Chapter One

ON A FINE EVENING IN SEPTEMBER MELISSA Hallam sat in Kensington Gardens with a young man to whom she had been engaged for three days. They had begun to think of the future and she was trying to explain her reasons for keeping the engagement a secret as long as possible.

'If my mother knows of it first,' she said, 'my father will be wounded to the quick.'

John Beauclerc had only just learnt that he was to have a father-in-law. He had always supposed that Mr Hallam, whose name was never mentioned, must be dead. But it appeared that he had merely left his family and was living by himself in a hotel at Budleigh Salterton.

'Can't you,' he suggested, 'write and tell him first?'

'That would wound my mother to the quick.'

'You could tell her next morning, just when he was reading your letter. Then they'd know simultaneously.'

'Ah, but the morning is a bad time with my mother. She is at leisure and able to listen to one. Fatal! She will instantly discover all the objections.'

'But are there so many objections? I don't see . . .'

'Of course there aren't. None. But that is so dull. My mother believes that life ought to be tense and dramatic. She would prefer one's choice to be disastrous. If you had been born in the gutter, or were tubercular and couldn't support one, she would be most sympathetic. As it is, I must choose a moment when she is involved in some other drama, late for an appointment, too frantic to listen. Then she'll say: Marry anybody you like but don't keep me now! You don't know my mother.'

He agreed that he did not. He had only met Mrs Hallam once and she had frightened him. He had fallen in love with Melissa during the summer holidays, at a country-house party, and their courtship, after their return to London, had been carried on outside her home. He had called for her in Campden Hill Square, where she lived, and taken her out to dine and dance, but she generally ran down the steps as his taxi drew up at the door. On the first occasion, however, she had not been quite ready, and he had been shown into a large dim room, full of flowers and engraved glass and Hallams, to wait until she came down. They were a formidable family. He was daunted by the suavity with which little Julius, who was at Eton, offered him sherry. He was chilled by the languid sophistication of Valentine, a schoolgirl sister. And the tense, haggard gaze of Mrs Hallam terrified him out of his wits until he realised that she was not looking at him at all and that her thoughts were elsewhere. They were not, as he had at first supposed, scrutinising and condemning him. He was merely one of the procession which called nightly for Melissa. They were vague about his name and he was still disentangling himself from another John, a John Hobbes, when Melissa tripped in, wearing the flowers he had sent her. Mrs Hallam's

enormous eyes rested on these for less than a second, but in that instant he realised that pink carnations were a mistake. The odious Hobbes would, he supposed, have sent orchids.

He was soon to know better. During that first outing he picked up a great deal of useful information. Orchids would have been a worse mistake. She disliked conventional flowers. She had a friend who kept a flower-shop and would make up an amusing corsage of sweet-williams or nasturtiums, or would send something arranged for the hair, which Melissa preferred that summer. Yellow, orange, red or white blossoms would be welcome; blue and pink should be avoided. She did not tell him that her friend was inexpensive, but he soon discovered this, with considerable relief. All his discoveries, indeed, were of a kind to raise his spirits, for he had been wondering how often he could afford to take Melissa out, and how he was to press his suit if he did not take her out. But it seemed that her tastes were unexpectedly simple. She drank very little. She would enjoy a country walk, a Promenade Concert or an afternoon at Kew. By some miracle everything was made easy for him, since she had decided to marry him while still down in Hampshire and intended him to save up his money for their honeymoon. When John Hobbes took her out she cost him a pretty penny.

She had never talked very much about her family, with the exception of her elder brother, Humphrey, whom she adored. When she spoke of him her whole aspect changed: her eyes sparkled and she would begin to laugh. He was in Africa, among the French Dandawa, behaving very badly, said Melissa, with fond pride, earning no money and wounding both his parents to the quick. Having qualified as a doctor he had turned himself into a vet and was studying cattle diseases, simply for love of a black man called Kolo, king of a

poor small tribe, to whom he had attached himself in Paris. In Kolo's country the cattle pined and died, and nobody knew why. The people were desperately poor, but the tribe was isolated, the disease did not spread to richer territories, and the French Government was apathetic. Kolo, however, was not. By some means or other he had managed to educate himself and had scraped up the money to get to Paris and plead his cause. Official ears were deaf but he had made some valuable friends. A coloured American singer, struck by the force and heroism of Kolo's character, had offered money for research and Humphrey Hallam had undertaken the work. Melissa pretended to laugh at the whole enterprise, and called Dandawaland 'Humptopia', but John saw very clearly that she was consumed with anxiety lest the money should run out before any positive success had been achieved.

'If only Hump were at home,' she now said, 'the whole problem would be easier. There wouldn't be a problem. When he is at home everybody behaves sensibly. I don't think my parents would have parted company if Hump had been here.'

'Why did they . . . what did they . . . I mean what was the trouble?'

'Oh, a magnolia tree.'

'A magnolia tree?'

'Yes. My mother wanted it in the back garden and my father in the front garden. He was out when it arrived, and my mother put it in the back garden. So, when he came in, he said it was the last straw and went to live at Budleigh Salterton.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I am. That was exactly what happened. It isn't a legal separation. They are emotional gluttons, both of them. They gobbled up every sensation they could extract from marriage,

and now they are seeing if separation won't provide them with a few more. I think they miss each other dreadfully. They have nobody to make scenes with.'

Melissa broke off and mused for a while, her pretty eyebrows slightly lifted in distaste.

'Personally,' she remarked, 'I am an emotional ascetic. But if Hump had been at home he would have done something. He would have gone to Budleigh Salterton and been so intolerable that my father would have been obliged to come home to get away from him.'

'But why Budleigh Salterton?'

'Oh, my father has a sort of romance about that place. He believes that the happiest years of his life were spent there as a child. Actually it was only three weeks, when he was recovering from measles. But, as he has never been happy anywhere else for longer than three days, I daresay he does feel attached to it. He gets rather bored there and loves an excuse for coming home and setting us all by the ears. He did that when my sister Cressida got married. And I suppose we must expect him at our wedding.'

'You don't sound very . . .' John checked himself and put it in another way. 'Which of your parents,' he asked, 'are you fondest of?'

The answer to this question was of some importance to him. Melissa had just described herself as an emotional ascetic and he feared that this might be perfectly true. There had been moments during their courtship when, in spite of his attachment to her, he had found himself wondering if she was capable of any strong feeling. She had revealed very little of her heart to him, and, though she had said that she loved him, she had made the avowal in so cool a manner that he doubted if she knew what she was saying. He put his question

therefore a little anxiously, and was rewarded by a smile of approval.

'I'm so glad,' she said, 'that you don't mind putting the preposition last. Jane Austen frequently did.'

'Melissa! I asked a question. Of which are you fondest?'

'Now don't alter it just when I've said I like it. Which am I fondest of? Really, I don't know. For years I've been so perfectly exasperated with both of them that I might say I'm usually fondest of the one I'm not with.'

This was not very reassuring. He watched her unhappily as she picked up a large straw hat which lay on the grass beside her. Her expression was pleasant but her voice had been chilly.

'I must go,' she said, getting up. 'Cressida is coming to supper.'

'You're very fond of her, I expect,' he pleaded as he scrambled to his feet.

She turned to him with an amused stare.

'How anxious you are that I should be fond of people!'

'I want to believe that you have a very sweet nature.'

'Oh, but I have a very sweet nature. I like most people. I'd like everyone if I could. Dislike is so fatiguing.'

'But do you really love anybody, Melissa?'

'You should know.'

She gave him a glance, soft and ardent, which made him feel quite dizzy. When he had recovered, she was walking quickly away across the thick summer grass. He rushed after her, aware of people everywhere – people with dogs, people with perambulators, strolling couples, recumbent couples, and children playing organised games. He was obliged to walk sedately by her side through the alternate patches of sun and shadow, towards Notting Hill Gate.

'I wish . . .' he murmured.

'I know. But my mother is going to Italy soon, and I shall have the house to myself, because Julius and Valentine will be back at school. You can come to supper every evening, and we shan't have the whole of London looking on.'

'Oh, Melissa! How did you know what I was thinking?'

'Ha! Ha! I'm Madame Leonore, the celebrated clairvoyante. My crystal tells me that you still hanker for a list of the people I love.'

'Yes I do. I want to know all about you.'

'How dangerous!'

'I want to love them too.'

'How ambitious! Well . . . there are three. But you only have to love two, because Narcissus came to a bad end.'

'Hump?'

'Yes. And for years Hump was the only one. Till I was eighteen I could count the people I loved upon my thumb. But then I met . . .' Melissa paused and smiled to herself before she finished: 'Then I met Lucy Carmichael.'

'Oh! A girl! This girl who is going to be married . . . that you're going to be bridesmaid to?'

'Keep it up! Your prepositions beat Jane Austen's.'

'She's no relation, is she? Just a friend.'

'Umhm. Just an old College chum.'

'What is she like? Is she pretty? Is she at all like you, I mean?'

'Not a bit. She is tall and slender, while I am short and dumpy.'

'You are not. You aren't dumpy.'

'I would be, if I wasn't as light as a bird. She has short, light-brown, curly hair. Very attractive.'

'So have you. I mean your hair is dark but it curls.'

'I'm glad you think so. Lucy's nose is aquiline, not *retroussé*, and her eyes are grey. She has a very delicate skin, too pale, but that's easily remedied. I wouldn't call her pretty. When she is well and happy she is extremely beautiful. When she is out of sorts or depressed she is all nose, and dashes about like an intelligent greyhound after an electric hare. She has a natural tendency to vehemence which is unbecoming to one so tall, but under my influence she occasionally restrains it. She believes me to be very sophisticated – a perfect woman of the world. She admires my taste beyond anything and does her best to imitate me. She is incautious and intrepid. She will go to several wrong places, and arrive at the right one, while I am still making up my mind to cross the road. She is my opposite in character. She is cheerful and confident and expects to be happy. She taught me how to enjoy myself. Until I knew her I had always been convinced that I must be destined for misery. I thought it safest to expect the worst. I suppose it was because everything in my home has always been so stormy and insecure; I was brought up never to expect anything to go right. Lucy forced me to believe that I might be happy. I don't expect I'd have had the courage to marry you, to marry anybody, if it hadn't been for Lucy.'

'In that case,' said John, 'I shall have no difficulty in loving her.'

'You will oblige me by trying to do so. She's not everybody's cup of tea. My mother is very supercilious about her, simply because her father, who is dead, was only a chartered accountant, and her mother is a woman doctor in Surrey. In my mother's idiom, Lucy is "a very ordinary girl". And in some ways she is still rather childish. It is her ambition to be suave and *mondaine*, which she will never be. When she remembers this she undulates about with a remote smile.

When she forgets, which is pretty nearly all the time, she prances along and roars with laughter.'

'Did you know her before you went to Oxford?'

'No. We were freshers together and took to each other the first night, at dinner in Hall. I thought she was the only female in sight who didn't remind me of an earwig. She thought the same thing about me. So we went and sat in my room, and agreed how awful everything seemed to be, and I impressed her with my mulberry house-coat.'

John also was immediately impressed by the mulberry house-coat, though he had never seen it. But he could and did imagine how it would become her.

'So after that,' said Melissa, 'we always went about together. We never accepted an invitation unless it was for both, and we made a very good team. When we arrived at a party everybody said: "Here's Lucy and Melissa!" Or, if they did not, we would just look round the room, and at each other, and laugh a little, and go away, as if we had a much better party waiting round the corner. One girl by herself can't do that. There is nothing more humiliating than having to edge out of a crowded room when nobody has noticed one is there. Are you listening?'

'Oh . . . yes . . . yes . . .' said John, who was still musing on the mulberry house-coat. 'Er . . . is she clever?'

'Lucy? Clever? You do ask the strangest questions. Why, yes, I suppose so. As clever as she needs to be.'

'What class did she get in Schools?'

'A second. She ought to have got a first, but she must needs go and fall in love during our last term, which made hay of her work. It was too bad of her, and entirely against our principles. We had decided not to fall in love till we had left College.'

'But can people always decide whether . . .'

'Of course they can. There is no excuse for falling in love with an undergraduate. What sensible man wants to tie himself up so young? And where's the attraction of a silly man? Our men were all of them very superior men; ambitious men, who meant to get somewhere in the world. We danced and dined with all the future Prime Ministers and Attorney-Generals. We had a glorious time. But, at the end, Lucy had to go and spoil it all. She went to a party without me. I had a headache and cried off, but she had promised to go. It was a cocktail party, and she said she'd just look in for half an hour. She wasn't back at dinner-time. She wasn't back at lock-out. She had to climb into College over the garden wall at half-past two in the morning, and I never did find out what she'd been doing all that time. I don't believe she knew herself. She'd met this man . . . at *least* he wasn't an undergraduate . . . he was staying in Oxford and came to the party; Patrick Reilly. You've heard of him?'

'You mean the explorer?'

Melissa looked doubtful.

'I wouldn't call him that. What has he explored?'

'Doesn't he go to places and write books about them?'

'M'yes. Have you read any?'

'I read the war one – about working with the French Resistance. I thought it pretty good. He must be a remarkable man.'

'Oh? In what way?'

'He seems to have so many adventures.'

'Quite. So then Lucy met Remarkable Reilly at this party and so then it was all over with Lucy.'

Melissa led the way off the grass into the shaded avenue of the Broad Walk.

'That's all,' she said flatly.

'But what kind of a man is he?'

'Haven't you seen his photographs?'

'What is he like to meet, I mean?'

'Oh, irresistible. One can't blame Lucy for a moment. A most elegant brogue, with just a touch of swagger and impudence . . . not offensive, you know . . . endearing! He rushes round having adventures just for the love of it. He's only got to be told: "You can't do that there 'ere" and he goes and does it, and gets away with it, and nobody minds, because he's the eternal boy. He's Mister Peter Pan.'

'But is he *nice*?' persisted the patient John, plodding beside her along the Bayswater Road.

'Can you ask? No woman could ever resist a man like that.'

A pneumatic drill in the road made further conversation impossible for several minutes. John stole glances at Melissa and when the racket had died away behind them he asked why she was looking so sad.

'That,' she said coldly, 'is not the sort of question I care to hear.'

'But you *are* looking sad.'

'So what? I don't look sad in order to be asked what is the matter.'

'I want to understand you.'

'That's quite easy. I'm a very simple, obvious person.'

'But if we are to live together . . .'

'Darling, you'll find me uncommonly easy to live with. I hardly ever have moods. I don't approve of them. I dote on equanimity. But, if a mood should overtake me, I expect that lapse to be pardoned and overlooked, like the hiccups. And if you want to understand it, think of the most obvious explanation.'

An obvious explanation for Melissa's depression was

already tormenting John. He could not quite allow himself to entertain it and stalked along beside her, keeping it at bay, until she suddenly began to laugh.

'No,' she said. 'No, no, no! I was not in love with Remarkable Reilly myself, and I am not marrying you on the rebound.'

'Melissa!'

'How dare you think such a thing, after the description I gave of him?'

'I didn't know . . . I thought . . . you said he's irresistible. You said no woman could . . . then you really think he's a stinker?' cried John, brightening up.

'I've only met him twice, but I think he's bogus. He can climb the foothills of the Himalaya, and write about it as if he'd been up Everest. If he went up the Eiffel Tower I believe he'd write a book about it called *Parisian Escapade*, and there would be a waiting list for it at the libraries. No real adventurer has half so much façade. His talent is for blowing his own trumpet. We've all had adventures. I was machine-gunned myself, at the seaside, when I was a little girl. And you fought from Normandy to the Rhine. If our adventures had happened to Reilly, people would be paying fifteen shillings to read about them.'

Melissa's eyes flashed during this tirade, which was music in John's ears. But he felt obliged, in fairness, to point out that Reilly was talented as a writer.

'I suppose so,' she agreed crossly. 'But if I breathe a word in his favour it appears to cause you pain.'

'Why . . . I could see you were very sad about something.'

'Use your loaf. Consider what else I've told you.'

He used his loaf, and by the time they reached Kensington Church Street he suggested that she had wanted Lucy to marry Hump.

'That's better. Always look for the obvious, when you're dealing with me. There is nothing subtle or mysterious about my nature. What else would a simple, natural girl like me want, when she has a brother and a friend?'

'Do they know each other?'

'No. They've never met. Hump has been in France and Africa ever since I knew Lucy. But they would have met sometime, and they're born for each other. If Lucy wants adventures she couldn't do better than go to Humptopia.'

'I see.'

But he did not see. Melissa might be disappointed at the collapse of a favourite scheme, but he had caught a glimpse of something deeper than disappointment in her face. She was profoundly miserable.

'Here is the tube station,' she said, 'and I think you had better go home, because we might run into my mother at any moment, on her way back from a tea-party, and she might get ideas into her head if she knew how often I am meeting you.'

'Come with me and help me to buy my ticket.'

She laughed, and crossed the road with him and stood beside him while he bought a ticket for Lancaster Gate. They then waited for a lift to appear. It took some time to do so, after the manner of lifts at Notting Hill.

'You're quite right,' she said, interpreting his silence. 'The disappointment over Hump is only a side issue. Go on chasing the obvious.'

'You're sad . . . on Lucy's account?'

'Wretched.'

'Because . . . because you think Reilly's a stinker? You think it's a frightful mistake?'

The hum of the rising lift ceased and the gates opened.

Melissa nodded and turned away without a word. He saw that she was crying.

All that he had learnt of her forbade him to attempt any consolation. He stepped into the lift and sank downwards, deeply moved by her tears, painfully content – sure, at last, that his beloved had a very warm heart.