

Roseheath

MR. AND MRS. HEYWOOD had six forthright and erratic children, and the doors and windows of Roseheath were never locked. The Heywood children dictated the uses of the house and grounds, and their parents fell in with this generously. They turned the stables into badminton courts and built, in the middle twenties, a large swimming pool. The neighborhood tennis tournaments were held on the Heywoods' courts, and Mr. and Mrs. Heywood made it clear that their house and grounds were for the use of everyone their children knew. This accommodating and affectionate environment provoked recklessness and desperation in the Heywood children. One by one, each of them left home, met with disaster, and never returned. Carol married a middle-aged bartender her second year at Bryn Mawr, Pete flunked out of medical school, Lucille had a nervous breakdown and was confined to a sanatorium in Boston, Harry became a drunkard, Eugenia went to England during the war and fell in love with a married man, and Malcolm was killed in a senseless automobile accident. The aged and saddened couple continued to leave Roseheath open to the friends of their children. The summer after the war, when the beaches were crowded and the club was filled with strangers, the tranquil pool at Roseheath remained unchanged, but even this was to go. The Heywoods sold the place, without telling anyone, and stole off to California. A family named Field or Fields bought it, and this ambiguous name deepened the neighbors' sorrow, for they had not only lost Roseheath but had presumably lost it to someone obscure and unworthy of the life that had been lived there. The sale of Roseheath affected perhaps a dozen couples. The people who seemed to feel the loss most were Ethel and Dana Wilcox.

People said of Ethel Wilcox that she was good and sweet. Her father had been an alcoholic and her mother had been involved in a scandal, and Ethel's plain face and her readiness to laugh and the fact that she had had an unhappy childhood prompted women to say, "Ethel is a good, dear, sweet creature." She married Dana Wilcox, from Baltimore, and of her

husband they all said, "He's so smart! That Dana Wilcox is so smart!" Dana was six feet seven and in his early thirties, and he enjoyed sailing. If the conversation was about foreign automobiles, he would break into it with "I don't know anything about automobiles, but I've managed every kind of sailing craft there is and I know every rock in Northeast Harbor." If the conversation was about railroad trains, he would say, "I don't know anything about trains, but I've managed every kind of sailing craft there is and I know every rock in Northeast Harbor." The Wilcoxes had been warm friends of the Heywood children and of their parents. "I feel as if I'd lost my own father and mother," Ethel often said, "and if I can't swim in that pool this summer, I'll die."

The mysterious Field or Fields family moved in in the spring. Ethel tried to discover who they were, but she was never even to be sure of their initials. The name was vaguely associated for her with actresses, cut-rate drugs, and orchestra leaders. "If you were going to make up a name," she said, "it's the sort of name you'd pick." When the weather grew hot, Ethel would not swim at the crowded beach but sat on her scorched lawn and thought of Roseheath.

One evening in August, the Wilcoxes went to a large party given for someone's mother. Ethel disliked the guest of honor, and, having paid her respects briefly, she sat down on a sofa beside a stout, gray-haired woman, a solid, reassuring type who, when the conversation turned to the sorrows of change, spoke emphatically. "We used to drink so little and dance so much!" she exclaimed. "We used to wear those hard satin slippers and dance through them in an evening, and my ball dresses used to be splinters up to the knee. We used to have the most divine dresses, with panniers and trains and those cloth flowers from Paris. Of course, the trains were hazardous. I tripped on mine while I was dancing the Castle Walk with Hamilton Fish and fractured my skull." She stood up, and when Ethel asked her name, she said, "I'm Mrs. Field. We've bought the Heywood place."

Ethel was so pleased with her discovery that she went to tell Dana. She found him with a dry gentleman who was discussing his collection of Princeton memorabilia. When he had finished describing a manuscript copy of "Old Nassau," Ethel

was introduced to Mr. Field. The sullen blonde on his left was his daughter-in-law, and the correct young man on his right was his son Roger, who was about Dana's age. "I'm so delighted to meet you!" Ethel cried. "We were afraid you were going to be Armenians."

A few days after the party, while Dana was waiting for the morning train, he saw Roger Field on the platform and spoke to him. They sat together on the train and discussed the Heywoods and the neighborhood. "I go in to the city only three days a week now," Roger said. "I'm not working. I'm being analyzed. We've all been analyzed. That is, everyone but my wife. She won't go to Dr. Willet. I think she should, but she won't. Mother's been analyzed twice. She plays the violin now. Dr. Willet thinks it might help her. Dad finished his analysis in '43, but he still goes to Dr. Willet on Fridays. One of the reasons we came East was because Dr. Willet came East." Roger said all this casually, and any shock Dana might have felt was dispelled when he said goodbye in the station. "If Sunday's a fine day, you must come swimming," he said. "The gardener tells us that you and your wife used to use the pool, and we feel very selfish keeping it to ourselves. So if Sunday's a fine day, please come."

Sunday was hot and fair, and after lunch the Wilcoxes put their tennis rackets and bathing suits in the car and went to the club to play tennis. The place was filled with strangers, and when Ethel and Dana had finished their game, they were glad to leave. They drove down the back road to Roseheath. The gates were open, as they had always been; the flower beds along the driveway were unchanged; the doors and windows of the big house were open, with the curtains flying; and Dana parked his car by the old stables, as he had always done. As the Wilcoxes walked toward the pool, they could hear Mrs. Field's voice. She was counting. The water reflected her voice faintly, and the sound reminded them of other summer afternoons.

The pool was screened from the rest of the grounds by a dense hedge, and when the Wilcoxes went around the hedge that afternoon they found the Fields resting in the same iron furniture that the Heywoods had used, except for Roger, who was in the water, hanging to the edge of the pool. The others

were spread around the end of the pool, and there was that pleasant absence of self-consciousness about them that marks an amiable family. "We're so terribly glad you decided to come," Mrs. Field said. She was knitting. Mr. Field was in his bathing shorts and a canvas hat with air vents in the crown. Young Mrs. Field, like her mother-in-law, was bundled in a wrap made of towelling. She had smoked glasses on, and a wide-brimmed hat. Roger called hello.

The Wilcoxes went to the bathhouse at the foot of the lawn and changed into their bathing suits, and then went back and sat on the grass beside the Fields. They were welcome, they felt. It was as though the family, with an invisible gesture, had let them come in. Roger continued to cling to the side of the pool. "Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven," Mrs. Field said, counting stitches. "I'm knitting a sweater for my seven-year-old granddaughter. She's at camp." She held up the beginnings of a sweater. "Don't you think she'll be stunning in this color?" she asked her daughter-in-law.

"Yes," the young Mrs. Field said without turning her head.

"I think it will go so well with her eyes," Mrs. Field said, apparently to herself.

"Would you like to play some tennis before you swim?" Mr. Field asked the Wilcoxes.

"We've been playing," Dana said. "Of course, if you'd like to play . . ."

"No, not if you've been playing," Mr. Field said. "This sun is too hot for that much tennis. Do you know anything about this pool, by the way? We've had some trouble with the pump machinery."

"I don't know anything about machinery," Dana said. "I don't know anything about automobiles or electrical motors or radios, but I've managed every kind of sailing craft there is and I know every rock in Northeast Harbor."

"It's heavenly to be here," Ethel said. "The beach at the club is crowded, and we don't know a soul there. We went there for dinner on Thursday night and couldn't get a table. I've been paying dues for fifteen years, and Mother gave them the tapestries in the lounge, and the dining room is full of people you've never seen before—people who got rich yesterday."

"I must tell you that we were worried when we heard the

Heywoods had sold Roseheath," Dana said. "Some Greek in the garment business bought the Marston place last year."

"They've ruined the garden," Ethel said. "It breaks my heart."

"Eight, nine, ten, eleven," Mrs. Field said. A maid came to her across the lawn and said there was a Mrs. Frazier on the telephone. "Tell her I've gone motoring," Mrs. Field said. She shook her knitting, and the maid returned to the house.

"Since I can't interest anyone in tennis, I think I'll take a dip," Mr. Field said. He unbuttoned his shorts, let them fall to the ground, and stepped out of them. Wearing nothing but his canvas hat, he went to the edge of the pool and, kneeling there beside Ethel, scooped some yellow leaves out of the water.

"The water ought to be delicious," Mrs. Field said, and frowned at her knitting. "We had it changed yesterday." She pressed her knitting into her lap and looked up abruptly. "Don't tell anyone. There's a shortage of water and the town authorities have asked us not to change the water very often, but I can't stand a warm pool."

"The Heywoods used to feel that way," Ethel said. Her voice was strained. "Mrs. Heywood used to say," she went on nervously, shrilly, conscious of the naked man at her side, "Mrs. Heywood used to say that she'd rather have her garden wither than swim in tepid water. I can remember seeing these lawns scorched! I can remember seeing these lawns burned! I can remember seeing this lawn when it was burned from there to there! And the flowers!"

"Cold water is so enthralling," Mr. Field said. There was a splash as he dived into the pool, and this signal of his disappearance relieved Ethel. She lit a cigarette.

"I think I'll go in," Mrs. Field said. "I haven't been in today." She put her knitting on the grass and stood up. "That's an enchanting bathing suit you have on, my dear," she told Ethel. "We don't wear bathing suits, you know. Dr. Willet thinks it's so good for us." She walked toward the pool. She was of that generation that was taught to walk in school, and she moved with small, light steps. She took off her robe and descended slowly into the water. "I wish you could decide about Wednesday," she said to her husband. She began to swim, using the breast stroke. "I thought if we had chicken for dinner

on Tuesday, we could have chicken hash for lunch on Wednesday, if you and Roger are going to be home."

Dana watched as Roger pulled himself out of the pool. He also was naked. "You know," he told the Wilcoxes, "I've been swimming for fifteen years and my kick is still bad."

"It's a good idea to practice a flutter kick on a board," Ethel said. She stared into his eyes as he came toward her. "If you get an old aquaplane or some kind of board and practice your flutter kick on that. If you practice. If you keep practicing on a board."

"I think I'll go in," Dana said.

"I'm going to try the diving board," Ethel said.

Dana dived and swam the length of the pool, and when he came up, Ethel was standing on the diving board. There was a loud shuddering of wood as the board, relieved of its weight, flew into the air. Ethel made a clumsy dive. She swam to the edge of the pool and climbed up to the diving board again, wondering how long it would be before they could leave politely. Dana swam the length of the pool twice more and climbed out at the end, where young Mrs. Field was sitting.

"That sun's hot," he said.

"I hate the sun," the young woman said. "I don't tan. I freckle. Whenever I sit in the sun, I have to cover myself."

"Cigarette?"

"No, thanks," she said. "I think I'll go in." There was the crash of the diving board, and Ethel flew through the air. Young Mrs. Field waited until Dana dived from the board. Then she took off her hat and her smoked glasses and stepped into the shadow of the trees that now touched the side of the pool. She loosened and dropped her robe. Her figure was lovely and her skin was alarmingly white. There was nothing brisk or athletic about her dive, and she swam indolently through the water.

Ethel was tired and winded, but she continued to dive, so that she would not have to look at the naked men and women around her. As she pulled herself out of the pool, she heard a startling exchange of conversation from the water below.

"We have a convert, dear," young Mrs. Field called to her mother-in-law.

"Well, we often swim in the buff when we're sailing," Dana

called in his boyish and earnest voice, "but I must say that the water at Northeast is a lot colder than this!" His wet swimming shorts came sailing through the air and landed on the grass near the diving board. He surface-dived, came up, and spouted a mouthful of water. Ethel floundered off the board and swam to his side. "We've got to go, dear," she told him.

"Why?" Dana asked.

"I told them at the house that we'd be back at five and it's nearly that now. We've got to go," she called to Mrs. Field.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Field said. She turned to her husband. "Isn't this the most delicious hour of the day?" she asked.

Dana put on his trunks when he climbed out of the pool, and the Wilcoxes returned to the bathhouse and dressed without speaking. Ethel put on her lipstick in the central room, where there was a large mirror, and Dana waited for her there. He could see the Fields from the open door of the bathhouse. They had left the water, covered themselves with robes and bath sheets, and gathered again at the edge of the pool. They were talking comfortably to themselves and to one another—talking, it seemed, to the shadows that had begun to cross the water and to the crows in the pines. Ethel massaged her face, so that her smile would appear natural when she said goodbye to the Fields—goodbye and thank you and goodbye to Roseheath forever.