

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Summer Promise And Other Stories

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

From Elvi Rhodes, bestselling author of *Ruth Appleby*, *The Golden Girls* and *Madeleine*, comes a collection of stories to suit the reader's every mood - tender, funny, romantic, ironic, bitter-sweet, nostalgic.

The couple in *Summer Promise* are, at first glance, placed in an appalling situation, but nevertheless in the warmth of southern France their relationship develops in an unexpected way. *Be Your Age, Dear* is a delightful tale of a generation gap which, in one family, seems non-existent - or has it gone into reverse? *The Meeting* describes the ten-yearly reunion of a group of friends which, for obvious reasons, dwindles each time. The two members most closely involved come to a decision that was, perhaps, inevitable. *Model of Beauty* is set in a painting class, where the temporary illness of the generously endowed model brings about surprising consequences.

These enchanting stories are guaranteed by turn to entertain, soothe, intrigue and touch you.

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SUMMER PROMISE

and other stories

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CORGI BOOKS

Summer Promise

'ARE WE NEARLY there, Mummy?' Nicola asked me.

'I hope so. According to the map it's not much further.'

'How will you know which house it is?'

'I'll find it, darling,' I said. 'Don't worry.'

I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt. Nora had been vague about the last bit of the journey.

'Of course I've not actually been there,' she confessed. 'But Fiona says it's a super place.'

Fiona was the owner of the house. Through Nora she'd agreed that I could rent it for two weeks in the school holidays at a price which I could just about afford.

I had no business, I thought, to be splashing out on a holiday in France. But the last two years had been the low point of my life, at times almost more than I could bear. The divorce. Jim, whom I still missed so much, emigrating to Australia with his new wife, so that even the children were deprived of him. The move from our lovely house to a smaller one which was cheaper to run.

And then the long cold winter. Grief, I believe, can be harder to bear in an unkind climate. Both can eat into your heart.

It was on a bitter Saturday, the ground hard with frost, the wind sharp and cutting from the east, that I met Nora in the High Street.

'It's awful isn't it?' she said. 'But thank goodness we've just booked our summer holidays. Spain again.' It was obvious that she could already feel the hot sun.

'Why don't you go abroad, Linda? Take the children. You could all do with a change.' That's the stupid kind of thing

Nora says. 'You could rent a house or something.' Perhaps not so stupid.

Later she remembered Fiona, and made all the arrangements. My bank let me make out a cheque for the rent in advance, and from then on I started to dream. And plan, and save, and brush up my French. And nurture my elderly Mini.

So here I was, driving along this narrow, twisting road in the south-west of France, Nicola and James in the back of the car. Not sure where I was, and any minute now it would be dark. But I'd find the house, and then our holiday would really begin. Two glorious weeks. Sun, warmth, freedom. Country air, good food.

My daughter looked in need of a holiday. She's a seven-year-old edition of me. Fair hair, pale skin, slender or downright skinny according to how you look at it. It can all add up too quickly to an air of fatigue. James is dark and sturdier, and at four years old absurdly like his father, so that sometimes it hurts just to look at him.

'Why don't you be like James and have a sleep?' I said.

'I don't want to,' Nicola answered. 'I want to be awake when we get to the house.'

I pulled into the side of the road and looked at Nora's scribbled instructions. It seemed that if I took the left turn after the bridge, followed the road by the river and then turned right up the hill, I couldn't miss it.

On the river road the overhanging trees completed the darkness. I put my headlights on full and braked to avoid a fox caught in the strong beam. Turning away from the river the country opened up, and at the top of the hill I could see a house silhouetted against the sky.

'This should be it,' I said. My heart beat faster with excitement.

And then a light came on in one of the downstairs windows, so I thought it couldn't be the house I was

looking for. Even so, I'd stop and ask for directions. I hoped I'd be able to understand them.

We reached the house. 'Wait in the car,' I said to Nicola.

There was no bell or knocker. I rapped hard with my knuckles on the heavy door. All the windows on this side of the house were shuttered. The one from which I had seen the light was round the other side.

Eventually the door was opened by a man. He was tall, dark-haired, and I judged him to be in his late twenties. He waited for me to speak.

'*Excusez-moi,*' I said. '*Je cherche Les Champignons, s'il vous plaît.*'

He didn't answer immediately, which I put down to my faulty French.

'*Excusez-moi ...*'

'Don't bother,' he said. 'I'm. English.'

'Thank heaven! I think we're lost. I'm looking for a house called *Les Champignons.*'

'This is *Les Champignons,*' he said. 'What do you want?' He sounded surprised.

'Oh, marvellous! We're staying here for the next two weeks. I've rented it from the owner.' He was probably the local agent, I thought, come to see that everything was in order.

'I'll get the children in first,' I said. 'If you could give me a hand with the suitcases I'd be grateful.'

'Children?'

'In the car.'

'You say you've rented this house from the owner?' He sounded as though he didn't believe me.

'Yes. Actually I have a key. I hadn't expected to find you here, but I'm glad you are. Perhaps before you leave you'll show me where things are kept.'

He continued to block the doorway and I began to feel impatient. It had been a long drive and we were tired. Food

was our first need, and as quickly as possible after that, bed.

James and Nicola got out of the car and came and stood beside me on the doorstep.

'May we come in, please?' I asked.

He looked at the three of us.

'You can come in for a minute,' he said slowly. 'But you can't stay here. *I'm* the owner and I'm living here.'

I stared at him, not believing what I heard.

'You can't be. I've got the key. I've got my receipt for the rent!'

'I assure you I am. And as you see, I'm living here.'

'If you're a squatter,' I said, 'it's no go. I shall call the police.'

James started to cry. Nicola clung to my hand.

'Mummy, I want to go home,' she said. 'I don't like it here.'

'I am not a squatter,' the man said. 'I *am* the owner and I'm living here with my son. Since you're here you'd better come in and we'll sort this thing out.'

We followed him through the porch into a large living-room. There were comfortable easy chairs and a large sofa. Two or three lamps threw pools of light on to the pale stone walls. It was everything I'd hoped for. A small boy, about Nicola's age, sat at a family-sized table doing a jigsaw puzzle.

'Please sit down,' the man said. 'Mike, fetch some lemonade and some biscuits for these children.'

'Now,' he went on, turning to me. 'I'm Graham Harker. I assure you that I own this house, and I'm here with my son for the summer. What about you?'

'Then I can only think,' I answered, 'that I've come to the wrong house. There must be another house of the same name.'

'There isn't,' he said. 'Not around here. There are very few houses and I know them all.'

It occurred to me as I was speaking that I had no proof that he was who he said he was. But I had proof of my rights. I fished in my handbag and brought out the key, and the scrap of paper which was all Nora's friend Fiona had sent me in the way of a receipt.

'Here's the key,' I said. 'I'm Linda Preston and here's my receipt for the rent. If my key fits, then I'd like some proof of *your* identity. I'm sure you understand.'

He looked at me in astonishment, and then burst into a loud laugh. He was really amused.

'It's not funny!'

'Forgive me! But from my point of view ... A complete stranger arrives after dark, comes into my house and asks me for proof of my identity!'

He leaned across and took the key, a large, heavy affair. 'That's the key all right,' he agreed. He held out his hand for the receipt. As he studied it I watched his face flush. When he looked at me his eyes were hard, angry. I felt a little afraid.

'Fiona!' he said. 'I might have known. What the hell does she think she's up to now?' There was a world of bitterness in his voice; more than my affair merited.

The boy came back into the room with the lemonade as his father was speaking.

'Is Mummy coming *here*?' he asked.

'No.'

Graham Harker turned to me. 'It's obvious what's happened, Mrs Preston. Fiona is my ex-wife. She and I bought this house together, but she never stayed here. She prefers places like New York, Athens, Rome. I've just completed buying her out. So you see, she'd no right to let it to you.'

'But it was last January,' I protested. 'I paid the rent. Why didn't she let me know?'

'That's Fiona. She wouldn't mean any harm to you. Little things just never stay in her mind.'

'Little things! Do you realize ...'

'Equally likely,' he said, 'if she did remember, she'd leave the problem to me.'

I thought I would faint. The man in his red pull-over, the green-upholstered chair in which he was sitting, the lamp behind him, blurred and began to spin. I gripped my handbag, willing myself not to keel over. Then the room steadied.

All those months of scraping and saving; of going without. The clothes I'd made for the children. The food I'd hoarded over the months and brought with us to save money in France. But above all, the sorrows and unhappiness and frustrations of the last two years which were all to have been healed by these two wonderful weeks. It was not to be borne. I had no words to say. Nicola and James, sensing my feelings, came and stood beside me.

'I'm sorry,' Graham Harker said. 'I'm truly sorry, but you can't stay here.'

'But where are we to go? What are we to do?' I was utterly bewildered.

'I suggest an hotel,' he said.

'An hotel? That's impossible. If you knew what a struggle it's been to save enough money even to get here, you wouldn't talk about hotels.'

'I meant for tonight.'

Go back home tomorrow, he meant. Turn the car around and drive four hundred miles back to Dieppe.

'I shall get in touch with your ex-wife,' I was shouting now. 'She's responsible. She'll have to do something.'

'I quite agree. I hope you know where to get in touch with her. I seldom do.'

I didn't. I would have to contact Nora, and that I couldn't do until morning. I knew this house wasn't on the telephone.

'I didn't think you could be a friend of Fiona's,' he said. 'You're not the type.'

Not sophisticated, he meant. Provincial; gullible; defenceless. Well, I was all of those.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'I'm not. I can't stand Fiona's friends.' I thought he warmed a little towards me for that very reason.

'Could we get back to the subject of what I'm going to do?' I asked him. 'Even if I could afford an hotel, I don't think we'd get one tonight, not this late. And we've already slept one night in the car. The children are desperately tired.'

I heard myself pleading, asking to be allowed to stay the night under his roof.

He sighed. 'It's very inconvenient. I don't ...'

'I have loads of food in the car,' I interrupted.

'I have work to do. I'm working to a deadline on a set of plans. I can't do with people around.'

'But just for tonight? We'd go to bed quite soon.'

He looked at us. The children stared at him silently.

'Very well,' he said, 'but only for tonight. You'll all three have to share a bedroom, but it's big and there are two beds. I expect you've brought sheets and things?'

Suddenly I was shivering, unable to keep a limb still. I felt sick.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'You look all in. I'm going to pour you a glass of wine, and when you've had that we'll get your things in from the car.'

Lying in bed a couple of hours later I tried to sort out what we'd do, and faced the fact that we might have to turn around and go back home. I also wondered how safe we were, sharing a house hundreds of miles from home with a man we didn't know. But I was glad to be there, and too tired to care about anything else. And in his own way he'd been quite kind to us. I slept soundly until morning.

When I wakened the bed which Nicola and James had shared was empty. For a second I panicked, and then I

heard their voices through the open window; light, clear, laughing. I got up and looked out of the window. There was a stretch of land on this side of the house which someone was trying to turn into a garden. My children were standing with Graham Harker and his son, carefully examining two or three fresh molehills in a flowerbed. Nicola and James were dressed in the clean tee-shirts and jeans I'd put out for them last night. I must have slept heavily not to have heard them get up.

'Hello there,' I called.

'Good morning,' the man said. 'We thought we'd let you sleep.'

He looked older in the clear daylight; probably he was in his thirties. His hair was red-brown in the sunlight.

'Is it very late? My watch has stopped.'

One of the features of the holiday was to have been a total disregard for time. As a teacher I must always pay strict attention to a timetable. My life is ruled by the school bell.

'I'll be right down,' I called.

'There's hot water if you want a shower,' he said.

I felt better after a shower and a hairwash: more able to face things. Hot coffee and some fresh bread added to my well-being. Of course I knew it couldn't last.

When Nicola and James went outside again after breakfast Graham Harker remained at the table. He poured another cup of coffee and then said:

'I'm sorry, Mrs Preston, but I shall have to ask you to make other arrangements from today. I really do have work to do. Also, Mike and I aren't geared for company.' Mike, I thought, would have been pleased for us to stay. He seemed glad of the children's company. He was probably a lonely child.

But I was helpless. This man was, after all, in possession. If there was to be any solution it must come through his wife.

'I understand,' I said. 'We'll go to the village right away and I'll telephone my friend; ask her to get in touch with your wife.'

'Ex-wife,' he corrected.

'... whatever. She *must* do something. I hold her responsible. One more favour - could I leave our things here until I've telephoned? I'll come back and pack later.'

He hesitated and then said 'Very well.'

'I shan't trouble you,' I assured him. 'I promise I'll move out this afternoon.'

Where to, I didn't know. I thought it was essential to stay in the area for a day or two, to give Nora or Fiona time to come up with something. It looked as though what money I had would have to be spent on hotel accommodation and then if there was nothing forthcoming from Fiona we'd have to go home.

I wished I'd never left there. Or I wished I'd simply taken the children to the seaside. They'd have enjoyed that, perhaps more than the long journey through France. I realized now that in choosing this holiday I'd been thinking of myself: my need to put a distance between myself and all my troubles.

It took three attempts, spread over an hour, to get through to Nora. Even then I wasn't sure that she'd heard or understood me.

'The very least your friend Fiona can do is put us up in an hotel for a fortnight,' I shouted. Before she could reply the line went dead.

We came out of the post office into the hot sunshine. I was grateful for its warmth on my shoulders, which were stiff from yesterday's long drive.

'I'm thirsty,' James said.

'Can we have a drink?' Nicola asked.

'Soon. First of all we must book into an hotel for the night. Then we'll have a long, cool drink.'

There were two hotels in the village. Both were full.

'It will be the same everywhere,' the *patron* said. 'It is the season.'

'I'm thirsty,' James persisted. 'And hot. Also my head aches.'

I laid my hand on his forehead. It was dry and burning.

'And I feel sick,' he said.

We went into a bar and I ordered cold drinks. It was cool and shady in there and Nicola and I felt better for it. Not so James. He drank avidly but his cheeks remained red, his eyes too bright. Without a doubt he had a temperature. He walked around the table and leaned against me, whimpering a little. *Now* what was I to do?

I'd have to look further for an hotel, but just supposing there weren't any vacancies? The thought of starting back for home with James ill in the back of the car was not to be endured.

'Why can't we stay with Mr Harker?' Nicola asked. 'It's nice there. And we like Mike. Don't you like Mr Harker?'

In other circumstances, I thought, I would have. Right now he was a great big stumbling-block.

'Unfortunately,' I said, 'Mr Harker doesn't like us that much. Certainly not enough to have us stay.'

I couldn't, simply could not, ask him if we might stay another night. His attitude that morning, though polite, had made it plain that if asked he would refuse.

'I want to go to bed,' James pleaded. 'Can I go to bed, Mummy?'

'He must feel *awful* to want to go to bed,' Nicola sympathized.

'We'll go back to the house,' I said. 'You can lie down on the bed while I pack. After that I'll make up a nice bed in the back of the car while we look for somewhere to stay.'

When we got back to the house Graham Harker and Mike were nowhere to be seen and Graham's Renault was missing. I laid James on the bed, sponged his face with cool

water, gave him another drink. He was hotter than ever, turning his head from side to side, unable to find comfort. I closed the shutters to cool down the room. Then I stripped the other bed, collected the garments I'd washed in the morning and which had been drying in the hot sun, packed the case and carried it to the car.

When I came back to collect James he had fallen asleep. I stood beside the bed looking at him, touching his forehead. His skin was still hot but asleep he looked more comfortable. I decided to let him lie until the last possible moment. As long as Graham Harker was out of the house he couldn't object to us being there, and the urgency of finding an hotel would have to take second place to my son's present need.

I felt utterly weary now, as though I had no strength left in me to make even one more decision. I lay down on the spare bed and the tears, refusing to be held back any longer, ran down my cheeks. Nicola came and lay quietly beside me, holding my hand.

'I've made a very special wish, Mummy,' she confided. 'I can't tell you what it is because if you do they don't come true. But I made it.' She gripped my hand tightly and then we must both have fallen asleep.

When I wakened Graham Harker was standing in the bedroom doorway. The sight of him brought back my troubles and I closed my eyes to shut him out - but it didn't.

'We were just going,' I said, getting up. 'I'm all packed. Only James isn't well and I didn't want to move him until I had to.'

'Did you find an hotel?' he asked.

'No. Everything's full. I must start looking again now.'

Nicola was standing by James's bed.

'He's very red, Mummy,' she said. 'Come and look.'

His face was covered with spots. I lifted his tee-shirt and saw the spots on his chest. Chickenpox!

'Hell,' Graham Harker said. 'Damnation!'

Then he ran downstairs and I heard the front door slam as he went out. A minute or two later he came in again and I went downstairs to meet him.

'You win,' he said tersely. 'You can stay.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't want it this way. It gives me no pleasure.'

He didn't answer. He simply walked into the living-room and began taking books and files from the shelves.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Packing. I shall leave with Mike in the morning. We'll find somewhere. We'll be back Friday week.'

'We'll be gone then,' I said.

'I figured that. And if you ever get in touch with that goddam wife of mine you can tell her what I think of her!'

He hates us, I thought. He really hates us. I felt as if I wanted to creep away and hide. And then suddenly I was angry. Why should *I* feel guilty? What had *I* done wrong?

'You can do that for yourself,' I flared. 'I shall be too busy on my own behalf. Do you think I want to be in this position? I don't want your charity. I want the house I paid for in good solid cash. *I'm* the one who's been cheated. I'm the one whose holiday's been ruined.'

I was shrieking at him now. Nicola and Mike ran into the room, Nicola to me, Mike to his father. I became conscious of James's whimper from the bedroom.

'We've both been cheated,' Graham Harker said. 'But that's typical of Fiona. I paid good money to have this house to myself. I have drawings and plans to complete which must be submitted to my client in ten days' time. How do you think I can concentrate with all this going on?'

'I don't know. I don't know and I don't care!' I screamed. 'I've got problems of my own. And just about more than I can cope with!'

I heard myself screaming like a fishwife and I knew it had all gone too far.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'That's quite all right, Mrs Preston.'

Nicola tugged at my hand. 'Mummy, James is calling,' she said.

Next morning James was much better. Although he was still covered in spots, his temperature was down. I smiled at him as he sat up in bed, his dark hair lying damply on his forehead.

'Oh James my darling, why did you have to have chickenpox? You *have* complicated things!'

When I went downstairs Mike was already in the car. He had wound down the window so that he could talk to Nicola, who was standing beside the car. In fact, they were not talking: simply being together. Mike's father was packing the boot.

'Good morning,' he said, not looking up.

'Good morning. Is there anything special you want me to do in the house while you're away? What about your post, or any messages?' I asked.

'No one knows I'm here.'

'Very well then. And thank you again,' I said. 'We'll leave everything in order when we go.'

He got into the car, slammed the door, switched on the engine. Nicola and I watched them disappear from sight round the bend of the road.

'I didn't want them to go,' she said. 'It was fun with Mike.'

'Never mind. We'll have fun,' I promised. 'James will soon be better and then we can *really* start our lovely holiday.'

As we turned to go into the house I saw the postman cycling along the road towards us. He waved an arm and shouted.

'*Un télégramme!*' He dismounted and gave it to me.

'For Monsieur Harker and Madame Preston,' he said.

'For both of us?'

'*Mais oui!*'

'Monsieur Harker has just left,' I told him.

'I know. I saw him. I waved the telegram but he did not stop.'

I opened it and read it. In the circumstances, it was no help at all. It had come too late.

'Come along Nicola,' I said. 'Let's have some breakfast.'

It was while I was pouring the first cup of coffee that the Renault screamed to a stop outside the house and Graham Harker marched in.

'Forgot a notebook,' he said. 'Can't work without it.'

Mike ran into the house after him. 'We saw the postman,' he said. 'We saw the telegram.'

His father looked confused, caught out. I handed him the telegram.

'It's for both of us,' I said. 'I opened it.'

'*Both* of us?'

'From Fiona.'

He read it, a frown creasing his face. I watched him, waiting for his verdict. I knew what it would be.

'Hm!' he said. 'Sometimes Fiona has the most irritating way of saying the sensible thing. It was a habit I disliked in her.'

It seemed I might be wrong.

'Is it *really* possible?' he said. 'Do *you* think it's possible?'

'It was you who was against it. You didn't want to be disturbed. But in fact it could work out well. I could look after Mike while you got on with your job. That way you'd be through in no time.'

'I was hasty,' he said. 'And rather rude, I'm afraid. I suppose you could be right. Shall we give it a try, then? For the sake of the children, I mean.'

'For the sake of the children, of course!' I agreed.

'I haven't ever read a telegram,' Nicola said. 'Can I see it?'

'Sure.' I handed it to her and she read it out loud, stumbling over the unfamiliar words.

'TEN THOUSAND APOLOGIES. CAN ONLY SUGGEST SHARING. HAPPY HOLIDAY TO ALL. FIONA.'

Graham sat down at the table, poured himself coffee. I knew from that moment that the holiday was going to be everything I'd hoped for. Perhaps even better than I'd hoped for.

The Centre of Attraction

SHE MARCHES RHYTHMICALLY into the square, like an invading army. Clomp-clomp; clomp-clomp. As my old grandmother would have put it, 'All on her own she marches four abreast.' Her bounteous bosom, unconfined beneath cotton tee-shirt, bobs jubilantly up and down with every stride. Her hair - thick, white, tied with a red bow into a far-too-youthful ponytail - bounces in unison.

Of course, she has ruined my painting. She just does not fit into the composition. The washed-out pink of the buildings, the far background of sand-coloured cliffs, the faded terracotta of the pavement - everything calls out for the muted palette I have arranged. Ochre, gamboge, the siennas.

Walking purposefully towards the table which was to have been the focal point of my picture, she unharnesses herself from the large rucksack, inserts her ample blue-clad behind into the fragile white chair. Her face, glistening with sweat, is a rich shade of tomato, only a little less brilliant than her scarlet shirt. Her sturdy, suntanned legs culminate in emerald green socks and heavy boots.

We are the only people in the square, she and I. The only signs of life except for the mongrel dog asleep under a table, and the fly which torments it. The Minorcan siesta is not to be taken lightly, and only middle-aged foreigners, who think they know better, ignore it. The reason for my foolishness is that I am a man who likes to paint empty spaces. In the morning I am too lazy to get up. In the evening all is bustle. So, although I do not like the intensity of the midday light, I am too indolent to change my ways. I

compromise by wearing a pair of slightly tinted spectacles which tone down my surroundings. And when I feel guilty about not painting the truth, I remind myself of the theory that the Impressionists would not have painted as they did had they not been shortsighted. My sunglasses seem to do no harm to my potboilers. They sell with pleasing regularity, and at prices which please both the owner and myself, at the small art gallery near to the west door of the church.

My spectacles, however, are powerless to dim this intruder into my picture. She stands out from the background as vividly as a humming-bird against a bush – but larger. She looks around expectantly and, since she is one of those women born to rule, without so much as a lift of the finger on her part, the waiter emerges from the dark cavern of his bar.

'Buenos dias.' Her voice is clear, loud, with an accent common among my English friends. Spanish was not on her school curriculum.

'Buenas tardes' the waiter corrects her. *'Buenos dias, good morning; buenas tardes, good afternoon.'*

These little niceties of Alonzo's, and the smile which, even for the plainest women, accompanies them, earn him a small fortune in tips over the summer months.

'Buenas tardes,' she repeats. *'Gracias.'*

While waiting for her drink she looks across at me, not attempting to hide her curiosity. Since I am dark-haired and have been a year in the sun of southern Europe, no doubt she thinks I am a native. There is nothing against staring at natives. Besides, I have an easel set up, and a collection of brushes in my hand. Anybody, anywhere, may look at a painter. They may stand behind him, watch him work, praise or criticize him to their heart's content, and always as if he were not there, or was stone-deaf. If I were a writer, would they peer over my shoulder and say, 'I like the way he describes her hat'? But a painter is different.

Sure enough, here she comes.

'Buenas tardes, señor.'

'Good afternoon, madam.'

She is ever so slightly disconcerted to hear that I too, am English-spoken. But no matter. It will make it easier to discuss my work.

'Bertha Conway.' She stretches out her hand and her grip is every bit as vigorous as I expect it to be. She backs to a position a yard or two behind my easel, head on one side, eyes narrowed, evaluating my work. I move aside because I do not like people breathing down my neck. Also, I can study her while she looks at my painting.

I suppose, before she was covered by too much flesh in the wrong places, she must have been an attractive woman. There are still signs of it. Dark, widely-spaced eyes, broad forehead. Finely-chiselled ears cluttered with large pearl clips. Real pearls.

She makes no comment on my painting; simply nods her head once or twice. In fact I have only blocked in the shapes - everything else is still to come - so I am pleased she does not make some clever-sounding remark.

Alonzo places a jug of sangria on her table, its ruby colour glowing through the glass. I hope she knows it is well-laced with brandy.

'Will you join me, Mr ...?'

'Salter. Mel Salter. If you don't mind, I won't. I want to get on.'

'As you wish.'

She returns to her table. But how can I get on while she sits there in her confusion of colour? Her size, too, obscures the pink-flowered bush (I still do not know its name) which I wish to include.

She pours the sangria into her glass and drinks it greedily as if it were no more than orange squash. Ah well! She will soon know. She raises her hand, summoning Alonzo. Great God! She cannot be ordering more. Drat the

woman! I must go and warn her. It is I who will have to pick her up when she slumps to the ground.

'Then, since it is already ordered, you must do me the kindness of sharing it with me.' Her eyes are already brighter than they were. Alonzo, bringing the new jug of liquor, looks at me and lowers one eyelid almost imperceptibly. From a well-filled wallet she extracts a five-hundred-peseta note. Then she pours me a generous glass of sangria, and herself a third one.

'It's quite potent, you know. You don't feel it at first, but later you do,' I warn her.

'It's delicious, Mr Salter. Quite delicious!' (Do I already detect a trace of difficulty in her enunciation?) 'I like it! I like this place. A pretty village. I think I shall stay here a day or two. We'll have another little drink and then you can show me the hotel.'

'There's no hotel in the village. Across the bay there's a big one, owned by the tour company. Very comfortable, I believe, but atrocious food. The folks come across here in the evening to buy steak sandwiches.'

'Then I must find a house nearby. Someone, I'm sure, will be able to put me up.' She speaks with the confidence of one who has seldom had doors closed against her. 'I shall ask the waiter. A dear man! He'll have a cousin or someone who'll give me a bed. My wants are quite simple. The food of the people. And this pleasant fruit juice they drink.'

I have noticed that people who expect to be lucky usually are. Bertha Conway is no exception. Alonzo is sure that his brother's wife will have a room and will be pleased to have the lady. Not to worry; he will see to everything. She tips him in acknowledgement of his good intentions.

All is finally arranged as Alonzo has promised. His brother's wife is very happy to offer the lady a room - from which I am quite certain four small children have been temporarily evacuated. Eventually Bertha Conway is

escorted out of the plaza by the sister-in-law, like a ship in full sail accompanied by a tugboat.

I wipe my brushes, clean my palette, fold up my easel. So much for today's work. Better luck tomorrow.

But luck is not on my side. Tomorrow is here, and so am I. It is siesta time again and I have just begun to paint the deserted plaza when Madam Bertha walks once more into the middle of my scene. She waves a hand. Today she wears a shiny bright blue blouse, with yellow trousers straining over her behind. A green chiffon scarf adorns her hair and she has changed her pearl earrings for ruby-coloured danglers. She carries a large tapestry tote bag.

Why, you ask, can I not paint another angle of the plaza, excluding the lady? Well, to start with, the plaza is quite small, and since she sits in the middle there is no viewpoint which will exclude her. In any case, I was here first, and the siesta period is my time for painting. Why can she not lie down on her bed for an hour or two? Or, if she must exercise, go for a stroll along the beach?

Alonzo hurries across to her, jug of liquor in hand. It is obvious from their manner that their friendship progresses. He is all attention, adjusting the sunshade over her table, moving her chair.

She beckons me to join her but I am damned if I will. I make signs to indicate that I must get on with my painting. She smiles happily and takes an embroidery frame and a heap of coloured thread from her bag. I am surprised by the dextrous way she handles her needle, her unusually small hands moving back and forth like butterflies over a cabbage patch. No doubt she is making some hideous piece of nonsense for the church bazaar. Some poor soul will win it in a raffle.

It is no use. I cannot paint. She dominates the scene. I sit down and close my eyes. As I cannot work I might as well rest. But because I am angry with her, she also dominates my thoughts. Blast the woman! I glare at her