

# 1

The clatter of the day's business was winding up to its usual frenzied racket. The typewriters' staccato was punctured intermittently by the slam of a file cabinet drawer, while chair wheels squealed under their occupants' weight, and numerous phones on numerous desks jangled in unison.

If the silence started imperceptibly that morning, it ended pronouncedly. And the silence was more deafening than the noise. No head turned to see what caused the interruption; it was the Interruption that precipitated the head-turning.

The Interruption was a trifle over six feet tall, crowned with a luxuriant sea of blonde waves and illuminated by two penetrating beacons of steel-gray. As the glittering beams scanned the unfamiliar scene before him, a calculating, cynical half smile accentuated a deep cleft in the broad, square-set chin. On this occasion an avocado green suit was molded around the athletic frame, and the tie was a wild plaid ablaze with brilliant red. With long strides the Interruption turned down the corridor leading to the accounting department.

"Catch an eyeful of that!"

"There, Goldie, how about a go-around with that one!"

"Say, where did he come from?"

"Is there a ring on the third finger?"

The whispers joined a few faintly audible sighs, and slowly and reluctantly the clatter resumed in Central Typing.

Allyn Jespers managed to unearth from the bottom of her file drawer an all-but-forgotten memorandum that suddenly required immediate attention in the advertising department. Of course, in reaching Advertising with the memo, it was necessary for her to pass by the door into Accounting. There she observed that the newcomer had taken the desk vacated recently by the retirement of the chief accountant's assistant. Having deposited the memo on a puzzled young clerk's desk, Allyn made a circuitous path back to her typewriter. At each typewriter she passed, she paused in reply to eager queries to relay the scrap of information she had been able to ascertain.

It was only a few minutes until Martha Holliday, secretary to the office manager, hastily remembered a clipping from the newspaper that her boss had asked her several days before to carry into the advertising manager. She had misplaced it in the incoming mail, and it was only with some annoyance that she finally located it. Her observations on her way past the door into Accounting didn't reveal any more than had Allyn's. What a pity Advertising was the only department farther down the hall than Accounting. The girls in the main office couldn't think of any other reasons for going to Advertising or any reason for visiting Accounting.

It wasn't until the ten o'clock mail delivery that their golden opportunity dawned. The new girl from the mail-room was beginning her morning rounds. She would stop by each desk in the accounting department as part of her duties.

"Hey, Bonnie," Sue Ramsey called as the mail girl passed her desk with the morning's delivery. "When you get into Accounting, look to see if that blond Roman

god in the green suit has a ring on his left hand.”

Bonnie Lake registered some perplexity, for the mail-room was secluded from the main traffic through the office and she had not seen the new arrival. But she made a mental note that some sort of Roman god had shown up in Accounting and she must look for a ring on his left hand.

When Bonnie reached Accounting, she discovered it was break time for the accountants, and only two were at their desks. Of those, neither was wearing a green suit and she would never have mistaken Tom Robard and Hal Gregersen for Roman gods. Having been at Paramount Plastics for only three weeks, she did not yet know many of the other employees. She had, however, made the acquaintance of Tom and Hal. Tom’s girth must be somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty inches, and if his hair had ever been blond there was no evidence of it now. In fact, there was precious little evidence of any hair at all. Roman god? She even laughed out loud.

Hal was a different matter. Although it would be difficult to imagine him commanding the thunder or riding a chariot across the sky, he at least wasn’t half bad as far as looks were concerned. And he had been a most amiable companion on the one date he and she had shared the previous weekend. It had been nothing but a frivolous concert and a milkshake on the way home, but they had enjoyed each other’s company. Bonnie had every reason to suspect it might not be their last date.

“Hi!” he beamed up at her as she dropped some mail into the basket on his desk. “How’s the girl today? Aha! The scent of roses blooming in the cheeks.” And with that, he lifted and slowly turned his head while inhaling a long breath as though to fully appreciate a delectable aroma.

“Thanks,” she responded to the implied compliment. “I’m fine. A little behind in delivery. There was a pile of mail this morning.”

"Good! Must mean business is picking up. How about keeping the weekend open?"

"Oh, uh—sure. I mean, check with me a little later in the week."

"Full calendar, hey? I hear there's to be another concert at the armory."

"I'll think about it," she called from the next desk where she was lifting the outgoing mail.

The other accountants were in little clusters by the windows overlooking the boulevard many floors below and the lazy Ohio River in the distance. Bonnie's quick glance in their direction spotted two green suits. As she couldn't appear to be just standing there staring and could not yet name all the men, she could not guess which one was supposed to be the god, let alone determine whether he was wearing a ring on his left hand. Even though she circled slowly among the desks in the room, she could learn nothing more.

When she returned to the main office, all the girls looked hopefully toward her for some sign that would indicate either negative or affirmative. Instead they received only a slight upward turn of her own empty palm to indicate she had observed nothing.

The remainder of the morning passed uneventfully and rather slowly in spite of the excessive amount of mail. Bonnie had time to muse over her new job. At first she had felt it would be rather boring to spend most of her time simply opening, sorting, and stamping outgoing mail in the little room off the main office with only the company of her immediate supervisor, Peggy Rosensweig. But as she became familiar with her delivery route through all the departments and suites that covered one floor of a new aluminum-clad steel skyscraper in Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle, she realized she was in the center of the action. She was the only person in the whole establishment who could move freely from

one department to another. If there were any news to be gleaned, she would be among the first to hear it.

She was even winning her battle with the teletype. One of the fastest typists among the 1958 graduates of Oakland High, she now found her hard-gained speed a detriment to the type of keyboard on which she was assigned to work. The teletype's mechanism would respond only so fast to her eager, nimble fingers, and she found herself constantly making mistakes and having to retype the telegrams sent to the Western Union office a few blocks up the street. But she was learning to adjust her pace to the machine's rhythm, and the two of them were becoming more efficient. She only hoped that when she was finally assigned to a regular desk job her speed would not have become so slowed she would have difficulty increasing it again.

She had acquired this job with the understanding that she would eventually work into a position in the main office. All new female employees of Paramount Plastics started in the mailroom, where they were expected to gain some overview of the operation of the entire office. As a position became open farther up the line, she would be moved into Central Typing, which in turn served as a pool for the selection of private secretaries as the positions became available. The opportunities were as great as her ambition and ability. Altogether, it was a job that offered possibilities for a new high school graduate. She knew some of her classmates had fared worse.

And then there was Hal. He was an interesting development that she hadn't initially anticipated. There was nothing about him that had caused her to single him out from the other strange faces in Accounting. But he had discovered her on her first round through the office. She remembered how his face had broken into a cute little grin as he looked up at her, whistled softly, and

exclaimed, "Say, who's the new gal?" It had taken him two weeks to summon the courage to suggest that one date. Now, he had requested another.

Her first impulse had been to say, "Sure, any night you name." But she couldn't sound that eager. Coolness was the name of the game.

She was beginning to think about which of her dresses would be suitable for the armory, when the teletype clattered for her attention. She rose from her seat at the mail table and went to sign it off as received when it immediately began another message. It was in the middle of the second that Peggy picked up her purse and announced that it was lunchtime and that Bonnie could join her and the other girls in the cafeteria several floors below.

"Sure. See you there," Bonnie answered and started again to position her fingers over the keys for sign-off receipt. The machine immediately started another message. By the time six more messages had clattered across the yellow roll of paper Bonnie was ready to believe that business really must be picking up. She also believed that it was probably too late to join the others for lunch. They may have found the cafeteria already full and gone to a nearby restaurant. Snatching her purse and hurrying for the elevator, she anticipated a lonely lunch. A brief glance in the cafeteria door confirmed her suspicion. The others were nowhere to be seen, and she could not guess where they might have gone. She might as well remain here.

As she had begun her lunch hour late to start with and the cafeteria was crowded when she arrived, nearly half of her allotted forty-five minutes were gone by the time she moved through the line and picked up her chicken salad sandwich and Bavarian cream pie. She ate as hastily as she could. But by the time she returned her tray, dashed to the powder room for a quick lipstick

touch-up, and then waited for the overburdened elevator, she was a few minutes late in returning to the mailroom.

"Sorry," apologized Peggy, "but when the cafeteria was full we couldn't wait for you. Had no idea how long you'd be. We went to the lunch bar in the five-and-ten. It tasted like dog food, though. We should have stayed here."

"Oh, my lunch was passable and—that's OK. I didn't think I was going to get out of here myself. Eight 'grams came in. Looks like business is booming for sure. Do I hear that thing running again?"

Indeed, she did. And after several more messages had rattled their way onto the paper, Bonnie had a number of them waiting to be sent out. She worked at the keyboard until it was time for the afternoon mail delivery. Picking up the correspondence Peggy had opened from the afternoon US delivery and some interoffice mail that had accumulated since the last trip, she started out.

The machines in the main office were all in high gear with the normal nerve-jangling racket. Even the girls who usually found it necessary to stop often and file a broken nail or pat a recalcitrant curl into place were intent on the paper before them. No one looked up when she passed. As she had spent her lunch hour alone and had talked to no one, she completely forgot about the events of the morning. Even Hal was some distance from her mind when she entered Accounting. And here, also, everyone was intently pursuing the business before him. A picture of great diligence and studied concentration greeted her eyes as she started down between the desks.

The man at the first desk was rummaging in the bottom drawer and never even noticed the pile of yellow sheets Bonnie dumped into his mail basket. At the sec-

ond desk, its occupant was more intent on lighting a cigarette than on the afternoon mail. When she passed Hal's desk, she pretended not to notice him watching her approach out of the corner of his eye. He obviously had been waiting for her.

"Hi! Has the most weighty matter been granted any of your kind consideration?"

"Catch me later." And although she tried to sound hurried, she paused long enough to favor him with a mischievous grin.

Crossing to the other side of the room, she prepared to add the mail still addressed to "Mr. Witherow" to that for the desk next to the one recently vacated by that gentleman's retirement. But as she approached the once vacant desk, she observed it was now occupied. A blur of green passed before her consciousness, jarring a vague memory of the girls' conversation in the main office. What was it she was supposed to look for? Green—green god—oh, yes, ring on left hand.

Without being consciously aware of what she was doing, Bonnie leaned across the desk, attempting to determine whether there was a ring. She saw none, but she did suddenly realize how awkwardly she was staring at a person she had never seen before. She drew herself up in embarrassment and fumbled with Mr. Witherow's mail, hoping to deposit it quickly and move on. She wasn't quick enough.

As she raised her eyes from the basket, her attention was arrested by a glint of steel in this stranger's face. Unwillingly she felt compelled to focus on the origin of the gleam and found she was gazing into two huge pools of molten metal. A quizzical look danced out of their depths, while an amused smile played across full, sensuous lips and emphasized the cleft in the broad chin below.

Ah, yes, she had met the Roman god!

## 2

Bonnie kept the date with Hal, as she had known all along she would. It was a lovely end-of-June evening, with the scent of early summer flowers wafting from the landscaping around her apartment building. The air was clear, balmy, and refreshing. Gone was the haze from the steel mills that had obscured the golden streaks of the late evening sun. The huge corsage of American Beauty roses Hal had brought with him when he picked her up nestled in her ballerina length froth of white lace and ruffles. When they reached the armory, they discovered that her red and white effect beside his blue serge suit matched the streamers that twined up to the center ceiling, from which hung paper sprays resembling fireworks. They laughed as they realized they had inadvertently dressed patriotically, not remembering that the Fourth of July was within the coming week.

The evening was pleasant and ended too quickly. As the convertible wound its way back out to Oakland and parked before the entrance to the Shadyside Apartments, Hal stole one arm around Bonnie's shoulders and drew her to him. Little matter that the gorgeous roses received a slight crushing; the evening was over, and they had served their purpose well.

"Little girl," he began softly, "have I ever told you how much I like you? You're the kind of gal a fellow dreams of."

"Sure it's not a nightmare?" She never could resist some mischief, not even when the tone of voice and the setting showed promise of matters of the utmost gravity.

He twisted his face into a frown in mock reproof, but chose not to answer directly.

"Listen, you little imp, I can see you would be a trial to handle. Nevertheless, I'm asking you: Will you forget about the other guys and just keep the lines open for me? I mean, really, how about going steady?"

"Oh, uh, well—" She wasn't sure which would be the best choice of words. "Hal, you really are a neat guy and I do think a lot of you. But I'm just not quite ready yet to think about getting serious with anyone. I mean, I may even decide to go on to college. Mother and Dad would like for me to. I just don't know yet. It seems as though I've been in high school all my life, unable to breathe freely on my own, and now I want some time to simply coast along until I can decide what I really want to do. You do understand, don't you?"

"Sure, Bonnie, I understand. Had a couple years like that myself. Just kind of killed time until I could get it all together. But I'm twenty-three now and have decided it's about time to think about a little place out in the suburbs somewhere—somebody to come home to in the evenings— But, you'll still go on seeing me, anyway, I mean just on a friendly basis for a while until—"

"Oh, absolutely," she interrupted. "I don't mean not to see you, just none of that class ring hanging on a chain around the neck stuff. Just friends for the time being. OK?"

"Sure thing," Hal grinned. "In fact, next Saturday, same time, same place. Well, whaddaya know? Friday is the Fourth. Maybe a private little picnic in Schenley Park, concert in the bandstand in the evening, fireworks, the whole bit. Think you can throw a couple sandwiches together?"

"I'm the best sandwich-thrower-together there is. Chicken salad or ham on rye? Never mind, I'll make both."

"About four then? No, make it three. That way we'll have time for a longer stroll through the park."

"OK, but I'll see you Monday morning at work too, you know. And I've really got to go in now. The folks will be wondering where on earth. Maybe when you come by on Friday you could come in for a minute and meet them."

"Yeah, sure thing. Be glad to. Must be a couple of super parents to have a daughter like you. Here, I'll get the door." He hopped out, ran around the front of the car, made an exaggerated swing at opening the door, and swept into a deep, extravagant bow. Most of the effect was lost on her, though, because it was quite dark.

Unfortunately, when Friday dawned it appeared to be the beginning of the tropical monsoon season. When Bonnie awoke to leaden skies and a steady, relentless downpour, she at first hoped it would spend itself soon enough for the ground to dry out. By noon, however, the downpour was if anything even heavier than it had been. When the phone rang, she knew before answering it that Hal was calling to discuss some alternative way to spend the holiday.

"I'm not the museum kind, but at least the place has a roof overhead. Or maybe just dinner out," he suggested above a peal of thunder that crackled over the connection.

"Listen," she shouted over another ear-splitter, "why not just come over here for dinner? Then if it's still too wet to go somewhere later in the evening, we could play Monopoly or something. Third floor, apartment three-A."

Bonnie never had been very good at pie baking, but now was as good a time as any to practice. Mrs. Lake

certainly would need some help in the kitchen after her daughter had invited company for dinner at this late hour. When the pie crust kept falling apart, Bonnie kneaded and rolled it out again and again until she knew it had to be tough. She momentarily thought of making a molded salad. But she did have presence of wit about her to realize that would be total disaster; it would never have time to set now. Between her and her mother they managed to assemble a meal that looked as if it had been planned beforehand. Her hair felt like it was in strings and she still had an apron over her jeans when the doorbell rang.

"You're drenched!" She greeted him. "Did you walk the whole way?"

"Not at all; I ran from the car into the building. There were just too many drops against this one drip. That's a real storm out there."

"Well, come on in, Drip, and dry. How many other cycles does your model come in?"

"Just one—spin, for fellows whose girls give them the run-around."

"Oh, dear! Just disconnect that one and let me hang up your jacket."

With the jacket duly hung from the pole lamp in the hall, she took his arm and steered him into the living room. Her father was enjoying his holiday on his favorite chair before the television set. Upon the entrance of the two young folks, he rose to greet them.

"Dad, meet Hal Gregersen," she introduced eagerly, hoping her father would find it in his heart to put the young man at ease.

"Glad to see you, Hal," her father responded warmly. "I remember the time I would come out in a deluge like this just to see a pretty girl. Now living color girls on the screen are more my speed."

Bonnie felt as though her starch had just been watered

down while inwardly groaning, *Dad, how could you?* But aloud she tried to recoup the situation. "Well, he surely knew a pretty girl when he met one. Just wait until you see my mother. Here, sit down and I'll call her."

She led Hal toward the sofa and left the room.

As Hal settled and stretched his long legs out over the flowered carpet, the rustle of a sports magazine drew his attention to a chair by the window. A rather small, cherubic face appeared, partly camouflaged by a mass of strawberry blonde curls. Their owner drew himself up all the way his slight build would reach, and he stepped toward the visitor.

"Oh, this is my son, Perry. His ball game got rained out, so he has to spend the day in the unstimulating company of his family. He hasn't even discovered girls yet."

"Hi, Perry," greeted Hal. "I follow the fortunes of the Pirates pretty closely myself," he said, choosing to ignore Mr. Lake's last remark. "Read everything printed about them in every sports magazine there was when I was your age. What position do you play?"

"Oh, I don't actually play. Got a couple friends who are going to make it to the Babe Ruth All-stars this season. I just hang around and watch them."

"Babe Ruth, huh? That must mean you're about fourteen. Right?"

"Yeah. I'll be fifteen in September. I started out playing with the guys in the minor league when we were eight, but I only made it through one season. Most of the guys were a lot bigger than me."

Hal sympathized. Perry didn't look more than twelve even now.

"I had just the opposite kind of problem. I was always bigger than the other kids my age. That made everyone expect a little more of me, and I just simply couldn't deliver. I was turned down for Little League three times.

About the only thing I could come across in was swimming. I did make the swim team in high school, although I can't say I won any laurels for the old alma mater. I still paddle around the Y pool now and then, but a hundred yards is about all I can do in one stretch."

"If this rain keeps up, you may have to rely on your swimming skills to get you home," cut in Mr. Lake. "By the way, what are you driving?"

"Fifty-eight convertible. Eight cylinders, over three hundred horse power. You ought to see that sleek beauty—super chromed, white sidewalls. She'll do sixty in eight seconds."

"You drive like that in the city?" Mr. Lake asked incredulously.

"Never fear. I took her out on the turnpike once just to see what she really would do. Man, was that thing cruising. Laid that needle on the peg at one hundred twenty miles per hour. Purr like kitten and speed like cheetah. What are you driving?"

Mr. Lake didn't have a chance to answer. Bonnie, having remained in the kitchen to help a little more with the dinner, now returned. With her was a tall, very trim, and definitely handsome lady with soft, brunette hair neatly waved around an oval face. Her makeup reflected exquisite artistic skill with the brush and pencil and gave the lie to any possible tell-tale lines of approaching middle age that may have been lurking underneath. Although she wore a pair of casual slacks with a tailored blouse, she carried them with the dignity usually associated with a cocktail dress. And every movement was a deliberate study in grace.

Hal was instantly on his feet. His appraising eye took in every detail of her immaculate neatness, neatness in spite of the slacks. For ladies of any breeding to think of wearing "men's clothing" for any occupation other than berry picking, gardening, or window cleaning was a new

style innovation. His own mother would rather be caught dead. Somehow it was very becoming to Bonnie's mother.

"Mom." Bonnie took Hal's arm. "Meet Hal."

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Hal," Avonelle Lake replied warmly in a low, musical voice. "It was rather kind of the weather to bring you two indoors today so we could meet you. I hope you have a pleasant evening."

"I'm sure I will. I feel right at home with your family already."

"Well, this family was never known for shyness. You can't remain a stranger for long around here. Perry especially is always happy to have another man around. He thinks he's stifled by too many women."

"Yeah, there ought to be another guy in the house," Perry agreed. "One about my age. But we can't even have a dog in this apartment."

Hal disguised a slight puzzlement. The male-female ratio looked pretty balanced to him, especially when the latter was represented by these two lovely creatures. He couldn't imagine how anyone could possibly feel stifled by them. But he thought it better to say nothing.

"Anyone for some lemonade?" asked Bonnie. "We need to give the roast a few more minutes."

She disappeared and returned immediately with a frosty pitcher and matching glasses. Mrs. Lake poured while Bonnie handed each of the men a tall, refreshing glass.

Hal sipped and smacked his lips. "Sweetened just the way I like it. Did you dip your little pinky into it?"

If she missed the meaning of his words, she didn't mistake the look in his eye. She returned his gaze levelly as she said, "You men can go on solving the world's problems while Mom and I finish dinner. We'll call you in just a jiffy."

When the two ladies had returned to the kitchen,

James Lake set his glass on the coffee table and turned his rocker away from the TV set.

"Have you been with Paramount Plastics ever since you got out of school? Or did you put in some time in college?"

"No and yes. I take night courses about every semester at Pitt—accounting, a little bit of management. I hope to reach the top some day—soon. Could have taken a whole four years on the GI bill, but I wanted to get right into the job and make some rungs on the way up. School can fit into my spare time.

"Paramount Plastics is a good place for a fast climb. It's a relatively new company, and there's plenty of room for expansion. I figure that as soon as they start opening branch offices in other cities I should be in line to step right into department manager somewhere. Maybe the south. Maybe New England. Who knows? Right now they're looking toward the south. The biggest market seems to be opening up down there. New England is running a close second, though. On the other hand, if they move some of the other guys out of here to take those positions, that means an open shot right here in home office. Shouldn't be too far then to vice president." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"Sounds like pretty high aspirations for a young man your age. No doubt you'll make it, too. You say you could have gone to school on the GI bill? You weren't by any chance in the Korean Conflict, were you?"

"No, you've got me tagged a couple years ahead of my time. I was drafted just out of high school, but by the time I got through basic training and was ready to go to Korea, they called the whole thing off. Spent the rest of my time as a corpsman in the military hospital at Fort Sam Houston. I fell in love with the area down there and was tempted to stay. The folks wanted to see me come back home, though, and wrote to say this new

company was opening up and probably offered some opportunities. I got off the train on a Thursday and was working Monday morning. I've been there three years now. But if they open up an office anywhere in southern Texas, I'll be at the head of the line trying to get there."

"Then you didn't see any real action in the service. I got in right at the beginning of World War Two. I was one of those who waded ashore at Normandy Beach and pushed across France and on into Germany, slaughtering Hitler's war machine all the way. I can tell you, I didn't see anything that would ever make me want to go back there. Bombed out shells of buildings, children roaming the streets looking for garbage to eat, fields rutted by tanks and heavy artillery, dogs running in wild packs, old folks sitting by the road side with a glazed look in their eyes, your buddies lying at your feet with arms and legs gone— Had a few close calls myself. Once a mine went off ten feet behind me. Blew my helmet off and tore the back out of my jacket, but somehow I didn't actually receive any wound. I guess my time just wasn't up."

"I've had some close ones myself," Hal answered. "Nothing I didn't ask for with my own recklessness, though."

James Lake raised one eyebrow in a knowing look and suppressed a little upcurling of the corners of his mouth as he remembered the 120 miles per hour on the turnpike.

"This way, please," Bonnie addressed all the men as she appeared, took Hal's arm, and led him through the door into the dining room.

Hal noticed this room reflected a little more color than the living room which, though neat and tasteful, was not outstanding for imagination in decorating. The dining room had a slight touch of pink in the neutral background of the wallpaper. An exquisite walnut dining

suite with oval table occupied the center of the room directly under a simple but elegant crystal chandelier. The six chairs surrounding it had needlepoint seats in variegated shades of roses. Crystal candelabra, each holding two pink candles, graced the carved walnut buffet. And the centerpiece on the table was a vase of pink roses. Hal was about to exclaim on their beauty when he discovered on closer inspection that they were made of silk.

Mrs. Lake was directing him to a chair beside Bonnie on the side of the table next to the windows when Mr. Lake asked, "Where is Sylvia?" Perry, about to sit opposite Hal, released a low groan. Hal, having helped Bonnie into her seat, turned to pull out his own chair. As it slipped out from under the low-hanging Italian lace tablecloth, an elegant blue-point Siamese cat rose from the needlepoint cushion and leisurely stretched himself with a gaping yawn.

"If this is Sylvia, search no more," he laughed as the sleek, lithe body dropped to the floor, arched its way in a stately pacing across the room, and leaped onto a plant stand in front of the windows.

Now all four of the Lakes laughed.

"Sylvia's a *girl*," Perry explained with a pronounced show of contempt.

"That's Yang," ventured Mr. Lake, indicating the elegant Siamese.

"Sylvia is my younger sister," explained Bonnie. "Haven't I ever mentioned her?"

"She's always in her room, endlessly playing records," finished Mrs. Lake for her. "If I had a star for every time I've heard 'Catch a Falling Star and Put It in Your Pocket,' I'd have half the universe by now."

"You should have to share the room with her," added Bonnie. "I'll call her." She left the dining room but returned very shortly alone. "Said she has to get some

makeup on. We might as well eat without her. The meal could be over before she finishes."

Hal rose from his chair, helped Bonnie once more into hers, and reseated himself. Mr. Lake lifted the platter of the most tempting standing rib roast that Hal had ever seen, and the meal began.

Yang, tempted by the tantalizing aromas wafting in his direction, leaped down from the plant stand and passed from one to another around the table, rubbing his neck on their ankles, arching his sleek back, and curling the dark tip at the end of his tail.

"Didn't you say, Perry, that you can't have a dog in this apartment?" asked the visitor. "Strange that they would permit cats if not dogs. Usually it is just 'no animals—period.'"

Mrs. Lake answered for Perry. "They don't notice if you have something that remains quietly inside the apartment. Please help yourself to the rolls, Hal. Pass the butter, Perry."

"We had a parakeet once," Perry garbled with his mouth too full.

"Guess who left the cage open?" Bonnie raised her eyebrows in Perry's direction.

"And guess who got the parakeet?" Perry finished.

"Oh, no," groaned Hal, as the culprit reached his ankles with his silken neck.

"Yes, guess who left the cage open." A new voice was heard in the doorway—a taunting, high, lilting voice. "I see we have a guest!"

"Telescopic vision!" twitted Perry.

"Come in and sit down, dear," invited her mother kindly, but unnecessarily, for the newcomer, having hovered in the doorway just long enough to command the entire stage, fairly floated to the table and seated herself in a manner more becoming Victoria at the opening of Parliament. She proceeded to accept the dishes

offered her by her father in the same manner. The effect couldn't have been less lost on the visitor if she had been the venerable Queen herself.

Hal sat momentarily transfixed, thinking he had never seen a vision of such exotic beauty. Dark eyes flashed beneath silken lashes and widely-arched, thick brows. A ponytail contained the long, raven-hued, deep, curling waves of hair; but Hal could still see that they were thick and lustrous. Her complexion was the color of burnished copper, and Hal wondered whether that could be natural, as her hair was so dark, or whether she had a magnificent tan from long hours in the sun, then concluded it was probably both. A halter top, tied skimpily in front, revealed a tiny midriff, and a pair of the new, slim-fitting peddlepushers finished the picture of lithe youthfulness that had seated itself directly across the table from him.

"This is our daughter Sylvia," said Mrs. Lake after inviting her to the table. "Sylvia, I'm sure you knew Bonnie was entertaining a guest this evening. Say hello to Hal Gregersen."

"Hi!" replied Sylvia. "Sure, I knew Bonnie was entertaining this evening. I just didn't know it was Troy Donahue."

"How do you do, Sylvia?" returned Hal. "Neither did Bonnie tell me that her sister is Cleopatra."

He figured he might as well play her little game, although he knew perfectly well she had only given him a snow job. He couldn't be mistaken for Troy Donahue by a blind man during a midnight power failure.

"Are you enjoying your summer vacation?" Hal asked.

"Vacation!" snorted the raven-haired one, with a toss of the ponytail. "Who has time to take vacation? While sister spends her days toting mail to the handsome males at Paramount Plastics, and brother hangs around the sandlots, this gal is working for an honest living." She

paused to savor the effect she knew that revelation would have on the newest victim of her charms.

"Working? Oh, yes, of course. Some little dears in the neighborhood have the most glamorous babysitter ever known in these parts. Right?"

"Wrong! I—"

"She sells seeds door to door," interrupted her ever-sarcastic brother.

"Perry!" exclaimed Bonnie reprovingly. "Actually Sylvia is a lifeguard out at the Northside Pool. She has always been an excellent swimmer. Swam like a porpoise when she was only four. She completed her Red Cross Senior Lifesaving last year, but had to wait until this year when she was sixteen before she could get a job."

Her father chuckled at those words. It was clear that all the family were very proud of their beautiful vivacious Sylvia.

"No," he said, "she isn't as delicate as appearances would have you believe. She packs a real wallop in those fragile little limbs of hers. Hauled two kids out of the deep end herself last week. Say, didn't you say you had been up on the swimming yourself? You probably noticed her picture in the paper last February when she was sent as Pittsburgh's representative to the state regional swim competition. And only a sophomore at that. She lost to a senior then, but just watch her next year!"

"Now that you mention it, I believe I remember about it. Of course, it was just a name to me then. Imagine having the honor of meeting the one and only Sylvia Lake in person!" He flashed a generous grin across the table, to which she replied with a slight tilt of the head and another toss of the ponytail.

To say her eyes flashed in reply would be an understatement. *Her* eyes never quit flashing. Neither did she pass an opportunity to exchange a glance with the visitor. She had long known her special charms could be

worked on men, and she practiced on them every chance that came her way.

"What swimming was Dad referring to that you did?" she asked of Hal.

"Oh, I was the champ out in Mount Lebanon where I went to school, but that was a few years before your time. You must have been only somewhere in the grades. I got away from swimming in the army. Don't know if I could swim enough to save myself now. Say — that's a thought. Northside, did you say? I'll drop by, or rather, *in*, some-day and see if you can rescue me."

" 'Twould be a pleasure." The ponytail swished once more.

"You must be ready for a coffee refill," Bonnie offered, as she started to rise from the table.

"Let me." Sylvia was up and to the buffet in less time than Bonnie could sit down again. *Funny, Bonnie thought, where was she when Mother and I worked all afternoon to get this meal ready? Oh, well, she might as well do what she will. That's little enough.*

Before long, the standing roast was reduced to nothing but the ribs. The last parsleyed potato had disappeared. Bonnie rose to clear the table, Mrs. Lake to serve the pie, and Sylvia to make the rounds with the coffee pot again. Yang had resettled himself on the plant stand with some African violets. And the rain continued in the same relentless pouring that had pounded away the entire day.

Although the evening was still young when the family gathered in the living room, the storm clouds gave the impression of a very late hour. Thick darkness gathered itself early over the sprawling city like a blanket snuffing out the long, golden rays of the late sun. The incessant pelting of drops muffled the usual sounds of the neighborhood, even of the low-flying jets making their approach to the airport, creating in the little parlor the

impression of seclusion from the outside world. In the quiet contentment of the little group, the mood was anything but subdued. Sylvia, never one to be out of character, immediately lugged her record player from her room, and "Santa Catalina" and Debbie Reynolds's lovely rendition of "Tammy's in Love" spun among other current hits.

It was Bonnie who set up the card table and suggested a game of Scrabble. She placed a chair for Hal and seated herself on his right. Perry's attempt to place his chair on Hal's left was quickly discouraged with a slight shove on the shoulder by his raven-haired sister. Sylvia motioned for Perry to take the place opposite Hal, while she seated herself on his left. From that vantage point, she wasted no opportunity to catch Hal's eye. Should anyone have been observing, it would have appeared that opportunities abounded. But Hal showered no less attention on Sylvia's sister, and he obviously enjoyed his position and the attention he received from two charming ladies. Any undercurrent of rivalry between the two of them was well buried beneath the merriment of the game.

Wits were honed in the hour's excitement, and the game proceeded quickly. Even Perry was able to hold his own against the older opposition. The major boner of the evening was committed by none other than Sylvia when she insisted that "pisa" spelled pizza.

"P-i-s-a, dumb-dumb, spells a tower—the one that leans—remember?" Perry reminded her. "You can't spell 'pizza' any better than you can make it."

"Oh, you want to see?" she retaliated. "Just you wait until the game is over. I'll make the best pizza you ever ate, only you won't get any of it."

She repaired her damaged pride by carrying off the top score.

"There now, smarty pants. Maybe I did goof on one

word, but I won the game. And now if you all will excuse me, I'll show you I can also make a pizza."

If she was reluctant to leave her place beside Hal, Sylvia was more than compensated by her ambition to show him her one culinary skill, for she did consider herself rather competent in assembling pizzas. While she was so occupied in the kitchen, the remaining gamesters tried their hand at Chinese checkers. That particular game required some rearranging of positions. Bonnie and Perry exchanged chairs so that she would play opposite Hal, and Perry prevailed upon his father to play opposite him. James and Avonelle Lake had unobtrusively whiled away the evening watching television. But James willingly accepted the challenge to Chinese checkers while his wife watched.

The foursome played two games—both of which Bonnie won—in the time it took Sylvia to prepare the pizza for the oven. When she had popped it in, she reappeared. As usual, she couldn't just walk in and sit down quietly.

"Move over, Dad," she commanded. "No, you stay and play opposite Bonnie. Perry, you go on and wait this one out while I give poor Hal a chance to win. C'mon, Sis, let me play opposite Hal this game."

Obligingly her sister moved into Perry's chair. They soon tired of the game, and after one win by Mr. Lake, they were all relieved when Sylvia announced that the pizza was ready. She carried it triumphantly into the room and placed it on the coffee table, where she cut it with a flourish.

"Now I will have to say," Hal announced while reaching for a second piece, "it doesn't make any difference how you spell it so long as you can make it taste like this. It's really good."

"She just cleans out the refrigerator when she makes it," chided Perry. "You never know what leftovers you'll bite into next."

"Perry!" reprimanded his mother. "You know that isn't true."

When the last crumb of pizza had been devoured, Hal pulled his lanky frame up from the sofa, and surveying each of the family in turn, said, "I can't say how much I've totally enjoyed the evening with you all. You are just the greatest. I'm glad the rain did keep us all indoors or we would not have had such a lovely, entertaining time together. And to you, Mrs. Lake, and Bonnie—" he paused to pull her up beside him and slip an arm around her waist, "the meal was nothing if not superb. And permit me not to forget one magnificent pizza, Miss Sylvia." The wink that flashed her direction was answered by a flutter of the silken eyelashes. "And Perry, you and I will just have to see one of the Pirates' games together sometime. Perhaps Mr. Lake will join us. It was very pleasant to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure was all mine," James replied. "I suppose we'll be seeing more of you in the future."

"Yes, do come back, Hal. I'm glad you enjoyed the dinner. If the weather ever clears, perhaps we can make that picnic you and Bonnie had planned for the day a family affair."

Hal had started to walk toward the door, his arm still around Bonnie. Sylvia jumped to her feet and was at his other side in a moment, tugging at his free arm.

"You will come back, won't you?" she asked impulsively.

"Of course, you'll see me back here often." He bent to brush a light kiss across Bonnie's forehead. "You bet, as long as this gal is here."

Evidently Sylvia knew when she was beat and returned to her perch on the sofa. Hal and Bonnie proceeded on to the hall where she retrieved Hal's jacket from the pole lamp. "It appears, it has had time to dry," she observed, handing it to him.

“Ha! That will be short-lived. About from the building to the car.”

At the door he enfolded her in both his arms, and that time the kiss was not fleeting. “’Bye now, and see you soon.”

He did not bother to ring for the elevator but took the stairs two at a time. At the outside door, he pulled his jacket tighter, lowered his head, and dashed for his car parked at the curb. In the time it took him to unlock the door he was soaked to the skin. “What matter,” he said to himself as he revved up the motor. “I’ll have to congratulate myself on being the one guy in the office to recognize a prize when the new mail girl was hired.”