Imogen

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Extract

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Chapter One

The little West Riding town of Pikely-in-Darrowdale clings to the side of the hillside like a grey squirrel. Above stretches the moor and below, in the valley, where the River Darrow meanders through bright green water meadows, lies Pikely Tennis Club. In the High Street stands the Public Library.

It was a Saturday afternoon in May. Miss Nugent, the Senior Librarian, put down the mauve open-work jumper she was knitting and helped herself to another Lincoln Cream.

'I've never known it so slack,' she said to the pretty girl beside her, who was dreamily sorting books into piles of fiction and non-fiction and putting them on a trolley. 'Everyone must be down at the tournament. Are you going, Imogen?'

The girl nodded. 'For an hour or two. My sister's raving about one of the players – some Wimbledon star. I promised I'd go and look at him.'

'I'm sorry you had to work this afternoon,' said Miss Nugent. 'You're always standing in for Gloria. I wonder if she really was "struck down by

shellfish''. I'm going to ring up in a minute and see how she is.'

'Oh, I wouldn't do that,' said Imogen hastily, knowing perfectly well that Gloria had sloped off to Morecambe for the week-end with a boyfriend, 'The – er – telephone in her digs is in the hall, and I'm sure she's feeling far too weak to stagger down two flights of stairs to answer it.'

Feeling herself blushing at such a lie, she busied about stacking up leaflets entitled *Your Rights as a Ratepayer* and *What to do in Pikely*. Bugger all, Gloria always said, in answer to the latter.

Miss Nugent burrowed inside her cream rayon blouse, and hauled up a bra strap.

'Decided where to go for your holiday yet?'

'Not really,' answered Imogen, wishing some reader would come in and distract Miss Nugent's attention. 'My father's swapping with a vicar in Whitby in September. I might go with him.'

She dreaded discussing holidays; everyone else in the library seemed to have planned trips to exotic places months ago, and talked about nothing else. She extracted a romantic novel called *A Kiss in Tangier* from books destined for the Travel Section and put it on top of the Fiction pile. On the front was a picture of a beautiful couple embracing against a background of amethyst ocean and pale pink minarets. Oh dear, thought Imogen sadly, if only I could go to Tangier and be swept off my size seven feet by a man with a haughty face and long legs.

The library was certainly quiet for a Saturday. In the left-hand corner, where easy chairs were grouped round low tables, an old lady had fallen asleep over Lloyd George's letters, a youth in a leather jacket was browsing through a biography of Kevin Keegan, his lips moving as he read, and little Mr Hargreaves was finishing another chapter of the pornographic novel he didn't dare take home, for fear of his large wife's disapproval. Apart from an earnest young man with a beard and sandals flipping through the volumes of sociology and a coloured girl who got through four romances a day, desperately trying to find one she hadn't read, the place was deserted.

Suddenly the door opened and two middle-aged women came in, red-faced from the hairdressers opposite, smelling of lacquer and grumbling about the wind messing their new hair-dos. Imogen took money for a fine from one, and assured the other that Catherine Cookson really hadn't written another book yet.

'Authors have to write at their own pace you know,' said Miss Nugent reprovingly.

Imogen watched the two women stopping to browse through the novels on the returned books trolley. Funny, she thought wistfully, how people tended to look there first rather than at the shelves, how a book that appeared to be going out a lot was more likely to be in demand. Just like Gloria. Three boys had been in asking for her already that day, and had all looked sceptical on being told the shellfish

story. But Imogen knew they'd all be back again asking for her next week.

You learnt a lot about the locals working in a library. Only this morning Mr Barraclough, who, unknown to his wife, was having a walk-out with the local nymphomaniac, had taken out a book called *How to Live with a Bad Back*. Then Mr York, reputed to have the most untroubled marriage in Pikely, had, with much puffing and blowing, rung in and asked Imogen to reserve *Masters and Johnson on Sexual Inadequacy*. And after lunch Mrs Bottomley, one of her father's newest parish workers and due to do the flowers for the first time in church next week, had crept in and surreptitiously chosen four books on flower arrangement.

'Vivien Leigh's going well,' said Miss Nugent, 'and you'd better put David Niven aside for repair before he falls to pieces. When you've shelved that lot you can push off. It's nearly four o'clock.'

But next minute Imogen had been accosted by a dotty old woman with darned stockings asking if they had any dustbin bags, which led to a long explanation about how the old woman's dog had been put down, and she wanted to throw its basket and rubber toys away as soon as possible.

'The dustmen don't come till Wednesday, and I'll be reminded of him everytime I see them int' dustbin.'

Imogen's eyes brimmed with tears. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she said. After devoting five minutes to the old woman, she turned to two small boys who came up to the desk looking very pink.

'Any books about life?' asked the eldest.

'Whose life?' said Imogen. 'Biographies are over there.'

'You know, facts'a life – babies and things,' said the boy. His companion started to giggle. Imogen tried to hide a smile.

'Well the biology section's on the right,' she said.

'Don't be daft,' snapped Miss Nugent. 'Run along, you lads, and try the children's library next door. And hurry up and shelve those books, Imogen.'

She watched the girl pushing the squeaking trolley across the library. She was a nice child despite her timidity, and tried very hard, but she was so willing to listen to other people's problems, she always got behind with her own work.

Imogen picked up a pile of alphabetically arranged books in her left hand – so high that she could only just see over them – and started to replace them in the shelves. The collected editions were landmarks which made putting back easier. *Sons and Lovers* was replaced at the end of a milky green row of D. H. Lawrence. *Return to Jalna* slotted into the coral pink edition of Mazo de la Roche.

Even working in a library for two years had not lessened her love of reading. There was *Frenchman's Creek*. She stopped for a second, remembering the glamour of the Frenchman. If only a man like that would come into the library. But if he did, he'd be bound to fall in love with Gloria.

A commotion at the issue desk woke her out of her reverie. A man with a moustache and a purple

face, wearing a blazer, was agitatedly waving a copy of Molly Parkin's latest novel.

'It's filth,' he roared, 'sheer filth. I just came in here to tell you I'm going to burn it.'

'Well you'll have to pay for it then,' said Miss Nugent. 'A lot of other readers have requested it.'

'Filth and written by a woman,' roared the man in the blazer. 'Don't know how anyone dare publish it.' Everyone in the library was listening now, pretending to study the books on the shelves, but brightening perceptibly at the prospect of a good row.

Imogen returned *The Age of Innocence* to its right place and rolled the trolley back to the issue desk.

'Let me read you this bit, madam,' shouted the man in the blazer.

'Run along now, Imogen,' said Miss Nugent, hastily.

Imogen hesitated, embarrassed, but longing to hear the outcome of the row.

'Go on,' said Miss Nugent firmly. 'You'll miss the tennis. I won't be in on Monday. I'm going to Florrie's funeral, so I'll see you on Tuesday. Now, sir,' she turned to the man in the blazer.

Why do I always miss all the fun, thought Imogen, going into the back office where Miss Illingworth was clucking over the legal action file.

'I've written to the Mayor five times about returning *The Hite Report*,' she said crossly, 'You'd think a man in his position . . .'

'Maybe he thinks he's grand enough to keep

books as long as he likes,' said Imogen, unlocking her locker and taking out her bag.

'Twenty-one days is the limit, and rules is rules, my girl, whether you're the Queen of England. Have you seen Mr Cloth's PC? It's a scream.'

Imogen picked up the postcard of blue sea and orange sand and turned it over.

I wouldn't like to live here, the deputy librarian, who was holidaying in Sardinia, had written, *but it's a horrible place for a holiday. The pillows are like bags of Blue Circle cement. Wish you were here but not queer. B. C.*

Imogen giggled, then sighed inwardly. Not only had one to find somewhere smart to go on holiday, but had to write witty things about it when you got there.

She went into the ladies to comb her hair and wash the violet ink from the date stamp off her hands. She scowled at her reflection in the cracked mirror – huge grey eyes, rosy cheeks, too many freckles, a snub nose, soft full lips, long hair the colour of wet sand, which had a maddening tendency to kink at the first sight of rain.

'Why do I look so young?' she thought crossly. 'And why am I so fat?'

She removed the mirror from the wall, examining the full breasts, wide hips and sturdy legs which went purple and mottled in cold weather, and which fortunately today were hidden by black boots.

'It's a typical North Country figure,' she thought gloomily, 'built to withstand howling winds and an arctic climate.'

During her last year at school she had been unceasingly ragged for weighing eleven stone. Now, two years later, she had lost over two stone, but still felt herself to be fat and unattractive.

Her younger sister, Juliet, was waiting for her as she came out of the library. Far more fashion-conscious than Imogen, she was wearing drainpipe pedal pushers, brilliant coloured glove socks, and a *papier mâché* ice cream cornet pinned to her huge sloppy pink sweater. A tiny leather purse swung from her neck, and her blonde curls blew in the wind as she circled round and round on her bicycle like a vulture.

'There you are, Imogen. For goodness' sake, hurry! Beresford's on court already and he's bound to win in straight sets. Did you bring *Fanny Hill*?'

'Blast! I forgot,' said Imogen, turning back.

'Oh, leave it,' said Juliet. 'It doesn't matter.' And she set off down the cobbled streets, pedalling briskly.

'What's his name again?' said Imogen, panting beside her.

'I've told you a million times – Beresford. N. Beresford. I hope the "N" doesn't stand for Norman or anything ghastly. Mind you, *he* could get away with it. I've never seen anyone so divine!'

Last week, Imogen reflected, Juliet had been distraught with love for Rod Stewart, the week before for Georgie Best.

Although a pallid sun was shining, afternoon shoppers, muffled in scarves and sheepskin coats,

scuttled down the street, heads down against the wind. Imogen and Juliet arrived at the Tennis Club to find most of the spectators huddled for warmth around Court One.

'I can't see, I can't see!' said Juliet in a shrill voice.

'Let the little girl through,' said the crowd indulgently and, in a few seconds, Juliet, dragging a reluctant Imogen by the hand, had pummelled her way through to the front.

'There's Beresford,' she whispered, pressing her face against the wire. 'Serving this end.'

He was tall and slim, with long legs, smooth and brown as a conker, and black curly hair. His shoulder muscles rippled as he served. His opponent didn't even see the ball. A crackle of applause ran round the court.

'Game and first set to Beresford,' said the umpire.

'He plays tennis champion,' said a man in the crowd.

'Isn't he the end?' sighed Juliet.

'He looks OK from the back,' said Imogen cautiously.

But as Beresford turned round and sauntered back to the baseline for the next game, she caught her breath.

With his lean brown features, eyes bluer than delphiniums, and glossy black moustache above a smooth curling, sulky mouth, he was the embodiment of all the romantic heroes she'd ever dreamed of.

'You win,' she muttered to Juliet, 'he's devastating.'

In a daze, she watched him cruise through the

next three games, without conceding a point. Then – she could never remember afterwards exactly how it happened – he was strolling back to the wire netting to retrieve a ball, when suddenly he looked up and smiled at her. He just stood there smiling, his brilliant blue eyes burning holes in the netting.

The crowd was becoming restless.

'Beresford to serve!' snapped the umpire for the third time. Beresford shook himself, picked up the ball and went back to the baseline. He served a double fault.

'At the first sight, they have changed eyes,' crowed Juliet, who was doing *The Tempest* for 'O' Level. 'Oh, Imogen, did you see him look at you? And he keeps on looking. Oh, it's too unfair. Why, oh, why, aren't I you?'

Imogen wondered if she had dreamed what had happened. She glanced round to see if some beautiful girl, the real object of Beresford's attentions, was standing behind her. But there was only a fat woman in a purple trilby and two men.

His game had certainly gone to pieces. He missed several easy shots and every time he changed ends he grinned at her.

'He'd better stop fooling about,' said Juliet, 'or he's going to lose this set.'

As if by telepathy, Beresford seemed to pull himself together. Crouching like a tiger, he played four games of rampaging brilliance to take the match without dropping a set.

How the crowd – particularly Imogen – thundered

their approval. Beresford put on a pale blue blazer and gathered up his four rackets. As he came off court, he stared straight at Imogen. Suddenly she felt frightened, as though the tiger she'd been admiring at the zoo had just escaped from its cage.

'Let's go and find Daddy,' she said.

'Are you mad?' said Juliet. 'Stay put and Beresford'll know where to find you.'

But Imogen, seeing Beresford pause to satisfy the demands of a group of autograph hunters, had already bolted into the tea tent.

They found their father talking to the Club Secretary.

'Hullo,' he said, 'have some tea.' And went back to his conversation.

A savage example of the Church Militant, the Reverend Stephen Brocklehurst had one great secular passion – sport. He was now giving the Club Secretary a blow by blow account of why Beresford had played so badly.

'The boy was over-confident, of course; thought he had the whole thing sewn up.'

Juliet giggled and applied herself to the cucumber sandwiches. Imogen sat in a dream, until Juliet nudged her. 'Beresford's just walked in,' she hissed.

Imogen choked over her tea. Everyone was hailing him from all corners.

'He's seen you,' whispered Juliet. 'He's working his way in this direction.'

'Hullo Nicky,' said the Club Secretary. 'Whatever happened to you?'

Beresford laughed, showing very white teeth. 'I saw something I fancied on the other side of the netting,' he said, looking at Imogen.

'You ought to play in blinkers,' said the Club Secretary. 'Come and join us. Have you met our vicar, Mr Brocklehurst, and his daughters, Imogen and Juliet?'

'No, I haven't,' said Beresford, shaking hands and holding Imogen's hand far longer than necessary before he sat down between her and the vicar.

'Brocklehurst,' he said, reflectively, as he dropped four lumps of sugar into his tea. 'Brocklehurst? Weren't you capped for England just after the war?'

Mr Brocklehurst melted like butter in a heatwave.

'Yes indeed. Clever of you to remember that.'

After talking to the vicar about rugger for five minutes, and having wangled himself an invitation to lunch next day, Beresford turned his attention to Imogen.

'Well, you certainly threw me,' he said softly. 'It's a good thing there weren't any Davis Cup selectors about.'

'I'm so pleased you won,' stammered Imogen.

'And I'm pleased,' he looked straight into her eyes, 'that you're even more beautiful close up.'

So was he, thought Imogen. Far more beautiful, with dark smudges under his eyes, and damp tendrils curling round his forehead. His voice was low and confiding as though she were the only person in the world he wanted to talk to.

And although he asked the usual questions –

What did she do for a living? Did she enjoy it? Did she ever come to London? – his smoky voice, and the way his eyes wandered over her body and her face, made even those familiar phrases sound significant.

A pale youth with long mousy hair, wearing a v-necked sweater with reindeers round the border, came up and cleared his throat. Nicky looked up without enthusiasm.

'Yes?'

'I'm from Yorkshire Television,' said the youth. 'I wonder if we could have a few words with you?'

'When?' said Nicky.

'Well now?'

'I'm busy.'

'It won't take long.'

'I'll talk to you after the doubles. Now beat it,' said Nicky curtly, and turned back to Imogen.

She gazed at him, bewildered by such perfection. Perhaps it was the black rim round the iris or the thickness of the lashes that gave his blue eyes their intensity. His suntan was so even, it looked painted on. And he'd actually called her beautiful. Later that night she would bring out the remark like an iced cake saved from tea murmuring it over and over to herself, trying to remember exactly the husky smouldering overtones of his voice.

'Where d'you play next?' she asked. The thought of him going away was already unbearable.

Nicky grinned. 'Rome on Monday, Paris the week after, then Edinburgh, Wimbledon, Gstaad,

Kitzbühel, and then the North American circuit, Washington, Indianapolis, Toronto, finally Forest Hills, if I don't die of exhaustion.'

Imogen gasped. Scotland was the most abroad she'd ever been to.

'Oh, how lovely,' she said. 'Think of the postcards one could send.'

Nicky laughed. 'I could face it if you came with me,' he said, lowering his voice.

Imogen blushed and gazed into her tea cup.

Nicky watched her for a second. 'Trying to read the tea-leaves? They're telling you that a tall, dark, tennis player has just come into your life,' he said.

'Hi,' said a voice behind them. 'I see you've got yourself stuck in as usual, Nicky.'

They had been so engrossed, they hadn't noticed the arrival of a stocky, grinning young man. He was chewing gum and wearing a gold earring, a pale blue tracksuit top and a blue towelling headband to keep his blond hair from flying about.

'I came to see the reason you dropped three games in the singles,' he said.

'This is it,' said Nicky.

Once more Imogen felt herself colouring painfully.

'Congratulations,' said the young man, giving Imogen a comprehensive once-over and shifting his gum to the other side of his face. 'You always had good taste, Nicky.'

'This is Charlie Painter,' said Nicky. 'My doubles partner. Fancies himself as a tough guy.'

'I don't take anything lying down, except pretty girls,' said Painter, winking at Juliet. 'Look, if you can bear to tear yourself away, we're on court in a minute.'

'I can't,' said Nicky, turning his steady, knowing smile on Imogen again. 'You don't need me. You can thrash those two creeps with your hands behind your back.'

'The light's terrible. It's going to be like playing in a coal cellar,' said Painter, peering out of the tent.

'Well, appeal against it,' said Nicky. 'You know I'm frightened of the dark and I want to go on chatting up Miss Brocklehurst.'

Imogen shot a fearful glance at her father, but happily he was still nose to nose with the Club Secretary, rhapsodising over Hancock's try.

The loudspeaker hiccupped and announced the finals of the men's doubles. Reluctantly Nicky got to his feet.

'There's a party here this evening, I wonder if you – and your sister, of course,' he added smiling at Juliet, 'would like to come?'

'Oh, yes please,' began Imogen, but the vicar promptly looked round.

'Good of you to ask them,' he said blandly, 'but I'm afraid they've already been booked to help at the Mothers' Union whist drive. We shall look forward to seeing you at lunch tomorrow, any time after half past twelve.'

Both Imogen and Juliet opened their mouths in protest, then shut them again. They knew their

father. Just for a second Nicky's eyes narrowed. Then he smiled.

'I shall look forward to it too,' he said, and followed Painter out of the tent.

'Sod the Mothers' Union,' muttered Juliet.

'I know you like them below the age of consent,' said Painter, as they walked towards the No. 1 Court, 'but isn't she a bit wet behind the ears?'

'Older than she looks, left school two years ago,' said Nicky, pausing to sign a couple of autographs. 'And very nice, don't you think?'

'Sweet,' agreed Painter, signing them too.

'And entirely untouched by human hand,' said Nicky, 'which makes a change.'

'We were the first that ever burst into that sunless sea,' said Painter and laughed. 'All the same, you'll never get your spoon into that pudding. Bet the old Rev locks them both in chastity belts every night.'

'He's asked me to lunch.'

'So what? He'll still never let you get near enough to pull her.'

'Want to bet?' said Nicky, taking a racket out of its press, and making a few swipes with it. 'Bugger, my shoulder's playing up again.'

'A fiver,' said Painter, taking off his blue jacket.

'Make it a tenner,' said Nicky, flexing his shoulder.

'All right, you're on.'

As he and Painter took the first set 6–0, Nicky was aware of the vicar and his daughters watching him. He was glad his first serve went in each time, and for once volleys, smashes, lobs, drop shots, everything,

worked. He was getting to the ball so quickly he had time to examine it for bugs before he hit it. This was the kind of barnstorming form he'd got to maintain for the rest of the season. He flashed his teeth at Imogen and saw she was about to go.

Nicky had reached the age of twenty-six without ever falling seriously in love. He had had affairs by the score – there were endless temptations on the tennis circuit. If you were superbly fit, you didn't just go to bed and read a book in the evenings. If you won, you wanted to celebrate, if you lost you needed cheering up. But on the whole his heart was more resilient than his self respect. From broken affairs he recovered rapidly without any need of convalescence. They left no scars and no regrets and sometimes he was sorry they didn't, thinking he was missing out on something other people had and seemed to value, although it caused them anguish at the time.

Recently, too, he had felt a vague dissastisfaction with his life. There had been trouble about his knocking off another player's wife, a Mexican beauty, whose insanely jealous husband had rumbled them. The reason Nicky was playing in Pikely this week rather than Hamburg was in the hope that the whole thing might blow over. Then last week an offer of an advertising commercial which would have brought him in several thousand a year had suddenly gone instead to another British player, who, although less glamorous than Nicky, had reached the finals of the big tournaments more

often than Nicky had the preceding year. Finally, the night before he'd driven up to Pikely, his Coach had taken him out to dinner.

'What are you playing at, Nicky boy?' he had asked after the second bottle, with his usual mixture of bluntness and concern. 'You've got everything going for you, but you're not getting any younger, and you'll never make it really big unless you cut out the birds and the booze and the late nights. Haven't you ever thought of settling down?'

Nicky had replied that he had too much trouble settling up in life to think of any permanent commitment. His debts were crippling at the moment, he said, and they had both laughed. But the Coach's remarks had stung and Nicky had not forgotten them.

As the crowd clapped approvingly at the end of the set, Mr Brocklehurst dragged his protesting daughters away, saying they mustn't be late for the whist drive. Nicky had looked so sensational on court that Imogen could hardly believe their *tête-à-tête* in the tea tent had ever taken place, but as she left he had waved his racket at her, so it must be true.

As they drove home to the vicarage with Juliet's bike perched precariously on the roof rack, they passed a school friend of Juliet's riding home from a gymkhana festooned with rosettes, who gave them a lordly wave with her whip.

'Just showing off, silly bitch,' muttered Juliet.

'10p in the swear box,' reproached the vicar, but mildly, because he doted on his younger daughter.

As he crossed the River Darrow and took the road up to the moors, he, too, felt a faint dissatisfaction with life. Watching Beresford today had reminded him of his youth on the rugger field. He had been good looking too, and had experienced the same adulation from women and hero-worship from men.

'Having achieved the ultimate glory of playing rugger for England,' said an unkind fellow clergyman, 'Steve Brocklehurst spent the rest of his life in exhausted mediocrity.'

Mr Brocklehurst was also only too aware that another great athlete, David Shepherd, had made bishop. But no such promotion had come his way. No doubt he would be left to moulder away the rest of his life in Pikely, where the adoration of the spinsters of the parish was no substitute for the stands rising at Twickenham. In his more gloomy moments the vicar thought there was a great deal to be said for an athlete dying young, cut off in his prime, rather than growing paunchy and rheumaticky.

Life, however, had its compensations. He was well respected in the district; no local committee was complete without him; he loved his garden and his games of golf, and his vague, charming wife, probably in that order. His two sons, both at boarding school and costing the earth, were shaping up as excellent athletes. Michael was already in the

fifteen. Juliet, adorable, insouciant, the baby of the family, could twist him round her little finger.

But as a man of God, it had always nagged his conscience, like a bit of apple core wedged in one's teeth, that his elder daughter, Imogen, got on his nerves. In the beginning he'd resented her not being a boy; as she grew up he was irritated by her clumsiness, her dreaminess, her slowness, her tender heart (how easily he could reduce her to tears), her inability to stand up to him, and her complete lack of athleticism. He still remembered a humiliating gym display at her school a few years ago, when Imogen had been the only one in her class who totally failed to get over any of the apparatus. He had also been deeply ashamed of her lumpiness, but at least she'd slimmed down a bit lately, and she'd kept her job in the library, which helped out with the housekeeping. (Money was very tight, with three children still at school.) But why did she have to agree with everything he said, like one of those nodding doggies in the back of cars?

There was no doubt, though, that young Beresford seemed taken with her, and needed keeping an eye on. The vicar might not love his elder daughter, but he wouldn't let her come to any harm. He had been a bit of a lad himself in his day and, like most reformed rakes, he veered towards repressive puritanism where his daughters were concerned. He was only too aware of the lusts of young players after too much beer.

Next moment he caught sight of his curate on his

shiny new red racing bicycle, with its drop handlebars which the vicar thought both undignified and far too young for him. He waited until they were only a few yards behind the curate, then sounded his horn loudly, which made the poor young man nearly ride into the ditch.

The vicar chuckled to himself and turned up the drive. The vicarage was one of those draughty Victorian houses, made only slightly less forbidding by the creepers and rambler roses surging up its dark grey walls, and the wallflowers and purple irises in the front flower beds. At the back of the house was a lawn long enough for a cricket pitch, where Imogen bowled endlessly to her younger brothers when they were home. On either side were herbaceous borders, and at the end long grass and bluebells growing round the trunks of an ancient orchard.

As they opened the front door, Homer, the golden retriever, his eyes screwed up from sleep, greeted them, singing with pleasure, looking frantically round for something to bring them and settling for a pair of socks lying on the floor.

Going through the hall, with its old coats hanging on a row of pegs and a pile of parish magazines waiting to be delivered, Imogen found her mother in the drawing-room, looking rather pious and virtuously sewing buttons on one of her father's shirts. She knew perfectly well that her mother had been reading a novel and had shoved it under the shirt the moment she heard wheels on the gravel.

'Hullo, darling,' she said vaguely. 'Had a nice time at the tennis?'

'Yes, thank you,' said Imogen, kissing her. She knew there was no point in saying any more; her mother wouldn't listen to the answer.

'I suppose we ought to get changed for the whist drive,' said Mrs Brocklehurst with a sigh. 'What time does it begin?'

'Eight o'clock,' said the vicar, coming through the door. 'Hullo, darling. Just time for me to plant out my antirrhinums.'

'Well, of all the blooming cheats,' said Juliet to his departing back, as he went out of the french windows. 'We could have stayed and watched the last set after all. I hope his rotten snapdragons never come up.'

The whist drive seemed to last an eternity, but eventually the final chair had been stacked in the church hall, and the last *vol-au-vent* crumb swept away.

'Don't you sometimes wish Daddy had been an engineer?' said Juliet, as she and Imogen trailed home.

'Yes,' said Imogen, listening to the lambs bleating in the field behind the house, and praying that Nicky wasn't enjoying his party too much. 'I say, Juliet,' she felt herself blushing, 'it did happen, didn't it? This afternoon I mean.'

'Course it did,' said Juliet. 'Even Daddy got the wind up and whisked you home. Normally he'd never leave in the middle of a match.'

When she got home Imogen washed her hair, undressed and got into bed. Then she filled the rest of May and the whole of June in her diary ecstatically describing her meeting with Nicky, shivering with excitement and wonder at the imperious way he'd dismissed Yorkshire Television, and told his partner to appeal against the light to give him more time with her.

Why me? why me? she kept saying over and over again, burying her hot face in her pillow, and squirming with delight. She must get some sleep or she'd look terrible in the morning. But it only seemed a few seconds later that she was woken by Homer barking at the paper boy and the church bell tolling for Holy Communion, and the Sunday morning panic of her father calling from the depth of the hot cupboard that he couldn't find a clean shirt.