

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Stardust

Charlotte Bingham

About the Book

Elizabeth Laurence is astoundingly beautiful. So beautiful she has never known what it is to have even a plain day. Used to the admiration of all, it seems that she will always be in charge of her own destiny. A star from the first minute she appears on celluloid, her future is certain, until she is cast opposite Jerome Didier in a hit play. As staggeringly handsome as she is beautiful, and tipped to become the leading actor of his generation, Jerome would appear to be made for Elizabeth.

But Jerome has fallen in love with the tousle-haired and carefree Pippa Nicholls, who is neither conventionally beautiful nor an actress and, much to Elizabeth's fury, he marries her. They are set to live happily ever after until the playwright Oscar Greene creates a part for Elizabeth which she intuitively recognizes is based on the character of Pippa, and Jerome is tragically deceived by the duplicity of his art.

About the Author

Charlotte Bingham comes from a literary family - her father sold a story to H.G Wells when he was only seventeen - and Charlotte wrote her autobiography, *Coronet among the Weeds*, at the age of nineteen. Since then she has written comedy and drama series, films and plays for both England and America with her husband, the actor and playwright Terence Brady.

Her most recent novels include *Goodnight Sweetheart*, *The Enchanted*, *The Land of Summer* and *The Daisy Club*.

Also by Charlotte Bingham:

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(adaptation from the novel by Rosamunde Pilcher)

STARDUST

Charlotte Bingham



BANTAM BOOKS

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For the Duke who loves the stars



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Reprise

When he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Romeo and Juliet, Act III Sc II

Overture

It seems she was always beautiful. There are photographs to prove it, photographs that were taken at the time. Even at three months old, when other babies are rarely even pretty, she was beautiful. And already the camera was in love with her.

They say that beautiful babies don't grow into beautiful children. But at three her looks were so arresting, she won first prize in a national competition.

No doubt you saw her picture then. Everyone did. Whichever magazine you picked up, or whatever hoarding you glanced at, there was that perfect little heart-shaped face, staring out at you, or down at you, with big serious dark-lashed eyes, eyes which already fascinated, eyes like a baby tigress. And no doubt you were captivated even then, everyone was, particularly by those eyes, those strangely vulnerable eyes, with their odd little flecks and strange markings.

Naturally flawless, her skin unnaturally stayed that way. She took great care to make sure that it did, she took care to preserve its almost translucent whiteness, never allowing it to get fashionably tanned, knowing that the real drama of her looks depended on that pearl white skin being shown off against her thick and lustrous dark hair.

Early studio photographs reveal that without doubt her hair was one of her greatest assets, that and the incredible delicacy of her features. Even more unusually, she had identical profiles, making her every director's and cameraman's dream. Because in the theatre wherever the audience sat, or on screen from whichever angle the camera photographed her, her beauty was indefectible. Even her voice, so often the thief of beauty, was light and full of charm.

So imagine then, if you can, someone so beautiful that in all her life as she grew up into womanhood, she never had a plain day. Not, that is, until she finally won him from her. And it was from that moment, from the moment that she finally won him for herself, that her lustrous beauty began quite inexorably to fade.

ACT ONE

England

Some time in the Fifties

1

All she did was walk across the room. As the other woman entered, she simply got up from her desk, smoothed down her dress, smiled at the other woman, walked her across the office and let her through another door, which she held open with one hand and a smile that lit up the sky. That was all she did. And she only did it once.

There were no other takes. It had been the end of the day's shoot, it was routine, so the director had shot and printed just the one take. But the image was the stuff of dreams. Even though the print had been hastily processed, and was silent, as was the way with the rushes, the tall, dark-haired man standing by the door of the viewing theatre had seen enough. The way the girl looked, the way she moved, the way her eyes found the lens, and once they did, the way she smiled at you right through the camera, that was all he needed to see, to know that this girl was something quite exceptional.

'Lights!' he shouted, and at once there were lights.

Charles Keyes, the film's director, shot bolt upright in his seat in the second row. He hadn't even realized Boska was in the room.

'I want to see that last scene again,' Boska said. 'So Mike? Wind back if you will, please?'

'Something wrong, Boz?' Keyes asked as casually as he could. 'I didn't spot anything.'

'Obviously not, Charles,' Boska said. 'Luckily I did.'

'What was it?'

'Who was it?' Boska corrected him, taking a fresh packet of Passing Cloud from his suit pocket and carefully removing an oval cigarette which he tapped at both ends on one manicured thumb-nail. 'Who was the girl?'

Keyes stalled. He hadn't been paying full attention since, to his mind, the scene was of absolutely no importance.

'You obviously don't mean our Sylvia, Boz,' Keyes replied, referring to his leading lady. 'I was watching her, naturally.'

'You were half asleep, Charles,' Boska replied. 'I was watching you as well. Mike?' Boska opened the door through to the projection room. 'Roll it if you're ready, please.'

'Yes sir!' came the reply. 'Yes, Mr Boska sir!'

This time everyone in the viewing theatre watched, because as they all knew from experience, when Dmitri Boska said there was something to see, there was something to see. And now that they watched, they saw a dark-haired, slender; angelic-looking girl who moved as if she was dancing, and who smiled as if the sun had come out for the first time after weeks of nothing but rain. The reason they hadn't seen her before was because they were looking for technical faults or blemishes, noting detail for continuity, or checking that all was right with Sylvia Dean, the leading lady. No-one had paid the secretary any attention because the girl was a walk-on and this was her only scene. Yet now their attention had been drawn to her, everyone in the viewing theatre wondered how they could possibly have missed her.

'Well?' Boska asked as the lights came on again, momentarily dazzling the assembled company. 'I hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't paid you a visit this morning. Because if I hadn't, I swear the world would have been a poorer place.'

'She's certainly pretty, Boz,' Keyes said, stretching his long legs out in front of him. 'In fact I'd go as far as to say she is very pretty.'

'Don't be a fool, Charles,' Boska sighed. 'That girl is not *pretty*, or even *very pretty*. That girl is beautiful. That girl is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen, anywhere. Her eyes, for instance. You saw how the camera captured their look? The camera loves her, and if the camera loves

her, we love her. What you have just seen, what we all have just seen, we have seen a star being born, that's what. In just that one little scene. OK. So now what you do, Charles, is you build up her part in this film. You give her something to do, because I'm not wrong, believe me. You put her in two or three scenes, with dialogue. I don't care if it means getting another girl for the secretary, a reshoot, and casting this girl as something else. I don't mind what it takes. All I want is this girl back here, and under contract. So get moving.'

Boska dropped his half-smoked cigarette into the fire bucket, looked round the assembled company to make sure he had made his point, and then turned and swept out of the viewing room. When he had gone, Charles Keyes took a small pair of scissors from his top pocket and slowly began to trim his immaculate fingernails.

'Imagine that,' he said finally and to no-one in particular. 'A star. And there was I going to cut that whole silly sequence.'

While the studio was doing their best to track her down, Elizabeth Laurence was out shopping with Lalla Henderson, her best friend from her drama school days. They window shopped in Bond Street, and Knightsbridge, but they bought nothing, because neither of them could really afford to do so, Lalla because she was a struggling actress, and Elizabeth because she was newly married and dependent on her husband for her clothes allowance.

'You'd look sensational in those,' Lalla stopped to point at a pair of yellow velvet trousers with a high waist and tapered, zippered ankles. 'With your figure they're just made for you.'

'I can't,' Elizabeth said. 'I absolutely promised Sebastian.'

'What about the money you earned from your day on the film?' Lalla said. 'Surely that's yours to do what you like with?'

Elizabeth sighed and gazed longingly at the velvet trousers in the shop window.

‘I suppose there wouldn’t be any harm in trying them on,’ she said.

Unfortunately Lalla was right, and Elizabeth, with her twenty-inch waist, slender hips and perfectly proportioned legs looked wonderful in the dull yellow trousers, particularly when the shop assistant suggested teaming them up with a close-fitting black jersey blouse.

‘It’s no good,’ Elizabeth sighed as she turned and looked at herself from all angles in the mirror. ‘I simply can’t afford them.’

‘If you did some more filming you could.’

Elizabeth looked up at Lalla and smiled radiantly.

‘Get behind me, Satan,’ she said.

They left the shop empty handed and caught a bus in Oxford Street to take them to Kensington where they planned to have lunch on the roof garden of Derry and Toms.

‘When I get my big break,’ Lalla said, after they had settled in the empty front seat on the top deck, ‘the first thing I shall do is go to Bond Street and buy a dress by Balenciaga. And another by Givenchy. And another by Dior.’

‘Perhaps this will be your big break,’ Elizabeth said, holding on to the rail in front of them as the bus swung into Park Lane. ‘Perhaps someone will see you in it, and put you under contract. Isn’t that what happens?’

‘That’s what’s meant to happen,’ Lalla laughed, ‘in fairy stories. No, I don’t think *Made In Heaven* is going to turn yours truly into a star. I think it’s going to take more than one scene and my one line – “Dr Hargreaves will see you now, madam.” Still, it was fun, wasn’t it?’

Elizabeth agreed. It had been fun. Loath though she was to admit it, she regretted having had to give up acting once she had got formally engaged. Even though she hadn’t really taken drama school that seriously, and had been

much more interested in making a good marriage, she had secretly enjoyed performing, and although her young husband, Sebastian Ferrers, was extremely handsome, comfortably off and deemed the catch of the season, the newly married Mrs Ferrers adjudged her life dull, especially when compared to the life her friend Lalla was leading.

That was why she had allowed Lalla to persuade her to attend a casting session for the comedy being shot at Richmond Studios, a film in which Lalla had what she described as a cough-and-a-spit as a doctor's receptionist. Sebastian was away on business, and Elizabeth was even more bored than usual, so there really seemed to be no good reason to say no.

The casting director obviously felt the same about Elizabeth as soon as he saw her, hiring her at once, although her appearance among a crowd of extras somewhat disconcerted him.

'But you're a trained actress,' he said. 'Weren't you at RADA with Lalla Henderson?'

'Yes I was, why?'

'It just seems odd, if I may say so,' the casting director said, 'for a girl with your rather exceptional looks—'

'I'm - married,' Elizabeth interrupted with a sweet smile. 'I was married within months of leaving drama school.'

'Ah,' the director said. 'I see.'

'This is just for pin money,' Elizabeth explained. 'Nothing more.'

Which is probably how it would have remained, had Elizabeth not given in to temptation and decided to upstage the leading lady, a habit she had fallen into at drama school whenever she considered she hadn't been given a part worthy of her talents. It didn't take much effort, at least not when the upstager was as strikingly beautiful as Elizabeth was. All it required was a sudden smile in an unexpected place, a slight widening of the eyes, a small but eye-catching gesture (in this case, a simple straightening of her

dress), or just a special way of walking. Elizabeth had a special way of walking. Elizabeth walked as if on air. And, of course, she had learned how to look into the camera when she was a baby, with the consequence that whatever trick she might employ, Elizabeth discovered very quickly that there was no difficulty whatsoever in making audiences believe that it was she not the principal player at whom they should all be looking. As for Sylvia Dean, the leading lady, she never stood a chance from the moment Elizabeth came into shot.

‘You could perfectly easily get some more work on the film,’ Lalla persisted over lunch in the gardens high on the roof of Kensington’s most fashionable department store. ‘They’re shooting the big party scene next week, and all of us cough-and-spitters are doubling up for the crowd. I know that Gerry, the casting director you saw, remember? Gerry’d have you back like a shot.’

‘I’d love to,’ Elizabeth admitted. ‘But Sebastian will be back by then.’

‘You sound as if you’re dreading it,’ Lalla said with a frown.

‘Do I?’ Elizabeth said, without showing how pleased she was Lalla had picked up the nuance.

‘Well, yes,’ Lalla replied. ‘You do as a matter of fact. Is everything all right?’

Elizabeth sighed, pushed her half-eaten salad to one side and lit a Balkan Sobranie, the only cigarette she would smoke.

‘Do you promise you won’t say anything, darling?’ she asked, after exhaling a long plume of smoke.

‘There’s nothing to promise, I don’t believe there can be anything wrong between you and Sebastian.’

‘It isn’t Sebastian,’ Elizabeth replied. ‘There’s absolutely nothing wrong with poor Sebastian. No-one could be sweeter. And kinder. Or more thoughtful.’

‘So what is it then, Liz?’

'It's me, darling. And it's really rather awful, so you're not to say *one word* to anyone. Promise?'

'I promise,' Lalla agreed, and she rummaged in her handbag for her own cigarettes while never taking her eyes off Elizabeth. 'Well?'

'The trouble is, darling, whatever, and whenever, and however, the problem is I've discovered I don't like – I don't like *it*.'

'Oh *God*,' Lalla said. 'You can't be serious?'

'I'm very serious, darling, I assure you,' Elizabeth sighed. 'It's not Sebastian. Because as I said, Sebastian is kind, and gentle, and very considerate. It's me. I simply can't stand doing it.'

'Not at all?' Lalla frowned. 'Not ever?'

'No. To be perfectly honest, I find it incredibly boring. It just does nothing for me. Nothing – nothing happens. I just lie there, getting more and more bored. And rather revolted finally.'

Elizabeth looked up at Lalla, wide-eyed over her cigarette, challenging her to say something, but all Lalla could do was frown and shake her sleek blonde head.

'You obviously don't find it boring,' Elizabeth continued. 'Or repellent, you lucky thing.'

'I'm not married.'

'That's not the point, darling,' Elizabeth put in quickly. 'You've had lovers.'

'Only one really, I only really slept with David.'

'But you enjoyed it. You told me.'

'I certainly didn't find it boring, or – or—'

'Or revolting,' Elizabeth sighed again and raised her eyebrows, as if in wonder at herself. 'I don't think anyone else does, darling. That's what worries me. I think I must be some sort of freak.'

'Have you talked to Sebastian about it?'

Elizabeth stared at Lalla as if she were mad, and then burst into a peal of laughter.

'Can you imagine?' she asked. 'Sebastian, darling, I want to talk to you. I simply have to, because I'm so bored by you in bed!'

'What I meant was,' Lalla said, immediately defensive, 'what I meant was, don't you ever talk about – you know – *it?*'

'Of course not.' Elizabeth crushed her cigarette out while tossing back her dark hair. 'It's not something one talks about is it? It's just something you do. We do.'

'But what about Sebastian?' Lalla asked after a short silence. 'I mean surely if you're that bored—'

'Sebastian doesn't suspect a thing,' Elizabeth answered pre-guessing her friend's thoughts. 'I make quite sure of that. One good thing as far as I'm concerned about having gone to drama school, darling, is that it did teach us just a little about play-acting.'

'Play-acting?'

'Lalla darling, you don't think I'm going to just lie there yawning and looking at my watch, do you? Poor Sebastian. The last thing in the world I would do would be to hurt poor darling Sebastian.'

They fell to silence while a waitress served them coffee. Elizabeth lit another cigarette and stared at some of the other women lunching in the roof gardens.

'I wonder how many of them were virgins when they got married?' she finally wondered.

'You think that's what your problem is?'

Elizabeth nodded. 'Of course.'

'I don't,' Lalla replied. 'I think your problem is you have nothing to do. With Sebastian away so much, now they've made him a junior partner, you have nothing to do with yourself all day, and so you're bored. And because you're bored at home, by yourself—'

'That doesn't make sense, Lalla. If that was the case I'd be delighted when Sebastian made love to me, and broke the dreadful monotony of my day to day existence.'

‘All right. But you admit to being bored.’

‘Of course I’m bored, darling. I’m bored totally rigid. So what do you suggest I do? Join the Women’s Institute?’

‘No, I think you should start acting. Seriously.’

‘Sebastian wouldn’t hear of it.’

‘Sebastian would understand perfectly.’

‘I promise you he wouldn’t.’

‘In that case, the only other thing I can suggest is that you should get pregnant.’

It was this last remark that did it. The last thing Elizabeth wanted in the world was to have children. The very thought of something else growing inside her body and making her gradually, uncontrollably fatter and fatter filled her with horror.

‘If I had known, if I had only known,’ was what she dimly remembered her mother murmuring, and then sighing and saying, always the same words, ‘your birth was the most degrading, the most disgusting, the most horrifying moment of my life. I had rather someone shot me than that they put me through such torture ever again.’

Her foster mother took up the theme. Birth, pregnancy, babies, they were a terrifying ordeal. God didn’t love women which was why when He came down to earth He made sure He came down as a man, because He couldn’t have stood being a woman. Unfortunately she ignored her own terrible warnings. At a late age, in her middle years, she conceived for the first time and died in childbirth.

Little wonder then that when Sebastian touched, lightly but firmly, on the subject of their projected family Elizabeth found herself having to employ her play-acting skills. Naturally she found herself quite able to discuss the matter with all the necessary enthusiasm, while always managing to find a reason as to why she had not been able to make them both even more ecstatic with a Happy Event. For better or worse a confirmed fear of childbirth was not the

only legacy Elizabeth's late, great foster mother had left her with, she had also taught her how to make it impossible to conceive.

'All right. I'll ask Sebastian when he returns,' Elizabeth agreed in the taxi on the way back to her house in Chelsea. 'I'll whisper it in his ear, after I've whispered all the sweet nothings.' She stared out of the taxi window. 'About how strong he is. And how clever.' Then she turned back and stared at Lalla. 'I'll say it's just a bit of fun. He won't mind if he thinks I'm doing it just for fun.'

As the taxi pulled up outside the pretty, white-painted house in Chelsea, Elizabeth invited Lalla to come in for tea so that they could go on talking. She hated being alone, and now she was married, she hated it more than ever.

'What are you doing for the rest of the day?' Elizabeth asked Lalla as her maid opened the door. 'If you're not doing anything, why don't we go to the cinema after tea? *The African Queen* is on at the Odeon.'

'I think Maggie wants to say something,' Lalla replied, having noticed Elizabeth's maid trying to attract her mistress's attention.

'Thank you, Miss Henderson,' the girl said gratefully. 'It's the telephone, madam. It's been ringing all day. Someone called Mr Keyes at Richmond Studios is very anxious to speak to you. I wrote it all down by the telephone.'

Elizabeth watched the sweat forming on Sebastian's brow and wondered if it was going to fall on her. Sometimes, occasionally, a bead would roll slowly down his nose and drop on her face and she hated it when that happened, although when she was particularly bored she would have a bet with herself as to whether or not she could move and avoid it without Sebastian knowing. This time, however, such was her husband's ardour, having been absent from her for well over a week, the sweat began to run off him freely, and Elizabeth, closing her eyes as tightly as she

could, resigned herself to the awful feeling of being dripped over.

‘Darling,’ he was whispering. ‘Darling.’

‘Oh yes, darling,’ she whispered back, ‘oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.’

The only good thing, Elizabeth thought, as Sebastian suddenly collapsed with a gasp on to the pillows, was that they were in his bed and not hers. Because she wasn’t expecting him back until the weekend, only that morning she had ordered Maggie to make up her bed in her best and favourite hand-embroidered Italian cotton sheets. Luckily she had left Sebastian’s bed as it was.

‘Oh my God, darling,’ Sebastian sighed. ‘I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed you.’

‘I’ve missed you too, darling,’ Elizabeth replied. ‘But what a lovely surprise. You coming home three days early.’

‘I have to go away again next week, I’m afraid,’ Sebastian said, wiping his cheek and his forehead with the back of one hand. ‘We’ve got this new commission. A private house in North Oxford, and we’ve got a site meeting over two days.’

‘But how *exciting*,’ Elizabeth whispered, looking up from where she lay on her husband’s chest to put one finger under her chin, just like she had spent hours practising in front of the mirror when she was bored at school. ‘Didn’t you tell me the house in Oxford was one of your designs?’

‘Well, it’s – it’s not entirely all my own work,’ Sebastian replied with his usual modesty. ‘James did help considerably.’

‘I shall miss you,’ Elizabeth murmured.

‘I shall miss you too,’ Sebastian whispered back.

Elizabeth deemed it only diplomatic to allow Sebastian to make love to her again that night before she broached the subject.

‘Darling,’ she said. ‘I have a confession. I’m afraid I’ve been rather naughty.’

‘Nonsense, darling,’ Sebastian replied. ‘Angels just can’t be naughty.’

‘This one can, I’m afraid.’ She put her face closer to him on the pillow so that their noses touched. ‘I’m in a film.’

‘A film? What film?’ Sebastian propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at his young wife.

‘Oh, it’s nothing. It’s an awfully silly film. And it was only for a bit of fun. But Lalla was working on it, and she thought it might be a hoot if she got me a tiny part. Which she did. That’s all.’ She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. ‘It really was only for a bit of fun.’

Sebastian smiled, put his arm round her, and lay back beside her in the bed so that her head lay on his shoulder.

‘I don’t see that there is any great harm in that, angel,’ he said. ‘Just so long as it doesn’t become a habit.’

‘I don’t think that there’s much chance of that, darling,’ Elizabeth giggled. ‘It’s all a bit different from drama school.’

‘I’ll bet. No, I don’t see any great harm in that, angel. Not if it’s just a bit of fun.’

Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and kissed her husband on his bare chest. In return he kissed the top of her head, and then put his other arm around her, and held her fast. She sighed contentedly, and Sebastian sighed contentedly back, stroking her hair with a hand which he then let fall lightly on to one of her breasts. Elizabeth bit her lip and stared out into the darkness, and waited, and waited. But thankfully there was no further movement. Even so she waited for a good half an hour, until she was quite sure her husband was sound asleep, before she eased herself from his arms and back into her own bed, where she sighed once again with the sheer pleasure of being back in her own crisp, cool, pristine sheets, by herself.

As she spread her wonderful hair out behind her on her pillow, she thought all in all it, or rather *it*, was only a small price to pay for freedom.

At the eleventh hour, Cecil Manners, Lalla's agent and recommended choice of representation for Elizabeth, found he was after all unable to see them.

'I told you this might happen, Miss Henderson,' his secretary explained. She was a thin, plain girl in a homemade dress of an open lacey design, which was probably why she was suffering from a heavy cold. 'I said he was busy all morning. I told you you'd be taking a chance,' she sniffed.

'That's perfectly all right,' Elizabeth said sweetly, sitting down and indicating to Lalla that she should do the same. 'We're not in any hurry.'

'I don't think you understand, Miss,' the girl continued.

'Miss Laurence,' Elizabeth said helpfully. 'Miss Laurence.'

'You don't understand, Miss Laurence, but Mr Manners has got someone with him, and then he's got to go out to lunch.'

'Then we'll wait until he comes back from lunch,' Elizabeth replied, again with a smile. 'As I said, we're really not in a hurry.'

The secretary glared at them both, and then suddenly sneezed.

'Bless you,' Elizabeth said. '*What* a horrid cold.'

Meanwhile inside the elegant main office, Cecil Manners, whom most people would take to be forty-something, but in fact was only rising thirty, was doing his best to get rid of one Oscar Greene, playwright and budding genius in his own eyes, if not yet in Cecil's. Cecil represented Oscar, but that didn't mean he could allow Oscar to make him late for his luncheon appointment.

But Oscar was not a man to be hurried. He was a big man, more like a boxer than a writer, an Anglo-American with a mat of thick, dark, curly hair and a friendly, lightly jowled face. Oscar considered himself ugly, which in a way he was, until like most men of character he started to talk, when he

became, as most of the women of his acquaintance would vouchsafe, almost irresistibly attractive.

Not that it particularly worried Oscar how he looked. He had long ago concluded that he was ugly, and therefore not very attractive to women. And because of this modest self-assessment, and perhaps because he wore spectacles, and certainly because, despite the excellent cut of his clothes, he still managed to look like an unmade bed, women loved him.

He was opinionated, of course, as befitted a playwright not yet out of his twenties and with only one qualified success behind him – a romantic comedy which had filled on tour, but failed to make the West End. Success was just around the corner, and he knew it. It was just a question of which corner.

At this moment in time he was not in a mood to let Cecil go until Cecil was quite sure of Oscar's opinion of Jimmy Locke, the management who had been in charge of his oh-so-nearly-a-hit.

'Your lunch is going to have to wait, Cecil,' Oscar said, tapping out the last Lucky Strike from a crumpled pack. 'I'm blocking this door until you agree at the very least that I must have some say in the casting. Let's just call it consultation. I'm not going to stand by and see that silly ass Jimmy Locke putting yet another of his untalented boyfriends in any play of mine.'

'When you have your first West End hit, Oscar—' Cecil began, giving his watch another anxious glance.

'But don't you see? I'm not going to have any goddam West End hit, Cecil, you chump,' Oscar interrupted, 'not while Jimmy Locke puts his current favourites in my leading roles, OK?'

Oscar eyed him over the cigarette which he was finding impossible to light since it was as crumpled as the packet from which he'd taken it.

'Clive Willett—' Cecil said.

'Clive Willett,' Oscar groaned, breaking the Lucky Strike in half and trying again. 'Clive *Willett*.' The memory was too much for Oscar, who sank on his haunches before the office door.

'Clive is very popular in the provinces,' Cecil insisted, wondering how he was going to get past the hundred-and-forty odd pounds blocking his exit.

'Not in any of the provinces we play, Cecil,' Oscar replied, tilting his face sideways to avoid the flame of his Zippo lighter. 'They laughed at him – not with him, at him – from Sheffield to Brighton. Clive Willett would be overcast in the back row of the chorus. Well?' He looked up at his agent. 'I'm not moving, Cecil, not until you promise at least to *try*.'

The telephone rang on Cecil's desk.

'I told you I can't possibly see anyone now,' Cecil informed his secretary after a moment. 'And not after lunch either. Tell them to try ringing tomorrow, or the next day.'

Dropping the large white telephone back on to its cradle, Cecil pulled on a pair of expensive leather gloves.

'My car's here,' he told Oscar. 'And I will suggest it to Jimmy. I promise.'

'OK,' Oscar said with a sigh, pulling himself to his feet.

'But I can't promise more than that,' he added quickly.

'You never do, Cecil, *old boy*,' Oscar grinned. 'And you never have.'

He opened the door behind him without turning, so that Cecil could leave, which Cecil started to do, until he saw what was waiting for him in the outer office.

'Hey,' Oscar frowned. 'You look as though you've seen a spook.' Then he turned as well, following Cecil's gaze, and saw what Cecil had seen.

'No,' Oscar said, nodding slowly. 'That is not a spook. That is something that just fell out of the sky.'

'You must be Mr Manners,' Elizabeth said, rising and coming forward. 'I'm Elizabeth Laurence. A friend of Lalla's.'