

TWO IN TIME

Emma had a meticulous mother; she would be an equally precise wife. Her distant father provided similarly neat solutions: solid house with wide windows surveying a choice golf course; regular thoughtfully planned holidays (seaside or ski slopes in appropriate season) and tasteful presents.

She couldn't believe it when later everything was offered to her, almost too delicious a dish for a slip of a girl scarcely out of her teens.

'Grab it!' whispered her mother, 'you may never have another such chance.'

There he was at the local Conservatives' annual dinner dance, at the next table. Unattached, except for fellow male golfers, like Emma's father.

('I shouldn't have introduced you. Apologies,' was his only subsequent comment.)

He stood by her, tall and rather distinguished-looking for a man in his late twenties, with that irresistible man-about-town assurance that a promising position in Brookman Brothers (Established 1894) invaluable gives. Emma always thought she preferred the craggy looks of a Rochester-type male - dark with a wide warm clasp and more purposeful kissing than was forthcoming from the few neighbours' sons she had encountered in her secure suburban nest.

She had been safely entrusted to a convent school. His expensive loyalty was to Eton, slipping that fact into polite conversation with effortless ease. He had fine off-blond hair (once called mousy, the type that first gives way to shiny skulls) and a scarcely discernible chest thicket to explore. But he scored well on other counts: manners, voice inflections, flattering attention and no financial constraints.

'Don't let him slip out of your grasp,' Emma's mother repeated. 'I captured your father and you're enjoying the dividends.' True.

Emma relished having her photo feature on the third page of *Country Life*, her 'fairy-tale wedding' reported in the *Tatler* (*Hello* had been almost rudely repelled by her mother, Emma thought, a tad surprised). Reasonable lovemaking ensued, as far as one of the last virgin brides in the Western World could imagine, followed by the requisite son and daughter two and a bit years apart.

The nuns at Emma's school were expected to produce 'rounded characters, excelling in family virtues,' snuffing any desire for higher education. Some trustifarian activity in Sotheby's or Christies preferably or a Bond Street gallery, could occupy any waiting time. The right men prowled the salesrooms.

Rodney forged a satisfying ritual. Every evening he would close the front door and lean against it in the entrance hall to survey the plaster bust of Antinous he had treasured in his student days and the precious vases that Emma filled with flowers to welcome him. Behind the doors, open or ajar, were sounds of pleasing activity: dogs yapping and wagging towards him; children playing; Emma entertaining one of her numerous charity fund-raising groups or chopping vegetables in the kitchen. Entrancing smells of a promising menu for dinner completed his satisfaction. A good job.

Emma was never beautiful, if you think of Kate Moss, but what his father used to call 'comely'. Regular small features, good skin, a curvaceous figure without being fat. Interesting colouring if you

liked dark hair and grey eyes. All things being equal, he would have preferred a genuine blond. Oh well, most of the boxes had a tick. That's life.

Her curves became more rounded after the childbearing. This she noticed when she looked at herself in the mirror to check her hems and hair before he returned for dinner. She fretted at first when he phoned to say he would be late. Less so when he returned promptly for the children's bedtime stories and the meal, going back afterwards to the office having, 'Urgent matters to deal with before tomorrow,' home in the early hours when she was asleep.

'It's only in an emergency, darling,' he would explain with a light kiss on her forehead. There were office crises once, then twice or even three times a week.

All happened after that trip to Rome and the curious lunch in a *palazzo*. Their hostess, a widowed marchioness, drew her away from the other guests through a rabbit warren of rooms brimful of priceless paintings and *objets d'art* to a room overlooking the Pantheon.

'At every full moon I'm here to watch it sink behind the Pantheon as if it's falling through the hole in the dome, plop, like a coin in a piggy-bank.'

Plop. She sat down with a dozen guests round a rectangular table, their voices echoing in the picture gallery. Emma concentrated on her neighbours, as she couldn't hear what anyone else was saying. They were talking about Brazil, wandering curiously off along the trail of South American transsexuals and transvestites working in Rome. Unable to hear anything else, she cautiously entered the theme they'd strayed into.

Convivially, e-mail addresses exchanged, she hitched her arm into Rodney's. 'Sight-seeing now. The Pantheon!'

One thing leads to another, and Emma found she had made a couple of good e-mail friends on the international circuit. Other things don't necessarily follow, or shouldn't, such as when two weeks later Rodney slipped off after dinner. So much work, the only road to success etc... Emma and the children lacked nothing, he assured her - and himself.

Emma took a sleeping pill. She was woken by the phone her husband usually answered on his side of the bed. He had not returned.

The baying started.

'Will you go to the Westminster hospital?'

'Why?'

'Haven't they phoned you?'

She slammed down the phone to click on the TV.

'Well known banker,' and a smudged photo of Rodney (from his driving licence?) obliterated the anchor-man for a dreadful instant, 'found unconscious in millionaires' haunt, a refined massage parlour specialising in S & M... Efforts are being made to contact his family.' She switched off. Emma knew Rodney carried no addresses or identification papers to avoid fraud, but the press would unearth everything. She pursed her lips, put on her silk flowered dressing gown and went downstairs to the kitchen. A relief. It was Vicky's day off. Hugging a large mug of coffee she hatched a plan.

'Nothing to say!' steelfaced to the reporters surrounding her car as the electronic gates swung open.

'No comment!' to the pack outside the hospital.

'So you're conscious now,' to Rodney. 'How's your conscience?'

'Help. Please, Emma... '

'Wronged wife, husband in hospital after near fatal sex frolic -' or some variation of this ran the whole week and then resurfaced sporadically in the press. Gradually over weeks, months and years, the dust settled and their shocked children grew up into their own fraught existences. Retired prematurely with a pension, Rodney, after a discreet sabbatical, was offered a position with the help of the golfing fraternity, and the old pattern of life returned. Leaning back against the front door, he surveyed the familiar hall and doors opening off it, the dogs weakly beating their tails on the floor but no children at play. Just a loud TV in the kitchen accompanying the smell of burnt onion and Emma peering out at him.

Another day he returned to the usual dog welcome but no Emma. She came in late after he had made himself a forlorn omelette. She just stated that she had things to do. No excuses. Just busy. Often out. He'd have to learn to forage. Never too late, and so on. When he remonstrated in the old key of, 'After a hard day's work,' she just looked at him murmuring, 'Hospital, press...remember?' and he shut up. To console himself he frequented parties, but a baldhead didn't find it easy. No aura of wealth any more. Not flush enough to maintain an outside affair, not with two children at university and his inability now to poke his head above the lower rungs of middle management.

He alternated, 'Divorce?' (She shrugged her shoulders) with, 'Let's start again. Go on a holiday.' (Same reaction.) She refused to entertain any more. 'No Vicky, no entertaining at home.' So he took his guests to restaurants instead, sometimes with his wife, more often without. Safe, rounded Emma was proving unpredictable. She was fine; even at times her old vivacious self, when she was there. The house was well cared for: flowers in the usual vases and a well-stocked refrigerator, larder and store cupboard. His shirts and trousers were as usual immaculate. Rodney noticed that Emma was buying herself innumerable outfits, many from couturiers, and had to turn the small spare bedroom into a second closet. She had always managed well with the allowance he gave her for housekeeping. And for herself as well.

'Only money,' he thought as he followed a couple along Kensington High Street, 'could let a woman that shape keep such a young, lithe male.' He walked faster to get closer and admire the neat, tense buttocks and muscled thighs. 'Clothes don't hide anything.' He must have thought out loud as the woman turned. At his hissed surprise, Emma's companion turned as well. He was as dark and handsome as Rodney imagined.

'What are you doing?' Rodney spurted out.

'None of your business,' and she hooked her companion's arm to walk on.

This time there was no scandal, just a combination of interests. 'Let's talk it through,' she said when she calmly shut the front door and the dogs shuffled up to her.

His investment was used to obtain larger premises. The male and female clientele are now

discreetly separated in the 18th- century mansion in Playfair. Licensed as a club, managed by Emma's friend from that dinner in Rome, it houses mainly Brazilian trans-, bi- and tri- or more groups for all tendencies, no sexes barred. All combinations are understated but included on the menu of pseudonyms. Business flourishes. It's all innocent, legal fun. Consenting adults and all that.

Anything goes except (Emma's orders) S & M.