

Chapter 1

The village of Pont Magna, tucked into a fold of the Mendip Hills, was having its share of February weather. Sleet, icy rain, a biting wind and a sharp frost had culminated in lanes and roads like skating rinks, so that the girl making her way to the village trod with care.

She was a tall girl with a pretty face, quantities of dark hair bundled into a woolly cap, her splendid proportions hidden under an elderly tweed coat, and she was wearing stout wellies—suitable wear for the weather but hardly glamorous.

The lane curved ahead of her and she looked up sharply as a car rounded it, so that she didn't see the ridge of frozen earth underfoot, stumbled, lost her footing and sat down with undignified suddenness.

The car slowed, came to a halt and the driver got out,

heaved her onto her feet without effort and remarked mildly, 'You should look where you're going.'

'Of course I was looking where I was going.' The girl pulled her cap straight. 'You had no business coming round that corner so quietly...'

She tugged at her coat, frowning as various painful areas about her person made themselves felt.

'Can I give you a lift?'

She sensed his amusement and pointed out coldly, 'You're going the opposite way.' She added, 'You're a stranger here?'

'Er-yes.'

Although she waited he had no more to say; he only stood there looking down at her, so she said matter-of-factly, 'Well, thank you for stopping. Goodbye.'

When he didn't answer she looked at him and found him smiling. He was good-looking—more than that, handsome—with a splendid nose, a firm mouth and very blue eyes. She found their gaze disconcerting.

'I'm sorry if I was rude. I was taken by surprise.'

'Just as I have been,' he replied.

An apt remark, she reflected as she walked away from him, but somehow it sounded as though he had meant something quite different. When she reached the bend in the lane she looked back. He was still standing there, watching her.

Pont Magna wasn't a large village; it had a green, a church much too big for it, a main street wherein was the Village Stores and post office, pleasant cottages facing each other, a by-lane or two leading to other cottages and half a dozen larger houses—the vicarage, old Captain Morris's house at the far end of the street, and several comfortable dwellings belonging to retired couples. A

quiet place in quiet countryside, with Wells to the south and Frome to the east and Bath to the north.

Its rural surroundings were dotted by farms and wide fields. Since the village was off a main road tourists seldom found their way there, and at this time of the year the village might just as well have been a hundred miles from anywhere. It had a cheerful life of its own; people were sociable, titbits of gossip were shared, and, since it was the only place to meet, they were shared in Mrs Pike's shop.

There were several ladies there now, standing with their baskets over their arms, listening to that lady—a stout, cheerful body with a great deal of frizzy grey hair and small, shrewd eyes.

'Took bad, sudden, like!' she exclaimed. 'Well, we all knew he was going to retire, didn't we, and there'd be a new doctor? All arranged, wasn't it? I seen 'im when 'e came to look the place over. 'Andsome too.' She gave a chuckle. 'There'll be a lot of lady patients for 'im, wanting to take a look. Lovely motor car too.'

She beamed round her audience. 'Would never 'ave seen 'im myself if I 'adn't been coming back from Wells and stopped off to get me pills at Dr Fleming's. There 'e was, a great chap. I reckon 'e'll be taking over smartish, like, now Dr Fleming's took bad and gone to 'ospital.'

This interesting bit of news was mulled over while various purchases were made, but finally the last customer went, leaving Mrs Pike to stack tins of baked beans and rearrange packets of biscuits. She turned from this boring job as the door opened.

'Miss Leonora—walked, 'ave you? And it's real nasty underfoot. You could 'ave phoned and Jim could 'ave fetched whatever you wanted up to the house later.'

The girl pulled off her cap and allowed a tangle of curly hair to escape. 'Morning, Mrs Pike. I felt like a walk even though it's beastly weather. Mother wants one or two things—an excuse to get out...'

I'm not surprised, thought Mrs Pike; poor young lady stuck up there in that great gloomy house with her mum and dad, and that young man of hers hardly ever there. She ought to be out dancing.

She said out loud, 'Let me have your list, miss, and I'll put it together. Try one of them apples while you're waiting. Let's hope this weather gives over so's we can get out and about. That Mr Beamish of yours coming for the weekend, is 'e?'

'Well, I shouldn't think so unless the roads get better.' The girl twiddled the solitaire diamond on her finger and just for a moment looked unhappy. But only for a moment. 'I dare say we shall have a glorious spring...'

Mrs Pike, weighing cheese, glanced up. 'Getting wed then?' she wanted to know.

Leonora smiled. Mrs Pike was the village gossip but she wasn't malicious, and although she passed on any tit-bits she might have gleaned she never embellished them. She was a nice old thing and Leonora had known her for almost all of her life.

'We haven't decided, Mrs Pike.'

'I like a nice Easter wedding meself,' said Mrs Pike. 'Married on Easter Monday, we were—lovely day it was too.' She gave a chuckle. 'Poor as church mice we were too. Not that that matters.'

It would matter to Tony, reflected Leonora; he was something in the City, making money and intent on making still more. To Leonora, who had been brought up surrounded by valuable but shabby things in an old house

rapidly falling into disrepair, and who was in the habit of counting every penny twice, this seemed both clever and rather daunting, for it seemed to take up so much of Tony's life. Even on his rare visits to her home he brought a briefcase with him and was constantly interrupted by his phone.

She had protested mildly from time to time and he had told her not to fuss, that he needed to keep in touch with the markets. 'I'll be a millionaire—a multimillionaire,' he told her. 'You should be grateful, darling—think of all the lovely clothes you'll be able to buy.'

Looking down at her tweed skirt and wellies, she supposed that her lack of pretty clothes sometimes irked him and she wondered what he saw in her to love enough to want to marry her. The family name, perhaps—they had no hereditary title but the name was old and respected—and there was still the house and the land around it. Her father would never part with either.

It was a thought which scared her but which she quickly dismissed as nonsense. Tony loved her, she wore his ring, they would marry and set up house together. It was a bit vague at present but she hoped they wouldn't have to live in London; he had a flat there which she had never seen but which he assured her he would give up when they married. And he had told her that when they were married he would put her home back on its original footing.

When she had protested that her father might not allow that, he had explained patiently that he would be one of the family and surely her father would permit him to see to it that the house and land were kept as their home should be. 'After all,' he had pointed out to her, 'it

will eventually be the home of our son—your parents' grandson...'

She had never mentioned that to either her mother or her father. How like Tony, she thought lovingly—so generous and caring, ready to spend his money on restoring her home...

Mrs Pike's voice interrupted her thoughts. 'Pink salmon or the red, Miss Leonora?'

'Oh, the pink, Mrs Pike—fishcakes, you know.'

Mrs Pike nodded. 'Very tasty they are too.' Like the rest of the village she knew how hard up the Crosby family were. There never had been much money and Sir William had lost almost all of what had been left in some City financial disaster. A crying shame, but what a good thing that Miss Leonora's young man had plenty of money.

She put the groceries into a carrier bag and watched Leonora make her way down the icy street. She had pushed her hair back under her cap and really, from the back, she looked like a tramp. Only when you could see her face, thought Mrs Pike, did you know she wasn't anything of the sort.

Leonora went into the house through one of the side doors. There were several of these; the house, its oldest part very old indeed, had been added to in more prosperous times and, although from the front it presented a solid Georgian façade with imposing doors and large windows, round the back, where succeeding generations had added a room here, a passage there, a flight of unnecessary stairs, windows of all shapes and sizes, there were additional doors through which these various places could be reached.

The door Leonora entered led through to a gloomy, rather damp passage to the kitchen—a vast room hous-

ing a dresser of gigantic proportions, a scrubbed table capable of seating a dozen persons, an assortment of cupboards, and rows of shelves carrying pots and pans. There was a dog snoozing before the Aga stove but he got up, shook himself and came to meet her as she put her bag on the table.

She bent to fondle him, assuring him that no doubt the butcher's van would be round and there would be a bone for him. 'And as soon as it's a bit warmer we'll go for a real walk,' she promised him. He was an old dog, a Labrador, and a quick walk in the small park at the back of the house was all that he could manage in bad weather.

The door on the other side of the kitchen opened and a short, stout woman came in, followed by a tabby cat, and Leonora turned to smile at her.

'It's beastly out, Nanny. I'll take Wilkins into the garden for a quick run.' She glanced at the clock. 'I'll see to lunch when I get back.'

Nanny nodded. She had a nice cosy face, pink-cheeked and wrinkled, and grey hair in a tidy bun. 'I'll finish upstairs. I've taken in the coffee—it's hot on the Aga when you get in.'

Wilkins didn't much care for the weather but he trotted obediently down one of the paths to where a door in the brick wall opened onto the park—quite a modest park with a small stream running along its boundary and clumps of trees here and there. They went as far as the stream and then turned thankfully for home.

The house was a hotchpotch of uneven roofs and unmatched windows at the back but it had a certain charm, even in winter months. Of course many of its rooms were shut up now, but Leonora conceded that if you didn't look too closely at peeled paint and cracks it was quite im-

posing. She loved it, every crack and broken tile, every damp wall and creaking floorboard.

Back in the kitchen once more, Wilkins, paws wiped and his elderly person towelled warm, subsided before the Aga again, and Leonora hung her coat on a hook near the door, exchanged her wellies for a pair of scuffed slippers and set about getting lunch—soup, already simmering on the stove, a cheese soufflé and cheese and biscuits.

Carrying a tray of china and silver to the dining room, she shivered as she went along the passage from the kitchen. It would be sensible to have their meals in the kitchen, but her mother and father wouldn't hear of it even though the dining room was as cold as the passage, if not colder.

'Mustn't lower our standards,' her father had said when she had suggested it. So presently they sat down to lunch at an elegantly laid table, supping soup which had already been cooling by the time it got to the dining room. As for the soufflé, Leonora ran from the oven to the table, remembering to slow down at the dining-room door, and set it gently on the table for her mother to serve, thankful that it hadn't sunk in its dish.

'Delicious,' pronounced Lady Crosby. 'You are such a good cook, darling.' She sighed faintly, remembering the days when there had been a cook in the kitchen and a manservant to wait at table. What a blessing it was that Leonora was so splendid at organising the household and keeping things running smoothly.

Lady Crosby, a charming and sweet-tempered woman who managed to avoid doing anything as long as there was someone else to do it, reflected comfortably that her daughter would make a good wife for Tony—such a good man, who had already hinted that once they were mar-

ried he would see to it that there would be someone to take Leonora's place in the house. She was a lucky girl.

She glanced at her daughter and frowned; it was unfortunate, but Leonora was looking shabby.

'Haven't you got anything else to wear other than that skirt and sweater, dear?' she asked.

'Well, Mother, it's awful outside—no weather to dress up. Besides, I promised Nanny I'd help her with the kitchen cupboards this afternoon.'

Her father looked up. 'Why can't that woman who comes up from the village see to them?'

Leonora forbore from telling him that Mrs Pinch hadn't been coming for a month or more. Her wages had been a constant if small drain on the household purse, and when her husband had broken an arm at work she had decided to give up her charring and Leonora had seen the chance to save a pound or two by working a bit harder herself.

She said now, 'Well, Father, I like to go through the stores myself once in a while.' A remark which dispelled any faint doubts her parents might have had.

'Do wear gloves, dear,' observed her mother. 'Remember it's the Willoughbys' dinner party this evening—your hands, you know!'

The Willoughbys lived just outside the village in a small Georgian house in beautiful grounds, and since they had plenty of money it was beautifully maintained. They were elderly, good-natured and hospitable and Leonora enjoyed going there.

The cupboards dealt with, she got tea with Nanny and carried the tray through to the drawing room. Even on a cold winter's day it looked beautiful, with its tall windows, plaster ceiling and vast fireplace in which burned

a log fire that was quite inadequate to warm the room. The furniture was beautiful too, polished lovingly, the shabby upholstery brushed and repaired.

Her mother was playing patience and her father was sitting at a table by the window, writing. She set the tray down on a small table near her mother's chair and went to put more logs on the fire.

'I thought we might give a small dinner party quite soon,' observed Lady Crosby. 'We owe several, don't we? You might start planning a menu, darling.'

'How many?' asked Leonora, humouring her parent, wondering where the money was to come from. Dinner parties cost money. They could pawn the silver, she supposed with an inward chuckle; on the other hand she could make an enormous cottage pie and offer it to their guests...

'Oh, eight, I think, don't you? No, it would have to be seven or nine, wouldn't it? We can't have odd numbers.'

Lady Crosby sipped her tea. 'What shall you wear this evening?'

'Oh, the blue...'

'Very nice, dear, such a pretty colour; I have always liked that dress.'

So did I, reflected Leonora, when I first had it several years ago.

Getting into it later that evening, she decided that she hated it. Indeed, it was no longer the height of fashion, but it was well cut and fitted her splendid shape exactly where it should. She added the gold chain she had had for her twenty-first birthday, slipped Tony's ring on her finger and took a last dissatisfied look at her person, wrapped herself in a velvet coat she had worn to her

twenty-first-birthday dance, and went downstairs to join her parents.

Sir William was impatiently stomping up and down the hall. 'Your mother has no idea of time,' he complained. 'Go and hurry her up, will you, Leonora? I'll get the car round.'

Lady Crosby was fluttering around her bedroom looking for things—her evening bag, the special hanky which went with it, her earrings...

Leonora found the bag and the hanky, assured her mother that she was wearing the earrings and urged her down to the hall and out into the cold dark evening, while Nanny went to open the car door.

The car, an elderly Daimler which Sir William had sworn that he would never part with despite the drain on his income, was at the entrance; Leonora bundled her mother into the front seat and got into the back, where she whiled away the brief journey thinking up suitable topics of conversation to get her through dinner. She would know everyone there, of course, but it was as well to be prepared....

The Willoughbys welcomed them warmly, for they had known each other for a long time. Leonora glanced round her as they went into the drawing room, seeing familiar faces, smiling and exchanging greetings; there was the vicar and his wife, old Colonel Howes and his daughter, the Merediths from the next village whose land adjoined her father's, Dr Fleming, looking ill, and his wife and, standing with them, the man in the car who had witnessed her undignified tumble.

'You haven't met our new doctor, have you, dear?' asked Mrs Willoughby, and saved Leonora the necessity of answering by adding, 'James Galbraith.' Mrs Wil-

loughby smiled at him. 'This is Leonora Crosby—she lives at the Big House—you must come and meet her parents.'

Leonora offered a hand. Her 'How do you do?' was uttered with just the right amount of pleasant interest, but it had chilly undertones.

His hand was large and cool and firm and she felt compelled to look at him. Very handsome, she conceded—rather sleepy blue eyes and very fair hair, a splendid nose and a rather thin mouth. He was tall too, which was nice, she reflected; so often she found herself looking down on people from her five feet ten inches. Now she had to look up, quite a long way too!

'Six foot four?' she wondered out loud.

The Flemings had turned away to speak to someone else. Dr Galbraith's mouth quivered faintly. 'Five, actually. Are you feeling sore?'

She said austerely, 'I hardly think that is a question I need to answer, Dr Galbraith.'

She had gone rather pink and glanced around her, on the point of making an excuse to go and talk to the vicar. She was stopped by his saying, 'I speak in my professional capacity, Miss Crosby; presumably you will be one of my patients.'

'I am never ill,' said Leonora, unknowingly tempting fate.

Mrs Willoughby had joined them again. 'Getting to know each other?' she wanted to know. 'That's nice—take Leonora in to dinner, will you, James?' She tapped his sleeve. 'You don't mind if I call you James? Though if ever I need your skill I'll be sure to call you Doctor.'

Leonora had been sipping her sherry; now she put the

glass down. 'I really must circulate, and Nora Howes is dying to come and talk to you.'

He looked amused. 'Oh? How do you know that?'

'Woman's intuition.' She gave him a brief smile and crossed the room and he watched her go, thinking that a splendid creature such as she deserved a better dress.

She had been right about Nora Howes, who laid a hand on his sleeve, threw her head back and gave him an arch look. Older than Leonora, he supposed, as thin as a washboard and wearing a rather too elaborate dress for a dinner party in the country. But he could be charming when he liked and Nora relinquished him reluctantly as they went in to dinner, and he turned with relief to Leonora as the soup was served. Not a girl he could get interested in, he reflected—far too matter-of-fact and outspoken—but at least she didn't simper.

It was a round table so conversation, after a time, became more or less general. He had Mrs Fleming on his other side, a quiet, middle-aged woman, a good deal younger than her husband and anxious about him.

'I didn't want him to come,' she confided quietly, 'but he insisted. 'He's not well; he's going into hospital tomorrow.'

He said gently, 'You mustn't worry too much, Mrs Fleming. If he leads a quiet life for the next few months and keeps to his treatment he'll get a great deal better.'

She smiled at him. 'If anyone else had said that I should have supposed them to be pulling the wool over my eyes, but because it's you I believe what you've told me.'

'Thank you. I wish all patients were as trusting. Don't hesitate to call me if you're worried.'

'I won't. It's so nice that you're going to live at Bun-

tings—such a lovely old house and it's been empty far too long.'

She turned to speak to her neighbour and presently everyone went back to the drawing room to drink coffee and gossip. It might be a small village but there was always something happening.

The party broke up shortly before eleven o'clock and since it was cold outside no one lingered to talk once they'd left the house. Sir William unlocked his car door and glanced at the Rolls-Royce parked beside him.

Who's the lucky owner? he wondered, and saw Dr Fleming getting in.

'Good Lord, Bill, have you come into a fortune?' he called.

'No, no, James owns it. Rather nice, isn't it?' He disappeared inside and Sir William got behind his wheel and backed the car. 'Lucky young devil,' he said to no one in particular. 'Come up on the pools, has he?'

Leonora made some vague reply. She was thinking about Tony. She hadn't seen him for a week or so; perhaps he would come at the weekend. She hoped so; she felt strangely unsettled and just seeing him would reassure her—she wasn't sure why she wanted to be reassured, but that didn't matter; Tony would set her world to rights again.

He did come, driving up on Saturday afternoon in his Porsche, and if his kiss and hug were lacking the fervour of a man in love she didn't notice because she was glad to see him.

He went indoors with her to meet her parents and make himself agreeable and then they went for a walk. He took her arm and talked and she listened happily to his plans. They would marry—he was a bit vague as to

exactly when—and he would set about restoring her father's house. 'There's a chap I know who knows exactly what needs to be done. It'll be a showplace by the time it's finished. We can have friends down for the weekend...'

Leonora raised a puzzled face. 'But Tony, we shan't be living here; Mother and Father wouldn't much like a great many people coming to stay—even for a weekend.'

He said rather too quickly, 'Oh, I'm thinking of special occasions—Christmas and birthdays and so on; it's usual for families to get together at such times.' He smiled at her. 'Tell me, what's been happening since I was last here?'

'Nothing much. The Willoughbys' dinner party, and—I almost forgot—the new doctor to take over from Dr Fleming—he had a heart attack—not a severe one but he's got to retire.'

'Someone decent, I hope. Local chap?'

'Well, no, I don't think so. I don't know where he comes from. He's bought Buntings—that nice old house at the other end of the village.'

'Has he, indeed? Must have cost him a pretty penny. Married?'

'I've no idea. Very likely, I should think. Most GPs are, aren't they?'

Tony began to talk about himself then—the wheeling and dealing he had done, the money he had made, the important men of the business world he had met. Leonora listened and thought how lucky she was to be going to marry such a clever man.

They went to church the following morning and she stood beside Tony in the family pew, guiltily aware that she was glad the new doctor was there too and could see her handsome fiancé.

Dr Galbraith was handsome too, and his height and size added to that, but he was... She pondered for a moment. Perhaps it was the way he dressed, in elegant, beautifully tailored clothes, sober ties and, she had no doubt, handmade shoes—whereas Tony was very much the young man about town with his waistcoats and brightly coloured ties and striped shirts. She took a peep across the aisle and encountered the doctor's eyes, and blushed as though she had spoken her thoughts out loud and he had heard her.

She looked away hastily and listened to the Colonel reading the lesson, with a look of rapt attention, not hearing a word, and she took care not to look at the doctor again.

It was impossible to avoid him at the end of the service; he was standing in the church porch with the Flemings, talking to the vicar, and there was no help for it but to introduce Tony to him.

'The new GP,' observed Tony. 'I don't suppose there's much work for you around here. Wouldn't mind your job—peace and quiet in the country and all that. You fellows don't know when you're lucky. I'm in the City myself...'

The doctor said drily, 'Indeed? One of the unlucky ones? You must be glad to spend the weekend in this peaceful spot.'

Tony laughed. 'Not even a weekend—I must go back after lunch, try and catch up with the work, you know.'

'Ah, well, it's a pleasant run up to town. I dare say we shall meet again when next you're here.' The doctor smiled pleasantly and turned away to talk to the vicar's wife, who had joined them, and presently when he and the

Flemings left the little group he did no more than nod affably at Leonora, who gave him a decidedly chilly smile.

‘A bit of a stiff neck, isn’t he?’ asked Tony as they walked back to the house. He gave his rather loud laugh. ‘I don’t need to have qualms about the two of you!’

‘If that’s a joke,’ said Leonora, ‘I don’t think it’s funny. And why do you have to go back after lunch?’

‘Darling—’ he was at his most cajoling ‘—I simply must. There’s no let-up, you know, not in my world—the business world. Keeping one step ahead is vital...’

‘Vital for what?’

‘Making money, of course. Don’t bother your pretty head; just leave it to me.’

‘Will it always be like this? I mean, after we’re married? Will you be dashing off at all hours of the day, and do we need a lot of money? Don’t you earn enough for us to get married soon?’

He gave her a quick kiss. ‘What a little worrier you are. I am that old-fashioned thing—comfortably off. We could marry tomorrow and live pleasantly, but I don’t want to be just comfortably off; I want to be rich, darling—a flat in town, decently furnished, money to go abroad when we want to, all the clothes you want to buy, dinner parties, the theatre. I want you to have the best of everything.’

‘Tony, I don’t mind about any of that. I’m not a town girl; at least, I don’t think I am. I like living in the country and I don’t care if we haven’t much money. After all, I’m used to that.’ She added thoughtfully, ‘Perhaps you’ve fallen in love with the wrong girl...’

He flung an arm around her. ‘Darling, what nonsense. The moment I set eyes on you when we met at the Willoughbys I knew you were what I was looking for.’

Which was quite true—she was a very pretty girl, had

been ready to fall in love, and was an only child, with no large family to complicate matters. She lived in a lovely old house with plenty of land, which would be worth a fortune once he could get his hands on it.

He would have to go slowly, of course, and naturally he couldn't do anything to make Leonora unhappy. Her parents would be just as happy in a smaller house, somewhere close by, and he and Leonora could live in the big house. It would be a splendid focal point for meeting influential men and their wives—men who would give him a helping hand up the financial ladder.

Decently dressed, Leonora would prove an asset; she had lovely manners and a delightful voice. A bit outspoken at times and a good deal more intelligent than he had expected, but he was sure that he could persuade her to his way of thinking.

It was a couple of days later when Leonora met the doctor again. The icy weather had become quite mild and it rained from a dull sky. Sir William had caught cold and sat morosely by the fire, while his wife fussed around him and Nanny offered hot drinks and aspirin, which left Leonora looking after the household and doing the shopping, for, much as she loved her father, she could see that two females hovering over him was just about as much as he could stand. So she made the beds and hoovered and did most of the cooking and now they were running out of groceries.

In a mackintosh even older than the tweed coat, a hat, shapeless with age, rammed down onto her head, she picked up her basket, announced that she was going to the village and, accompanied by Wilkins, set out.

'At least we won't skid on ice,' she observed to

Wilkins, who was plodding along beside her. 'Though we are going to get very wet.'

Mrs Pike's shop was empty, which was a good thing for she allowed Wilkins to come in out of the rain, offering a sheet of newspaper which he was to sit on while Leonora took out her list.

A visit to Mrs Pike's was a leisurely affair unless she had a great many customers; she chatted while she collected bacon, cheese, the loaf the baker left each day, the marmalade Sir William preferred, tea and coffee, sugar and flour. Not that there was much to gossip about: Mrs Hick's new baby, the Kemp's youngest boy with a broken arm—'What do you expect from boys, anyway?' asked Mrs Pike—and Farmer Jenkins making a bit of trouble about his milk quota. 'Whatever that is, Miss Leonora; I'm sure I don't know what the world's coming to!'

This was one of Mrs Pike's frequent observations and the preliminary to a lengthy monologue of a gloomy nature, so it was a relief when two more customers came in together and Leonora was able to gather up her shopping and start for home.

It was still raining. Dr Galbraith, driving out of the village, saw Leonora's bedraggled figure ahead of him, marching along briskly, Wilkins beside her. He passed them and then pulled in to the side of the road, opened the door and said, 'Get in—I'm going past your place. Your dog can sit at the back.'

'Good morning, Doctor,' said Leonora pointedly. 'Please don't bother. We are both very wet; we shall spoil your car.'

He didn't answer but got out of the car and walked round to where she stood. 'Get in,' he said pleasantly,

and opened the door for Wilkins, who was only too glad to get out of the rain.

‘Oh, well, all right,’ said Leonora ungraciously, and slid into the front of the car. ‘I have warned you that we are both very wet.’

‘Indeed you have, and now I’m wet as well.’ He glanced at her. ‘A waste of time, Leonora...’

‘What’s a waste of time?’

‘Trying to get the better of me.’ He was driving now and turned to smile at her. ‘How are your mother and father?’

‘They’re very well—no, that’s not quite true. Father’s got a very bad cold; he’s a shocking patient when he’s not well and Mother gets worried.’

‘In that case, perhaps it might be as well if I took a look at him. An antibiotic might get him back on his feet—colds can drag on at this time of year.’

‘Yes, but aren’t you on your rounds or something?’

‘No.’ He swept the car through the gates and up the neglected drive to the front door and got out to go round the bonnet and open her door and then free Wilkins.

‘Do come in,’ said Leonora, all at once minding her manners, ‘and take off your coat. I’ll fetch Mother.’ She turned round as Nanny came down the staircase.

‘Oh, good, here’s Nanny. This is Dr Galbraith, our new doctor; he’s kindly come to see Father.’

Nanny eyed the doctor. ‘And that’s a mercy. How do you do, Doctor? And a fine, well-set-up young man you are, to be sure. Give me the coat; I’ll dry it out while Miss Leonora takes you to see the master.’

She turned her attention to Leonora then. ‘And you too, Miss Leonora—off with that coat and that old hat

and I'll give Wilkins a good rub down. There'll be coffee when you come down.'

Dismissed, the pair of them went upstairs to find her father sitting in a chair by a brisk fire with his wife bending over him. She looked up as they went in and gave a relieved sigh. 'Dr Galbraith, I was wondering if I should ask you to call. You met Leonora...'

'Yes, Lady Crosby, and it seemed sensible to take a look at Sir William, since I was passing.' He went to look at his patient and Leonora discovered that he was no longer a man who persisted in annoying her but an impersonal doctor with his head stuffed full of knowledge, and to be trusted. His quiet voice and his, 'Well, sir, may I take a look at you?' was reassuring.