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*The News Chronicle*

# DENNIS WHEATLEY



## TO THE DEVIL A DAUGHTER

BLOOMSBURY READER



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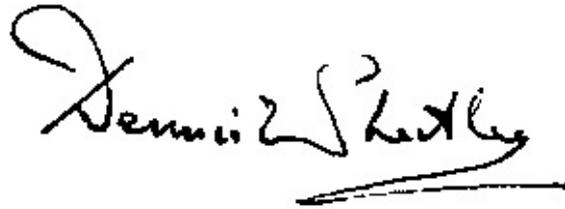
## TO THE DEVIL A DAUGHTER

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Dennis Wheatley

Edited by Miranda Vaughan Jones

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dennis Wheatley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

B L O O M S B U R Y R E A D E R

L O N D O N · N E W D E L H I · N E W Y O R K · S Y D N E Y

*For our good friends*

Diane and Pierre Hammerel

*with my most grateful thanks for their boundless  
hospitality and innumerable kindnesses to Joan and  
myself during our recent visit to Nice; not the least  
vivid memory of which remains our fatiguing but  
intriguing expedition (by daylight) to the  
Cave of the Bats*

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## A Note on the Author

## Introduction

Dennis Wheatley was my grandfather. He only had one child, my father Anthony, from his first marriage to Nancy Robinson. Nancy was the youngest in a large family of ten Robinson children and she had a wonderful zest for life and a gaiety about her that I much admired as a boy brought up in the dull Seventies. Thinking about it now, I suspect that I was drawn to a young Ginny Hewett, a similarly bubbly character, and now my wife of 27 years, because she resembled Nancy in many ways.

As grandparents, Dennis and Nancy were very different. Nancy's visits would fill the house with laughter and mischievous gossip, while Dennis and his second wife Joan would descend like minor royalty, all children expected to behave. Each held court in their own way but Dennis was the famous one with the famous friends and the famous stories.

There is something of the fantasist in every storyteller, and most novelists writing thrillers see themselves in their heroes. However, only a handful can claim to have been involved in actual daring-do. Dennis saw action both at the Front, in the First World War, and behind a desk in the Second. His involvement informed his writing and his stories, even those based on historical events, held a notable veracity that only the life-experienced novelist can obtain. I think it was this element that added the important plausibility to his writing. This appealed to his legions of readers who were in that middle ground of fiction, not looking for pure fantasy nor dry fact, but something exciting, extraordinary, possible and even probable.

There were three key characters that Dennis created over the years: The Duc de Richleau, Gregory Sallust and Roger Brook. The first de Richleau stories were set in the years between the wars, when Dennis had started writing. Many of the Sallust stories were written in the early days of the Second World War, shortly before Dennis joined the Joint Planning Staff in Whitehall, and Brook was cast in the time of the French Revolution, a period that particularly fascinated him.

He is probably always going to be associated with Black Magic first and foremost, and it's true that he plugged it hard because sales were always good for those books. However, it's important to remember that he only wrote eleven Black Magic novels out of more than sixty bestsellers, and readers were just as keen on his other stories. In fact, invariably when I meet people who ask if there is any connection, they tell me that they read 'all his books'.

Dennis had a full and eventful life, even by the standards of the era he grew up in. He was expelled from Dulwich College and sent to a floating navel run school, HMS Worcester. The conditions on this extraordinary ship were Dickensian. He survived it,

and briefly enjoyed London at the pinnacle of the Empire before war was declared and the fun ended. That sort of fun would never be seen again.

He went into business after the First World War, succeeded and failed, and stumbled into writing. It proved to be his calling. Immediate success opened up the opportunity to read and travel, fueling yet more stories and thrilling his growing band of followers.

He had an extraordinary World War II, being one of the first people to be recruited into the select team which dreamed up the deception plans to cover some of the major events of the war such as Operation Torch, Operation Mincemeat and the D-Day landings. Here he became familiar with not only the people at the very top of the war effort, but also a young Commander Ian Fleming, who was later to write the James Bond novels. There are indeed those who have suggested that Gregory Sallust was one of James Bond's precursors.

The aftermath of the war saw Dennis grow in stature and fame. He settled in his beautiful Georgian house in Lymington surrounded by beautiful things. He knew how to live well, perhaps without regard for his health. He hated exercise, smoked, drank and wrote. Today he would have been bullied by wife and children and friends into giving up these habits and changing his lifestyle, but I'm not sure he would have given in. Maybe like me, he would simply find a quiet place.

Dominic Wheatley, 2013

## Chapter 1

### *Strange Conduct of a Girl Unknown*

Molly Fountain was now convinced that a more intriguing mystery than the one she was writing surrounded the solitary occupant of the house next door. For the third morning she could not settle to her work. The sentences refused to come, because every few minutes her eyes wandered from the paper, and her mind abandoned its search for the appropriate word, as her glance strayed through the open window down to the little terrace at the bottom of the garden that adjoined her own.

Both gardens sloped steeply towards the road. Beyond it, and a two-hundred-foot fall of jagged cliff, the Mediterranean stretched blue, calm and sparkling in the sunshine, to meet on the horizon a cloudless sky that was only a slightly paler shade of blue. The road was known as the 'Golden Corniche' owing to the outcrop of red porphyry rocks that gave the coast on this part of the Riviera such brilliant colour. To the right it ran down to St Raphael; to the left a drive of twenty-odd miles would bring one to Cannes. Behind it lay the mountains of the Esterel, sheltering it snugly from the cold winds, while behind them again to north and east rose the great chain of snow-tipped Alps, protecting the whole coast and making it a winter paradise.

Although it was only the last week in February, the sun was as hot as on a good day in June in England. That was nothing out of the ordinary for the time of year, but Mrs Fountain had long since schooled herself to resist the temptation to spend her mornings basking in it. Her writing of good, if not actually best-seller, thrillers meant the difference between living in very reasonable comfort and a near-precarious existence on the pension of the widow of a Lieutenant-Colonel. As a professional of some years' standing she knew that work must be done at set hours and in suitable surroundings. Kind friends at home had often suggested that in the summer she should come to stay and could write on the beach or in their gardens; but that would have meant frequent interruptions, distractions by buzzing insects, and gusts of wind blowing away her papers. It was for that reason she always wrote indoors, although in the upstairs front room of her little villa, so that she could enjoy the lovely view. All the same, today she was conscious of a twinge of envy as she looked down on the girl who was lazing away the morning on the terrace in the next garden.

With an effort she pulled her mind back to her work. Johnny, her only son, was arriving to stay at the end of the week, and during his visits she put everything aside to be with him. She really must get up to the end of chapter eight before she abandoned her book for a fortnight. It was the trickiest part of the story, and if she had not got over that it would nag at her all through his stay. And she saw so little of him.

Despite herself her thoughts now drifted towards her son. He was not a bit like his father, except in his open, sunny nature that so readily charmed everyone he met. Archie had been typical of the Army officer coming from good landed-gentry stock. After herself, hunting, shooting and fishing had been his passions, and on any polo

ground he had been a joy to watch. Johnny cared for none of those things. He took after her family, in nearly all of whom a streak of art had manifested itself. In Johnny's case it had come out as a flair for line and colour, and at twenty-three his gifts had already opened fine prospects for him with a good firm of interior decorators. But that meant his living in London. He could only come out to her once a year, and she could not afford to take long holidays in England.

She had often contemplated selling the villa and making a home for him in London; but somehow she could not bring herself to do that. When she and Archie married in 1927 they had spent their honeymoon at St Raphael, and fallen nearly as much in love with that gold-and-blue coast of the Esterel as they were with each other. That was why, when his father had died in the following year, they had decided to buy a villa there. As a second son his inheritance amounted to only a few thousands, but they had sunk nearly all of it in this little property and never regretted it. During the greater part of each year they had had to let it, but that brought them in quite a useful income, and for all their long leaves, while Johnny was a baby and later a growing boy, they had been able to occupy it themselves; so every corner of the house and every flowering shrub in the garden was intimately bound up with happy memories of her young married life.

The coming of the war had substituted long months of anxious separation for that joyful existence, and in 1942 all hope of its resumption had been finally shattered by an 8-mm. shell fired from one of Rommel's tanks in the Western Desert. Johnny had then been at school in Scotland, and his mother, Molly, her heart numb with misery, had striven to drown her grief by giving her every waking thought to the job she had been doing since 1940 in one of the Intelligence Departments of the War Office.

The end of the war had left her in a mental vacuum. Three years had elapsed since Archie's death, so she had come to accept it and was no longer subject to bouts of harrowing despair. But her job was finished and Johnny had just gone up to Cambridge; so she was now adrift without any absorbing interest to occupy the endless empty days that stretched ahead. Nearly six years of indifferent meals, taken at odd hours while working, often till after midnight, on Top-Secret projects that demanded secretarial duties of the most conscientious type, had left her both physically and mentally exhausted; so when it was learned that the villa had not been damaged or looted of its furniture, her friends had insisted that she should go south to recuperate.

She went reluctantly, dreading that seeing it again would renew the intolerable ache she had felt during the first months after her loss. To her surprise the contrary had proved the case. If Archie's ghost still lingered there, it smiled a welcome in the gently moving sunlight that dappled the garden paths, and in the murmur of the sea creaming on the rocks there seemed to be a faint echo of his laughter. It was the only permanent home they had ever had, and in these peaceful surroundings they had shared she found a new contentment.

For a few months her time had been amply filled in putting the house to rights, getting the neglected garden back into order and renewing her acquaintance with neighbours who had survived the war; but with her restoration to health her mind began to crave some intellectual occupation. Before the war she had occasionally

written short stories for amusement and had had a few of them accepted; so it was natural that she should turn to fiction as an outlet. Besides, she had already realised that Archie's pension would be insufficient to support her at the villa permanently, and by then she had again become so enamoured of the place that she could not bear the thought of having to part with it. So, under the double spur, she set to work in earnest.

Very soon she found that her war-time experiences had immensely improved her abilities as a writer. Thousands of hours spent typing staff papers had imbued her with a sense of how best to present a series of factors logically, clearly and with the utmost brevity. Moreover, in her job she had learned how the secret services really operated; so, without giving away any official secrets, she could give her stories an atmosphere of plausibility which no amount of imagination could quite achieve. These assets, grafted on to a good general education and a lively romantic mind, had enabled her agent to place her first novel without difficulty. She had since followed it up with two a year and had now made quite a name for herself as a competent and reliable author.

Molly Fountain's books were set in a great variety of countries, but they were always mystery thrillers with a background of secret service. No one knew better than she that truth really was stranger than fiction; yet she never deliberately based a plot upon actual happenings to which she had been privy during the war. On the other hand, while taking considerable care to avoid any risk of an action for libel, she had no scruples about using as characters in her stories the exotic types frequently to be met with on that cosmopolitan coast, or incorporating such of their more lurid doings as the tittle-tattle of her bridge club in Cannes brought her, if these episodes could be profitably fitted in to add zest to the tale. That, subconsciously at least, was one of the reasons for her interest in the girl next door. Everything about this new neighbour suggested that she was the centre of a mystery.

Four days earlier Molly had just sat down to tea on her own little terrace when a taxi drew up in the road below and the girl had stepped out of it. She came from the direction of Cannes. In the taxi with her was a middle-aged man and some hand luggage. From the time and circumstances of her arrival it could be inferred that she had not come south on the Blue Train, but had landed from a plane at Nice airport. The man who accompanied her was strongly built, stocky and aggressive-looking, yet with something vaguely furtive about him. His clothes had struck a slightly incongruous note as he stood for a moment in the sunshine, looking up at the villa. It was not that there was anything really odd about them, and they were of quite good quality; but they were much more suited to a city office than either holidaying on the Riviera or travelling to it. He had helped the driver carry the suitcases up to the house, but remained there only about ten minutes, then returned to the waiting taxi and was driven off in it. That was the first and only time that Molly had seen him, and it now seemed evident that, having gone, he had gone for good.

There was nothing particularly strange in that. He might have been a house agent who had arranged to meet the girl and take her out to the villa that she had rented on a postal description through his firm; but in spite of his office clothes he had looked much too forceful a personality to be employed on such comparatively unimportant tasks. It seemed more probable that he was a relative or friend giving valuable time to performing a similar service. Anyhow, whoever he was, he had not bothered to come

near the place again.

The strange thing was that no one else had either; nor, as far as Molly knew, had the girl ever gone out—at least in the daytime—and there was certainly something out of the ordinary about a young woman who was content to remain without any form of companionship for three whole days.

Stranger still, she made not the least effort to amuse herself. She never brought out any needlework or a sketching block, and was never seen to write a letter. Even when she carried a book as far as the terrace she rarely read it for more than a few minutes. Every morning, and a good part of each afternoon, she simply sat there gazing blankly out to sea. The theory that she was the victim of a profound sorrow suggested itself, yet she wore no sign of mourning and her healthy young face showed no trace of grief.

Molly had never encouraged her servants to bring her the local gossip, but in this case so intrigued had she become that she had made an exception. Like most women with a profession, she was too occupied to be either fussy or demanding about her household, provided she was reasonably well served; so she still had with her a couple named Botin whom she had engaged on her return to France in 1946. They had their faults, but would allow no one to cheat her except themselves, and that only in moderation. They were middle-aged, of cheerful disposition and had become much attached to her. Louis looked after the garden and did the heavy work, while Angele did the marketing, the cooking and all those other innumerable tasks which a French *bonne à tout faire* so willingly undertakes. On the previous day Molly had, with apparent casualness, pumped them both.

Louis produced only two crumbs of information, gleaned from his colleague, old André, who for many years had tended the adjoining garden. The mademoiselle was English and the villa had been taken for only a month. Angele had proved an even poorer source, as she reported that the *bonne* who was looking after the young lady next door was a stranger to the district; she had been engaged through an agency in Marseilles and was a Catalan, a woman of sour disposition who had rejected all overtures of friendship and was uncommunicative to the point of rudeness.

Negative as Angèle's contribution appeared to be, it had given Molly further food for speculation. Why should an English visitor engage a semi-foreigner from a city a hundred miles away to do for her, when there were plenty of good *bonnes* to be had on the spot? It would have saved a railway fare, and quite a sum on the weekly household books, to secure one who was well in with the local shopkeepers and knew the best stalls in the St Raphael market at which to buy good food economically. The answer that sprang to mind was that a stranger was much less likely to gossip, and therefore something was going on next door that the tenant desired to hide.

Then, last night the mystery had deepened still further. Molly was a light sleeper. A little after one o'clock she had been roused by the sound of a loose stone rattling down the steep slope of a garden path. Getting out of bed she went to the window. The moon was up, its silvery light gleaming in big patches on the cactus between the pine-trees, and there was the girl just going down the short flight of steps that led from her little terrace to the road.

Fully awake now, Molly turned on her bedside light and settled down to read a new William Mole thriller that she had just had sent out from England; but while reading,

her curiosity about her neighbour now still further titillated, she kept an ear cocked for sounds of the girl's return. As a writer she could not help being envious of the way in which Mr Mole used his fine command of English to create striking imagery, so the next hour and a half sped by very quickly. Then in the still night she heard the click of the next-door garden gate, and, getting up again, saw the girl re-enter the house.

Why, Molly wondered, when she never went out in the daytime, should she go out at night? It could hardly be that she was in hiding, because she spent the greater part of each day on the terrace, where she could easily be seen from the road by anyone passing in a car. The obvious answer seemed to be that she had gone out to meet someone in secret; but she had been neither fetched in a car nor returned in one, and she had not been absent quite long enough to have walked into St Raphael and back. Of course, she could have been picked up by a car that had been waiting for her round the next bend of the road, or perhaps she had had an assignation at one of the neighbouring villas. In any case, this midnight sortie added still further to the fascinating conundrum of what lay behind this solitary young woman having taken a villa on the Corniche d'Or.

For the twentieth time that morning Molly's grey-green eyes wandered from her typewriter to the open window. Just beneath it a mimosa tree was in full bloom and its heavenly scent came in great wafts to her. Beyond it and a little to the left a group of cypresses rose like dark candle-flames, their points just touching the blue horizon. Further away to the right two umbrella pines stood out in stark beauty against the azure sky. Below them on her small, square, balustraded terrace the girl still sat motionless, her hands folded in her lap, gazing out to sea. About the pose of the slim, dark-haired figure there was something infinitely lonely and pathetic.

Molly Fountain knew that she had no right whatever to poke her nose into someone else's business, but she could bear it no longer. Her new neighbour, although unconscious of it, was playing the very devil with her work, and, worse, she would know no peace of mind until she had at least made an effort to find out if the girl were in trouble. That it was not the sort of trouble which sometimes causes young women to seek seclusion for a while in order to protect their reputations was evident, as the villa had been leased for only a month and the girl showed not the slightest sign of pregnancy. Yet there must be some cause for her abnormal conduct and obvious melancholy. Molly was far from being a motherly soul, but she had her fair share of maternal instinct and, quite apart from her desire to satisfy her curiosity, she now felt an urge that would not be denied to offer her help if it was needed, or at least endeavour to animate this woebegone young creature with something of her own cheerful vitality.

There was only one thing for it. On the Riviera it was not customary to call upon temporary neighbours, but the fact that they were both English would be excuse enough for that. With Molly, to make up her mind was to act. Pushing back her chair from the typing table, she stood up. For once a real-life mystery had been thrust beneath her nose. There and then she decided to go out and attempt to solve it.

## Chapter 2

### *Colonel Crackenthorp's Technique*

Going through into her bedroom, Molly Fountain pulled her linen working smock up over her head. Anyone seeing her at that moment would never have guessed that she was forty-five. Her upstretched arms emphasised the lines of her good figure; her hips had broadened comparatively little since she had reached maturity and her legs were straight and shapely. Only as she jerked off the smock and threw it on a chair did the fact that her youth was past become apparent, from a slight thickening of the muscles in her neck and her grey hair.

From her wardrobe she selected a white, hand-embroidered blouse and a grey coat and skirt. She used very little make-up, yet, even so, the face that looked back at her from the mirror as she quickly tidied her hair would have been judged by most people to be that of a woman still under forty. There were laughter-lines round the mouth and the beginnings of crow's-feet round the eyes, but not a hint of sagging in the still firm flesh, and it was moulded on that fine bone formation that preserves the basis of youthful good looks right into old age.

Reaching up on tip-toe she pulled a battered hat-box from off the top of the wardrobe and took from it a straw hat bedecked with cornflowers. Molly hated hats and never wore one if she could possibly avoid it, but she felt that on this occasion a hat should be worn in support of her pretence that she was making a formal call.

It was a little before midday and the sun was strong enough now to tan anyone who was not used to it. As she made her way down the garden path that zigzagged among spiky cactus and strange-shaped succulents she saw a little green lizard run up the trunk of a tall palm-tree, and on reaching the terrace at the bottom she made a mental note that enough roses were in bloom in the bed behind it to furnish her with another bowl. Out in the road she walked along under the tall retaining wall of rough-hewn rock that supported both her garden and those of several medium-sized villas situated on the same slope. At intervals along it hung festoons of large-flowered yellow jasmine and purple bougainvillea. The scent of flowers, mingled with that of the primeval pine-wood among which the villas had been built, was delicious. For the tenthousandth time the thought crossed her mind that never could she bring herself to leave it and face another English winter.

By then she had reached the gate to the next garden. Opening it, she went up the steep stone steps set in a narrow cleft of the stonework. As her head emerged above ground level she turned it towards the terrace. The girl had heard her approach and was looking in her direction. Slowly she stood up, but she did not move forward and gave no sign of welcome. Her face had a guarded look and Molly thought she detected just a trace of fear in her dark eyes.

Stepping up on to the terrace, Molly said, 'I'm Molly Fountain, your nearest neighbour. As we're both English I thought—'

The girl's eyes widened and her broad face suddenly became animated as she exclaimed, 'Not *the* Molly Fountain?'

Molly smiled. Her name was by no means universally known, but during the past two years it had become sufficiently so for quite a high proportion of English people to whom, for one reason or another, she had to give it to ask if she was the author; yet the question still never failed to arouse in her a slightly bashful pleasure, and she replied with becoming modesty: 'I don't know of any other, and if you are thinking of the writer of secret service yarns, that would be me.'

'Of course!' said the girl. 'I've read several of them, and they're awfully thrilling.'

'That makes things easier, doesn't it?' Molly quickly took advantage of the bridge unexpectedly offered by her literary activities. 'Having read some of my stories will, I hope, make you look on me as a little less like a total stranger. You must forgive me making my first call on you in the morning, but social customs are more elastic here than at home, and I thought you might prefer it to cards left formally on you in the afternoon.'

It was the first time Molly had seen the girl face to face, and while she was speaking she was taking quiet stock of her. Tall above the average, so slim as to be almost gawky, and a slight awkwardness in the control of her long limbs gave her somewhat the appearance of an overgrown schoolgirl. Seen from the distance Molly had put her down as about twenty-three, but now she revised her estimate and decided that nineteen would be nearer the mark. Her forehead was broad and surmounted by thick, wavy, dark-brown hair parted in the middle; her mouth was wide, full and generous. A snub nose robbed her of all pretence to classical beauty, and her complexion was a trifle sallow; but she possessed two excellent features. When her teeth flashed in a smile they were dazzlingly white: more striking still, her brown eyes were huge and extraordinarily luminous.

Molly's reference to formal calls caused her to remember the duties of hospitality, and with only a fraction of hesitation she said, 'Won't you ... come up to the house?'

'Thank you; I should love to,' Molly replied promptly. Then, as they turned towards it, she added, 'But, you know, you haven't told me your name yet.'

'Oh!' Again there was a slight hesitation before the answer. 'It's Christina Mordant.'

The path between the prickly-pears and oleanders snaked from side to side round a succession of hairpin bends, yet despite that it was still steep enough to require all their breath as they mounted it; so they spoke no more until they reached a small lawn on the level of the villa.

Molly had never been up there before and the lemon-washed house was partly concealed both from her windows and the road by umbrella-pines and palm-trees. She saw now that it was somewhat smaller than her own and probably contained only six or seven rooms including the servants' quarters. As they crossed the lawn she asked: 'Is this your first visit to the Riviera?'

'Yes,' Christina nodded, leading her guest through a pair of french windows into the sitting-room. 'But I've lived in France for quite a while. I was at a finishing school in Paris until just before Christmas.'

‘I first came to this part of the world in 1927, and have made my home here for the past five years; so you must let me show you something of this lovely coast,’ Molly volunteered.

Christina’s hesitation was much more marked this time. Her underlip trembled slightly, then she stammered, ‘Thank you ... awfully; but ... but I don’t care much for going out.’

A moment’s awkward pause ensued, then she pulled herself together and added in a rather breathless attempt to atone for what might be taken as rudeness, ‘Do please sit down. Let me get you a drink. I’m afraid we don’t run to cocktails, but Maria could soon make some coffee, or we have delicious orange-juice.’

Molly did not really want a drink, but realised that acceptance would give her an excuse to prolong her call, and the longer they talked the better her chance of winning the girl’s confidence; so she said, ‘I’d love some orange-juice if it’s not too much trouble.’

‘Oh, none at all,’ Christina cried, hurrying to the window. ‘There are masses of oranges in the garden. I’ll pick some. It won’t take me a moment. We’ve lemons, grapefruit and tangerines, too. Would you like it straight, or prefer a mixture?’

‘I always think orange and grapefruit half and half is the nicest out here, where there’s no shortage of sugar,’ Molly replied; and as the girl left the room she began to take detailed stock of it.

The villa belonged to a café proprietor in Cannes who had never occupied it himself, but bought it as an investment and made a good thing out of it by letting it furnished for short periods to a succession of holiday-makers. In consequence it contained only the barest necessities, and its furniture was of that positively hideous variety favoured by the French bourgeoisie. In vain Molly’s glance roved over the monstrosities in cheap wood and chromium for some indication of Christina’s personality, until her eye lit on a manicure-set which lay open on a rickety spindle-legged table half concealed by the chair in which she was sitting. Picking it up she saw that it was comparatively new, bore the mark of a Paris manufacturer, and that its morocco leather cover was stamped with the initials E.B.

When Christina returned she came in by the door from the hallway carrying a tray with a jug of fruit-juice, two glasses and sugar. As she poured out, she asked, ‘Do you live here all the year, Mrs Fountain?’

‘Most of it. I usually spend June in London and have a fortnight in Paris in the autumn; but the cost of living has become so high both in France and England that I can’t afford to live for more than about six weeks in hotels.’

Christina raised her dark eyebrows. ‘Really! I should have thought you were terribly rich. Your books must bring you in thousands.’

‘That’s a popular illusion that the public have about all authors,’ Molly smiled. ‘Except for a handful of best-sellers, writing is one of the worst-paid jobs in the world; and even in France, these days, a big part of one’s earnings is taken away by taxation.’

For ten minutes or so she went on talking about books and authors, as Christina was obviously interested, and it seemed a good line for tuning in on the girl’s mind without arousing her suspicions. Then, having learnt that she had a liking for historical novels,

Molly said: 'In that case it surprises me all the more that you don't make some excursions. This coast is full of history right back to Phoenician times. When I was your age I would have given anything for the chance to visit all these places.'

Christina gave her an uncomfortable look, then averted her eyes and muttered, 'I'm quite happy lazing in the garden.'

'How long are you here for?'

'About another three weeks. The villa is taken for a month.'

'Are you quite on your own?'

'Yes.'

'Surely you find it very lonely? Have you no friends you could go to visit, or who could come to see you?'

'No. I don't know anyone at all down here. But ... but I like being on my own.'

'In that you are lucky,' Molly commented quietly. 'It is a great blessing to be content with one's own company and not be driven constantly to seek some new distraction from one's own thoughts. But all the same I should have thought you would have sometimes liked a change of scene. Don't you ever go out at all?'

Christina shook her head.

'An exciting book kept me reading very late last night, and when I got out of bed to get one of my sleeping pills I thought I saw you coming in through the garden.'

For a moment the girl's face remained closed and secretive, then she replied, 'Yes. I had been for a walk. I sleep most of the afternoon and go for a walk every night. I don't know why, but I've always felt listless after midday; then, as darkness falls, I seem to wake up and want to do things.'

'Some people are like that. The astrologers say that we are influenced all our lives by the hour of our birth, and that people born in the evening are always at their best at night.'

'Really! That seems to fit my case. I was born at nine forty-five in the evening.' After a second Christina volunteered the additional information, 'My birthday is March the sixth, and I'll be twenty-one next month.'

'You will be here for it, then. It seems an awful shame that you should be deprived of the chance to celebrate. But perhaps you have relatives or friends who will be joining you before that?'

'No; I expect still to be quite alone.'

There fell a pause while Molly considered this new evidence of the girl's complete isolation. A twenty-first birthday is such a landmark in any young person's life that it seemed quite extraordinary that she had not a single person in the world who wished to make it a happy day for her. Then, after a moment, Molly realised that so far she had got nowhere; she had not succeeded in getting the faintest clue to this mystery.

Swiftly she began to consider what line the favourite hero of her own creation, Colonel Crackenthorp, would take on having reached such an impasse. She knew this fiction character of hers as well as she knew herself; so the answer came automatically. The debonair and resourceful 'Crack' would employ shock tactics. Shock tactics it should be then. Looking the girl straight in the eye, she said suddenly: 'Christina

Mordant is not your real name, is it?’

Caught off her guard, the girl winced as if she had been struck, and gasped, ‘How ... how did you know?’

Then she recovered herself. Her face had gone white, but she slowly rose to her feet. As she did so her big brown eyes narrowed and filled with an angry light. Her whole body was trembling as she burst out: ‘What has it to do with you? I didn’t ask you to come here! What right have you to pry into my affairs? How dare you spy upon me and come here to catechise me? Get out! D’you hear me? Get out at once!’

This was not at all the sort of response that the shock tactics of the gallant ‘Crack’ would have met with in one of Molly’s books. The girl would have broken down, wept upon his broad shoulder and confessed all. But then ‘Crack’ was a handsome fellow who had the devil of a way with women, whereas his creator was only a middle-aged lady novelist. No doubt, thought Molly, that explained why his Technique had failed so lamentably in this real-life try-out. Anyhow, it was clear that she had botched the whole business beyond repair; so she stood up and said: ‘I *do* apologise. My inquisitiveness was quite unjustified and I’m afraid I was very rude. I’m not either usually, and in the ordinary way I’d never dream of forcing myself on anyone. My work keeps me far too busy to waste time calling on strangers. But I couldn’t help being worried by seeing you sitting on your terrace hour after hour doing absolutely nothing. And you looked so terribly unhappy that I felt sure you must be in some sort of trouble. Had other people come to see you I would never have come here; but you’re very young and seemed to have no one you could turn to. I’m old enough to be your mother, and I was hoping that you might care to confide in me, because I would willingly have helped you if I could. As it is I can only ask you to forgive my unwarranted intrusion.’

Mustering the remnants of her shattered dignity, Molly squared her shoulders then, with a brief inclination of her head, walked past the tall, now stony-faced, girl, through the french windows and out on to the lawn. She was only halfway across it when she was halted by a despairing cry behind her.

‘Oh, Mrs Fountain! Come back! Come back! I didn’t mean what I said. You’re nice! You’re kind: I’m sure I can trust you. I can’t tell you why I’m here, because I don’t know myself. But I’m worried out of my wits. Oh, please let me talk to you.’

Molly turned, and next moment the slim girlish figure was weeping in her arms. Without elation, but in faint surprise, she was conscious of the thought that good old ‘Crack’s’ technique had worked after all.

## Chapter 3

### *The Mysterious Recluse*

A good ten minutes elapsed before Christina—as she called herself—became fully coherent. During that time the only concrete fact that Molly had got out of her was that the purposeful-looking middle-aged man who had arrived in the taxi with her four days before was her father.

They were now back in the house and sitting together on the cheap, velvet-covered settee. Molly had one arm round the girl's shoulders and was gently wiping the tears from her cheeks with a totally inadequate handkerchief. When her sobbing at last began to ease, Molly said: 'My dear, do you really mean to tell me that your father brought you here and left you without giving any reason at all for doing so?'

'The ... the only reason he gave was that I ... I have enemies who are hunting for me.'

'What sort of enemies?'

The girl gave a loud sniff, then fished out her own handkerchief and blew her snub nose. When she had done, she said in a firmer voice, 'I don't know. I haven't an idea. That's just what makes the whole thing so puzzling.'

Molly poured some more of the fruit-juice into a glass and handed it to her. She drank a little, said 'Thanks,' and went on, 'He simply said that I was threatened by a very great danger, but that I had nothing at all to worry about providing I obeyed his instructions implicitly. When I pressed him to tell me what the danger was, he said it was far better that I should know nothing about it, because if I knew I might start imagining things and do something silly. All I had to do was to lie low here for a few weeks and I should be quite safe.'

'You poor child! I don't wonder now that you've been unable to give your thoughts to any form of amusement, with a thing like this on your mind. But have you no idea at all what this threat might be, or who these enemies are from whom your father is hiding you?'

'No. I've cudgelled my wits for hours about it, but I haven't a clue. I've never done any grave harm to anyone. Honestly I haven't. And I can't think why anyone should want to harm me.'

After considering the matter for a moment, Molly asked, 'Are you by chance a very rich girl?'

'Oh no. Father left me ample money to pay for my stay here, and he gives me a generous dress allowance; but that's all I've got.'

'I really meant, are you an heiress? Has anyone left you a big sum of money into which you come when you are twenty-one?'

'No: No one has ever left me anything. I don't think any of my relatives ever had much to leave, anyway.'