

1

Rookery Nurseries was situated almost halfway between the villages of Bewdley and Melworth. As it was higher than either of them, on a clear day one could look down on the cluster of houses built in the days when there was no idea of town planning. Some stood sideways facing the one main street, some ran in rows like a line of little girls all pressed close together, but others of varying sizes, and with differently sloping roofs, seemed to gather their skirts closely around them as if wanting to keep a respectable distance from their neighbors.

Along that important street in each village were a butcher's shop, which also sold vegetables, a general store—which contained the post office—a cottage bakery, and the village pub. At one end there was the church and small school and at the other the chapel and the village hall.

In the distance in the daytime one could see the haze of smoke that denoted the market town of Newbridge, and at night there was the glow of the lights and the bright gleam from one or two tall buildings with floodlights.

For the most part the villagers went about their own business, but there was a deadly rivalry between the two villages, although they often joined together for functions like the Women's Institute and the church fete. They played cricket and football against each other, but secretly Bewdley looked down on Melworth, and Melworth folks had little

use for the poor specimens who grew up in Bewdley. Sometimes a girl from Melworth married a boy from Bewdley, but that was almost a disgrace to the families involved. Far better choose a lass from their own village or get fresh blood from Newbridge or further afield.

One Saturday morning Anthea Gordon looked up from the rock plants she was putting into small plastic pots to watch her father walk up the path with a well-dressed middle-aged man, followed by a fair-haired girl and her tall, dark companion.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” she heard the older man say patronizingly. “I intended ordering the shrubs and plants we need from Newbridge, but my gardener suggested that I call here first as you have some rather unusual specimens.”

Mr. Gordon smiled. “I suppose this is more like our own garden than a nursery business. Sometimes I find it hard to part with plants we have collected and nurtured. Do you live near?”

“Just moved into the district. Towers is the name. I have bought Tall Timbers and am anxious to get the place in order. The last owner let it go, but at least that brought the price down. Do you know the house I mean?”

“Yes, I knew the former owners, but since her husband died Mrs. Hewson lost interest, and her old gardener was too crippled to do much.”

Mr. Towers nodded. “We fortunately have been able to get a young man who evidently knows his business, and with the help of a couple of boys we should be able to get the grounds knocked into shape. This is my daughter, Geraldine.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss Towers. May I also introduce my daughter, Anthea, who is a great deal more businesslike than I am.”

Mr. Towers nodded, while his daughter's eyes swept over her so casually that Anthea was suddenly conscious of her slightly grubby pants and well-washed blouse. Her hair was naturally curly and she kept it short, but beyond creaming her face at night and wearing rubber gloves most of the time, she never worried about her appearance.

Now she realized how she must appear to Geraldine Towers, who was dressed in a beautifully cut suit and expensive, high-heeled sandals. Her hair was very fair and glinted in the sunlight, her eyes dark brown with long lashes, and her face skillfully made up.

Their companion had wandered into one of the greenhouses, obviously bored with the whole business.

"We need some good roses, various flowering shrubs, and some fruit trees for the walled garden. We'll look around, then send Benson, the gardener, to get as many as he thinks necessary. We hope to get the hothouses repaired and then produce some of our own stock. In the meantime we need quick-growing plants to make the place look less like a wilderness."

Mr. Gordon led the way to the various sections, while Mr. Towers scribbled in a notebook, and Geraldine pointed out the colors she preferred. Anthea went on with her work but turned suddenly when a voice said, "Those are good specimens. They make me wish I had a rock garden myself. I always feel that they look like the most naturally growing plants—far more attractive than beds of roses, geraniums, or shrubs that look like regiments."

Anthea smiled. She too loved the variety of these small, hardy specimens.

"Must be an interesting business," the other went on.

"Plenty of hard work and not a lot of profit, but I'd rather do this than anything else," Anthea replied coolly.

“Some of those remind me of Switzerland and other remote European areas. Do you order from abroad?”

Anthea shook her head. “Sometimes Dad and I manage to get away for a few days and hunt up some of the less common ones. We have been to Switzerland, but Scotland and Ireland are good hunting grounds too. It is always interesting to see if we can grow plants that have been transplanted from their natural habitat.”

“Max,” came a voice from the other side of the wall, “come and help me choose these roses.”

“Duty calls,” Max said with a wry smile and sauntered in the direction the others had taken.

Anthea’s thoughts were busy. Who were these people? Max did not look like either of the other two. He was tall, with dark hair and alert blue eyes. He wore casual clothes, but there was nothing sloppy about him. Was he a relation or a fiancé?

Several other customers wandered in, and Anthea went to serve them. Ron, their helper, gave her a list of orders that had been phoned in, and Anthea got out the old van while he collected them and gave her the addresses. Saturday morning was often like this if the weather was fine. Evidently people got a sudden urge to spend the afternoon gardening and wanted some plants or shrubs sent immediately while the mood was on them. Ron did not drive, preferring his old bicycle to anything more dangerous, so it usually fell to Anthea to deliver orders, and she enjoyed the break and the glimpses she got of other people’s gardens.

Often she amused herself by guessing from the orders what sort of people she was going to visit. She usually guessed that old-fashioned plants like lobelia, delphiniums, marigolds, and dahlias would be for an elderly couple or spinster ladies. Expensive roses, azaleas, magnolias, and

more exotic shrubs probably would be for the newly rich who wanted to be able to walk their visitors around a well-kept lawn and admire the display of color.

Many of her customers were men or women living alone, whose garden was their dearest hobby. Often they were anxious to show Anthea some prize plant they had reared from a small cutting, or they wanted her advice on some plant that was not as healthy as it ought to be. Anthea knew she often spent far longer with those lonely people than she ought, and the visits brought in very little profit, but it was good to know that those people were friends, not merely customers.

She drove in as her mother was ringing the bell that called them to meals, and she washed her hands quickly in the small outside kitchen.

Ron already had eaten the sandwiches he brought with him, as many people came in during their lunch break.

Her father was seated at the kitchen table when she arrived. The dining room was used only when they had guests, because Mrs. Gordon objected to Anthea and her father's using it when dressed in their everyday clothes. She was a tall, slim woman who never looked untidy, no matter what she was doing. She took no interest in the nursery and never had plants or cut flowers in the house.

Anthea often wondered why her mother and father had married each other; they were so different in temperament and interests.

Her father was gentle, dreamy, affectionate, and a great reader, but her mother was withdrawn, had very little to say to her husband or daughter, and seemed to live a life of her own. She never accompanied them on their brief vacations, never asked Anthea to go shopping with her, but made it obvious that she preferred to go alone.

She kept the house in an immaculate condition, always dressed smartly, saw that meals were on time, and did not expect Anthea to help in the house, but she was cold and kept her family at arm's length. Anthea loved her father dearly, but her mother always stood outside their little world; it was impossible to break through the barrier she had erected.

She knew that her parents had met during the war, and that her father had been a teacher in biology for several years until trouble with his voice and throat had made him give up teaching. He had moved from the town, and, with the money left to him by his grandmother, had bought an old house with several acres of land and started a nursery business. She knew too that she had been born twelve years after her parents' marriage, and as her father had often told her, she had come like a miracle when he had given up all hope of having children. Therefore, she was extraspecial to him.

Even as a small child Anthea had felt that her father loved her more than her mother did. It was her father she turned to if she was hurt or upset. Her mother saw that she was well-dressed, well-fed, and well-mannered, but she never remembered her showing her any affection; Anthea was conscious that even her father loved her more openly when her mother was absent. As she grew older she realized that her mother resented their way of life; the quiet, rather humdrum sort of existence she and her father loved did not satisfy her. To them, living in the country, working among growing things, and being able to read during the long, dark evenings was utterly satisfying. Her mother only really came alive when they had visitors or when she was going to some sort of entertainment in Newbridge with her sister or her friends.

As she slid into her seat, Anthea noticed that her mother was wearing a new dress she had not seen before, with a lace apron tied around her waist.

“How smart you look, Mother,” Anthea said.

Her father looked up and blinked.

“She never looks anything else to me. Are you going into town, dear?”

“I arranged to go shopping with Kathleen, then have dinner with her and some of her friends. I have left your evening meal ready, so I hope that you will manage if I am not back until fairly late. There is a good show on, and Kathleen wants me to go with them.”

“One of the car’s taillights needs attention,” Anthea said quietly. “Better have it checked if you are going to drive in the dark.”

“That old car is hopeless. There is always something wrong. I am ashamed to be seen driving it.”

Her husband laughed. “I know, dear, and maybe at the end of the season we’ll manage to get a more up-to-date model for you. Why not stay with Kathleen overnight and come back in the daylight?”

“I might do that. I’ll take a small case with me, so don’t wait up. I have my key if I decide to come home.”

“I’ll do the dishes, Mother. You get off in good time and have that rear light checked just in case you need it.”

“Very well. I’ll probably see you tomorrow sometime.”

She walked out of the room, and Anthea collected the plates and took them to the sink, her eyes moist. Why was her mother so distant and so polite? She might have been talking to boarders or strangers instead of her family.

She heard the car driving away as she hung out the dish towel and watched her father walk back to the office, his shoulders bent and his steps slow. Her mother was never

discussed between them. All her life her father had been absolutely loyal and had never criticized her mother, no matter what his private thoughts might have been.

She had noticed that lately his movements had become slower, and that sometimes his face looked drawn and gray, but he would never admit to any actual pain. She wished that her mother would insist that he have a medical check-up, but he laughed off any remark Anthea made, saying it was only old age coming on.

“Can’t expect to have the energy I had forty years ago,” he would say lightly.

“But, Dad, you aren’t old.”

“Over sixty, girl. I’m nearly ten years older than your mother. I was past forty when you were born.”

“Then you have got to do less and leave the harder work to Ron and me. Or we can hire another man.”

“You know we can’t afford another wage.”

“Why not think about selling this as a going concern, moving to a smaller house, and me taking a job?” Anthea had suggested several times.

“What would I do with myself all day?” her father returned. “I’m not ready for the chimney corner yet.”

“You could have a smaller garden to keep you occupied but without pressure of customers.”

“Well, maybe I’ll have to come to that. Your mother would like to move back to town, but I like it here, though often I think I am not being fair to you. You are too young to be stuck in an isolated spot.”

“Rubbish! You know I’d hate being in a busy, noisy town. I love this place, and if we could afford another man, you could be head adviser and let us do the heavier work.”

There was a rush of customers all afternoon, and it was almost dark when Anthea had time to think about preparing a meal.

Her father came in, kicking off his boots at the back door and pushing his feet into his slippers. He sat down heavily in the old armchair at the side of the stove.

“A few more days like this, and maybe we’ll get that car for your mother,” he said, but Anthea noticed how exhausted he looked. She poured out some coffee and took it to him saying, “Drink this, Dad. You can listen to the news while the vegetables cook. I ought to have come in before. Good thing Mother left everything prepared.”

“She is a marvelous organizer,” her father replied between sips of coffee. “You and I would get into very slipshod habits if she did not keep us up to scratch.”

“I’ll go up and change my clothes before we eat, but don’t you bother.”

When Anthea returned, her father had his head back and was fast asleep. She tiptoed around, looking at him lovingly. What a wonderful father he had been, but she could see him aging almost before her eyes these last few months. Somehow he must be persuaded to take things more easily. She determined that at the first opportunity she would talk to her mother.

She turned down the heat under the pans and waited until her father awakened.

“Bless me, why didn’t you wake me up?” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“You’ve only had a catnap,” Anthea said. “You’ll feel more rested and able to enjoy your meal, and I guess you could do with an early night after such a busy day.”

“Mark calling in tonight?” he asked as they began to eat.

“I’m not sure.”

“Seems a long time since he was here. Not long ago he was always under our feet.”

Anthea colored, then laughed. “He’s very busy these

days. Now that he has passed his exams he is hunting up clients and learning the practical side of the business, I imagine."

"Must be a queer job, an attorney," her father said thoughtfully. "Have to get mixed up in all sorts of messy situations. I prefer flowers and plants to people who are all mixed up and claiming what isn't theirs."

"You and I were never cut out for big business and lots of social activities, Dad."

"If you marry Mark, you'll have plenty of that."

"Who said I was going to marry him? You know we have been like brother and sister for years. We aren't engaged—just good friends who enjoy the same sort of activities."

"If Mark married someone else you wouldn't be heartbroken?"

Anthea hesitated. "If Mark finds the right girl for him, I'll wish him happiness," she said slowly, and not even her father, who knew her so well, guessed at the effort that it took to say that calmly and unemotionally.

Mark and she had never been what might be termed passionately involved. They had been close friends over the years, had gone hiking, cycling, swimming, played tennis and golf together ever since they had been in the same class at school, and always sat together on the school bus. It had been taken for granted that Anthea was Mark's girl, and it was a foregone conclusion that someday they would marry.

They had lived near each other until Mark had moved with his mother to Newbridge and had started his training as an attorney. Anthea had studied horticulture, taken a commercial course, and settled down to help her father, believing in her heart that when Mark had finished his training and could afford a wife, they would be married.

He had acquired a secondhand car and used to come on

Saturday afternoons to lend a hand or on Sundays, when they would go off on long, rambling walks.

But this last year his visits had been less frequent, and Anthea had sensed a change in him. He was less easy to talk to, did not offer to help, and his visits were usually very short. She realized that he had a lot of studying to do, and sometimes had to visit clients who lived at a distance, but without putting it into words she knew that Mark was drifting away. He still put his arm around her and kissed her lightly when he arrived or departed, but it was as a brother, not a lover.

To change the subject Anthea said hurriedly, "Did Mr. Towers give you a big order, Dad?"

"Not yet. They chose what they wanted and said that the gardener would come to collect what they needed."

"Let's hope they don't change their minds. What sort of business is Mr. Towers in?"

"He said he was trying to retire, but he did not mention how he had made his money. His daughter keeps house for him and is very keen on horseriding and show jumping."

"Does the stepson live with them?"

"Evidently not. Mr. Towers said he was only visiting for the weekend."

"Why don't you take a long rest tomorrow morning, Dad? I can open the greenhouses and do anything necessary before I go to church."

Her father smiled at her affectionately. "Stop babying me, girl. You'll be suggesting breakfast in bed next, and you know how I hate that. I'd rather get up for a quiet walk as usual. That does me more good than lying in bed."

"OK," she replied, patting his shoulder. "Have it your own way."

Anthea had just finished clearing up when there was a

knock at the back door, and Mark pushed his head in.

“Hello, folks, Thought I’d pop in to see if you are still alive and to ask if Anthea feels like being energetic tomorrow afternoon.”

“Come in, boy,” Mr. Gordon said, holding out his hand. “We were just saying that we hadn’t seen much of you lately. Sit down if you don’t mind being in the kitchen. Anthea and I are having a quiet evening after a rather hectic day.”

“Business good?” Mark inquired and, pushing Anthea into the chair opposite her father, sat down on the arm.

“We can’t complain. We get spells when it is quiet; then everything happens at once. How about you?”

“Run off my feet. The boss hardly gives me time to breathe. Even tonight I’m off to a sort of working dinner. A client of ours has moved into the district and needs some papers and some information that couldn’t be given over the phone. He’s bought Tall Timbers. You remember how we used to think what a lovely house it was when we passed by it on the bus, Anthea. I used to dream that someday I might have a place like that, but I guess my sights are a bit lower now.”

“Mr. Towers was here with his daughter and stepson this morning choosing plants,” Mr. Gordon said. “You should enjoy your dinner. I don’t imagine they’ll eat in the kitchen like the Gordons.”

Mark looked around the familiar room and put his hand on Anthea’s shoulder: “I’ve had some mighty fine meals in this old place. Their food won’t be any better than Mrs. Gordon’s; she is a first class cook.”

“We’ll pass on the compliment,” Anthea said lightly. “Or you can tell her yourself tomorrow afternoon.”

“Well, I’d better get moving, or I’ll be late. Never does

to keep the big tycoons waiting. Half past two tomorrow, Anthea. We'll drive up to the beacon and walk from there if the weather is fine."

"I'll be ready."

Anthea waved as Mark drove off and returned to the kitchen with a lighter heart. Maybe she had only fancied the change in him. Probably he had been extra busy and occupied with the complexities of such a demanding occupation. He hadn't forgotten her anyway, and a long tramp tomorrow would be like old times.

They watched a wildlife film, the nine o'clock news, and after a hot drink made their way to bed. They were always up before six on Saturdays, and that made a long, tiring day.

The nursery was not open on Sundays, and that was one of Mrs. Gordon's special grievances. She believed that Sunday could be the most profitable day of the week, but her husband had never given in to this. He insisted that everyone needed a day of relaxation, and if business could not be done in six days, then they ought to reorganize.

Ron did not come on Sunday either so there were still a few chores to do, but they were kept to a minimum.

Anthea sang in the Bewdley Church choir, and Mr. Gordon liked to attend the morning service, but his wife never accompanied him. In the afternoon he loved to wander on his own, enjoying the peace and beauty of the countryside. Sometimes Anthea went with him, but he saw more when alone because he would take his binoculars and watch birds and animals for hours. When he found a rare plant he came home as excited as if he had found a precious jewel, and on Sunday evening his favorite occupation was writing up his nature diary, illustrating it with small, beautifully executed illustrations. Only Anthea had ever seen this notebook, and she had begged him to offer it for publication, but her father

had never thought there was anything outstanding in what he had drawn or written.

“There are thousands of books far better than anything I have done,” he said firmly. “I only do it for my own enjoyment.”

Anthea was awake early the next morning, her heart light, and she sang happily as she cooked breakfast and prepared what was needed for lunch. The thought of meeting with Mark made her bubble with excitement. Surely if she did not mean something special to him he would not have tried to take up their old relationship.

“Ready, Dad?” she called upstairs. “We’ve got to practice one or two pieces before the service starts. Will you lock the door while I get the van out?”

Mr. Gordon climbed in beside her. “Not a very elegant vehicle to take you to church,” he said whimsically.

“It runs, so that is all that matters,” Anthea replied. “That horse looks lively,” she exclaimed, pulling as far over to the side of the road as she could and reducing her speed.

The horse was a magnificent animal and the rider beautifully dressed in a dark green riding habit with a hard, peaked black hat. She was obviously having to make an effort to restrain the horse, which was prancing sideways.

Anthea breathed a sigh of relief when they had passed.

“That was Geraldine Towers, wasn’t it? She ought to keep that animal off the road until it is easier to control.”

“It looks too big for a girl,” her father replied. “I hope she doesn’t intend riding through Melworth where children may be playing on the street.”

“Perhaps she’ll turn along Croft’s Lane or another side road, although she may not know the neighborhood yet. I am surprised that her stepbrother is not with her.”

The Gordons had attended Bewdley Church ever since they came into the district. Mr. Gordon had once taught the man who was vicar at that time. Since then he had moved on to a bigger church, but by then both Anthea and her father loved the simple country church and had made friends with the parishioners.

Mark's family had attended there also before they moved to Newbridge, and Mark and she had both sung in the choir and joined in the young people's activities.

This morning as Anthea took her place in the choir loft she looked over the well-known faces and started as she saw Max Sinclair sitting alone at the end of a pew near the back. There was no mistaking his dark hair and deep blue eyes.

So, he is more interested in attending church than going riding with his stepsister, Anthea thought as she dropped her eyes to her music. She was singing the solo part of the anthem this morning, and she needed to concentrate on the service, not let her mind stray to thoughts of the family that had come to live at Tall Timbers. She would probably hear more about them from Mark this afternoon.

Anthea's voice was not powerful, but it was sweet and true, and she sang as if she meant every word. Some years ago she had taken Jesus Christ as her personal Savior, and for a long time had longed to become a missionary. However, she believed she was needed at home and that her duty was to her parents, especially to her father who worked too hard.

Religion was not a subject easily discussed in her home, because her mother had no use for what she termed sanctimoniousness, but Anthea believed that her father was very close to God, and in his quiet way he lived out his faith without a lot of talk.

Max Sinclair was striding down the road as they passed

him in the rattletrap van. He lifted his hand in a salute, and Anthea felt her color rise. There was something about this stranger that aroused her curiosity. He was striking to look at, but it was more than his appearance that disturbed her.

“That young man does not fit in with the rest of the family, I imagine,” Mr. Gordon observed thoughtfully.

“I wonder if Mother has returned,” Anthea said after a few moments’ silence. For some unknown reason she felt threatened by the Towers family and did not want to discuss them.

“Probably she will stay with Kathleen for the afternoon. It is a good day for you and Mark.”

Anthea’s heart lifted at the thought. “You won’t mind being on your own, Dad?”

“Bless me, Anthea, haven’t you learned yet that I enjoy being alone? Anyone who doesn’t enjoy his own company when he can get out into the woods or along the river must be a poor specimen.”

“I know,” Anthea replied, patting his knee. “People just clutter up your world, don’t they?”

Her father laughed. “Only some people. I never think of you as clutter. I’d like to see you married before I die, but life will be very cold for me when I have to hand you over to someone else.”

“Not much sign of that yet,” Anthea replied lightly. “I haven’t got a string of suitors lined up to claim my hand. Now let’s stop talking nonsense and enjoy our lunch. The car is not back, so we’ll have to feed ourselves.”

Anthea was lifting the casserole from the oven when the phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” her father said. After listening he called, “It’s Mark, Anthea. He wants to talk to you.”

Anthea pushed the dish back, hurried to the hall, and took the phone from her father’s hand.

“Anthea here,” she said gaily. She heard Mark say, “I’m sorry to have to cancel our date, Thea. Some new business has cropped up, and this afternoon is the only time I can meet this particular client.”

“Even on Sunday, Mark? That sounds tough.”

Mark gave a little laugh. “Some people do most of their best business deals on Sundays. I wish I needn’t disappoint you, love, but maybe your father will accompany you. We’ll plan another date soon, I hope. I can’t lose my oldest girl friend, you know, but at present I’m only at the bottom of the ladder, the general errand boy, so I have to do as I am told. I would come this evening, but my mother and I are invited out for dinner. No hard feelings, Thea?”

“Of course not,” Anthea replied, trying to speak gaily. “But Mark, don’t let business get too important in your life.”

“Aw, honey, don’t get preachy. I haven’t any choice at present. If I want to get anywhere I’ve got to oblige our clients.”

“See you soon, Mark. I must get Dad’s lunch as Mother is not back yet.”

Her father looked at her closely as she came back into the kitchen and picked up the potholders.

“Mark isn’t free this afternoon after all, so he had to call off our outing.”

“Rather short notice, isn’t it?”

“He says that he has to see another important client, and his mother and he have a dinner engagement.”

“Poor Mark. He’ll have to struggle hard if he does not want to get bogged down with business and that very ambitious mother of his.”

“Oh, well, he must make his own decisions,” Anthea said, placing the casserole and baked potatoes on the table.

“That smells good. I always enjoy Sunday’s lunch better than any meal of the week.”

“I hope you aren’t disappointed today. I know I can’t compete with Mother’s cooking.”

“Suppose we drive up to the beacon, and I’ll try to fill in for Mark,” her father suggested after a few mouthfuls. “I feel that I’d like some good fresh air in my lungs. We’ll certainly get it up there.”

“Wouldn’t you rather wander on your own?”

“Only if you don’t want to go with me.”

“That’s fine. I’ll hurry up and change, but I’d better leave the kitchen in apple-pie order, or Mother will be on the warpath. We’ll leave a note to tell her where we’ve gone. Let’s take some sandwiches and a thermos of coffee in case we don’t get back until late. Why don’t you have a short nap, Dad, while I get ready? I’ll be about half an hour.”

“Can’t I help?”

“No. I’ll work more quickly by myself.”

Guessing that Anthea wanted some time alone, her father wandered into the little used lounge and flopped into an armchair.

Why on earth had Mark upset Anthea again if he did not mean anything? For his own part he would be glad if the long, drawn-out friendship became nothing more serious. He had never considered Mark good enough, or stable enough, for Anthea, but he hated to see that disappointed look in her eyes. If only she could meet more young men she would be able to get over her girlish first love more easily, but there were few opportunities of meeting suitable friends in their kind of life. He wondered again, as he had done so often lately, if he ought to put his own preferences aside and move into town as his wife wished. Then Anthea could join in more social activities.