculous to be an Englishwoman and yet never once to have set foot in England."

The man's eyes clouded.

"You're not—entirely—English," he said in a low voice. Jean knew from what memory the quick correction sprang. Her mother, the beautiful opera singer who had been the one romance of Glyn Peterson's life, had been of French extraction.

"I know," she returned soberly. "Yet I think I'm mostly conscious of being English. I believe it's just the very fact that I know Paris—Rome—Vienna—so well, and nothing at all

about England, that makes me feel more absolutely English than anything else.”

A spark of amusement lit itself in Peterson’s eyes.

“How truly feminine!” he commented drily.

Jean nodded.

“I’m afraid it’s rather illogical of me.”

Her father blew a thin stream of smoke into the air.

“Thank God for it!” he replied lightly. “It’s the cursed contradictoriness of your sex that makes it so enchanting. If women were logical they would be as obvious and boring as the average man.”

He relapsed into a dreaming silence. Jean broke it rather hesitatingly.

“You’ve never suggested taking me to England before.”

His face darkened suddenly. It was an extraordinarily expressive face—expressive as a child’s, reflecting every shade of his constant changes of mood.

“There’s no sense of adventure about England,” he said shortly. “It’s a dull corner of the world—bristling with the proprieties.”

Jean realised how very completely, from his own point of view, he had answered her. Romance, beauty, the sheer delight of utter freedom from the conventions were as the breath of his nostrils to Glyn Peterson.

Born to the purple, as it were, of an old English county family, he had stifled in the conventional atmosphere of his upbringing. There had been moments of wild rebellion, bitter outbursts against the established order of things, but these had been sedulously checked and discouraged by his

father, a man of iron will, who took himself and his position intensely seriously.

Ultimately, Glyn had come to accept with more or less philosophy the fact of his heirship to old estates and old traditions, with their inevitable responsibilities and claims, and he was just preparing to fulfill his parents' wishes by marrying, suitably and conventionally, when Jacqueline Mavory, the beautiful half-French opera singer, had flashed into his horizon.

In a moment the world was transformed. Artist soul called to artist soul; the romantic vein in the man, so long checked and thwarted, suddenly asserted itself irresistibly, and the very day before that appointed for his wedding, he and Jacqueline ran away together in search of happiness.

And they had found it. The "County" had been shocked; Glyn's father, unbending descendant of the old Scottish Covenanters, his whole creed outraged, had broken under the blow; but the runaway lovers had found what they sought.

At Beirnfels, a beautiful old schloss on the eastern border of Austria, remote from the world and surrounded by forest-clad hills, Glyn Peterson and Jacqueline had lived a romantically happy existence, roaming the world whenever the wander-fever seized them, but always returning to Schloss Beirnfels, where Peterson had contrived a background of almost exotic richness for the adored woman who had flung her career to the winds in order to become his wife.

The birth of Jean, two years after their marriage, had been frankly regarded by both of them as an inconvenience.

It interrupted their idyll. They were so essentially lovers that no third—not even a third born of love's consummation—could be other than superfluous.

They had proceeded to shift the new responsibility with characteristic lightheartedness. A small army of nursemaids and governesses was engaged, and later, when Jean was old enough, she was despatched to one of the best Continental schools, whilst her parents continued their customary happy-go-lucky existence uninterruptedly. During the holidays she shared their wanderings, and Egypt and the southern coast of Europe became familiar places to her.

At the age of seventeen, Jean came home to live at Beirnfels, thenceforward regarding her unpractical parents with a species of kindly tolerance and amusement. The three of them had lived quite happily together, though Jean had remained always the odd man out; but she had accepted the fact with a certain humorous philosophy which robbed it of half its sting.

Then, two years later, Jacqueline had developed rapid consumption, and though Glyn hurried her away to Montavan, in the Swiss Alps, there had been no combating the disease, and the romance of a great love had closed down suddenly into the grey shadows of death.

Peterson had been like a man demented. For a time he had disappeared, and no one ever knew, either then or later, how he had first faced the grim tragedy which had overtaken him.

Jean had patiently awaited his return to Beirnfels. When at last he came, he told her that it was the most beautiful

thing which could have happened—that Jacqueline should, have died in the zenith of their love.

“We never knew the downward swing of the pendulum,” he explained. “And when we meet again it will be as young lovers who have never grown tired. I shall always remember Jacqueline as still perfectly beautiful—never insulted by old age. And when she thinks of me—well, I’m still a ‘personable’ fellow, as they say—”

“My dear Glyn, you’re still a boy! You’ve never grown up,” Jean made answer. To her he seemed a sort of Peter Pan among men.

She had been amazed—although in a sense relieved—to find how swiftly he had rallied. It seemed almost as though his intense loathing of the onset of old age and decay, of that slow cooling of passion and gradual decline of faculties which age inevitably brings, had served to reconcile him to the loss of the woman he had worshipped whilst yet there had been no dimming of her physical perfection, no blunting of the fine edge of their love.

It was easily comprehensible that to two such temperamental, joy-loving beings as Glyn and Jacqueline, England, with her neutral-tinted skies and strictness of convention, had made little appeal, and Jean could with difficulty harmonise the suddenly projected visit to England with her knowledge of her father’s idiosyncrasies.

It was just possible of course, since all which had meant happiness to him lay buried in a little mountain cemetery in Switzerland, that it no longer mattered to Peterson where he sojourned. One place might be as good—or as bad—as another.

Rather diffidently Jean voiced her doubts, recalling him from the reverie into which he had fallen.

“/ go to England?” he exclaimed. “God forbid! No, you would go without me.”

“Without you?”

Peterson sprang up and began pacing restlessly to and fro.

“Yes, without me. I’m going away. I—I can’t stay here any longer. I’ve tried, Jean, for your sake”—he looked across at her with a kind of appeal in his eyes—“but I can’t stand it. I must move on—get away somewhere by myself. Beirnfels—without her——”

He broke off abruptly and stood still, staring down into the heart of the fire. Then he added in a wrung voice:

“It will be a year ago... to-morrow.”

Jean was silent. Never before had he let her see the raw wound in his soul. Latterly she had divined a growing restlessness in him, sensed the return of the wander-fever which sometimes obsessed him, but she had not realised that it was pain—sheer, intolerable pain—which was this time driving him forth from the place that had held his happiness.

He had appeared so little changed after Jacqueline’s death, so much the wayward, essentially lovable and unpractical creature of former times, still able to find supreme delight in a sunset, or an exquisite picture, or a wild ride across the purple hills, that Jean had sometimes marvelled, how easily he seemed able to forget.

And, after all, he had not forgotten—had never been able to forget!

The gay, debonair side which he had shown the world—that same rather selfish, beauty-loving, charming personality she had always known—had been only a shell, a husk hiding a hurt that had never healed—that never would find healing in this world.

Jean felt herself submerged beneath a wave of self-reproach that she could have thus crudely accepted Glyn's attitude at its face value. But it was useless to give expression to her penitence. She could find no words which might not wound, and while she was still dully trying to readjust her mind to this new aspect of things, her father's voice broke across her thoughts—smooth, polished, with just its usual inflection of whimsical amusement, rather as though the world were a good sort of joke in which he found himself constrained to take part.

"I've made the most paternal arrangements for your welfare in my absence, Jean. I want to discuss them with you. You see, I couldn't take you with me—I don't know in the least where I'm going or where I shall fetch up. That's the charm of it"—his face kindling. "And it wouldn't be right or proper for me to drag a young woman of your age—and attractions—half over the world with me."

By which Jean, not in the least deceived by his air of conscious rectitude, comprehended that he didn't want to be bothered with her. He was bidding for freedom, untrammelled by any petticoats.

"So I've written to my old pal, Lady Anne Brennan," pursued Peterson, "asking if you may stay with her for a little. You would have a delightful time. She was quite the most charming woman I knew in England."

“That must be rather more than twenty years ago,” observed Jean drily. “She may have altered a good deal.”

Peterson frowned. He hated to have objections raised to any plan that particularly appealed to him.

“Rubbish! Why should she change? Anne was not the sort of woman to change.”

Jean was perfectly aware that her father hadn't the least wish to “discuss” his proposals with her, as he had said. What he really wanted was to tell her about them and for her to approve and endorse them with enthusiasm—which is more or less what a man usually wants when he suggests discussing plans with his womankind.

So, recognising that he had all his arrangements cut and dried, Jean philosophically accepted the fact and prepared to fall in with them.

“And has Lady Anne signified her readiness to take me in for an indefinite period?” she enquired.

“I haven't had her answer yet. But I have no doubt at all what form it will take. It will be a splendid opportunity for you, altogether. You know, Jean”—pictorially—“you ought really to see the ‘stately homes of England.’ Why, they're—they're your birthright!”

Jean reflected humorously that this point of view had only occurred to him now that it chanced to coincide so admirably with his own wishes. Hitherto the “stately homes of England” had been relegated to a quite unimportant position in the background and Jean's attention focussed more directly upon the unpleasing vagaries of the British climate.

"I should like to go to England," was all she said. Peterson smiled at her radiantly—the smile of a child who has got its own way with much less difficulty than it had anticipated.

"You shall go," he promised her. "You'll adore Staple. It's quite a typical old English manor—lawns and terraces all complete, even down to the last detail of a yew hedge."

"Staple? Is that the Brennans' place?"

"God bless my soul, no! The Tormarins acquired it when they came pushing over to England with the Conqueror, I imagine. Anne married twice, you know. Her first husband, Tormarin, led her a dog's life, and after his death she married Claude Brennan—son of a junior branch of the Brennans. Now she is a widow for the second time."

"And are there any children?"

"Two sons. The elder is the son of the first marriage and is the owner of Staple, of course. The younger one is the child of the second marriage. I believe that since Brennan's death they all three live very comfortably together at Staple—at least, they did ten years ago when I last heard from Anne. That was not long after Brennan died."

Jean wrinkled her brows.

"Rather a confusing household to be suddenly pitchforked into," she commented.

"But not dull!" submitted Peterson triumphantly. "And dullness is, after all, the biggest bugbear of existence."

As if suddenly stabbed by the palpable pose of his own remark, the light died out of his face and he looked round the great dim ball with a restless, eager glance, as though trying to impress the picture of it on his memory.

“Beirnfels—my ‘House of Dreams-Come-True,’” he muttered to himself.

He had named it thus in those first glowing days when love had transfigured the grim old border castle, turning it into a place of magic visions and consummated hopes. The whimsical name took its origin from a little song which Jacqueline had been wont to sing to him, her glorious voice investing the simple words with a passionate belief and triumph.

It’s a strange road leads to the House of Dreams,
To the House of Dreams-Come-True,
Its hills are steep and its valleys deep,
And salt with tears the Wayfarers weep,
The Wayfarers—I and you.

But there’s sure a way to the House of Dreams,
To the House of Dreams-Come-True.
We shall find it yet, ere the sun has set.
If we fare straight on, come fine, come wet,
Wayfarers—I and you.

Peterson’s eyes rested curiously on his daughter’s face. There was something mystic, almost visionary, in their quiet, absent gaze.

“One day, Jean,” he said, “when you meet the only man who matters, Beirnfels shall be yours—the house where *your* dreams shall come true. It’s a house of ghosts now—a dead house. But some day you and the man you love will make it live again.”

CHAPTER II—MADAME DE VARIGNY

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J EAN was standing looking out from the window of her room in the hotel at Montavan. In the distance, the great white peaks of the Alps strained upwards, piercing the mass of drifting cloud, whilst below lay a world sheeted in snow, the long reach of dazzling purity broken only where the pine-woods etched black trunks against the whiteness and the steely gleam of a frozen lake showed like a broad blade drawn from a white velvet scabbard.

It had been part of Peterson's expressed programme that, before going their separate ways, he and Jean should make a brief stay at Montavan, there to await Lady Anne Brennan's answer to his letter. Jean had divined in this determination an excuse, covering his need to take farewell of that grave on the lonely mountain-side before he set out upon the solitary journey which could not fail to hold poignant memories of other, former wanderings—wanderings invested with the exquisite joy of sharing each adventure with a beloved fellow-wayfarer.

Instinctively though Jean had recognised the desire at the back of Glyn's decision to stop at Montavan, she was scrupulously careful not to let him guess her recognition. She took her cue from his own demeanour, which was outwardly that of a man merely travelling for pleasure, and she listened with a grim sense of amusement when poor Monsieur Vautrinot, the *maître d'hôtel*, recognising Peterson as a former client, sympathetically recalled the sad

circumstances of his previous visit and was roundly snubbed for his pains.

To Jean the loss of her mother had meant far less than it would have done to a girl in more commonplace circumstances. It was true that Jacqueline had shown herself all that was kindhearted and generous in her genuine wish to compass the girl's happiness, and that Jean had been frankly fond of her and attracted by her, but in no sense of the words had there been any interpretation of a maternal or filial relationship. As Jean herself, to the huge entertainment of her parents, had on one occasion summed up the situation: "Of course I know I'm a quite superfluous third at Beirnfels, but, all the same, you two really do make the most perfect host and hostess, and you try awfully hard not to let me feel *de trop*."

But, despite the fact that Jacqueline had represented little more to her daughter than a brilliant and delightful personality with whom circumstances happened to have brought her into contact, Jean was conscious of a sudden thrill of pain as her glance travelled across the wide stretches of snow and came at last to rest on the little burial ground which lay half hidden beneath the shoulder of a hill. She was moved by an immense consciousness of loss—not just the mere sense of bereavement which the circumstances would naturally have engendered, but something more absolute—a sense of all the exquisite maternal element which she had missed in the woman who was dead.

And then came recognition of the uselessness of such regret. Nothing could have made Jacqueline other than she

was—one of the world's great lovers. Mated to the man she loved, she asked nothing more of Nature, nor had she herself anything more to give. And the same reasoning, though perhaps in a less degree, could be applied to Peterson's own attitude of detachment towards his daughter; although Jean was intuitively aware that she had come to mean much more to him since her mother's death, even though it might be, perhaps, only because she represented a tangible link with his past happiness.

Thrusting aside the oppression of thought conjured up by her glimpse of that quiet God's Acre, set high up among the hills, she turned abruptly from the window and made her way downstairs to the hotel vestibule.

Here she discovered that Peterson had been claimed by some acquaintances. The encounter was obviously not of his own choosing, for, to Jean's experienced eye, his face bore the slightly restive expression common to it when circumstances had momentarily got the better of him.

His companions were a somewhat elaborate little Frenchman of fifty or thereabouts, with an unmistakable air of breeding about him, and a stately-looking woman some fifteen years younger, whose warm brunette colouring and swift, mobile gesture proclaimed her of Latin blood. All three were conversing in French.

"Ah! La voici qui vient!" Peterson turned as Jean approached, his quick exclamation tinged with relief. Still in French, which both he and Jean spoke as fluently and with as little accent as English, he continued rapidly: "Jean, let me present you to Madame la Comtesse de Varigny."

The girl found herself looking straight into a pair of eyes of that peculiarly opaque, dense brown common to Southern races. They were heavily fringed with long black lashes, giving them a fictitiously soft and disarming expression, yet Jean was vaguely conscious that their real expression held something secret and implacable, almost repellant, an impression strengthened by the virile, strongly-marked black brows that lay so close above them.

For the rest, Madame de Varigny was undeniably a beautiful woman, her blue-black, rather coarse hair framing an oval face, extraordinarily attractive in contour, with somewhat high cheek bones and a clever, flexible mouth.

Jean's first instinctive feeling was one of distaste. In spite of her knowledge that Varigny was one of the oldest names in France, the Countess struck her as partaking a little of the adventuress—of the type of woman of no particular birth who has climbed by her wits—and she wondered what position she had occupied prior to her marriage.

She was sharply recalled from her thoughts to find that Madame de Varigny was introducing the little middle-aged Frenchman to her as her husband, and immediately she spoke Jean felt her suspicions melting away beneath the warm, caressing cadences of an unusually beautiful voice. Such a voice was a straight passport to the heart. It seemed to clothe even the prosaic little Count in an almost romantic atmosphere of tender charm, an effect which he speedily dispelled by giving Jean a full, true, and particular account of the various pulmonary symptoms which annually induced him to seek the high, dry air of Montavan.

“It is as an insurance of good health that I come,” he informed Jean gravely.

“Oh, yes, we are not here merely for pleasure—*comme ces autres*”—Madame de Varigny gestured smilingly towards a merry party of men and girls who had just come in from lugging and were stamping the snow from off their feet amid gay little outbursts of chaff and laughter. “We are here just as last year, when we first made the acquaintance of Monsieur Peterson”—the suddenly muted quality of her voice implied just the right amount of sympathetic recollection—“so that *mon pauvre mari* may assure himself of yet another year of health.”

The faintly ironical gleam in her eyes convinced Jean that, as she had shrewdly begun to suspect, the little Count was a *malade imaginaire*, and once she found herself wondering what could be the circumstances responsible for the union of two such dissimilar personalities as the high-bred, hypochondriacal little Count and the rather splendid-looking but almost certainly plebeian-born woman who was his wife.

She intended, later on, to ask her father if he could supply the key to the riddle, but he had contrived to drift off during the course of her conversation with the Varignys, and, when at last she found herself free to join him, he had disappeared altogether.

She thought it very probable that he had gone out to watch the progress of a ski-ing match to which he had referred with some enthusiasm earlier in the day, and she smiled a little at the characteristic way in which he had

extricated himself, at her expense, from the inconvenience of his unexpected recontre with the Varignys.

But, two hours later, she realised that once again his superficial air of animation had deceived her. From her window she saw him coming along the frozen track that led from the hillside cemetery, and for a moment she hardly recognised her father in that suddenly shrank, huddled figure of a man, stumbling down the path, his head thrust forward and sunken on his breast.

Her first imperative instinct was to go and meet him. Her whole being ached with the longing to let him feel the warm rush of her sympathy, to assure him that he was not utterly alone. But she checked the impulse, recognising that he had no use for any sympathy or love which she could give.

She had never really been anything other than exterior to his life, outside his happiness, and now she felt intuitively that he would wish her to remain equally outside the temple of his grief.

He was the type of man who would bitterly resent the knowledge that any eyes had seen him at a moment of such utter, pitiable self-revelation, and it was the measure of her understanding that Jean waited quietly till he should choose to come to her.

“When he came, he had more or less regained his customary poise, though he still looked strained and shaken. He addressed her abruptly.

“I’ve decided to go straight on to Marseilles and sail by the next boat, Jean. There’s one I can catch if I start at once.”

“At once?” she exclaimed, taken aback. “You don’t mean—to-day?”

He nodded.

“Yes, this very evening. I find I can get down to Montreux in time for the night mail.” Then, answering her unspoken thought: “You’ll be quite all right. You will be certain to hear from Lady Anne in a day or two, and, meanwhile, I’ll ask Madame de Varigny to play chaperon. She’ll be delighted”—with a flash of the ironical humour that was never long absent from him.

“Who was she before she married the Count?” queried Jean.

“I can’t tell you. She is very reticent about her antecedents—probably with good reason”—smiling grimly. “But she is a big and beautiful person, and our little Count is obviously quite happy in his choice.”

“She is rather a fascinating woman,” commented Jean.

“Yes—but preferable as a friend rather than an enemy. I don’t know anything about her, but I wouldn’t mind wagering that she has a dash of Corsican blood in her. Anyway, she will look after you all right till Anne Brennan writes.”

“And if no letter comes?” suggested Jean. “Or supposing Lady Anne can’t have me? We’re rather taking things for granted, you know.”

His face clouded, but cleared again almost instantly.

“She *will* have you. Anne would never refuse a request of mine. If not, you must come on to me, and I’ll make other arrangements,”—vaguely. “I’ll let the next boat go, and stay in Paris till I hear from you. But I can’t wait here any longer.”

He paused, then broke out hurriedly:

“I ought never to have come to this place. It’s haunted. I know you’ll understand—you always do understand, I think, you quiet child—why I must go.”

And Jean, looking with the clear eyes of unhurt youth into the handsome, grief-ravaged face, was suddenly conscious of a shrinking fear of that mysterious force called love, which can make, and so swiftly, terribly unmake the lives of men and women.



CHAPTER III—THE STRANGER ON THE ICE

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“AND this friend of your father’s? You have not heard from her yet?”

A Jean and Madame de Varigny were breakfasting together the morning after Peterson’s departure.

“No. I hoped a letter might have come for me by this morning’s post. But I’m afraid I shall be on your hands a day or two longer”—smiling.

“But it is a pleasure!” Madame de Varigny reassured her warmly. “My husband and I are here for another week yet. After that we go on to St. Moritz. He is suddenly discontented with Montavan. If, by any chance, you have not then heard from Lady—Lady—I forget the name——”

“Lady Anne Brennan,” supplied Jean.

A curiously concentrated expression seemed to flit for an instant across Madame de Varigny’s face, but she continued smoothly:

“*Mais, oui*—Lady Brennan. *Eh bien*, if you have not heard from her by the time we leave for St. Moritz, you must come with us. It would add greatly to our pleasure.”

“It’s very good of you,” replied Jean. She felt frankly grateful for the suggestion, realising that if, by any mischance, the letter should be delayed till then, Madame de Varigny’s offer would considerably smooth her path. In spite of Glyn’s decision that she must join him in Paris, should Lady Anne’s invitation fail to materialise, she was

well aware that he would not greet her appearance on the scene with any enthusiasm.

“I suppose”—the Countess was speaking again—“I suppose Brennan is a very frequent—a common name in England?”

The question was put quite casually, more as though for the sake of making conversation than anything else, yet Madame de Varigny seemed to await the answer with a curious anxiety.

“Oh, no,” Jean replied readily enough, “I don’t think it is a common name. Lady Anne married into a junior branch of the family, I believe,” she added.

“That would not be considered a very good match for a peer’s daughter, surely?” hazarded the Countess. “A junior branch? I suppose there was a romantic love-affair of some kind behind it?”

“It was Lady Anne’s second marriage. Her first husband was a Tormarin—one of the oldest families in England.” Jean spoke rather stiffly. There was something jarring about the pertinacious catechism.

Madame de Varigny’s lips trembled as she put her next question, and not even the dusky fringe of lashes could quite soften the sudden tense gleam in her eyes.

“Tor—ma—rin!” She pronounced the name with a French inflection, evidently finding the unusual English word a little beyond her powers. “What a curious name! That, I am sure, must be uncommon. And this Lady Anne—she has children—sons? No?”

“Oh, yes. She has two sons.”

“Indeed?” Madame de Varigny looked interested. “And what are the sons called?”

Jean regarded her with mild surprise. Apparently the subject of nomenclature had a peculiar fascination for her.

“I really forget. My father did once tell me, but I don’t recollect what he said.”

A perceptible shade of disappointment passed over the other’s face, then, as though realising that she had exhibited a rather uncalled-for curiosity, she said deprecatingly:

“I fear I seem intrusive. But I am so interested in your future—I have taken a great fancy to you, mademoiselle. That must be my excuse.” She rose from the table, adding smilingly: “At least you will not find it dull, since Lady Anne has two sons. They will be companions for you.”

Jean rose, too, and together they passed out of the *salle à manger*.

“And what do you propose to do with yourself to-day?” asked the Countess, pausing in the hall. “My husband and I are going for a sleigh drive. Would you care to come with us? We should be delighted.”

Jean shook her head.

“It’s very kind of you. But I should really like to try my luck on the ice. I haven’t skated for some years, and as I feel a trifle shaky about beginning again, Monsieur Griolet, who directs the sports, has promised to coach me up a bit some time this morning.”

“*Bon!*” Madame de Varigny nodded pleasantly. “You will be well occupied while we are away. Au revoir, then, till our

return. Perhaps we shall walk down to the rink later to witness your progress under Monsieur Groilet's instruction."

She smiled mischievously, the smile irradiating her face with a sudden charm. Jean felt as though, for a moment, she had glimpsed the woman the Countess might have been but for some happening in her life which had soured and embittered it, setting that strange implacability within the liquid depths of her soft, southern eyes.

She was still speculating on Madame de Varigny's curious personality as she made her way along the beaten track that led towards the rink, and then, as a sudden turn of the way brought the sheet of ice suddenly into full view, all thoughts concerning the bunch of contradictions that goes to make up individual character were swept out of her mind.

In the glory of the morning sunlight the stretch of frozen water gleamed like a shield of burnished silver, whilst on its further side rose great pine-woods, mysteriously dark and silent, climbing the steeply rising ground towards the mountains.

There were a number of people skating, and Jean discovered Monsieur Griolet in the distance, supervising the practice of a pretty American girl who was cutting figures with an ease and exquisite balance of lithe body that hardly seemed to stand in need of the instructions he poured forth so volubly. Probably, Jean decided, the American had entered for some match and was being coached up to concert pitch accordingly.

She stood for a little time watching with interest the varied performances of the skaters. Bands of light-hearted young folk, indulging in the sport just for the sheer