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CONTENTS

Part One: The Rivalry—1840

1. <i>A Ball at Gracefield</i>	3
2. <i>A Cloud the Size of a Man's Hand</i>	23
3. <i>The New Preacher</i>	37
4. <i>The Choice</i>	51
5. <i>Melora</i>	67
6. <i>A Visit to Washington</i>	83
7. <i>The Wrong Bride</i>	92

Part Two: Incident in Mexico—1846

8. <i>The Guns of Monterey</i>	107
9. <i>A Dragon for Melora</i>	116
10. <i>The New Recruit</i>	137
11. <i>Death at Cerro Gordo</i>	146
12. <i>The End of a Man</i>	161

Part Three: Prodigal's Return—1859

13. <i>The Slaver</i>	175
14. <i>The End of the Tether</i>	181
15. <i>A Visitor from the Past</i>	189
16. <i>The Homecoming of Clay Rocklin</i>	198
17. <i>The Old Maid</i>	211
18. <i>Melora's Visitor</i>	230

Part Four: Thunder over Sumter—1860

19. <i>The Winds of War</i>	251
20. <i>Kissing Cousins</i>	269
21. <i>"I Can Be Alone!"</i>	287
22. <i>Before the Storm</i>	299
23. <i>The Cannon's Roar</i>	316
24. <i>After Darkness, the Dawn</i>	329



PART ONE
THE RIVALRY—1840



CHAPTER ONE

A BALL AT GRACEFIELD



“CLAY Rocklin! You let me go this minute, you hear?”

Melanie Benton’s voice was sharp, but her blue eyes were filled with laughter and her lips curved upward as she tried to pull away from the tall young man who held her easily. She showed no sign of alarm, but as he drew her closer, she glanced over her shoulder quickly, saying, “If my father sees us, he’ll shoot you!”

Rocklin’s grip on her waist tightened. “He can’t see us,” he said with a reckless grin. “This old scuppernong vine arbor is useful for something besides good wine, Mellie. From the house you can’t see what’s going on inside it. And I’d risk getting shot any time for a kiss from the prettiest girl in the county!”

Melanie turned her head aside just in time to catch his kiss on one satiny cheek. “It’s a wonder some jealous husband hasn’t shot you before this, Clay,” she said sternly. But she was pleased by his words, as she was by his appearance.

Clay Rocklin was the most handsome of all the Rocklin men. He was six feet two inches tall, lean and muscular, and as Melanie tilted her head back to look up at him she thought, not for the first time, *He’s too good-looking for his own good!* Clay was one of the “Black Rocklins,” deriving his raven dark hair, black eyes, and olive skin from his father. The strain of Welsh blood that flowed through his veins showed in the strong, clean features: straight nose, wide cheekbones, deep-set eyes under black brows, and the cleft in the determined chin. He might have been charged with being too pretty save for the mouth that was too wide and the

chin with the deep cleft that jutted out too aggressively.

The tendrils of the scuppernong vine overhead blocked out the warm April sun, throwing lacy patterns of shade on Melanie's face. Clay's voice grew husky as he murmured, "Mellie, you're so beautiful!" Then he kissed her, and as she stood there in his arms, Melanie tried to resist. She had always been able to handle Clay at such times, but now there was a power in his arms. Suddenly she found herself kissing him back with an ardor that she had never shown to any man. Then she realized that her hands were behind his head, and with a shock she pulled her lips away and pushed at his chest.

"I—mustn't!" she whispered. When he released her, she added, "You shouldn't do that, Clay!"

"I only did half of it, Mellie."

Though his answer angered her, she knew he was right. "Well, I shouldn't be letting you kiss me," she said. Her hands were trembling, and she turned suddenly, clasping them. "It's wrong."

He put his hands on her shoulders, turned her around, then put his hand under her chin. "What's so wrong with a kiss? Especially when you know how I feel about you."

"Clay, you've courted half the girls in Richmond," Melanie insisted. "And you've told most of them the same thing you're telling me."

A slight flush tinged Clay's cheeks, but he shook his head stubbornly. "A man's got to look around, doesn't he? Well, I've seen a few girls, but now I'm sure, Mellie. I love you, and I'll never love another woman."

Melanie was startled by the intensity in Clay's voice. She had never encouraged his attention; indeed, she had discouraged him frequently. They had grown up together, their families living only ten miles apart, bound by common interests. James and Alice Benton, Melanie's parents, ruled over the second-largest planta-

tion in the county. But their holdings were only slightly less than Gracefield, the Rocklin estate.

Theirs was a feudal society, and it was no less rigid than the world of the Middle Ages. At the bottom of the pyramid lay the black slaves, owners of nothing, not even their own bodies. Over them, the poor whites, struggling for survival. Next were the shopkeepers and small businessmen, then the professional men—the lawyers and doctors who touched on all worlds.

At the top, at the apex of Virginia society of 1840, were the elite group of plantation owners whose estates ran into thousands of acres—and whose whims were law to the slaves and free whites who kept the cotton and rice flowing out of the rich earth. The South was ruled by this upper class, by men like Wade Hampton of South Carolina and the Lees and Hugers of Virginia.

The Rocklins and the Bentons, like most wealthy planters, liked to think of themselves as heirs to the traditions of knights and cavaliers, and they played the part stylishly. It was their code to practice chivalry toward women, kindness to inferiors, and honor among equals. They cultivated a taste for blooded horses, fine foxhounds, handmade firearms, and the Southern belles of affluent families. Many studied the arts of war, though seldom with the intention of actually using what they learned. A Mississippi planter, Jefferson Davis, stated with pride that only in the South did gentlemen who did not intend to follow the profession of arms go to a military academy.

In such a world, the marriages of sons and daughters were almost as carefully planned as those of the royal families of Europe. In the latter instance, only a young man of royal blood was considered eligible for a princess. Both the Bentons and the Rocklins would have stated promptly that the only candidates they would welcome into their family must come from the minutely small group that made up the “royalty” of Richmond.

The rigid caste system of her people was not in

Melanie's thoughts as she stood facing Clay—at least, not *consciously*. But in another sense, there was never a time when knowledge of such things was not with her. She could not have put her finger on a specific time when her parents had said to her, "You must marry a man who is from your world, Mellie; who is wealthy, cultured, and Southern." And yet, as she looked up at Clay, her blood still not cooled after his embrace, she was aware (as she had been for years) that he was one of the few men who would be welcomed without reservation by her parents.

Seeing her hesitate, Clay smiled roguishly and grasped her shoulders. "You do love me, Mellie! I know you do!" He would have kissed her again, but just at that moment the sound of a voice filtered through the arbor, startling both of them. They stepped apart quickly, and Melanie smoothed her hair nervously.

"Clay? You in here?"

Noah Rocklin's cane tapped on the stone walk that led from the house to the arbor, and his pace was so halting and slow that by the time he rounded the corner and saw his grandson and Melanie, the pair seemed calm and uninvolved. "Here we are, Grandfather," Clay said quickly, stepping forward to meet the old man. "We were making plans for the ball tomorrow. Here, sit down and help us."

"No time for that, boy." Noah Rocklin studied them, his black eyes sharp as ever despite his seventy-three years. Time may have bent his tall figure and transformed his coal-black hair to silver, but he had lost none of the astuteness that had enabled him to create an empire out of nothing. Fifty years earlier he had stepped off a boat at the dock in Richmond, a penniless lad from the coal mines of Wales. With no backing, no influence, and little education, he had shouldered his way into the cloistered world of the rich planters of Virginia. He had gotten his start by means of a bay mare who could beat any horse in the country for a quarter of a mile. Moving around from meet to meet, he had won purses, then invested in a worn-out farm that he

bought for almost nothing. He had purchased one slave, Jacob, and in their first year together the two of them had wrenched a bumper crop of cotton from the woebegone farm. Noah still had Jacob, along with 160 other slaves—and that first farm of 120 acres was now lost in an ocean of over 50,000 acres, all rich, black land that sprawled over much of the county.

Only one thing held as much importance in Noah Rocklin's heart as his self-made empire, and that was his wife, Charlotte. She had brought him great joy and had blessed him with four sons—Stephen, Thomas, Mason, and Mark—and with his only daughter, Marianne. The fierce devotion Noah felt for Gracefield was nominal compared to his feelings toward his family.

Of course, Noah Rocklin's rise to power had not been unopposed—and the stories of his fits of anger were legendary. He had fought in the War of 1812, rising to the rank of major. When that was over, he had fought three duels, winning each with contemptuous ease. Perhaps it was because he recognized too much of his own fiery temper and wild youth in his grandson Clay that he scowled now, saying, "I heard about that trouble you had with Louis Waymeyer, boy. Bad business!"

"It was a matter of honor, sir!"

"Honor!" Noah scoffed, punching his cane against the stones angrily. "It was a brawl over a silly woman between two empty-headed young men!"

His remark caused both young people to redden, but Noah went on. "You're going to get your head shot off if you keep messing around with that kind of woman, Clay."

"Grandfather, you shouldn't speak that way in front of Mellie!"

"Why not? Why, boy, she's heard the story a dozen times—and I'd guess you got some of the minute details, didn't you, missy?" A stricken look came to Melanie's face, and he laughed loudly. "Why, I heard at least six ver-

sions of it myself, and the women don't let a thing like that die!"

Clay clamped his lips shut, saying nothing, but he noticed that Melanie seemed more amused than upset. It had been a piddling affair. He had cut Louis out with Dora Seller, and Louis had called him an unpleasant name. "I had to give him satisfaction, Grandfather," he insisted.

"If some of my family has to die, I'd rather see them die over something more important than Dora Seller's petticoats." Then he laughed again. "Look at her," he said suddenly, waving toward Melanie. "You thought what the boy did was romantic, didn't you? Well, you better watch out for this one. He's too much like I was at his age!"

"I think that's a great compliment to Clay, Major Rocklin," Melanie said with a smile and patted his arm. "If I get a husband half as handsome and romantic as you, I'll be happy."

"Romantic!" Noah recoiled as if she had put a snake on his arm. "I deny it, girl!"

"You can't," Melanie giggled. "Your wife showed me some of your old letters to her!"

Noah stared at her, then muttered, "I'll beat that woman! See if I don't—and it's long overdue!" He saw that his threat didn't impress the pair and changed the subject abruptly. "Stephen and his family will be on the 1:15, Clay. You get the large buggy and bring them here."

"Yes sir." Clay nodded. "How many will there be?"

"Why, Stephen and Ruth and the baby, of course. And Laura and that abolitionist she married."

"I'm surprised you'd let him come, Grandfather," Clay said, smiling. "You said before the wedding you'd horse-whip him if he ever stepped foot on Gracefield."

"Never mind what I said!" Noah snapped. "They'll have my great-grandson with them. He's bound to be an improvement over you young whelps I call grandsons!"

Melanie knew that the old man was fiercely proud of his grandsons, and asked, "Will Gideon be here?"

"Stephen said he would. I think he pulled some strings

to get leave for him." Gideon, Stephen's son, was about to graduate from West Point, and this military career gave him a special favor with Noah Rocklin—indeed, with most of the family.

"I'll go along, Clay," Melanie said suddenly. When he gave her a sharp look, she added quickly, "To help Laura hold the baby. I'm sure she'll be worn out after that long ride from Washington."

Clay said stiffly, "Be pretty crowded in the carriage, Mellie."

"Oh, I don't mind," she answered with a sly smile. Clay walked off with a frown on his face, and she turned to see that Noah was studying her with his black eyes. "Why—I guess he doesn't want me to go, Major. But I am anxious to see Laura's baby." His shrewd eyes studied her for a moment.

"'Course it's the baby you're anxious to see. Who else would it be? Certainly not that good-looking soldier grandson of mine," he said dryly.

Melanie flushed uncomfortably and glanced away. "I think I'll go anyway. Clay won't mind," she said stubbornly, then walked quickly out of the arbor. As soon as she left, the old man pulled a very old silver flask out of his hip pocket. When he had taken two large swallows, he took a deep breath, then said, "Ahhhhhh!" He sat there, the sunlight creeping through the branches causing him to narrow his eyes. He grinned suddenly, saying out loud, "'Making plans for the ball tomorrow! Ho! I know what you and that girl were doing, Clay Rocklin!" The thought amused him, and he lifted the flask again.

Suddenly a voice very close made him jump so abruptly that he spilled some of the liquor down the front of his shirt.

"Yas! I kotteded you, din't I?" A tall, gangling Negro dressed in black pants and a white shirt had emerged from the far end of the arbor and approached to stand beside Noah. The Negro's hair was white as cotton, and despite the lines which were etched in his face, his eyes

were sharp. "You gimme that liquor, now!" he insisted, holding out a pink palm. "You know Miz Charlotte and the doctuh say you kain't have no mo'!"

Noah glared at the slave, saying defiantly, "Who cares what that quack says? Get away from here, Jake!"

"I won't do it! If you don't gimme dat liquor right now, I gonna tell Miz Charlotte!"

Noah stared at the slave, then suddenly lifted the flask and drained the last few swallows. Tossing the flask to Jacob, he laughed, "There! Now tell her whatever you like."

The tall slave shook his head in disapproval. He had been with Noah Rocklin since he was sixteen years old. The two of them had suffered together to bring Gracefield to where it was. Now that death was close, the two of them felt a special kinship that went beyond master and slave. Both knew that whichever of them went to the grave first would leave a massive gap in the heart of the other.

Carefully, Jake lifted the flask and licked the last few drops of amber liquor. Then he cocked his head and asked, "Marse Clay gonna marry up with Miss Mellie?" When Noah gave him a discouraged look and merely shook his head, a curious light came into his faded eyes. "I reckon she ain't made no pick yet. You reckon she's gonna pick Marse Stephen's boy, Gideon?"

Noah stared at the black face, so familiar to his sight, and knew that no detail of his family life was safe from this one. "Don't you have enough to do without keeping up with every case of puppy love on this place?"

"No sah, it ain't none of puppy love." Jake shook his head, thinking hard. Anything that touched Noah and Charlotte Rocklin touched him, and he saw trouble ahead. "It gonna be bad if she choose Marse Gideon, ain't it, Major?"

Noah got to his feet painfully. Leaning on his cane, he moved across the stone walk, but turned as he reached the edge of the arbor. His old eyes were filled with apprehension as he said, "Jake, it's going to be bad no matter *which* of those boys she chooses!" Then he moved out of

sight, leaving the tall slave staring after him, his lips drawn up in a pucker and his brow wrinkled.

"Seem lak a woman ain't nevah happy lessen she causin' men trouble!"

The architect of the mansion at Gracefield had given much thought to the exterior grounds and the approach from the main road. A long, sweeping drive, lined with massive oaks and broad enough for three carriages, made a U-shape from the road to the mansion. The curve of the drive made a convenient place for carriages to wait until the balls were over.

Those arriving at the Gracefield mansion were often struck by the majestic beauty of the white frame building with white Corinthian columns across the front and down both sides. A balcony, set off by an ornate iron grill painted gleaming white, ran all the way around the house. Tall, wide windows could be seen on both floors of the house, the blue shutters breaking the gleaming white of the siding. The steeply pitched roof ran up to a center point, broken by three gables on each side, which gave light and air to the attic rooms. High-rising chimneys capped with curving covers of brick added further beauty to the building.

The house seemed to have been constructed for the purpose of formal balls; fully half of the space on the first floor was designated for that purpose. A pair of enormous oak doors opened into a spacious foyer. Upon entering, one's attention was immediately drawn to the broad stairway that divided the lower section of the house and curved to the right and left at the landing. At the left one could see the library and a large dining room; to the right, the ballroom. Behind these was a wide hallway that ran the length of the house. On the east was the very large, stately master bedroom. Most of the rest of the house was taken up by the kitchen and canning room, which were separated by a covered porch.

The second floor was composed of bedrooms, and in

the largest and most ornate of these, Thomas Rocklin was helping his wife, Susanna, with the buttons on the back of her dress. "There . . .," he said finally, then stepped back and took a careful look at her. "You'll be the belle of the ball," he pronounced. "You're as beautiful as ever."

Susanna gave him a smile. She was a handsome woman of thirty-nine, only one year younger than her husband. Her auburn hair gleamed in the lamplight, and the green silk dress she wore set off her blue-green eyes. Patting Thomas's arm lightly, she said, "Thank you, dear. And you'll be the finest-looking man." She gave him a quick glance of inspection, pulled his tie into line, and thought that he might just *be* the most handsome man at the ball. He had the blackest possible hair, with dark eyes and complexion to match. His bad habits had not yet put signs of dissipation on his face. For one instant, Susanna felt a wave of sadness and the thought came to her, as it had many times before, *I wish your ways were as handsome as your looks!*

But she allowed none of that to show on her face. Instead she said, "It's good to have Stephen and his family for a visit. I wish we could see more of them."

"Not much chance of that." Thomas shrugged. "I'm surprised my hardworking brother let himself be pulled away from that factory of his. Must be the first vacation he's had in two or three years." He glanced at the low walnut table close to the massive bed, then moved toward it and poured himself a drink from the cut-crystal bottle. "Stephen's changed a lot. He's become a Yankee peddler."

Susanna opened her mouth to say, "You shouldn't begin drinking so early," but cut the words off—he would only be angered by her interference. Instead she said, "I think Stephen came to show off his son. He and Ruth are very proud of Gideon's career."

"I suppose so. Do you think you can put up with Ruth's ways while they're here?" Thomas gave her a gloomy look, for he had not yet completely forgiven his

brother Stephen for marrying a woman from the North. He agreed with his father that Stephen's decision to move to Washington and go into business was due to Ruth, his wife. The fact that he had done well there did nothing to placate either Thomas or his father. Both felt that Stephen had somehow betrayed his legacy as a Southerner.

"Oh, Ruth's all right, Thomas," Susanna said. "And they're right to be proud of Gideon. He's in the top 10 percent of his class at West Point, and he's been asked to stay on after graduation to help train the new cadets. That's quite an accomplishment." Then she added with a smile that didn't quite come off, "Gideon's quite good-looking, and in his uniform he'll have every girl in Richmond after him—even if he is a Yankee."

"Gideon's no Yankee!" Thomas drank the rest of the liquor in his glass, then came to take her arm. "He's a Southerner. You can't take that out of a man. Come on, let's go to the ball."

As they came to the staircase, a bedroom door opened. "Ruth, how nice you look!" Susanna said with a bright smile as her sister-in-law emerged, followed by Stephen. "That must be one of those new Washington fashions."

"Oh, I bought it to wear to the president's reception," Ruth said. She was a blonde woman of forty-three, with quick brown eyes and a pronounced Northern accent. "President Van Buren thought it was nice, or so he said." She spoke of the president lightly, but both Thomas and Susanna knew they would hear of President Van Buren's opinion of Ruth's dress innumerable times. Stephen's wife was a ruthless socialite who structured her whole life by the political and social hierarchy that reigned in Washington. Her father had been in the House, and two of her brothers held offices in the federal service.

As Ruth continued talking about Washington, Susanna listened, but stole a glance at the two men at their sides. The difference between the brothers had fascinated her from the time she had first met them. Over the years she

had watched these differences grow. Now she noted again how, physically, they looked very little like brothers. The term “Black Rocklins” fit Thomas very well—as it did Mark—for both of them were dark in coloring. But the other two brothers, Stephen and Mason, were fair like their mother. Thomas seemed much taller than Stephen, though actually he was only two inches over the other’s height. The illusion came from the two men’s builds—Thomas was lean and almost thin, whereas Stephen Rocklin was thickset and muscular. Because of this, Stephen’s five feet ten inches seemed even shorter when he stood next to his taller brother. He had fair coloring like his mother, Charlotte, and possessed the only pair of gray eyes in the family. There was a solidness about him, not just physically in the thick shoulders and strong hands, but in the spirit, that impressed all he met.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Stephen turned and smiled at Susanna. “I want your first dance, Susanna. If I don’t get that one, these young fellows will never give me another chance.”

Ruth gave her husband a look of irritation. She never liked it when he paid attention to her sister-in-law. She was a quick-witted woman and had long ago realized that Susanna Rocklin and her husband were mutual admirers. Yet she said nothing, choosing to go at once to where the attorney general of Virginia was speaking with Noah Rocklin.

Stephen’s dancing, Susanna thought as the two of them moved over the polished heart-pine floor, *is much like the man himself—competent and steady*. He had none of Thomas’s flair, on the dance floor or otherwise, but he was a man women and men alike would trust.

“We’ve all missed you,” Susanna said as they swung around in a stately waltz. “I’ve never ceased to be sorry that you moved to Washington. Though it’s only a few miles from Gracefield, it’s like another country.”

“I miss this place. Don’t think I’ll ever get over my

longing for the South," Stephen said slowly. "But Ruth would never be happy here."

"No, I don't think she would." Susanna avoided the subject of Ruth, for it was somewhat of a delicate matter. As was the matter of their daughter Laura's husband, Amos Steele. Amos and Laura had been married less than two years, and none of the Southern branch of the Rocklins could understand why such a sweet girl had married an abolitionist. Tactfully, Susanna said, "Laura's baby is precious. Isn't it nice that we both have new grandsons the same age?"

Stephen grinned suddenly, looking much younger. "It's pretty sad I think, Susanna. All of us grandparents standing around bragging on each other's grandchildren, and thinking all the time how much more handsome *ours* really is!"

"Oh, Stephen! I don't do any such thing!" Susanna protested. Then, being an honest woman, she laughed ruefully. "You're right, of course. I guess we all feel that way. But your new grandson is every bit as handsome as mine!"

Stephen said with an unexpected burst of gallantry, "Well, Susanna, any grandson of yours would have to be handsome."

Susanna was taken aback by his remark. In all the years she had known him he had never paid her such a compliment. "Why, Stephen, you're getting positively gallant!" Then she smiled at him, adding, "We're growing older, aren't we? At a fancy ball and talking about grandchildren! Let's talk about *children*," she urged. "I don't feel so old doing that. And let me say first how impressed I am with Gideon. You must be very proud, the record he's made at West Point."

"Ruth and I are proud of Gideon," Stephen agreed, nodding. "He's going to be a fine soldier." He lifted his head and glanced over to where Clay and his son were talking, one on each side of Melanie Benton. "Clay is the finest-looking young man here." Then he looked into her

eyes and said seriously, "I heard about the duel. Too bad."

It was as close to being critical of Clay's behavior as Stephen would ever come. And he softened the remark at once by smiling. "I hope he doesn't challenge Gideon to a duel over Melanie. Arms are his profession."

The remark, lightly made and not intended to be serious, brought a line between Susanna's eyebrows. "I used to think that the two of them were just joking about their rivalry over her, but it's serious, Stephen. One of them is going to get a heartache sooner or later."

Even as she was speaking, Clay and Gideon were enduring some sly teasing over their rivalry. Taylor Dewitt, part of the group of young people that had clustered around Melanie and her two suitors, was saying, "Well now, Cadet Rocklin, looks like you got the inside track on all the rest of us." He winked at Tug Ramsey, the rotund nephew of the governor, adding, "I never can get over how a uniform makes a woman blind to real quality!"

"Oh, you hush, Taylor!" Melanie said sharply. "You've had too much to drink already."

"Why, Melanie, there's no such thing as too much to drink!" Dewitt smiled. "Like there are never enough beautiful women. That's right, isn't it, Clay?"

His remark was a sly jab, and not without danger, for though Clay Rocklin believed exactly the same thing, he was touchy about having remarks made on it. Everyone glanced at him with a certain degree of apprehension, the memory of Clay's duel with Louis Waymeyer vivid in their mind. The fact that Dewitt was a daredevil himself made the situation even more explosive.

Fortunately, Clay chose to ignore Dewitt's jibe. "You old degenerate!" He grinned at Dewitt. "I resent your remark. It's an insult to Southern womanhood." His smile took the sting from his words, and he added, "Cousin Gideon doesn't need any uniform to attract women. He's always been a favorite with the fair sex." Then he turned to Gideon, who was taking all of this in with a faint smile. "Re-

member Lucy Ann Garner, Gid?" he asked. "I declare, that girl was so in love with you it was a shame!"

Melanie giggled then, for Gideon's solid features flushed and he looked very uncomfortable. "I remember that, Clay," she said, nodding, then explained, "Lucy was the daughter of the Baptist preacher who was here a few years ago. She was so taken with Gid that her father had to have a talk with him."

"I heard he brought his shotgun along for the talk," Clay said, his black eyes dancing.

"Oh, nonsense!" Gideon stammered. "You two always bring that poor girl up! She was like a sister to me."

A howl of laughter went up from the young men, and Dewitt cried out over them, "Ladies, look to your honor! When a dandy begins that old story about 'just being a brother,' it's time to flee!"

"That's right!" Tug Ramsey said, his blue eyes gleaming with fun in his round face. "As Doctor Johnson said, 'When a man starts talking a great deal about his honor, I start counting the spoons!'" Just then the music started, and Ramsey said, "Melanie, you can't trust either one of these two Rocklin boys, so I'll just claim this next dance."

He moved toward her, but suddenly Gideon was in front of him. "Ramsey, your uncle, the governor, has told my father some of the problems you've handed him. I don't think it would be safe for Melanie to be seen dancing with such a Don Juan."

He swept Melanie away while the group was laughing at the surprise on Tug's face, and only when the pair were swirling around the room did Dewitt say in surprise, "Well, I'll be dipped! I guess ol' Gid *has* learned something at West Point!"

"Learned what?" Clay asked at once, his dark eyes following the pair.

"Why, I guess he learned about maneuvering, Clay," Dewitt answered. "'Cuz I surely don't see any of *us* dancing with Melanie!" Catching the look of irritation on Clay's face, he winked again at Tug Ramsey. "Maybe there

is something in a uniform. Guess I'd better go sign up and get me one. Looks like that's what it takes to get the ladies around here!"

A small young woman who had walked up to the group in time to hear the last of the conversation said, "Taylor, that remark is an insult to ladies everywhere!"

Taylor Dewitt turned to her, a smile breaking across his lips. "I don't see how you can say that, Ellen. Everybody knows how I revere the ladies." That brought a laugh from everyone, for Dewitt was a womanizer of infinite proportions. "But it does seem that a uniform draws pretty girls to a man."

Ellen Benton shook her head firmly. "It's not what a man wears that's important. It's what he is underneath." Her remark caught Clay's attention, and he studied her as she carried on a lively conversation with Dewitt. Ellen was Melanie's cousin, the daughter of Melanie's father's only brother. She had come to Briarcliff Plantation after her parents were killed in a steamboat accident in Portland. There was some sort of scandal attached to her family, but what it was no one quite knew. The Bentons never spoke of it. All anyone knew was that Melanie's father had cut all communication with his brother.

Wonder what her father did to get cut off from the family? Clay pondered, studying the girl. *She's good-looking, but pretty free with men.* Ellen was not beautiful in the sense that Melanie was, but she did have large brown eyes, a wealth of dark brown hair, and a fine complexion. And there was a certain quality in her looks and bearing that caused men to turn and stare at her. Yet none of the young men of the county pursued her seriously.

She's got what it takes to draw men, but none of us is quite sure what to do about it, Clay thought as he watched Dewitt and Ramsey and the others. *She's something else—if she were just any girl it would be easier to pursue her. But she's the niece of James Benton, and it'd be a bad mistake to antagonize him.*

Suddenly Ellen turned to him. "Clay, ask me to dance."

"I was waiting for you to settle these callow youth," Clay answered at once, and soon they were whirling around the room. Several times she brushed against him, and the faint perfume she wore was sweet. She was not a tall girl, and when she tilted her head up to smile at him, he could not ignore the fullness of her lips.

As they danced, he was totally aware of her femininity, yet he was on his guard. Her free ways puzzled him, and he was aware that she was not a candidate for a serious courtship. Of course, he was drawn to her physically—but she was, in one sense, a nobody. Despite her uncle's wealth, there was a cloud over her past and an uncertainty about her future. And she was not a Southern girl.

As the dance went on, Ellen glanced at Gid and Melanie, then looked up at Clay. "I suppose Taylor was right," she said. "About girls liking uniforms. I didn't like what he said, but you can't deny the truth of it, can you?"

"Maybe I ought to join the army."

"Don't do that, Clay!" Ellen said quickly, her hand tightening on his. "It may be all right for Gideon, but it wouldn't be for you."

He looked down at her, admiring the perfect skin and the smoothness of her shoulder. "Why not, Ellen? Don't you think I could be a good soldier?"

"You would be good at anything, Clay Rocklin," Ellen said instantly. "But you are different from Gideon. He doesn't mind the monotony and the formality of a soldier's life. You have a free spirit. A life like that would be misery for you."

He was startled at her perception, but shook his head. "Father wishes I *were* a little more disciplined." He grinned briefly. "And Mother thinks my 'free spirit' is sinful. I'm a pretty big disappointment to them. Matter of fact, both of them wish I were more like Gid."

"As much as I admire your parents," Ellen said, "I don't think they're right in this case. The worst thing a parent

can do is to try to make a child into something he's not. Wives make that mistake, too, don't they? A man has to be what he is, Clay. And what your parents don't see is that this is just a time for you to explore the world. Young people have to touch the world, and that means the bad as well as the good."

Clay was fascinated by her thinking—it was exactly the same thing he had said to himself many times. "What about you, Ellen?" he demanded. "What kind of life do you want?"

She smiled then, saying, "I'm like you, Clay. I want all that life has. It's soon over, isn't it? When I am old I want to say, 'I've had an exciting journey. I didn't refuse life because I was afraid of what people would say.'" Then she laughed out loud, in a charming manner. "I've shocked you, haven't I, Clay? Women aren't supposed to even *think* such things, much less *say* them to a man!"

Clay suddenly pulled her closer, excited by her manner and by the pressure of her full figure. "You're quite a woman, Ellen," he whispered, and as they danced on, he forgot about Gid and Melanie, which was exactly what Ellen wished.

Melanie had not been at all displeased with the way Gideon had stepped in to take her out on the dance floor. As he held her she was very conscious of the strength of his arms. "My, you've changed, Gid," she said with a smile. "You couldn't have done that two years ago. Are you sure you've been studying guns and marching and all that, and not courting those Yankee girls?"

Gid grinned suddenly. "My life's been one constant series of balls and picnics with beautiful women since I went to the Point," he said with a nod. "We have special classes in ballroom dancing and the fine points of courtship. Should have gone there years ago!" He pulled her closer, dropped his voice, and said, "Right now, page 84 in the manual on courtship would advise, 'As soon as you have wooed the young lady away from the lesser men, take her out to the garden for a breath of fresh air.'"

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" Melanie protested, but scant minutes later she found herself in the same arbor where she'd stood with Clay a few hours earlier. The night was so clear that the silver globe of the moon seemed huge against the velvety night sky. The music came to them, thin and faint, from the ballroom. The happy sound of laughter drifting on the wind was pleasant.

They stood there, looking out over the rolling hills, and finally Melanie asked, "Well, what does your old manual say to do now?"

"This—," Gid said firmly, and took her in his arms. It caught her off guard, for he had always been rather shy. She had known, in the way that beautiful young ladies know such things, that he liked her, but she had never been able to draw him out. As he kissed her, her idea that he had been without fire left her. There was nothing insipid in his manner now!

She pulled away, leaned back in his arms, and whispered, "Why, Gid! You've never done such a thing before!"

Gid stood there, taking in the beauty of her face, and then said slowly, "I was always afraid you'd laugh at me, Mellie. You were always the prettiest girl around. Every fellow wanted to be your beau. You could have had any of them. Still could," he added, then a light of determination came to his eyes. "But you're going to have to run me off this time! I haven't read any manuals on how to court a girl, Mellie. There was never anyone I wanted. But I love you. Always have, I think, since the first time Father brought me to Gracefield. I was nine, and the first time I saw you, I think I just fell in love."

"Oh, Gid, that's not possible!"

"I think it is," he said, and there was a rocklike certainty in his manner that made her nervous. She was accustomed to light flirtations, but Gideon Rocklin, she saw, would pursue a woman with the same dogged determination he had used to get to the top of his class at West Point. "I guess that's about the only plan I have for court-

ing you, Mellie," he said quietly. "Just to say I love you. And to promise that if you marry me, I'll do everything under God's heaven to make you happy." He shrugged slightly, adding, "I don't cut a very romantic figure. I know that."

Melanie understood at once that he was thinking of Clay, who cut a *very* romantic figure. The seriousness on Gid's face sobered her as she stood still in his arms. Finally she sighed, "Well, Gid, a romantic figure isn't everything." Then, knowing that it was time to break the scene off, she came up with a smile. "But I'll expect a little more in the way of courtship than a discussion of military tactics!"

Her remark brought a smile to his lips. Nodding, he said, "Maybe I'd better buy a manual on courtship, after all."

As she drew him down the stone walk, she glanced up at him. "No, you're doing fine, Cadet Rocklin. Do carry on!" They stepped inside and at once were engulfed by a world of music and color.