

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The weather could not have been better when he came to leave to walk to the flat. Richard had expected it to rain and had spent the previous hour and a half looking out at the sky, waiting for the expected cloud which never materialised. He also sat nervously, in anticipation of a knock on the door to inform him that Mrs Howard was downstairs and asking to see him urgently, or that there was another telegram from Eastgate. Something had to happen to spoil the evening! Perhaps Dennet would call on the way home from seeing his mother and demand that he joined him in one or all of the nearby taverns? But there was no knock, no callers, no messages, nor was there anyone waiting for him as he went downstairs and let himself out of the house. He could not believe that everything was, for once, going like clockwork.

Dutifully and correctly he pressed the appropriate buzzer at eight o'clock. The outer door opened and not many minutes later he was admitted to the flat. Stephanie's appearance surprised him. She had no make up on other than a faint blue tinge across her eyelids. She wore a long, plain, lilac dress, closely fitted to her figure, adorned with a single strand of pearls. Her auburn hair, normally loose over her shoulders, was twisted and plaited into a buffon, exposing her long, sensuous neck. "Come in, Richard," she said, softly "Everything is ready." He felt uncomfortable. He should have been handing something to her, a box of chocolates, flowers, even a bottle of wine. But he, thoughtlessly, had come empty handed!

The table was fully and carefully set for two, with a cluster of plates, glasses and cutlery. "Please feel at home," she said, sensing his discomfort. "Just relax. Would you like something to drink, first?"

"Oh, yes. Anything will do," he said, clumsily. She smiled.

"A Campari, perhaps?" she murmured, and went out for the glasses. He stood awkwardly, awaiting her turn. Why did he feel so tense? He should be suave, worldly, dominating, yet here he was, nervous, clumsy, fearful of knocking something over, or saying or doing the wrong thing. "I hope you'll like it," she announced, returning, "but I've made us a stroganoff. There's home-made soup to start with, and a Pear Belle-Stephanie with which to finish."

"It sounds delicious," he said.

"Oh, and we've got candles. I know it's a cliché, but I love candle-lit suppers. It must be my religious upbringing!"

"I think they're pagan in origin," Richard said, confidence growing as he drained his glass.

"Are they? Then perhaps it was my lack of a religious upbringing. That would explain it all, then. How about music? Do you like serious music? Brahms?" Richard nodded. "This is my pride and joy," she said, opening the doors of a cabinet and revealing a large tape-deck. "I know it is wrong and one day the little men from the record company will come and carry me away, screaming, for infringement of copyright, but I love music and I tape a large amount from the wireless. It's VHF as well, you know. Now, Brahms' Second to begin with?" It was soft and evocative, but neither passionate nor Richard's idea of romantic. He thought of the choices he might have made: Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin: but Brahms? They sat and commenced the meal, Stephanie calm and assured, Richard nervously trembling.

"I trust you realise that this is an even rarer privilege than visiting my flat? You really are being honoured. I don't make a practice of this." He gulped a mouthful of soup and stared at her. Those green eyes were sparkling with confidence and a sense of complete, overwhelming, victory.

"You don't?" he murmured, rallying his spirits. "I must say, you don't appear to be in need of practice." She raised her eyebrows. "This is very good," he added.

"Now, you must save your judgement until you have sampled the whole meal. Everything that is on offer, I should say. You do tend to be impulsive, Richard."

"It is a sign of immaturity," he thought.

"Would you like to open the wine?" she called over her shoulder as she carried the

soup bowls back to the kitchen. "Its on the sideboard." It was a task which Richard thought he could be guaranteed to make a mess of and he was relieved to discover that Stephanie's corkscrew was both foolproof and Richard-proof.

"Oh, don't shake it!" she cried. He smiled sheepishly.

"I'm not very good with wines," he admitted. She looked at him teasingly.

"Ah ha! We shall have to educate you, I see."

Richard could not help praising the stroganoff. "How is it," he said, "that you can cook like this?"

"How is it that you are good at mathematics? Good enough to teach others? I do not think I can add to save my life."

"I mean, if you can cook like this, why do you go to that dreadful little restaurant?"

She scowled. "You are quickly forgetful," she said censoriously. "I told you that it is run by my aunt who is, while we are on the subject, a far better cook than I, but such meals as she might serve to impress you would be beyond the extent of your pocket, and might be totally wasted on your palate. And, I should add, it is no fun cooking and being alone, up here." She finished her statement in a sharp tone and the meal continued in silence. Richard felt glum. There was an opening there, the subject of feeling glum, but he felt he could not use it. He sought desperately for something to say, a mere comment, anything to restore the earlier, carefree, atmosphere. "You are just like all men," she said bitterly.

"I'm sorry," replied Richard, assuming she was referring to his faux-pas earlier. "I meant it as a compliment. I had no idea it would be so sensitive." She gave him a strange look, almost as if she neither believed nor trusted him.

"It isn't your fault," she said after a pause. "Somehow you have opened the door on a whole chain of thoughts and memories that I'd rather forget."

"It has to do with Mrs Hiller," he said instinctively, guilty, unable to leave it alone.

"Why did you say that?" she said sharply. "What do you know?" She looked at him closely. "You've been to see her? She has been talking to you about me, has she? You are not just playing games with me, are you?" Richard blushed and felt wretched. This was not how he imagined the evening and he doubted that it coincided with Stephanie's plans. How could he restore the harmony?

"I have been to the cottage, but she said nothing about you. Why should she? And I don't know anything," he said, weakly. "Shall I go out and come in again?" A smile was forced.

"No. You may stay, seated."

"I must say," said Richard, after the passage of a few minutes in silence, and now that the Brahms had reached its conclusion, but still half thinking about Mrs Hiller, "that you are a very mysterious woman."

"And is that why you wish to marry me? No, don't answer that. Instead, shall we call a truce? No more references to my mysterious past. I'll serve the sweet, then we'll have some port, and you won't worry about the past anymore."

"To the future, then?" Richard proposed.

"Oh, no. Not the future. Just the present. The past is gone before us, sadness and happiness reduced to a lone, frozen, buried corpse. The future is yet to be born and is full of unknown, uncontrollable, events. I don't any more believe in hoping or planning. If you do, someone, somewhere, is planning the exact opposite, preparing to undermine your aspirations, working steadily against you. And that is life. Only the present exists. Today, this evening, right now. Unless you are very alert, it slips by you so quickly that it becomes the past before you are aware of it. Then it is all too late." She stood and gathered up the plates, and started towards the kitchen. "I suppose love is where two people can live and share the same present, as one, in harmony, yet in unison."

"What about memories, or one's future aspirations?" he called towards the kitchen. Her head appeared around the door.

"Oh, they are part of the present, aren't they? If you remember something, the remembrance is now. The thing you remembered a minute ago is now a memory of a memory. The same applies to the future. Any wish you care to wish is a present wish. Any

hope is a present hope, no matter how futile. There is nothing but us, and the rest of the world, right now.”

“And what about conscience and fear?” said Richard, ransacking his brain.

“They're totally imaginary, self-protective mechanisms. Like giving white rats electric shocks when they do something wrong. They soon learn.”

“But those are in the past.” Stephanie smiled, returning with her Pear Belle-Stephanie and placing it before him with a flourish.

“Yes, but only the experience, a memory in their imagination, or what ever they keep in their little ratty brains. Their remembrance is present. What I am expounding, Richard, is that life is now, the present, the living of it.”

He complimented her again, having finished his sweet. She laughed and waved him towards an armchair. “I can see that you do not fully understand my philosophy in life. Don't take it too seriously. Let me see if I can find some music from the past that is apt for the present. Do you know much about music? I was once told that mathematics and music are akin.”

“I know a little,” he said cautiously.

“Enough to recognise this?” The music, from an Opera, was familiar, but he shook his head. Stephanie sat opposite him and smiled knowingly. “Rosenkavalier,” she whispered.

“Rosenkavalier,” he repeated.

“You know the story? This is from the conclusion, where the Marschallin gives up her young lover so that he can marry the girl he is in love with, Sophie.”

“You see yourself as a dramatic, sacrificing, heroine?”

“The Marschallin? Oh, no. I'd rather see myself as the pure, innocent, Sophie.”

“Receiving someone second-hand?”

She laughed sharply. “Show me a woman who doesn't. And is that immoral?”

“It doesn't happen that way in real life,” he said, beginning to wonder what she was thinking about this time. Stephanie laughed again.

“Doesn't it, Richard? Doesn't it? Oh you have so much to learn still, not about mathematics, maybe, but about life. Let me whet your appetite by telling you that if my mother will think of herself as the Marschallin, I will play the part of Sophie, although I may not be as innocent and pure as the character I portray.” The remark was as cryptic as anything she had said and provocative enough to disturb him. But the port was now beginning to blunt the sharp edge to Richard's thought.

“It is good,” he said, holding up his empty glass. Stephanie smiled and pushed the bottle towards him.

“Be careful,” she said. “It is deceptively potent. You've still got to get back to your lodgings safely.”

“I have?” he said playfully.

“You have.”

Later she stood close to him near the door. “I am glad that I asked you to come. It seemed a nice way to celebrate.” He wanted to apologise, for the upset, for the misunderstandings, yet - .

“It was,” he said. “It is, but what are we celebrating?”

“Oh, our reunion. When you stopped coming to the restaurant, I grew a little anxious, you know.”

“You mean, you care?” She looked downwards for a moment, then answered him earnestly.

“If it means that I would not be happy if you were to unaccountably disappear, without explanation, goodbyes, and all that, yes, I do care. If you would have that it means more than that, then I don't know.”

“Enough to marry?” It was a foolish question. She shook her head slowly.

“Don't think I wasn't aware if the likelihood of that question arising sometime this evening. I can't give you an honest answer. Let me just say that I have acted towards you, and treated you, and will continue to do so, just as I would a prospective husband. I could have acted differently and that is not a licence to raise your hopes. I still doubt that I'm suitable for

you. I'm uncertain that I could accept male domination, not in that way, anyway. I've been my own woman for too long. Now, kiss me!" Almost timidly he obeyed the command, placed his arms around her, and kissed her forehead. "Not like that, silly," she said forcibly. "Here!"

"Can I not stay?" he whispered, breaking out of her embrace. She raised her eyebrows.

"Not if you ever wish to be my husband." He stared at her in disbelief, turning her words over in his mind. "Make your choice, Richard," she said sternly.

"Do you mean - .?"

"I mean that I will not sleep with the man I intend to marry, nor would I marry any man who was not prepared to wait for that pleasure. In the interim, you can do what you wish with the other girls, and I expect to be allowed to enjoy a similar licence, to the same extent."

"Do you really mean that you would not be hurt and upset if you discovered I was messing with someone else while courting you?" said Richard, thinking again of Mrs Hiller.

"In theory, no," she said quietly, but he noticed that Stephanie looked away as she answered. Then she looked up fully into his face. "Richard, the conversation is becoming too abstruse. We are fencing with each other. Please choose. Have me now and be done with it, or wait." His heart thumped, but as he looked at her in the dimmed light of the flat, he could have sworn he saw a tear glistening on her cheek.

"I'll say goodnight," he said, kissing her lightly, and then going down and out into the cool, sobering, air of the night.