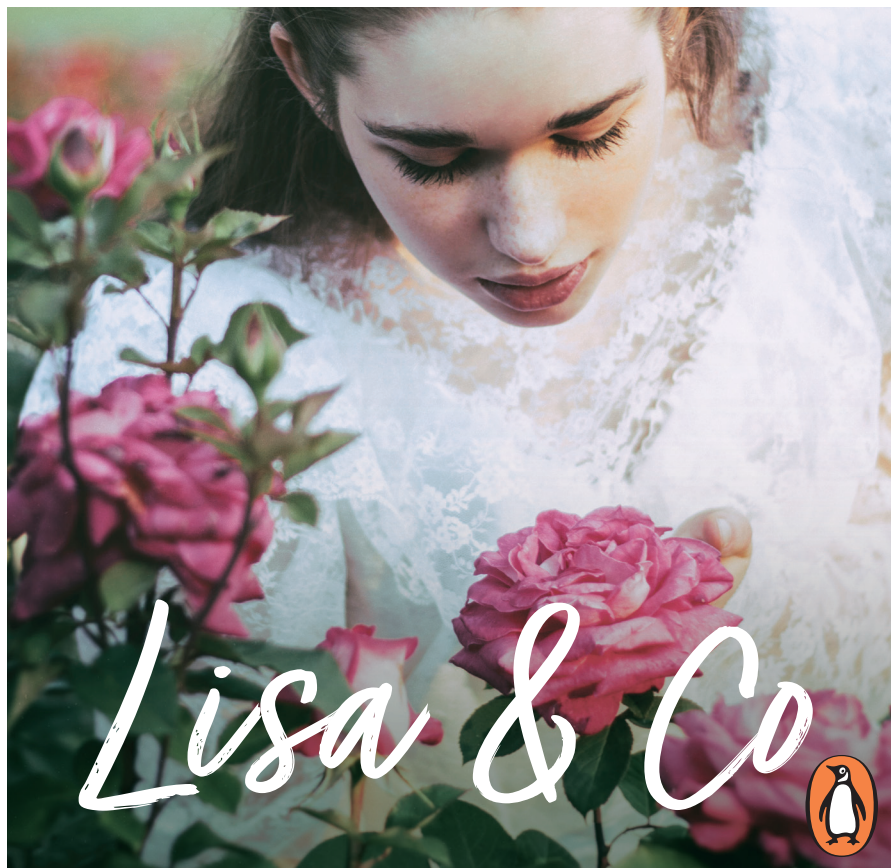


THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JILLY COOPER



Lisa & Co



Jilly Cooper is a journalist, author and media superstar. The author of many number one bestselling books, she lives in Gloucestershire.

She has been awarded honorary doctorates by the Universities of Gloucestershire and Anglia Ruskin, and won the inaugural Comedy Women in Print lifetime achievement award in 2019. She was also appointed DBE in 2024 for services to literature and charity.

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By Jilly Cooper

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Rivals

Polo

The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous

Appassionata

Score!

Pandora

Wicked!

Jump!

Mount!

Tackle!

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How to Stay Married

How to Survive from Nine to Five

Jolly Super

Men and Supermen

Jolly Super Too

Women and Superwomen

Work and Wedlock

Jolly Superlative

Super Men and Super Women

Super Jilly

Class

Super Cooper

Intelligent and Loyal

Jolly Marsupial

Animals in War

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Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with Patrick Lichfield)

How to Survive Christmas

Turn Right at the Spotted Dog

Angels Rush In

Araminta's Wedding

Between the Covers

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Little Mabel's Great Escape
Little Mabel Wins
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For Rosemary Nolan with love and gratitude
because she encouraged me to write these stories
in the first place

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Introduction

All my life I wanted to be a writer and scribbled away at short stories, plays, and the first chapters of frightful novels, but never tried very hard to get anything published. When I was twenty-nine, while employed in the publicity department of William Collins the publishers, a friend, Cherry Lewis, told me she was working on a new Odhams magazine for teenagers called *Intro*. She introduced me to the editor, Marjorie Fergusson, who asked me if I'd like to edit the fiction. She was looking for stories, she said, which were funny and realistic, and would appeal to the new, optimistic, flower-power mood of the late sixties.

At first, the only stories I could find were either too heavily romantic and humourless, or too pornographic for a teenage magazine, which still didn't allow you to mention any parts of the female anatomy between the neck and the kneecaps. We did publish, however, a lovely story by Virginia Ironside, and another by a then unknown writer called Beryl Bainbridge.

Finally, in despair of ever finding enough stories, I

sat down and wrote one myself. For a week I bit my nails, then Marjorie Fergusson sent for me. ‘You’re a rotten editor,’ she said, ‘and this story is no good for us, but it’s well written. If I were you I’d give up any ideas of editing, and concentrate on writing.’

I walked back to Collins on air. For the next year, I did very little work for either of my two jobs, but instead spent my time in office hours writing stories. The first one, *Temporary Set-Back*, was published in *Intro* in 1967. Others followed: *The Red Angora Dress*, *Christmas Stocking* and *An Uplifting Evening*. Few experiences have ever equalled the ecstasy of seeing my name in print for the first time. With *Sister To The Bride* and *May The Best Girl Win*, I even achieved the dizzy heights of *Woman’s Own*. *The Square Peg*, one of my favourite stories, appeared in *Woman’s Weekly*. *Petticoat* published *Lisa* and *Forsaking All Others*. *Johnnie Casanova* appeared in *19*. *Political Asylum*, written in 1968, never found a home in a magazine at all, everyone then considering it to be far too risqué and probably libellous as well.

It was on the strength of these stories, which are all gathered together in this book, that another friend, Ilsa Yardly, introduced me to Godfrey Smith, then editor of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine, who asked me to write a piece on being a young wife. As a result of this article, Harold Evans, then editor of the *Sunday Times*, gave me a column on the *Look* pages, and I was suddenly launched on a brand new journalistic career.

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This book also contains three long stories started in the sixties, which I finally finished this year. They are *Kate's Wedding*, *A Pressing Engagement* and *The Ugly Swan*.

I cannot pretend that these stories are literate. They are written purely to entertain. I have updated where possible but their mood is rooted firmly in the sixties, when we all lived it up and had a great deal more fun, I think, than people do today. It was a time before the women's movement had gained so much ascendancy, when the young were still optimistic about marriage, and believed that God was in his Heaven if all was Mr Right with the world.

Jilly Cooper, 1981

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A Pressing Engagement

Darrell French did not look like a film director. He wore a pinstriped suit, a regimental tie, and a watch chain looped across his waistcoat. He was washing down Rennies with Perrier water, drunk straight from the bottle, and he had the most chaotic office Hester had ever seen. Books, scripts, papers, copies of *Spotlight* and *The Stage* were piled so high on his desk, it was like talking to someone over a garden wall.

‘My last PA,’ he said wearily, ‘spent all day painting her nails, talking to her girlfriends on the telephone, and screwing my most important clients. She couldn’t type, or do shorthand, or spell, or even make Nescafé. She once tried to book Nanette Newman for the lead in a war film instead of Paul Newman.’

Hester burst out laughing.

‘Believe me,’ said Darrell French, ‘it was not funny at the time.’

The telephone rang. It was several seconds before he could locate it in the débris on his desk.

‘Well, put him through . . . Hi, David, how are you . . . Bugger,’ he rattled the receiver button

hysterically, 'you cut him off, you imbecile . . . well get him back again . . . David, yes Niven, at the South of France number . . . you'd better go through the exchange then.'

He sighed and put down the telephone receiver, staring at Hester beadily. 'As you can see, I am up the proverbial ordure creek. I'm entirely dependent on a decent PA and I'm fed up with flash, beautiful, illiterate girls who are not prepared to work, but who find the idea of movies glamorous. In the last two days, I have interviewed more than a hundred girls. You're the only one who's taken the trouble to wear a skirt.'

He looked at Hester again, taking in the round sweet face, the gently curving mouth, the shiny copper hair drawn loosely into a coil at the nape of the neck, and the skin as clear and brownly glowing as Pears' soap.

'You seem a nice girl,' he went on dubiously, 'but I could be wrong. I must also tell you that I am a happily married man with three children, for whom I have to pay nine thousand pounds a year in school fees after tax. This I am capable of doing if things are running smoothly at the office. I have never made a pass at any of my PA's.'

'You seem to have had an awful time,' said Hester sympathetically.

'I need a lot of cherishing,' said Darrell French. 'I'm off to Nairobi on Monday fortnight to make a television series of *The Grass is Singing*.'

'Doris Lessing?' asked Hester.

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‘Well, that’s a step in the right direction,’ said Darrell French. ‘Can you get away from your present job by then?’

‘Oh, yes please,’ breathed Hester.

‘Well, you’d better go and get some jabs – cholera, yellow fever, TAB – that one’s nasty, probably lay you out for twenty-four hours. Is your passport in order?’

Hester nodded incredulously. ‘Are you actually offering me the job?’

‘I am. Is a thousand enough?’

‘A year?’ asked Hester, her face falling.

Darrell French laughed. ‘No, a month. You’re not married or heavily involved or anything are you?’

Hester’s mind was spinning at the thought of so much money. She hesitated for a moment before answering – you could hardly call her involvement with Julian heavy. ‘No,’ she finally said, ‘definitely not.’

‘Good – this job is likely to take you abroad for weeks, even months on end, and husbands don’t like that very much.’

Hester tried to ring Julian from a telephone box the moment she was a safe distance from Darrell French’s office. She absolutely hated being the one to call him, particularly as he hadn’t telephoned her for over a week. But a dazzling new job was surely a legitimate excuse. It was Julian after all who had always nagged her to get out of her present job, and she could sound happy and on top of the world,

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instead of stiff and stammering as she would have done normally. Her hands grew damp on the receiver, as the number rang on and on. Julian must be out or not answering. He often switched off his telephone when he was immersed in work.

Coming out of the telephone box, Hester went straight into an off-licence and bought a bottle of Dom Perignon. Then she hailed a taxi. If she was going to be earning twelve thousand pounds a year, she could afford a few luxuries.

‘I got the job,’ she shouted, as she rushed into the outer office which she shared with Beverly, the Sales Director’s secretary.

‘Fantastic,’ said Beverly, who had finished her frugal lunch of cottage cheese, flavoured with prawns, and was now stirring Sweetex with a ball-point pen into a paper cup of black coffee.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Hester, unpinning her hair, so it fell bronze and shining to her shoulders. ‘Oodles of money, and such a sweet man, and David Niven rang up in the middle. I’ve bought this to celebrate.’ She waved the bottle of champagne.

‘I’m on a diet,’ said Beverly, ‘and you’ve got the Fisher-Holmes report to type this afternoon.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Hester, ripping the gold paper off the top of the bottle with her fingernails, ‘two weeks on Monday, I’m off to Kenya on location.’

‘Blimey,’ said Beverly, getting a couple of plastic mugs out of the cupboard. ‘What on earth will Mr Petrie say?’

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Yes indeed, wondered Hester, what would Mr Petrie say? She had worked for him for six years, ever since she'd left her secretarial college. Although the work had been hard and often boring, she had been so fond of everyone in the office, and Mr Petrie had always looked so mortified every time she suggested she might move on, that she'd been unable to tear herself away.

Recently, however, she'd reached the end of her tether. She had been working late every night, Julian seemed to be showing less and less interest in her, and she never met any new men. Well, she'd got herself out of the rut by landing a new job. Now she had to face the awful task of telling Mr Petrie.

The cork flew out of the window, endangering the lives of two pigeons mating on the roof, and the champagne, shaken in Hester's excitement, gushed all over the faded green carpet, as she filled up the two mugs.

'To your brilliant career,' said Beverly. 'How many calories are there in champagne?'

'Hardly any,' said Hester. 'I know – I'll tell Mr Petrie I've got engaged.'

'You haven't,' said Beverly.

'I can pretend I have. Not to Julian – I'm much too superstitious to risk that, but I'll say I've had a whirlwind courtship and am suddenly going to marry someone else.'

'Dodgy,' said Beverly, 'he's bound to want to know who he is.'

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Hester had another brainwave. 'I'll say I'm going to marry Nico.'

'Who's he?'

'Nicholas Calvert – we were brought up together, he's the only platonic friend I've got.'

'Won't he mind?' asked Beverly.

'He won't know,' said Hester.

Mr Petrie had had a good lunch. His white hair was slightly ruffled, his face more magenta than ever. As a gesture to the heat of the day, he had discarded his waistcoat. When Hester brought in her shorthand book, he smiled fondly at her, as well he might. Mr Petrie's continuing existence at Bateman and Mathers, when he was well beyond retiring age, was entirely due to Hester's efficiency. All day long she was a captive audience, forced to listen to his jokes and his troubles, smiling at his dictated quips, correcting his grammar, and steering him with skilled anonymity through the day's routine. Mr Petrie only appreciated that Hester was sympathetic on the ear, and almost more delightful on the eye. He thought how particularly fetching she looked today, lushly spilling out of her new willow-green suit.

He gave her some letters. Hester reminded him he would need the draft of the Fisher-Holmes report by that evening, double-spaced so that he could tinker about with it at home. Then buoyed up by half a bottle of champagne, and doodling frantically around the spirals of her notebook, she gave in her notice.

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Mr Petrie's magenta face lost a few degrees of colour. 'Oh Hester, you can't leave me.'

'I must,' she said, going scarlet at the thumping lie, 'I'm getting married you see.'

This was a different matter altogether. Mr Petrie was a deeply sentimental man. Immediately he waddled round the desk and kissed her on the cheek. 'My dear! Congratulations! It couldn't have happened to a nicer person. And who is the very lucky young man – is it Julian?' he asked a shade doubtfully.

Hester crossed her fingers behind her back. 'Well, actually no, it's an old friend from my childhood called Nicholas Calvert. We've known each other for ages, but suddenly the whole thing gelled.'

'Splendid, splendid,' said Mr Petrie. 'I wouldn't have liked it if you'd abandoned me for another boss. And I'm so relieved this young man can support you, without your having to go on working. I always feel so sorry for poor young Mrs Davies in accounts, staggering home with all those carrier bags every evening, and then having to clean the flat and cook her husband's dinner. Now when do you want to leave us?'

Hester stepped up the doodling. 'Well, in a fortnight's time, I'm afraid, we're getting married in – er – six weeks, and I really need a month at home first to organize the wedding.'

'That's all right,' said Mr Petrie, suddenly looking doleful. 'I suppose you'd better put an advertisement in the paper – perhaps you could interview the applicants. But oh Hester, I shall miss you.'

Fortunately for Hester, at that moment the internal telephone started ringing. It was the Managing Director wanting Mr Petrie, who promptly started to flap. 'Where's the background to the Marsh and Follifoot deal?'

'I put the memo on your desk this morning,' said Hester soothingly. 'Here it is.' She extracted it from under the *Sporting Times* and a copy of *Playboy*.

'Thank you,' said Mr Petrie, scuttling out of the office, 'I hope you're going to ask Nancy and me to the wedding.'

There were tears in Hester's eyes, as she went out of his office. 'I've done it,' she said to Beverly. 'I haven't felt such a heel since I let my brother's gerbil out of its cage when I was seven, and the cat ate it.'

'Can I be bridesmaid?' said Beverly. 'I wish you hadn't made me drink all that champagne, this letter is straight Tippex.'

Mr Petrie sent for Hester later in the afternoon and said he had just telephoned his wife, Nancy.

'I can't tell you how delighted she is, sad for me, of course, but thrilled for you. She was always saying she couldn't understand why a lovely girl like you wasn't snapped up years ago. She wants to know what your fiancé does.'

'He's a stockbroker – in the City,' said Hester, sensing trouble, but not sure from what direction.

'Splendid,' said Mr Petrie. 'Well, Nancy's got to come up to London some time for the Constable

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exhibition at the Royal Academy, and she wants us to give a little engagement party for you both at the office that day, so she can say goodbye to you.'

Hester turned as green as her suit. 'Nico's going abroad next week.'

'Well, make it the week after,' said Mr Petrie, 'it'll be your last week, so we can give you a royal send-off.'

Nico was with a client, when Hester telephoned his office. He rang back when she was in Mr Petrie's office giving him the Fisher-Holmes report and the remaining letters to sign.

'Your "fiancée's" on the 'phone,' said Beverly, popping her head round the door, with a malicious gleam in her eyes.

'Put it through here, I won't listen,' said Mr Petrie untruthfully.

'Hello, Nico,' said Hester picking up the telephone, and once again blushing scarlet.

'Hes, how nice to hear you.'

'Darling!' Hester dropped her voice an octave, 'Are we meeting up later this evening?'

Nico sounded surprised. 'Were we meant to be? I've got to drive Annabel to the airport.'

'Well, after that then, it doesn't matter how late it is.'

'Can't we make it tomorrow?' said Nico.

Hester looked at Mr Petrie's fountain pen – static over the blue writing paper. 'I do *so* want to see you, darling,' she said even more huskily.

‘OK, I’ll drop round about eleven,’ said Nico, a little taken aback by Hester’s insistence.

‘That’ll be lovely.’ She took a deep breath, ‘And, Nico darling, I do love you.’

Nico sounded startled. ‘Hes, have you been drinking?’

‘Me too, darling. I can’t wait to see you. Bye, my angel,’ murmured Hester, and slamming down the receiver she fled out of the room.

Ah young love, thought Mr Petrie.

‘How the hell did Machiavelli do it?’ said Hester, collapsing behind her desk and putting her burning face in her hands.

‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave,’ said Beverly. ‘I must say your “fiancé” sounds delicious on the telephone.’

‘He’s infinitely too nice to get caught up in a mess like this,’ agreed Hester.

Hester bought a bottle of whisky, and sat in her empty flat, wishing Julian would ring her. She looked at his photograph on the mantelpiece: surly, hopelessly good-looking, dark eyes brooding with an intensity that he certainly didn’t feel towards her. On the table, with the top page coated in ginger cat fur, were the three copies she had typed of his latest book. It was called: *Stratification, Gender-Role Stereotyping and Sexual Behaviour Patterns Among Middle Class Siblings, with Special Reference to Canvey Island*.

Hester hadn’t understood much of it but believed

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Julian, who was senior sociology professor at London University, when he told her it was a deeply significant, seminal work. The typescript had been ready for him a week now, but she liked to keep an excuse to ring him up her sleeve, just in case she got too desperate. Now she had her new job to tell him about as well, but although she'd tried his flat several times that evening there was no answer. She had been in love with Julian for two years. On good days, she fantasized about their future together. On bad days she felt cut off from all human warmth.

Above the forest of shiny green plants on the window ledge, she watched the colour drain out of the Cambridge-blue sky, and the great plane trees round the common fill up with black shadows. It was one of those stiflingly humid nights that descend on London like a blanket. Every window was open in the flat in the hope of inducing some breeze to enter.

Instead, Hockney, Hester's ginger tomcat, pushed his way through the plants mewing disapprovingly, and landed with a heavy thud at her feet. He started to weave furrily round her bare legs, then thinking better of it, gave her a right and left on the calf with fat, unsheathed paws.

'Nasty, ungrateful creature,' chided Hester. 'I bought you a tin of salmon to celebrate. We're in the money, Hockney.'

In the kitchen, she opened the tin. Hockney, however, took a few mouthfuls, and then disdainfully scratched up all the newspaper under the plate, and wandered off into the drawing room to wash himself

on Julian's typescript. Hester shooed him away, and shook the ginger fur off the top copy.

If Julian had had this typed professionally, she thought, it would have cost him at least two hundred and fifty pounds – his writing had been absolute murder to decipher. Then she felt guilty. Of course she had done it for love, but one needed a little love in return. She knew it was nearing the end of the university term and he must be desperately busy. Perhaps in the long summer vac, he'd have more time for her.

She looked at her watch – a quarter to eleven – Nico probably wouldn't have eaten. At least she could make him an omelette. She picked some thyme and marjoram from the window box, and went into the kitchen to chop them up.

Nico Calvert had been the school friend of her elder brother, Michael, that she had liked the best. He used to stay with them often in the holidays, and she'd had a mild crush on him, because he was clever, and quiet, and laughed easily, and never expected her to be anything she wasn't. She was also impressed by the way he didn't mind if he lost at the endless games of tennis, croquet, poker and vingt-et-un, they'd played through those long, hot summers. In a way she felt he was more of a brother to her than Michael.

Michael, who'd been back to stay with Nico's family in Somerset, had often implied that Nico was rather smart. His mother was a peer's daughter, the family seemed to own a lot of land, and after Nico

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left school, he'd been considered something of a Deb's Delight, and often appeared in the gossip columns photographed with a succession of pretty girls. But he never dropped names, or boasted about the invitations, thick as a pack of cards, on his mantelpiece.

Nor did he ever grumble that (because of the crippling estate duties when his father died) he was the first member of the family who'd seriously had to earn his own living. He was obviously miserable working as a stockbroker – it was rather like keeping a gun dog cooped up in a stuffy London bedsitter.

For the last eighteen months, since Nico had fallen in love with Annabel, Hester had seen much less of him. Annabel was a model, with infinitely more beauty than talent, who wanted to break into acting. She was enormously fancied in the market place, and, rather like Hockney, was all soft curves and melting eyes one moment, then scratching and clawing the next. She gave Nico a hard time because he wasn't rich enough to take her to nightclubs every evening, or fly her – when she felt so inclined – to exotic parties in distant corners of the world. Yet she raised hell if he looked at other women. Hester had met her twice and disliked her exceedingly. She was the sort of person who only watered plants when they were about to expire.

Nico arrived about eleven. He was wearing a yellow and white striped shirt, and had taken off his tie, and the jacket of his dark grey suit. He looked tired and very pale. Annabel must have been playing

him up, thought Hester savagely. He was tall and rangy, with straight sandy hair, and nothing exceptional about his bony face, except freckles, a flat nose and sleepy amber eyes. Hester poured him a very stiff drink.

‘I bet you haven’t had anything to eat,’ she said.

‘I had lunch, I think,’ said Nico collapsing onto the sofa. ‘I’m not very hungry, too bloody hot.’

‘It must be hell in the City.’

‘My office is like a sauna.’

‘How’s your mother?’ asked Hester.

‘Still missing my father, but getting over it – slowly. Her real problems are financial. The farm manager’s ripping her off right, left and centre. I really ought to pack in the Stock Exchange, and go home and run things.’

‘Why don’t you?’ said Hester. ‘You always wanted to.’

‘Wouldn’t earn enough money,’ said Nico. ‘My father let things go so badly at the end, it’ll be five years before we start breaking even, and that’s dependent on good summers. I can’t see Annabel as a farmer’s wife either.’

‘She might get used to it,’ said Hester unconvincingly. ‘She’d have you.’

‘And hay fever,’ said Nico. ‘She hates the country.’

‘How is she?’ asked Hester, noticing that the little bunched lines at the corners of his eyes had deepened since they’d last met.

‘Never at her best before a flight.’

‘Where’s she gone?’

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‘Rome, modelling for *Vogue*, and auditioning for some film part.’ He looked miserably down at his glass, ‘We had a hell of a row before she left, she threw a telephone directory at me.’

‘Which one?’ said Hester.

Nico smiled slightly. ‘The E-K, at least it wasn’t Debrett’s. Fortunately she missed and smashed that Meissen bowl Mickie Middlesex gave her for Christmas, which put her in an even worse mood. We didn’t speak on the way to the airport. Then I’m sure I saw Jamie Cavendish going into the departure lounge just ahead of us.’

‘Doesn’t he have rather a nice wife?’ said Hester.

‘He’s had several,’ said Nico gloomily. ‘It doesn’t stop him running after Annabel.’

‘Might have been a coincidence,’ said Hester soothingly. ‘He was probably flying somewhere quite different.’

Nico shook his head. ‘Probably explained why she was in such a foul mood, expect she was terrified of being rumbled. Christ, I’m sorry, I must stop belly-aching.’

‘Annabelly-aching,’ said Hester, going into the kitchen. ‘Help yourself to another drink, I’m going to make you some supper.’

She broke three eggs into a bowl with cream, salt and pepper, and was just adding the herbs when Nico wandered in.

‘What was the reason for that extraordinary conversation we had on the telephone this afternoon?’ he said, stooping to rub Hockney behind the ears.

'I was just coming to that,' said Hester cautiously.

As she waited for the butter to smoke in the frying pan, she told him about the new job. Nico was delighted.

'I've been moaning on about my boring miseries, and you've been bursting with this amazing piece of news. I'm so sorry, Hes. Tell me more about it.'

'Well, it's going to take me abroad a lot.'

'That's a good thing for a start – get you away from the History Man.'

'I wish you wouldn't call him that,' snapped Hester, tipping the eggs into the frying pan. 'Julian isn't always having affairs with his students, nor any of the dons' wives either. He just works terribly, terribly hard.'

'Producing rubbish like that typescript next door – Julian knows as much about sexual behaviour patterns as Hockney knows about hang-gliding.'

Hester giggled. 'Hockney's very good at hang-gliding, you should have seen him halfway up Julian's trouser legs when he was a kitten.'

'How's Julian's marriage?'

'He's not living with his wife anymore, and he keeps talking about getting a divorce,' said Hester, pulling forward the cooked edges of the omelette so that the liquid in the centre ran out into the hot fat.

Nico admired the opulent curves of her bosom and hips, and the ankles, still slender despite the punishing heat of the evening.

'You're a very attractive girl,' he said, 'totally

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wasted on Julian. Why don't you find some nice, uncomplicated chap for a change?'

'Why don't you pack in Annabel, and find *yourself* some nice, uncomplicated girl?'

'Annabel is not in the same league as Julian,' said Nico coldly, 'who is a man of deep and frequent idiocy.'

'Annabel is a four-star bitch,' snapped Hester.

For a second they glared at each other, then Nico laughed. 'You are speaking of the woman I lust after. All right, pax, let's keep off the subject of both of them.'

'All right,' muttered Hester, turning a perfect omelette onto an emerald green plate. She buttered two pieces of French bread, and put them on either side. 'There. Now eat it while it's hot.'

'Not likely to get cold in this weather,' said Nico. 'You are an angel, what it is to feel cherished.'

He took the plate into the drawing room. Hester followed with some Brie which was beginning to slide off the plate, and a bowl of greengages.

'Tell me more about the job,' said Nico, settling himself on the sofa. 'You'd better watch it, film crews get frightfully lecherous when they're abroad.' He took an unenthusiastic bite of the omelette.

'My new boss is heavily married,' explained Hester.

'Just like Julian,' said Nico. Then seeing the expression on Hester's face, 'All right, pax, pax. This really is a most delicious omelette, perhaps I am hungry after all.'

After he'd wolfed it down and eaten the two

slices of bread, and a large piece of Brie and five greengages, he got out his cigarette case, and offered one to Hester, who shook her head.

‘I’ve given up. I’m a slave to propaganda.’

‘Now tell me why,’ Nico said, ‘you were so amorous on the telephone this afternoon and why it was so vital that I came round this evening.’

Hester scuffed the carpet with her foot. ‘I’ve got myself into a bit of a spot, and you’re the only person who can get me out of it.’

Nico gazed at her through a haze of cigarette smoke. ‘That sounds horribly ominous.’

Blushing, she told him about pretending to be engaged in order not to hurt Mr Petrie’s feelings.

Nico grinned. ‘Bloody idiot, but typical, I’ve never forgotten you crying your eyes out when Michael ran over that weasel in the road.’

‘But that’s not all,’ she went on miserably. ‘Mr Petrie’s insisting on giving a farewell party at the office for me and my fictitious fiancé.’

Nico whistled. ‘Wow – that *is* tricky. Won’t Julian oblige?’

‘I said it was you,’ said Hester in a small voice.

‘You what!’ It was like a clap of thunder. Even Hockney jumped off Julian’s typescript.

‘I couldn’t think of anyone else, and now he wants to give the party any day in the next fortnight.’

Nico shook his head. ‘Uh-uh, you just tell him I’ve been posted to the Paris office.’

‘He caught me off guard, he already knows you’re here.’

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‘But it’s bound to leak out.’

‘It won’t – no one in the office knows anyone who knows you.’

‘Everywhere,’ said Nico, with a total lack of conceit, ‘someone knows someone who knows me.’

‘Just one evening for a couple of hours,’ pleaded Hester, ‘for the sake of our long and trouble-free friendship.’

‘No,’ said Nico. ‘I’d have to miss *The Archers* – take Hockney instead.’

But Hester sensed weakness. ‘Oh *please*.’

‘Well, I was rather good as Orsino in the school play,’ reflected Nico, ‘and the boy playing Olivia – it was Charlie Paignton-Taylor actually – wasn’t nearly as attractive as you, Hes, so I suppose I shouldn’t find it too hard to play an infatuated lover. All right, I’ll do it – just for one night, then.’

He stubbed out his cigarette, and reached for his diary. ‘Now I know why it’s called an engagement book. What about Wednesday week. We’d better have lunch that day too so you can brief me.’

Hester went over, and crouched down beside him. ‘I can’t thank you enough. You are the dearest, dearest person in the world.’

‘May I get myself another drink then?’ said Nico. ‘And then can we watch *Soap*.’

‘Oh yes please,’ said Hester, turning on the television. ‘Julian never lets me watch it, he thinks it’s too silly for words.’

‘Never send to know for whom the Bells toll,’ said

Nico, pouring two fingers of whisky into his glass, 'Annabel says I drink too much.'

'Probably drives you to it,' said Hester. Then seeing the mutinous, bulldog expression on his face, 'Oh, sorry, pax pax.'

The temperature rocketed, London wilted. Hester spent the next twelve days working late at the office to make sure everything was in order for when she left. She trailed round the shops in her lunch hour looking for clothes for Kenya, and wondering if she really wanted to spend the next few months in a country that was probably full of snakes, and twice as hot as this. The necessary jabs made her feel awful, and almost too weak to drag herself out in the evening to catch up on old Darrell French films, which were so romantically bitter-sweet, they made her long and long for Julian. He still hadn't rung. She wished she could have a jab against him. The rest of the time was spent worrying frantically whether Hockney would survive being looked after by a girlfriend while she was away, and even worse, whether poor Nico would survive the engagement party.

The whole thing seemed to be snowballing alarmingly. Not only did everyone in the office know about her engagement, and keep bombarding her with questions, but also all the reps who called on the firm, and all Mr Petrie's numerous business cronies who rang up, seemed to have heard the good news, and were anxious to congratulate her.