

E. M. DELAFIELD

GAY LIFE

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**To
FRANCIS ILES**

**from his obliged and affectionate friend
The Author**

CHAPTER I

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(1)

"Maman, j'ai raté l'autobus!"

The shimmering heat-haze of the afternoon seemed to quiver as the shrill, lamentable announcement of this disaster broke into the silence that lay over the deserted terrace of the Hotel.

"Ma-man!"

It was as though a slight shudder pervaded the Hotel—a preliminary to complete awakening.

"Maman, j'ai raté l'autobus!"

The announcement, at its third repetition, resembled a shriek of defiance rather than an admission of defeat.

The young son of the Hotel proprietor, wearing a pale-blue *maillot* and a large straw hat, ascended the very last of the numerous steps leading from the dusty red drive to the terrace, and wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Maman—dites donc—j'ai raté l'autobus!"

The smooth, black head of Madame appeared from a ground-floor window, and she made imperative signs to her son that he should come in and be quiet.

But it was too late.

Mr. Bolham, in No. 16, had indignantly closed his window with a bang. The Morgans' youngest child, who had presumably been asleep, had awakened and was to be heard singing. The French family next door, perhaps in order to drown the sound, immediately started their eternal gramophone. On the top storey, above Mr. Bolham, a window was flung open with an impetuosity that caused the

bathing-dress and cloak that lay on the sill to fall below on to Mr. Bolham's little balcony, from whence they could only be retrieved by an appeal to Mr. Bolham, who would resent it.

In the open doorway of the Hotel on the top of the white steps, there suddenly appeared—like a conjuring trick—a number of figures. The *chasseur*, who had been dozing in a chair behind the little desk of the *concierge*, sprang into a state of resentful animation, the *concierge* himself—who had not been visible at all a moment earlier—snapped his fingers and imperatively said *psst* in the direction of the waiter from whom tea and iced drinks would shortly be ordered—and madame—frowning at her son Edouard, and simultaneously smiling at the wealthy American gentleman in the blue singlet who was passing through the hall—resumed her endless labours on the big ledger in the bureau.

Edouard—Dou-dou—said *Pardon, mademoiselle, and Bonjour, madame*, and made his way through the group of Hotel guests to his mother's little office. Now that it was too late, he carefully lowered his voice as he hung over the desk and related to her the history of his misfortunes with the *autobus*.

The visitors, for the most part still rather limp from the afternoon's siesta, dispersed themselves, in small groups, amongst the little tables that stood all along the terrace, each one sheltered by a huge red-and-white striped umbrella.

The young Moons, who had only arrived on the Blue Train the day before, and whose first visit to the Côte d'Azur it was, looked as self-conscious as they felt, Angie in brand-new beach pyjamas and Hilary in a black-and-green swimming-suit and bath-robe, and both of them shamefully pink-and-white, except where the sun had already made a small scarlet patch on the back of Hilary's neck.

The Moons sat together in silence. The little that they had ever had to say to one another had been said in the course of an electrically-charged fortnight, two years earlier, when they had fallen desperately in love. The rest had been an affair of dancing, drinking, kissing and violent love-making, marriage, and rapid and complete satiety.

They bore one another no malice for their present state of mutual boredom, but took it philosophically for granted. Hilary Moon, who was held to be clever by himself and his friends, was already thinking out the aspect of his marriage that he would present to the next woman with whom he fell in love.

Angie, with even less subtlety, was merely looking carefully at every man within range in the hope of seeing a certain expression, that she knew well, leap into his eyes at the sight of her beauty.

Angie was, indeed, as beautiful as she could well be. To a lovely slimness she added that length of shapely leg that is usually the prerogative of American women. But her sea-blue eyes, her thick fair hair and peach-blossom complexion, were all English.

She had everything: even to eyelashes that curled up and curled down, and a dimple at the corner of her lovely mouth. Several people had already looked at her rather intently, but Angie knew, without stopping to think about it, that all these people were entirely negligible. Either they were women, or servants, or elderly men whom she, at twenty-four, never took into serious consideration at all.

Presently, however, two young men appeared. One of them, indeed, was so young that he might be called a boy—perhaps even a schoolboy. Angie's experienced eye dismissed him, and passed on to his companion. This was a dark, rather thick-set young man of seven-or eight-and-twenty, with brown, bold eyes and remarkably beautiful teeth. There was something faintly unusual in the animation of his face and manner, and the frequency of his smile.

Angie instantly perceived that he had noticed her the moment he came on to the terrace, and that the ease and sprightliness with which he was now talking to his companion was entirely directed towards herself. With a tiny little sigh of relief, she settled back in her chair, relaxing completely.

"What are you going to have?" Hilary asked.

"Orangeade. Iced. Ask if they've got any biscuits."

Hilary gave the order, frowning slightly. His French was better than Angie's, but it was not good, and he disliked doing anything that he did not do well. By a natural transition, his thoughts immediately turned to something that he did do well.

"Shall we go down to bathe, afterwards?"

"Yes. I wish we had a car."

"We might be able to hire one while we're here."

"Oh, could we?"

"I expect so," said Hilary negligently.

There was no reason why the Moons should not hire a car, except that they had no money. They were, however, accustomed to having no money, and they did not allow the lack of it to stand in their way when they wanted cars, or clothes, or drinks, or restaurant meals, or trips to the South of France. They were, of course, in debt, but so were their friends and contemporaries, and still all of them went on spending money that wasn't there, and somehow, miraculously, evading the continually threatening crash.

"There's a garage at the bottom of the drive—quite a big one."

"That's no good. One would have to go to Cannes, or Nice, or somewhere like that, for a decent car," said Hilary. "I'll ask the *concierge*."

"We might go in to-morrow morning. I want to get some things," Angie said eagerly. "Cannes would be better than St. Raphael for shopping, wouldn't it?"

She had decided, within the last two seconds, that she needed a large straw hat, of shiny red-and-blue straw, and a wide pair of white silk trousers, and one of those triangular coloured handkerchiefs that went over one's head, and tied at the back.

Hilary had decided with equal promptitude that he must get hold of a car somehow—a swift, high-powered car with chromium-plated fittings.

They sipped through straws at the orangeade in their tall glasses, absorbed in these agreeable fancies.

Angie, however, did not cease to be aware of the dark young man at the next table, and presently she saw him half-stand up, as a woman in rose-coloured tussore pyjamas came and sat down between him and his companion.

The sight was faintly disagreeable to Angie, and became more actively so when she discerned that the woman, although not young, was good-looking in very much her own style—fair, and slim, and big-eyed—and with that indefinable air of self-assurance peculiar to a woman who has always been attractive to men. Angie directed Hilary's attention to the next table by a slight movement of the head.

"What do you think they are? Mother and sons?"

"Sons? She's much too young to be the dark one's mother," said Hilary tactlessly. "She might be his wife."

"He couldn't possibly be the boy's father."

"Well—no. Perhaps he's her second husband."

"She wouldn't be making eyes at him like that, if he was."

They gazed at the trio. The boy was silent, and looked faintly bewildered, but the other two were talking and laughing noisily with an air of great intimacy.

"They aren't interesting—particularly," at last said Hilary—meaning that the woman was not the type that attracted him. He looked up and down the terrace and then said, with a shudder:

"My God—children. You'd think English people would have the sense not to bring children to the South of France in August."

Hilary, however, had overrated the sense of his compatriots. They had with them three children, of the fatal ages of eight, ten, and fourteen years old.

It was nothing to Hilary, or to his wife either, that the three children were good-looking, in a clear-cut, distinguished way, with beautifully bronzed skins and heads of golden hair that gleamed in the sun.

The Moons knew that all children were undesirable. They cost money, they interfered with every adult form of enjoyment, they attracted attention that should have been bestowed elsewhere, and they not infrequently gave rise to the type of conversation most disliked by the Moons, since it was neither flippant, suggestive, amorous, nor scandalous.

"I hope to God," said Hilary disconsolately, "that a few amusing people are going to turn up in this hole. Otherwise it won't have been worth coming."

"There are the people in the villa," suggested Angie—but languidly, for she knew that the people in the villa, one of them a friend of a friend of Hilary's, were unescorted women and therefore uninteresting to herself.

"We might look them up after dinner."

"Or before dinner."

"Too obvious, a bit. They'll have to ask us to a meal, anyway, and there's no sense in rushing things."

"Well——"

Angie's eye roved away once more, as a noisy group of French people came up the steps, talking and laughing. The women were young, fat, dark, and wore very smart bathing-dresses and sandals. The men were dark and fat, too, and full of animation. They all looked hard at Angie, and, having passed, looked back again. The impression that she had obviously created pleased her faintly, but the group was too evidently a family one. There was little satisfaction to be got

out of the admiration of a middle-class Frenchman taking a holiday with his wife and—probably—sisters-in-law.

Angie's thoughts, followed by her glance, slid round again to the dark young man, and she saw that he—or more probably his companions—had been joined by two other men, one of them of some age between forty-five and fifty, an obvious American, and the other one fair and undersized, and very much younger.

The place, Angie decided, wasn't going to be hopeless at all.

"I'm going to have another orangeade," said Hilary. "What about you?"

"All right."

She didn't want the orangeade, but drinking it would be something to do, and it was worth while sitting on for a bit, letting all these men watch her, more or less surreptitiously, and giving them the chance of realising that she and Hilary were staying at the Hôtel d'Azur, and that they could get to know her without any difficulty at all.

(2)

Mr. Bolham, having been roused from some extremely serious reading that was his form of relaxation, looked with slight, habitual distaste at his elderly form and bald head reflected in the mirror, approved at the same time his beautiful white flannels, and went downstairs.

He walked, in preference to using the lift which had, three days earlier, stuck half-way down, imprisoning Mr. Bolham *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Romaine, the lady now sitting, in pale pink pyjamas, on the terrace below. This misadventure, although it had only lasted for the space of seven minutes, had led to Mrs. Romaine's assuming an intimate and proprietary air towards Mr. Bolham ever since, and this, in its turn, had occasioned in Mr. Bolham a

complex in regard to the use of the lift. He walked down the shallow white marble stairs.

At the Hotel entrance, he stood on the top step of another flight that led on to the terrace, and looked down on the red-and-white umbrellas, the little tables, the palm trees, and the several groups of Hotel guests sitting either in the shade or in the blaze of brilliant sunlight that still poured down steadily.

It was the misfortune of Mr. Bolham to dislike, temperately but quite genuinely, the majority of his fellow-creatures. He felt rather more conscious than usual of this idiosyncrasy, as he stood, unobserved, in the entrance-way of the Hotel.

He saw at once that some new people—the Moons—had arrived, and that the girl was strikingly pretty. The beauty of her face left him perfectly cold, for he descried in it neither intelligence, kindness, nor sensitiveness—but he was faintly moved by the beautiful lines of her body.

(Though by the time they've been here twenty-four hours, and she's got properly acclimatised, thought Mr. Bolham, I shall have seen practically all there is to see. She's the kind that comes down to dinner in shorts and a handkerchief.)

Hilary Moon he dismissed at once as being exactly like every other unemployed young man living in London and wearing round, horn-rimmed spectacles. He had certainly never done any hard manual work in his life, and Mr. Bolham surmised that his mental labours had gone no further than an occasional conversation, amongst drinks, with somebody who was in touch with somebody who had to do with the films, and perhaps a faintly fishy transaction or two in motor-cars.

Averting his gaze from the Moons, Mr. Bolham permitted it to seek and find Mrs. Romaine, in order that he might avoid sitting anywhere within reach of her conversation.

She was, as usual, surrounded by men. Her boy, Patrick, was there, looking faintly anxious and unhappy, as always, and her boy's tutor, Mr. Buckland—on such much franker and happier terms with Mrs. Romaine, conversationally, than Patrick ever seemed to be. Sitting with them were the dark, silent American financier, Muller, and a narrow young man of sallow colouring, at whom Mr. Bolham glanced with acute dislike. The young man was his temporary secretary, Denis Waller, and had only been engaged by Mr. Bolham a month earlier—and then mainly because Mr. Bolham had felt—mistakenly, as he now knew—that it would be too much trouble to interview the many other applicants for the post.

At the next table were Mrs. Morgan and her three children. Mr. Bolham resembled the Moons in disliking the society of children, although for other reasons. Quite simply, they made him feel inferior. Of their mother, he was inclined to think well. She was at once the least smart, and the only distinguished-looking, woman at the Hotel. Moreover, she always took the trouble to talk to her husband at meals.

If it had not been for the three children, Mr. Bolham felt that he might have taken a chair next to Mary Morgan's and talked to her. But she was listening to the earnest prattle of Olwen and David and Gwennie, and when presently they went down to the *plage* to bathe, she would probably go with them.

"Mr. Bolham, Mr. Bolham!"

Reluctantly turning round, Mr. Bolham found himself faced—as he had known, from the moment of hearing himself called, that he would be—by Dulcie Courteney. She was the thin, shrill, blonde daughter of the Hotel's Mr. Courteney, whose duties lay midway between those of a social entertainer and a courier. His horrible child, as Mr. Bolham invariably designated her in his own mind—and sometimes, indeed, in his conversation—was permanently installed in the Hotel, and it was understood that she was always ready to make friends with any English or American

children, in order to improve their French, and to perform the like service for the English of any French children. Her command of both languages was undeniable, but Mr. Bolham considered that her accent, in either, was totally lacking in distinction.

The same thing could be said of her appearance. She was prettyish in a thin, green-eyed, fair-haired style, but her teeth, even at sixteen, were brittle-looking and discoloured, her figure under-developed and angular, and she had a habit of grimacing slightly whenever she spoke.

"Mr. Bolham, *is* your bedroom door locked?"

"Why should my bedroom door be locked?" said Mr. Bolham. "I've nothing to hide."

Dulcie gave a thin shriek of nervous laughter.

"You *are* funny, Mr. Bolham. I shall die. I suppose it did sound funny, me putting it like that. What I meant was, really, could I possibly pop in there, just for one second, to get something—well, it's a bathing-cloak really—that's fallen on to your balcony."

"Again?"

Dulcie giggled uncertainly.

"It's not my fault, Mr. Bolham," she said at last, putting her head on one side.

"I know. It's the Duvals."

"It just dropped off their window-ledge, you know."

"Did madame Duval send you to get it?"

Dulcie nodded.

"I expect she thought you might be a tiny bit cross, as it's happened so often," she suggested. Mr. Bolham felt her eyeing him anxiously, to see if this would get a laugh. He maintained, without any difficulty, a brassy irresponsiveness, and Dulcie immediately changed her methods.

"I like to do anything I'm asked, always—my Pops says that's one of the ways a little girl makes nice friends," she observed in a sudden falsetto. "And Marcelle—she lets me

call her Marcelle, you know—she's always terribly sweet to me. So naturally, I like to run about and do errands for her, Mr. Bolham."

"Well, I hope you've enjoyed doing this one," said Mr. Bolham sceptically. "I'll send the towel, or whatever it is, up by the chambermaid."

"Oh, but Mr. Bolham," wailed Dulcie, "Marcelle wants it *now*. She's going down to bathe. Do let me just run in and get it. I won't look at anything—truly I won't."

"There isn't anything for you to look at—or not look at. Tell your friend that the next time she throws her clothes down into my balcony I shall complain to the management. No, don't. Tell her that she ought to send her husband to retrieve them, or come herself—not send you."

Dulcie stood on one leg, evidently uncertain how to take a remark that had, actually, been prompted by a slight feeling of compassion.

"But I like it, Mr. Bolham," she said at last, feebly. "I always like to do as I'm asked. Pops says I'm ever such a helpful little girlie now that I'm growing older."

Mr. Bolham, every frail vestige of compassion destroyed on the instant, walked away on to the terrace.

In his determination to avoid the society of Dulcie, he moved quickly, and rather carelessly, into Mrs. Romaine's line of vision.

She called to him immediately.

"Come and sit here, Mr. Bolham. We're just going to order drinks."

At the sight of his employer, Waller stood up in an uncertain way, bowed, and sat down again with a slightly apologetic smile. He wore shorts and a singlet, and revealed a bony expanse of hairy chest and shoulders burnt to an ochrish brown.

"Of course you know Mr. Muller?" said Mrs. Romaine.

Mr. Bolham exchanged with Mr. Muller the briefest of nods. They had spoken to one another, shortly but quite

amicably, about three times already, and Mr. Bolham approved of the great financier because he had never sought to carry the intercourse any further. He did not wonder why Mr. Muller should waste his time listening to Mrs. Romaine, because he knew only too well that people were very often allowed no choice in the matter.

Mrs. Romaine and her son's tutor, Buckland, were chaffing one another, with shrieks of laughter, and a free exchange of personal remarks.

"I've had my hair shampoo'd at the place in the village here," declared Mrs. Romaine. "Wasn't it brave of me? Of course I couldn't have had it properly set, but then I don't need to. The wave is natural."

She ran her fingers through the corrugated thatch of lustreless fair hair that fell on either side of her face and hung in unconvincing curls behind her ears.

"The wave's natural," she repeated firmly, "but I must say I don't think they've washed it half badly."

Buckland burst out laughing.

"They sprayed it all over with scent, or something. It's stinking like a street-walker's."

"You *would* know that, wouldn't you?" retorted Mrs. Romaine.

Mr. Bolham, to whom the conversation appeared offensive in the extreme, sought to distract his own attention from it, and averted his look from the speakers. It fell instead upon Patrick Romaine.

The white, puzzled dismay on the boy's face, his pitiful attempts to seem amused, filled Mr. Bolham with a sudden horror. What on earth was going on beneath that surface of immaturity, that young inarticulateness? The mind of Mr. Bolham, at all times distrustful of personal relations, violently protested against any consideration of such a question. He had no wish to become involved with any emotional situation, least of all one that concerned the

affairs of Mrs. Romaine, her insufferable young bounder of a tutor, and her sixteen-year-old son.

The waiter arrived with drinks, for which Muller signed the bill.

"Have you seen the new couple? They only arrived yesterday," Mrs. Romaine said, without troubling to lower her voice.

Muller—habitually a silent man—said "Yeah" and Buckland exclaimed, with his usual familiarity:

"The girl's marvellous. Quite extraordinarily pretty."

"Have you succeeded in speaking to her yet?" enquired his employer derisively.

"Not yet, but I'm hoping to, on the rocks or somewhere. They're going bathing, presently—I heard them say so."

"If you get off with her, I suppose I must see what I can do with him. He looks as though he might be able to dive."

"What's the good of that, when you can't?"

"He can save my life," pointed out Mrs. Romaine.

She finished her Martini and stood up. She was tall and well made, astonishingly slim for a woman who was certainly over forty, and with definite good looks, and even charm. She was common, reflected Mr. Bolham, but she at least avoided the supreme commonness of affectation.

"Who's coming? Mr. Muller?"

"I don't think so, thanks." Muller politely rose to his feet. Waller, who had not spoken at all, nervously followed his example, looked round and saw that Buckland had not stirred, and sat down again.

"Coming?" said Mrs. Romaine carelessly. "Hell, I believe I've forgotten my bathing-shoes. I must have them, if we're going to that beastly *plage* down here. Or shall we get the car and run up to the rocks?"

"Yes," said Buckland. "I'll give you another diving lesson."

"Not sure if I want one."

"Yes, you do."

She made a face at him.

"Patrick, d'you want to bring the car round for your mother?" Buckland enquired, still without moving.

The boy looked at his mother.

"He isn't allowed to drive," she said, her eyes on her son's tutor all the time.

"Yes he is, if I say so. Cut along, Patrick."

"May I, mother?" said Patrick doggedly.

"I suppose so, if Buck says so."

The boy walked away, acute self-consciousness in every movement of his tall, overgrown figure. The laughter of his mother and the tutor—the pointless, spontaneous laughter of people who are exhilarated by one another's companionship, rather than amused—rang across the terrace.

"Well——" said Muller vaguely.

He moved towards the Hotel again.

"Can I fetch your shoes for you, Mrs. Romaine?" the sallow Waller enquired.

"Oh, don't bother. I mean, why should you?"

"No bother at all," said Waller eagerly. "A pleasure, I assure you."

He sped into the Hotel.

"God, anybody would think he came from behind a counter," ungratefully remarked Mrs. Romaine. "Come on, Buck. What a slack creature you are!"

She pulled the tutor out of his chair, and then stood, still holding his hands, laughing.

"Come down with us, Mr. Bolham."

"Thank you very much, I'm not going to bathe again just yet."

From the corner of his eye he saw the Morgan family gather up their bathing gear and prepare to start.

"We could give those kids a lift," said Mrs. Romaine. "They've no car."

She turned and shouted to the Morgan children.

"D'you want to go to the rocks? We're going, and you can come along with us. Plenty of room."

The mother of the children was with them. She came up.

"Thank you so much. It's very kind of you."

How strange, thought Mr. Bolham, to hear the accents of a well-bred English woman on the Côte d'Azur—or, for that matter, anywhere at all, in these days.

He looked at Mrs. Morgan. She was tall and slight, with a delicate, intelligent, colourless face, very beautiful deep blue eyes, and fair hair, coiled over her ears in shells. It was now of a neutral tint, but he felt sure that it had once been as golden as that of her children. Although she looked tired, she was not devitalised. Her eyes and mouth were expressive and mobile, and she carried herself well.

When her eyes met those of Mr. Bolham, she smiled frankly. They had already exchanged a good deal of conversation, and Mr. Bolham knew that his more malicious sallies at the expense of their fellow-guests were not unappreciated by Mrs. Morgan.

Mrs. Romaine, in her pale pink pyjamas, and still holding hands with her son's tutor, looked through, rather than at, the other woman, although with complete amiability, and repeated her offer of driving them all up to the rocks, where there was better bathing to be had than from the *plage*. David and Gwennie, the two younger children, were already hopping about eagerly.

"Please, mummie, may we?"

"Certainly."

Olwen, the eldest, said: "We *said* Dulcie might come and bathe with us this evening."

"My God," said Mrs. Romaine. "Well, I suppose one more doesn't make any difference. Only hurry up, if you want to go and fetch her. Here's the car."

The car, an enormous Buick, was coming round the corner from the Hotel garage.

Waller returned with Mrs. Romaine's shoes. When she thanked him, he replied: "Don't mention it, please."

The children climbed into the car, Dulcie effusively and tiresomely grateful, and Buckland said to Patrick Romaine:

"Out you get, my lad, I'm driving."

"Why can't I?"

"Because we value our lives, even if you don't," retorted the tutor smartly, and looked round for approval. Waller, Mrs. Romaine, and Dulcie Courteney all laughed, and the boy at the wheel turned rather white.

"Climb out, Pat," directed his mother. "Get in at the back. Buck, I'm coming next you."

She took her place next to the driver.

"Here—you—" her look indicated Denis Waller. "Why don't you come along too? Heaps of room."

Waller, looking at Mr. Bolham, protested insincerely.

"If I'm not wanted elsewhere——"

"Go, by all means," said Mr. Bolham sourly.

"If you're sure—but really—if I'm not trespassing on Mrs. Romaine's kindness ... I could quite well walk——"

"Get *in*!" shouted the hearty tutor, Buckland.

At last they were off.

Mary Morgan and Mr. Bolham remained together on the terrace, watching the car, diminishing swiftly, rush down the S-like curves of the long drive.

"Why do you allow your charming children to go anywhere with that vulgar woman and her appendages?" enquired Mr. Bolham, although aware that the question was quite unjustifiable, if judged by the extent of his acquaintance with Mrs. Morgan.

She replied to it, however, readily and without any trace of resentment.

"Partly because I'm sorry for the boy, Patrick. The children say he's nice. And partly on principle."

"What principle?"

Mrs. Morgan's blue eyes rested on him thoughtfully, as though wondering if he were really interested. Mr. Bolham, who was, endeavoured to look as intelligent as he felt.

"If we're going to discuss principles," said Mary Morgan at last, "don't you think we might sit down?"

Mr. Bolham, desiring nothing better than a conversation with her, brought forward two deck-chairs, and they sat down, by mutual consent finding a place in the now diminishing heat of the sun.

"Well—what principle impels you to expose your children to the contamination of a third-rate adventuress?" said Mr. Bolham pleasantly.

"I don't believe in tying children to their mother's apron-strings. They'll have to meet all kinds of people in the end. They can only learn to discriminate by experience."

"They're too young."

"No," said Mary kindly, but with decision. "I assure you they're not. I think so many mothers make that mistake. Of course, really, they want to go on believing that the children are babies—not individuals—because they're afraid of losing them."

"And how do you get over that—the fear of losing them, I mean?"

"I suppose by facing it. By letting them" —she smiled at him—"associate with third-rate adventuresses. Though really, you know, I do think you're rather hard on Mrs. Romaine. She's very good-natured."

"I wonder if Waller intends to enter into competition with that outrageous tutor?"

"I shouldn't think so. Yes—that *is* bad. I'm so sorry for the poor boy, Patrick. I suppose she thinks that he doesn't notice."

"Far more likely she never thinks about him at all."

"He's a nice boy—terribly pathetic. Olwen has made friends with him, I think."

"I wonder you let them— However, I've said that before."

"Well," said Mary Morgan, "I will admit that I mightn't have sent them all off just now, if I hadn't known that my husband was already at the rocks. They'll join up with him."

"He's a fine swimmer. Does he like this place? Do you?"

Mrs. Morgan appeared to consider. One of the things he liked about her was that she never seemed to be surprised by anything he asked, and she always gave consideration to her reply.

"Pretty well," she said at last. "I like the sun, of course, and the swimming, and seeing the children turn brown. I don't like the Hotel, much, or many of the people in it."

Her eyes, perhaps unconsciously, wandered to where the new couple, the young Moons, were rising from their table and preparing to go indoors.

"That girl is lovely," she added irrelevantly.

"No," said Mr. Bolham. "Prettyish, if you like, and good legs. But a vicious fool. So's he."

"How irresponsible you are in your statements," observed Mrs. Morgan.

Mr. Bolham, who had a not inconsiderable reputation as a *savant* in his own circles—which were London Library circles—received this in surprised silence.

The young man, Moon, approached them.

"I wonder if I might bother you for a light, sir," he said, with an accent of nonchalance that completely neutralised his use of the respectful monosyllable. "One hasn't yet learnt to realise that one isn't wearing pockets."

The slighting gesture with which he indicated his smart new beach-wear was directed towards Mrs. Morgan, who smiled in reply.

Mr. Bolham, not smiling, produced matches.

"Thanks. My wife remembered to bring down her cigarette-case, but forgot the matches. Here you are, Angie." His wife had joined them.

He lit her cigarette.

"Thanks a lot," said the girl, not looking at any of them.

There was a moment's pause.

"Well—I think we'll go and have a dip," said Mr. Moon. "It's a bore not having brought a car. We didn't know this Hotel was so far from the sea."

"It's a disadvantage," Mary Morgan agreed.

Mr. Bolham, whose large Sunbeam was in the Hotel garage, said no word, and the Moons, swaying slightly from the hips as they walked, went away.

(3)

"Pretty bloody, weren't they?" observed Hilary.

"Oh, quite. Still, one's got to begin somewhere, and the *concierge* says the Morgans have been here longer than anyone. They're sure to know everybody in the Hotel."

"Well, I shall go round to those villa people this evening. I suppose it might be as well to try and remember their name first."

Angie made no reply. The Moons seldom held sustained conversations with one another.

She cursed the heat, and the uneven surface of the winding road, and decided within her own mind that the old stick-in-the-mud—this was Mr. Bolham—was worse than useless, though Hilary might stand a possible chance with him, provided he didn't swank. She knew this by instinct, as she also knew by instinct that Mr. Bolham was a rich man whose wealth had been inherited rather than earned.

Mrs. Morgan was not rich, and she clearly belonged to a world about which the Moons practically knew nothing whatever, and which knew nothing whatever about them.

Angie dismissed her.

The pink-pyjama'd woman was the person to cultivate—Mrs. Romaine. She obviously shared Angie's own predilections for free drinks, the society of men, and an atmosphere of talk and laughter, and noise, and general looseness.

The French people were no use.

Buckland and Waller were both young, more or less unattached, and each had certainly remarked Angie. They would be easy.

The American, Muller, was obviously most worth while, but he would also be far more impervious to her attractions than the younger and less experienced men. Angie had no illusions, and she knew very well that a rich and travelled American would have met her type over and over again.

CHAPTER II

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(1)

The rocks, to which Mrs. Romaine's new and superb Buick conveyed the party at break-neck speed, formed a small bay where a section of the Mediterranean splashed gently and tidelessly.

Buckland pulled the car up by the side of the road, and everyone got out and began the descent, which was steep and necessitated climbing.

The children, already in bathing-suits, negotiated it easily. Patrick Romaine hung back, and put out his hand doubtfully to help his mother.

"Don't touch me," she screamed. "I shall overbalance if you do."

"I'll go first," volunteered Denis Waller, clinging in a most uncertain fashion to a ledge of red rock, and inwardly terrified lest he might be going to make a fool of himself by slipping, and breaking the glass of his wrist-watch. It was a new wrist-watch, set in a broad gold band, and it helped to bolster up his deficient self-assurance, because he secretly felt that it lent him individuality.

Mrs. Romaine screamed again, this time with derisive laughter.

"There wouldn't be much left of you, if I fell on you," she said crudely but accurately.

Waller privately winced. He was sensitive about himself in every possible aspect, but perhaps most of all where his small and skinny physical appearance was concerned.

Buckland, big and strong and hairy, thrust himself forward.

"Come on," he ordered masterfully. "I've got you."

He grasped Mrs. Romaine by the arm—the shoulder—the ankle—anywhere—half pushing and half lifting her down.

Denis Waller gritted his teeth.

He disliked Buckland intensely, and thought him a cad; nevertheless he envied him.

Why couldn't he have some of Buckland's self-confidence, his loud efficiency, and his easy success?

Denis slipped a little further down the rock, glanced round surreptitiously to see if anyone had noticed it and was despising him, and continued to slither, slowly and carefully—for he was rather frightened—in the rear of the party.

As he went, he comforted himself with a series of phantasies that had sustained him, varying hardly at all through the years, ever since his little boyhood.

The assumption on which most of these phantasies rested was to the effect that Denis Hannaford Waller had, in a past existence, been one of the world's Great Teachers—which of them, he hardly liked to formulate even to himself, although he had his own secret convictions on the subject). Deliberately, on returning once more to earth, he had elected to embrace humiliation, an insignificant position, a frail and unimposing physique. Through the medium of these disadvantages, he would not only attain to a higher spirituality, but would continue his mission to humanity.

It was a large, indefinite mission, that embraced general understanding, and helpfulness, and service, and soon after attaining his seventeenth year, Denis had found that all these could be offered to, and welcomed by, girls of his own age or rather younger, of an intelligence slightly inferior to his own. Often and often these alliances of the spirit had landed him in difficulties, but he sincerely believed, on each occasion, that the difficulties had only been occasioned by the unworthiness, fickleness, or weakness, of the people whom he had tried to help. His own integrity he felt to be intact, and indeed morally—in the common acceptance of

the term—he had remained impeccable, for he was both undersexed and inclined to a physical fastidiousness that he mistook for spirituality.

Mrs. Romaine, coarse-tongued and flamboyant, repelled rather than attracted him, but it was so essential to Denis Waller to be approved, and if possible liked, by all those with whom he was thrown into contact, that he always behaved exactly as if he admired and respected her very much. Dimly, he excused this insincerity to himself whenever he realised it—which occasionally happened if he woke up suddenly in the middle of the night—on the grounds that Mrs. Romaine might one day be Influenced by him.

Denis had a pathetic belief in the power of Influence, especially his own. He had often dreamed of obtaining a post as tutor in a private family, where he would have profited by his opportunities in a manner very different from that of Buckland—but the dream had remained a dream, in spite of tentative visits to various scholastic agencies, for his educational attainments were not very much more distinguished than were his athletic capabilities. Nevertheless, he continued to think of himself as an Influence, and it was, in fact, true that he had several times occasioned a temporary psychic disturbance in the lives of various young women with whom he had held long and personal conversations—in the course of which he had made frequent, and usually inaccurate, use of the word "psychological."

It would have required much less intelligence than Denis possessed, to suppose for one instant that he would ever be permitted to influence his employer. Denis did not fall into this error. But he still hoped, though ever more faintly, that one day Mr. Bolham—if he did not sack him first—might come to like him. Unfortunately, he had obtained the post of temporary secretary to Mr. Bolham partly by inducing a woman friend to write a glowing testimonial to his abilities, based almost entirely on what he had himself told her about

them, and partly by undertaking, with an air of modest efficiency, to do a great many things of which he was, actually, more or less incapable. This incapacity had become obvious, almost at once, to his employer, and Denis lived in daily terror of being sent back to England, jobless and without a reference.

It was partly from a panic-stricken desire to have a possible second string to his bow that he took pains to ingratiate himself with the other visitors in the Hotel. One never knew when, and in what way, social contacts might become of practical use.

On a more exalted plane was his perfectly genuine wish to fulfil his own vision of himself as helping and influencing less evolved souls.

Lowering himself cautiously to the rocky *plateau* from which they were all to bathe, Denis reflected how terribly the boy Patrick Romaine needed help.

Perhaps he could win his confidence....

"So you've got here at last," observed Buckland, not very kindly.

He was changing into his bathing things without any particular regard for privacy.

Denis, more modestly, sought a pinnacle of rock and went behind it, when he instantly found himself face-to-face with Mrs. Romaine, half-in and half-out of a backless, and nearly frontless, emerald green swimming-suit.

"You can't come here," she shrieked.

"I'm most frightfully sorry—I beg your pardon."

Denis in reality was hardly more shocked or disturbed by the sight of a semi-naked woman than a child might have been, but he mistook his terror of having offended Mrs. Romaine for outraged masculine susceptibility, and retired in great discomposure to another projection of rock, where he undressed as quickly as possible.

The children were already in the water.

He watched the two younger Morgans, Gwennie and David, with some envy and admiration. They were only eight and ten years old, and swam well and fearlessly in water in which they were nowhere within their depths. He could see them moving steadily forward, shouting to one another in a conversational manner, and guessed that they were making for a rocky islet some sixty yards away, where a man's figure—that of their father—could be seen.

The eldest Morgan was not visible, neither was Patrick Romaine. As Denis emerged from behind his shelter, in a pair of blue bathing-pants without any top—for his desire to acquire a virile bronze was intense—he met Dulcie Courteney, whom he had forgotten all about, for she had not much personality and would certainly never rank as a social asset to anybody.

But he was at his best with children, whom he genuinely liked, so he smiled at her and said: "Hallo."

"Hallo, Mr. Waller. Are you going in immediately?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Denis, guessing that this was what she wanted him to say.

"Oh, good. Will you sit on the rocks with me, and sun-bathe, Mr. Waller? I don't mean *really* sun-bathe, of course."

"I quite understand. This would be rather a good place, wouldn't it? I'm afraid I've forgotten to bring any oil."

Denis had carefully forgotten to bring any oil ever since his first, rather expensive, bottle had come to an end. Other people were always sure to have plenty.

"I'll lend you my bottle," Dulcie volunteered eagerly. "You see, I don't really need it, do I? I've been here all the summer, so of course I'm brown. Though I don't think very fair people like me ever go quite as dark as if they weren't so fair, do you? Though of course, you're very fair yourself, Mr. Waller."

She gazed at him critically, and Denis threw back his shoulders, then felt that this was a very cheap and obvious gesture, so pretended that he had only meant to lie down

flat on the rock, and did so, at the expense of some pain to his shoulder-blades and the back of his head.

Dulcie continued to prattle. It was evidently her idea of good manners, to permit no interval of silence.

"It was sweet of Mrs. Romaine to bring me down in her car, don't you think, Mr. Waller? She's always awfully sweet to me. So's everybody in the Hotel, really. My Pops says I'm ever such a lucky girl to have such heaps of friends. Of course, I do what I can to help people—like talking French, or anything like that—I've taught the Morgans ever such a lot of French."

"They've been here a long time, haven't they?"

"A whole month, and they're staying on for ten days more. I think they must be quite well off, really, you know. Oh"—she clapped her hands over her mouth—"oh, I forgot! Pops says I'm *never* to talk over other-people-in-the-Hotel's business. You *won't* say anything, will you?"

"No, of course not. I'm a particularly safe person, as it happens. I get a great many secrets confided to me, and it's just as if they were dropped into a great well."

The rock seemed to be growing harder and harder, and moreover the glare of the sun was still strong enough to necessitate closed eyes, which might look rather silly—besides, he had been lying on his back long enough to preclude any suspicion of not having chosen the position on purpose—so Denis rolled over on to his front, and felt far more comfortable.

"Oh, look, Mr. Waller! Gwennie and David have got right out to that rock where their daddy is. They're waving."

Dulcie agitated a bathing-cloak, and Denis, under pretext of waving his hand, was enabled to sit up again.

"Gwennie swims awfully well, I think, for a little child of eight; don't you, Mr. Waller? Look, she's going to dive. I wish I could dive as well as she can. I dive awfully badly. Pops always says he's going to give me some lessons, but he never has time."