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Finding Fortune

Written by

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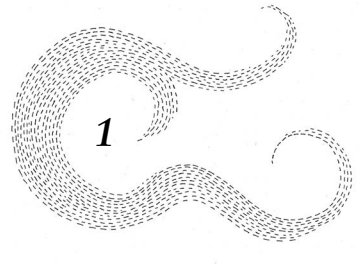
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For Tom Deveson who gave
me the gift of a free choice of book
forty-three years ago, and helped
turn me into a reader



Ida looked at the stone slab under her feet. She read the twirly writing that listed names and dates of her dead Berringer ancestors. Soon Mama's name would be added to that list.

Isabella Metcalf 1866–1897

Was Mama an 'ancestor' too, now that she was dead, wondered Ida? Ancestor didn't feel right for someone who hadn't been old and hadn't lived a very long time ago.

Last Friday they had lowered the coffin with Mama's body in it into the vault. The Berringer family – Grandmama, Uncle Stephen and Aunt Helen, their three children, Aunt Theodora, and some elderly cousins Ida didn't even know – had all been dressed in stiff, stifling outfits of sombre black to parade behind the coffin, out of the summer sunshine and into the church. The estate servants and people from the village had worn their best black too, shuffling and watching. Like crows, thought Ida.

She and Fa were there, holding hands very tightly, not quite belonging to either of the groups. Grandmama had insisted that she, Lady Berringer, was principle mourner,

following directly behind the coffin. So, in death, the Berringer family had reclaimed their Isabella and pushed Fa and Ida to one side.

Now Ida's eyes welled with hot tears. She blinked hard and wiped the back of her hand crossly over her face as she ran, clattering her feet, down the aisle and out of the church. She ran out into sunshine and air that was fresh. Ida hitched up her long black skirts and began to climb an old apple tree that drooped a branch down as if to invite her up. She went up into the tree's branches, then leaned against the trunk and looked out through a dancing veil of leaves. When I die, thought Ida, I want a grave outside in the sunshine.

Of course, it was proper that Mama had been put in the family grave. Mama was a Berringer, even though her family had hardly spoken to her after she married Fa and became a Metcalf. Fa was not 'one of us', according to Grandmama. He was not of their social class. So that made Ida only half 'one of us'. Which half, she wondered?

The hustle-rustle of leaves in the breeze all around brought to Ida's mind the sounds of the sea at home, in Norfolk. Fa and Mama and Ida had lived there in a small damp house with knapped flints pressed into its walls. Behind the house were dunes of sand and scratchy grass, then a beach of millions upon millions of pebbles, each one of them different in size and colour and shape. The pebble beach sloped steeply down to a great green-grey sea that was never still. The sea was pulled and pushed by the tides,

rolling and tossing and rattling the pebbles as it sucked them in and spat them out, then it sighed a froth of foam as it stroked the last lick of each wave over them.

They had been happy in Norfolk until Mama had got sick, coughing and thin and pale.

'Is it any surprise that she is ill?' said Grandmama's letters, 'living in that hovel of a home?'

Fa and Ida had cooked Mama tasty broths to try and make her strong. They had kept Mama warm and made her laugh, but she continued getting worse until the day came when she coughed spots of blood onto her white lace handkerchief. Then Fa had come downstairs from Mama's room with his face as white as milk.

'Is it very bad?' Ida had asked. And Fa had looked at Ida and nodded.

'Isabella must be brought here and cared for properly,' was Grandmama's response when told. She had sent her carriage to fetch Mama, along with Fa and Ida.

So they had left Norfolk and gone to live in the Dower House, near the main gate of the Berringer family estate of Yewdale Hall. Grandmama had loaned them Tilly, an undermaid, as well as a cook to help care for Mama. She had also sent her own doctor.

Grandmama had visited poor sick Mama, curling her lip when she saw the way that Fa had taken over the parlour for his painting because the light was best in that room.

'I shall see Isabella in her rest room,' Grandmama

would say. She could never bring herself to say 'bedroom'. She would sweep into the room where Mama lay propped up on pillows in her bed. Fa would make tea and send Ida up with a tray laid with the best china and with a vase of flowers freshly picked from the garden.

They all did anything they could think of to make Mama well. Fa hardly slept at all by the end, constantly sitting at Mama's side in case she needed anything. Ida read Mama storybooks, especially adventure stories by G.A. Henty that her cousin Eric lent them. Those stories were full of unladylike things such as shooting and bad language, but Mama didn't mind. When Ida noticed Mama wince with pain she would hesitate in her reading, but Mama would always smile and say, 'Go on. The story takes my mind off the discomfort.' So Ida read lots, taking Mama and herself to countries and times far away from real life in the Dower House.

But, in spite of their care, Mama died; now she was in the Berringer tomb for ever.

Ida closed her eyes and let the tree rock her. 'But I am Ida Adelaide Metcalf,' she told the tree. 'I am not a Berringer.'

With one arm secure around a branch, Ida pulled the ribbon from her plaited hair and shook it free. She undid the top button on her high-necked black bodice. She wished that she could kick off the tightly buttoned boots and strip down her stockings so that her legs could be free, as they so often were in Norfolk.

They would be serving tea in the big house now and Ida should be there. She would be scolded for being late.

'Well, let them be cross!' She couldn't think properly with the cousins and their nanny watching every move and insisting on 'polite conversation'.

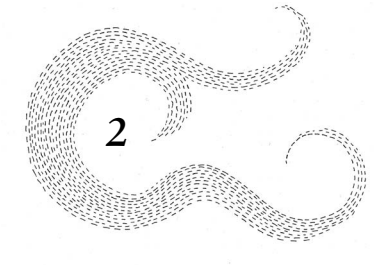
In Norfolk, Fa would serve the tea beside the little cast iron fireplace in the small front room. Mama would sip from her cup, the saucer held elegantly in the other hand. Then she would laugh as she tried biting into one of the hard little rock cakes that Fa had cooked.

'Dip them into the tea. That makes them softer,' Ida advised Mama. But Mama would never do anything so unladylike. She nibbled at her dry rock cake. Ida dunked her own, making it soggy enough to collapse all down her pinafore.

Fa laughed.

'You two are incorrigible!' smiled Mama.

'I want to go home,' Ida told the tree. She jumped down and ran towards the Dower House to find Fa.



2

Ida ran through the estate's park of ancient oak trees and grass and grazing sheep towards the Dower House. She ran up the path, past rose beds, and in through the open door.

'Fa!' shouted Ida. 'Fa?'

There was no reply. But there were voices upstairs. Not Fa's voice, but the shrill voice of Aunt Dora. Why might she be here? Aunt Dora had hardly visited when Mama was alive, and certainly hadn't been here since Mama's death.

Ida froze statue-still to listen from the hallway as Aunt Dora said, 'You see, Mr Smollet, my brother-in-law Frank is up in town about some business today, so this is an opportunity to assess the house for the improvements my mother, Lady Berringer, has proposed.'

Ida frowned. Improvements? Maybe Grandmama was instructing that Mr Smollet should install gas lighting to replace the candles? Mr Smollet was a builder, so it must be something of that kind. How strange of Grandmama to turn generous just now. But how rude to send people into their home without even asking permission! And how awful if Grandmama went to all the trouble and expense

of improving the Dower House, only to be told that Ida and Fa were going home to Norfolk!

Ida slipped back out into the garden. So, Fa was in town. Why might that be? Why hadn't he told her? They are all of them keeping secrets from me, thought Ida! Well, I shall go and ask Grandmama directly what she is about and warn her that Fa and I are about to go home.

Ida marched up the rhododendron-bordered drive towards the 'big house', meeting Tilly round a corner.

'Oh, there you are, Miss Ida!' Tilly's kind face was pink from hurrying. 'Nanny said that you weren't at nursery tea. Wherever have you been, Miss?'

'I am sorry, Tilly,' said Ida. 'You see, I was going to the big house, but I stopped by at the church and . . .'

Tilly put a hand on Ida's arm. 'Oh, Miss Ida. You wanted to be with your mama. Of course you did.'

'Then I went to find Fa. He wasn't there, but Aunt Dora was, sneaking around with . . .'

'Well, your father is expected back soon and the two of you are to attend dinner with Lady Berringer this evening. So perhaps it is as well that you didn't eat your fill of nursery tea after all! Apparently Her Ladyship has some news that she wants to tell the two of you over dinner.'

'Oh dear,' said Ida. 'I think that I know what that news is. She's planning to make the Dower House nicer for Fa and me.'

'Is she now?' Tilly gave Ida a doubting kind of look. 'Whatever makes you suppose that, Miss?'

So Ida told her about the conversation between Aunt Dora and Mr Smollet as Tilly bustled her in through the back entrance of the big house and down the stairs to the servants' quarters.

'We must make you presentable,' said Tilly, glancing at the clock. 'There's no time to return to the Dower House for fresh clothes, especially if your aunt is there and hoping not to be disturbed. We must just make the best of what you have on.' Tilly looked at Ida. 'Button up that neck, Miss, if you please. Goodness, your hair is like a teasel! It's lucky that you are still in mourning. Nothing elaborate would be either expected or proper, but we must tidy you up. Take off your boots, Miss, and Timmy can give them a polish. I'll see what I can do with that hair, but first let's put that kettle on the hob. Cook is up to her eyes with your dinner to prepare, but I think she'll allow us a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, Tilly,' said Ida.

Tilly did what she could with Ida's hair and a broad black ribbon that she took from a drawer.

'Just like your mother's – full of curls!' said Tilly, tugging a brush through the tangles.

'Oh-ouch!'

'There! I think you'll do.'

As they sipped their tea, there was a sound of wheels

crunching on gravel outside the steps. Ida peeped out of the window, where the driveway was at eye level.

'It's a dog cart,' she said.

'That'll be your father arriving from the station,' said Tilly, tucking a strand of hair behind Ida's ear. 'Put those boots back on and straighten your skirts. You and your father can wait in the drawing room for the dinner gong to sound.'

Up in the hallway Fa stood tugging at his beard and looking awkward as Ida's cousins Charlotte and Elena danced around him.

'Did you get the position at the bank, Uncle Frank?' asked Charlotte.

'Uncle Frank will work in a bank!' giggled Elena.

'Except,' said Fa, blushing slightly, 'that Uncle Frank will not work in a bank. I was not appointed.'

'Fa?' said Ida, and Fa turned towards her.

'Ida! You and I are to dine with your Grandmama and the aunts.'

'That's what Tilly says,' said Ida.

Charlotte gave Ida a poke on the arm. 'Are you really? In the dining room? Is that why you weren't at tea? Nanny was cross, you know.'

Fa raised questioning eyebrows at Ida, but she stuck her chin upwards.

'I didn't want to spoil my appetite for the party that Grandmama is arranging for Fa and me.'

'Party!' shrieked Elena. 'Ooh, that is unfair! Why are we not invited?'

'Oh, are you not?' said Ida. 'Poor you.'

'I'm going to ask Mother!' said Elena, and she and Charlotte raced up the stairs, calling for their Mama.

Ida and Fa moved into the hushed drawing room full of chairs and sofas and curtains in dark colours. Fa perched awkwardly on the edge of a well-stuffed sofa. 'Do I look suitable?' he asked, easing the cravat at his neck.

Ida looked at tall skinny Fa with his mass of dark brown hair and beard and those big dark eyes peering anxiously out of his pale face. He was wearing his black funeral jacket and trousers, quite new, and his beard had been trimmed for Mama's funeral last week. But somehow, Fa could never look properly smart, not like Uncle Stephen who could always look plump and dashing in army dress uniform. Fa was 'all legs and arms, elbows and knees,' Mama used to say.

'You look nice,' Ida told him, and she squeezed his arm.

'What do you suppose this dinner is all about, eh?' asked Fa. 'Is it really some kind of a party? That seems unlikely.'

Ida shrugged. 'Tilly just said dinner, but that is a kind of party. I think that Grandmama wants to be nice to us.' Ida looked at Fa's furrowed brow and she wagged a finger at him as Mama had sometimes done. 'Why didn't you tell me that you were going to town? Tilly knew. Aunt Dora

knew and even Charlotte and Elena knew, but not me! And what did they mean about a position in a bank?'

Fa raised his hands in a hopeless kind of gesture. 'I didn't tell you because I thought that I could perhaps surprise you with good news on my return. I went to speak to a gentleman about a possible position working in a large bank in Manchester.'

'But we don't want to be in Manchester,' said Ida. 'And you can't do sums! Remember that bother we got into with the grocer when you didn't keep the accounts properly? Why do you want to work in a bank?'

Fa shook his head. 'The truth is that I don't want to work in a bank. I would be hopeless at working in a bank. The bank manager saw that for himself, so no job was offered.'

'Well, I'm glad . . . !' began Ida, but Fa put a hand on her arm.

'No, Ida. I do need to find some kind of employment. We no longer have Mama's allowance from her family, you know.'

Ida jumped up from the sofa.

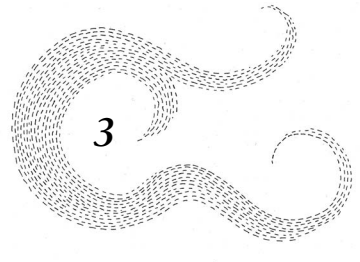
'Be a fisherman, Fa!' she said. 'We will go back to Norfolk. You'd like fishing, I'm sure, with your own boat and everything! We could eat fish most days, so we wouldn't need much money in any case. I could go back to school, and . . .'

Bong!

The brass gong in the hall was slung between baby elephant tusks. It had been brought from India by Uncle Stephen, and now it had been rung for dinner.

Fa stood up and took a deep breath. 'Well,' he said, 'we are about to find out what your Grandmama's thoughts on the matter are. And I don't think they will involve fishing boats.' Fa held out a hand and grinned at Ida. 'Best of luck, old bean! We'd better face it.'

'Best of luck to you too, old chap!' said Ida as she shook his big hand in hers. 'But remember, Fa, we don't have to do what Grandmama says.'



3

Ida had never seen the dining room beyond a peep through an open doorway before. In front of her was a long dark polished table sparkling with silver and cut glass, fruit, and some lilies. There was black ribbon around the vases because the household was in mourning. The lilies were beautiful, thought Ida. Elegant, like Mama. She felt a sudden fondness for the Berringer family for keeping reminders of what had happened to Mama all around the house. That felt right.

The dining room walls were papered in moss-green. Dark heavy, plum-coloured curtains with tassels hung half-drawn across tall windows through which the sun shone. Sliced shafts of sunlight lit up some of the shelves, cabinets and small tables displaying Grandmama's ornaments – china figures, feathery ferns in pots and stuffed birds. The pictures on the walls were pale depictions of Bible scenes, not at all like the colourful landscapes that Fa painted. There were mounted stuffed heads of antelope and tiger, on the wall over the fireplace. Uncle Stephen had shot those poor creatures in India and brought back their heads to England as a present for his mother.

Amid it all was Grandmama at the head of the table.

Grandmama was, of course, dressed in black. She had worn nothing but black since the death of her husband twelve years ago. Since the death of her daughter Isabella, Grandmama's white lacy widow's cap had been replaced with what looked like a black crepe napkin on top of her head. Her hair was a silvery white and her skin properly pale, so the only real colour on Grandmama was her eyes, which were fierce turquoise blue.

Aunts Dora and Helen bustled into the dining room and stood behind chairs on either side of Grandmama. Both aunts looked towards Ida and Fa with the slightly smug air of those who know something that others don't.

Ida bobbed a curtsey. 'Good evening, Grandmama,' she said, her voice sounding strange in the large room. 'I hope that you are well.'

Grandmama inclined her head in a slight nod of acknowledgement. 'Thank you for enquiring, my dear. I am tolerably well, but not as well as I look, you know. My bunions have been quite painful.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Grandmama.'

That was always the first exchange between Ida and her grandmother. The question and its answer never differed very much.

'Lady Berringer,' said Fa, bending at the waist. 'It is very good of you to include us in your dinner party tonight.'

'It is,' agreed Grandmama. 'I have my reasons, which I shall reveal once we have eaten. Do sit down, everyone.'

Ida sat and looked in awe at the array of cutlery and drinking glasses laid in front of her. As the meal progressed, she was grateful that Aunt Helen felt it her duty to nudge and whisper to make Ida use the correct implement for each eating task she faced.

The food arrived over Ida's left shoulder. The 'simple menu', as Grandmama called it, consisted of cucumber soup, baked turbot, roast wild duck with vegetables and delicious creamy gooseberry fool, followed by cheeses and fruit. Ida tried to do Mama proud by eating daintily and only speaking when spoken to. The grown-ups talked about weather and politics, leaving Ida free to concentrate on the food, but as the last plate was cleared a sudden chill silence made Ida look up. The aunts and Grandmama were all looking at Fa.

'Well?' said Grandmama.

'Oh, well, er . . .' said Fa. 'Um, no. I did not take the job at the bank.'

'Did not take, or were not offered?' asked Aunt Dora, in a sly voice.

Charlotte and Elena have sneaked, thought Ida.

'The post was not offered,' admitted Fa, going red at the collar. 'But the truth is that I would not have suited it, and it would not have suited me. I must think of some other way to earn a living.'

'Indeed you must!' said Grandmama, popping a grape into her mouth and chewing it forcefully.

Ida saw Fa's fists clench. 'I fully intend to make my own way in the world.'

'Exactly how?' Grandmama's icy question hung in the air, unanswered, leaving Fa looking foolish and embarrassed. Grandmama daintily wiped her mouth with her crisp white napkin, then announced, 'No matter. I have corresponded with Stephen and we have it planned.'

Ida saw hurt in Fa's eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but Aunt Helen's hand, firm on her arm, stopped her as Grandmama continued, 'With Isabella's death has come change for us all. I have asked Dora to put in hand some building works at the Dower House . . .'

Aha, thought Ida! So she *is* going to be nice, for all that she likes to frighten people!

'Thank you, Grandmama,' began Ida. 'That is so very kind of you, but . . .'

'Shush, child!' hissed Aunt Helen.

'. . . because,' said Grandmama, raising a finger to emphasise her point, 'I intend to move into the Dower House directly Stephen is able to free himself from the army and take over here. The Dower House was always intended for the dowager to live in, after all. It is high time that Stephen took over headship of this family, and that entails living in the family seat.'

'But,' said Ida, 'there isn't a spare bedroom in the Dower House, Grandmama. Where would you sleep?'

Grandmama laughed. 'Oh dear me, I am not to move in

with you, Ida my dear. No, no. I shall be living there *instead* of you, with your Aunt Theodora as my companion.'

'That suits us very well, thank you, Grandmama,' smiled Ida. 'Because Fa and I are to go back to Norfolk. You may have the Dower House if you wish.'

Grandmama chuckled. 'You are forgetting, Ida, that the Dower House *is* mine. But you, my dear Ida, are not going back to Norfolk. No. You are to live here in Yewdale Hall, along with your cousins.' Ida felt Aunt Helen stiffen beside her, and realised that maybe this was news to her as well. But Grandmama was still talking.

'Ida is to be sent to a well regarded boarding school in term time. Stephen's girls, of course, have their governess, and Eric will continue at Eton. But Ida will become part of Stephen's family during the holidays. It is what Isabella would have wanted.'

Aunt Helen had gone pale. 'You shall become one of us, Ida,' she said.

Ida looked at Fa who was silent now. 'Is Fa to live in the big house too?'

There was a pause for a moment, then Grandmama said firmly, 'No. What you call the big house will be my son's home, with you as an honorary member of his family, Ida. Your father will be starting a new life elsewhere.'

Fa's voice was quiet, but fierce, as he rose to his feet. 'Madam, I have lost my wife and I have no intention of also losing my daughter. You cannot simply take her

as your own.' Tall Fa leaned, challengingly, towards his mother-in-law.

Grandmama didn't flinch. She raised her closed fan and jabbed it towards Fa. 'Do shush, Frank. I shall explain. Sit down.' Fa sat. Grandmama placed her fan beside her plate.

'My family has thought this through most thoroughly.' So 'my family' doesn't include Fa and me, noted Ida bitterly. Maybe it hadn't even included Aunt Helen who, after all, was only a Berringer by marriage. Grandmama sniffed. 'I have decided to settle a sum of money upon you, Frank. A substantial sum, I might add. A generous sum. Offered because my daughter would have wanted me to be generous to you. You are to use the money to start a new life in a new place. You might like to take a living in the church. You could settle in a nice little parish. That would be quite suitable and of course follow in your own father and grandfather's footsteps, if I am not mistaken. You may even find yourself a new wife and raise a new family.'

'How can you even suggest . . . !' Fa was almost spluttering with rage.

Grandmama raised her finger. 'If you are not intending a new family, you should maybe go abroad.'

'Abroad?' said Fa.

'Abroad!' said Ida.

'Abroad,' said Grandmama. 'I suggest South Africa as a suitable destination for a relatively young man with money to invest and no property of his own to keep him at home.'

'South Africa!' Ida stood up now, crashing her chair into the table so that it set the wine and water quivering in their glasses.

'The child has no manners at all!' whispered Aunt Helen.

'Good Lord!' Fa had turned pink. 'Are you trying to pay me off, Lady Berringer? As if, as if, I was some . . . some . . .'

'I am offering you an opportunity and you'd be a fool to turn it down. I am giving your daughter the chance to better herself,and you an opportunity to make something of yourself. Are you going to turn me down?'

'Er, I . . .'

'Fa!' said Ida. 'Don't say "yes". I'd much rather be with you in Norfolk!' But Fa seemed too stunned to speak.

Grandmama cleared her throat. 'So, I will pay for Ida's schooling. And I have here . . .' Grandmama drew something out of the black depths of her dress, '. . . a signed promissory note for a full one thousand guineas, made out to Frank Metcalf, Esquire. Will you take it?'

'No!' said Ida. 'He will not! Fa? Don't!'

Fa took a deep breath.

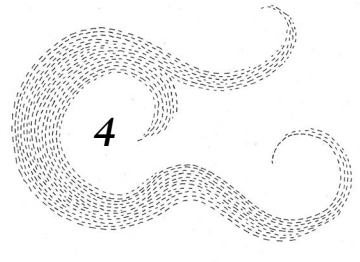
'Fa!'

'Mind, there are conditions that go with the money.' Grandmama withdrew the note a little. Ida threw down her napkin, knocking over a flower vase, spilling water and lilies over the table.

'Really!' tutted Aunt Dora.

'We shall have to tame her!' said Aunt Helen.

But Ida was already running down the hall, heading for the front door.



4

Ida heard Fa's steps up the creaky Dower House stairs late that evening.

'Ida?' he called out. 'Are you still up? Can we discuss things, my love?'

Fa pushed open the door of Ida's bedroom. Ida was standing on a chair, reaching up to take a picture from the wall.

'What are you doing?' asked Fa.

'Packing,' said Ida. The picture was one that Fa had done, a picture of gorse and pebbles and sand seen from their Norfolk home. She put the picture on top of the tumble of clothes that she had already thrown into an open trunk.

'But they'll send people from the big house to move your belongings up there, I'm sure. There's no need to do this.' Fa held out his arms. 'Come down to the kitchen for a mug of cocoa. I want to talk to you.'

'I am not going to live with them up there, whatever Grandmama thinks. I am going back to Norfolk. With you, Fa.'

Fa fiddled with the pebbles that Ida had arranged along her windowsill.

'We can't do that.'

'Yes, we can! You took Grandmama's money, didn't you? So we can afford to buy a house of our own.' Ida stopped packing. 'Let's go tonight! Please, Fa? Eloping, just as you and Mama did. That worked out, didn't it?'

Fa smiled, but shook his head. 'Grandmama's money comes with conditions. Since I won't go into the church, I must go abroad.' Fa's big hand stroked Ida's hair. 'It won't be for long. Not more than a year or two. I shall probably go to Africa . . .'

'Then I shall come with you!' Ida shook Fa's sleeve. 'I would love to visit Africa!'

'This isn't a holiday trip, or one suitable for children,' said Fa. 'I will be amongst rough, primitive kinds of people, and there will be diseases and nobody of your own kind. There is even a threat of fresh fighting out there.'

'But I don't . . . !' began Ida, but Fa put a finger to her lips.

'Your mama wanted you to be brought up as a young lady, and that is what Grandmama and Uncle Stephen and Aunt Helen are offering. It might not be what you or I want, but it is, nevertheless, a generous offer. I want you to accept it, for Mama's sake.' Ida was silenced.

Fa took her hands into his own big ones. 'Walking home just now I was thinking and, you know, it really is quite exciting.' He squeezed Ida's hands and she saw a spark in his eyes. She knew that Mama would love the fact that

Fa was properly excited about something for the first time in months. 'I could become a farmer in Kenya, growing maize, or raising cattle or somesuch. I really must find out exactly what.'

'But you don't know anything at all about farming,' said Ida.

'Then maybe I would do better in the diamond mining business in South Africa?' Fa held up Ida's hand, kissed it and laughed. 'Oh, I shall bring you back diamonds, my Ida, and have them made into so many rings that all the ladies at the big house will be green with envy! How about that, eh?'

Ida didn't have the heart not to smile back.