

PAUL S A REDMOND

**THE NEWINGTON QUARTET**

**BOOK ONE**

**SMOULDERING EMBERS**



*Tanners Books*

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*The Newington Quarter is dedicated to British Rail without  
whose propensity for totally disregarding the contents of  
published timetables none of these books might have been  
written.*

*The best laid plans of mice and men lead all astray.*

## CHAPTER ONE

A breeze stirred and rippled the long, aged, tinder-dry grass as the lone couple slowly made their way up the hill. First came the man, young - an onlooker would have placed him in his early twenties - and casually, although expensively, dressed. He moved forwards, upwards, with purposeful, relentless, steps while some little way behind, tentatively, as if held back by some hidden force, yet invisibly and elastically fastened to him, came the girl. And, having taken in the young man and noted his light brown, almost reddish, hair and clear grey eyes, the onlooker's attention would have been riveted on his companion. No ordinary country or town girl, this! There was an unmistakable lithe grace and delicacy in her poise and movement. It could have been in the way she pointed her toe when she placed her foot on the ground before her, as if only the slightest whisper of her minute weight should be permitted to bear down upon the dead and living grass beneath her as she passed. This feature would be seen from afar, but as she drew nearer an onlooker could not be other than awed by her colouring and beauty, the gentle paleness of her flawless complexion, her small delicate mouth, a perfection of a nose, those hazel eyes, and her long auburn hair which, released from its normal, pinned, position, fired, sparkled and dazzled in the muted, late Winter's afternoon, sun. There could be no doubt that this was no ordinary girl!

Once or twice the young man stopped, turned and looked to ensure that the bond had not parted and that she was still there. And when he did, she lowered her eyes as if she were afraid to meet his direct gaze, afraid of finding there some dreadful message there, yet unspoken, not even whispered. Having stopped and satisfied himself that the thread held firm, he did not wait but continued his climb, zigzagging upwards along the sheep tracks which ringed the hill until, at length, he came, slightly discomforted, to a chalk-based path leading through a gap in the ancient stone wall which capped the hill.

Here he paused and looked back, down at this serene goddess, drawing her up to him by some magical, irresistible, magnetism. Yet, still he did not wait until she gained the path and was at his side. Instead he turned abruptly and passed through the opening, reappearing into her view higher still, dominating and looking down upon her. Once established in this place of supremacy, he did then wait, surveying the scene with majesty until she stood beside him.

Below them, wide, indistinct, a jumble of roofs and chimneys in a bluish haze, lay the town. They could see the minute specks of its inhabitants as they went about their afternoon business. Here and there were glimpses of the green trams as they made their uncertain and precarious ways through the cobbled streets on ageing and ill-maintained tracks. And beyond, glistening, smooth, expansive, stretching across the horizon from hill to hill on either flank, lay the defensive green waters of the English Channel.

Puffing, almost breathless, she was alongside him. "You really need more exercise," he said, casually and unkindly, oblivious of the fact that he had been standing there more than long enough to fully recover his composure.

"I?" she said quietly and without the slightest trace of hostility. "I? No-one could exercise more than I!"

"Even so.....," he muttered and, firmly taking her arm, started to walk.

Before them the scene was magically transformed. By some marvel a gathering of mediaeval builders had painstakingly erected their Monastery there, nestled in a shallow fertile depression on this hill top in the South Downs. They had shunned the local flints and

used a limestone which was not to be found naturally within a radius of a hundred miles. Each stone had been brought from its remote quarry and hauled up to the summit of the hill, cut, and then mortared into place. The result of years of toil and hardship, was the collection of buildings, which had been sacked upon the Dissolution and then pillaged by the locals as a ready-made quarry. Yet, on account of its remoteness, a substantial proportion of the walls, arches and pavements resisted plunder and, at the end of the eighteenth century, the local land owner, enriched with poetic views of Rome and the Ancient World, commissioned a landscape artist of some renown to create formal gardens where once the Monks had laboured over their crops. There was created a wonder of its age, a haven of great beauty in and amongst the ruins, something to rival the gardens of Babylon and, having done so, established, in his last Will and Testament, a trust for their maintenance with the proviso that the gardens should be open on each and every day of the Christian year for the peace and meditation of gentlefolk. However the gentlefolk of the town were more intent on exploiting the riches of the Industrial Revolution and few were prepared to make the long, twisting, journey by road or climb the precipitous direct route that the young couple had chosen to follow.

So it came as no surprise to them to find themselves alone in this Eden. Indeed they might have resented deeply the presence of another. They walked in silence along the paths between fragrant shrubs, past neat grassy banks, pausing before flower beds, lingering on the small decorative bridge spanning a segment of the large ornamental lake, through the cold, creeper clad, walls of the Monastery, skirting the modest graves where the Monks slept their eternal sleep, until they found their way back to the wall overlooking the town.

She broke the silence. "This is our place," she said softly but distinctly. "It will be so always. I dedicate it to our love." He was struck by the unexpected note of grim finality, of doom, in her gentle voice. And he had as yet said nothing. "When I die," she continued, "I would like to be buried here, with the Monks. If the Monks will.....," She broke off and dropped her head, dumb, as if some inner, inhibiting, thought had reared up and struck her. All that remained was a lingering, demure, sigh into the gentlest of breezes.

"You know why we have come here, what I have to say," he said hesitantly.

"Perhaps I could die now," she continued. "Just cease to be..... would you die with me? We could be together, forever." Her face turned up towards his, to his eyes, searching, minutely examining his features.

"You do know, don't you?" he said again.

"Perhaps it would be better if you did not say anything. If we just silently parted now and went our separate ways. Oh, I have expected it. I knew it must happen sooner or later. I just hoped and hoped that this day would never come. When we parted at Christmas I thought I could face it, but now ..... It is God's judgment on me!" She turned away and studied a dark ship on the horizon.

"Don't be silly," he cried, catching hold of her hand. "I've got to go back to London for several months because of my work. That's all!" A wistful half-smile crossed her sad face and she said nothing. "God!" he cried. "You could make it easier!"

The desire to reproach him for his blasphemy, untruthfulness and fickleness swelled up with the anger inside her but she fought and contained it. He paused and looked down at the bracelet on her arm, then released her hand and turned away abruptly and, almost before she realised it, he passed through the wall and started his descent.

Oh, they could not part like this! Not like this! A word, one mere word, from her would stop him. She had only to call his name and he would stop! She had only to call for him to return!

In silence, she watched him go. It was her burden, her penance, her cross to be borne. With him went something vital and irreplaceable from her life. Inside her, something of him remained. Yet she could do nothing. She was powerless as she watched his figure shrink and grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared. Only then did she slump back on a grassy bank and begin to weep. And no matter how long or hard her tears fell, even though they might in time douse the flames, there would always be that which could never be completely extinguished, the remnants of the uncontrollable fire which had burned so fiercely and which

had now consumed her - smouldering embers.

“What are you going to do, then, Michael? What will you say when Father asks you? I mean, you must do something. He will expect you to do something. He expects us all to do something, to keep busy, to be industrious.”

“Well, I certainly don't expect to be able to live off his money,” said Michael glumly. “I wouldn't want to. But it is all right for you. You have your particular gift. I seem to have nothing - nothing except the knack of making a mess of things. I wasn't even all that good academically. I just don't know.”

“You cannot possibly say that to Papa!” the girl said brightly. “If you do, you know full well what he'll say.” She adopted a stern countenance and continued in the deepest voice she could muster. “You have, Sir, spent all this time at Public School and university, at great expense - my expense. And now what have you got to show for it, Sir? Eh?”

Michael looked at his sister, then away again, his eyes wandering around the room, lingering on the spot in the bay window where the late afternoon sun was beginning to fall and carve out a bright patch on the floor, rising up to survey the decorative plaster of the ceiling, then coming to rest on the ornate French chiming clock which crouched on the shelf above the elaborate fireplace. A great sorrow gripped his heart for it was true what Natacha had said. His father had not spared his education. He had received the best of attention and tutorial throughout his schooling. Yet, here he was, returned from Oxford, undistinguished, with far less idea about his future aspirations than he had entertained when first he went there. All those hours, days and weeks, wasted! Now only a few months later, just as the autumnal nights were beginning to close in on the days, no more than blurred, golden memories lingered. Of sunny, carefree, days whiled away alongside the river, of blissful gatherings at garden parties, and of wilder parties. Though he had painstakingly kept himself out of trouble. He had not even earned the notoriety of being sent down. Yet it had all been without any clear objective in mind and all that he had learned, or should have learned, seemed fast to be fading. “There's always the Church,” he said lowly.

“Oh, Michael!” she cried. “For goodness sake don't mention the Church. Don't suggest that to Papa even if you should have it in mind. No one goes into the Church. Its just too much! Do you have no ambition?”

“Of course I have ambition!” he said fiercely. “Of course I have! I just don't know what to do. I have no inclination - no leaning in any particular direction. None at all. But I do have ambition. Never doubt that for a moment. I will achieve something. I'll leave my mark on the World, and I'll ensure that it is my mark and not one that Father scribed there for me!”

“Zat is the spirit!” said a new voice from the direction of the double doors that led from the room onto an expansive landing. “It is nearly time, Michael, and you, Natacha, should be practising.”

“I know. I was just giving Michael some moral support and encouragement. He needs it.”

“Miss Crotchet's waiting.”

“Yes, yes. I'll go up now.” She turned towards Michael and smiled. “To you who are about to die, we bid farewell!” she said, blowing him a kiss as she flounced out of the room.

The woman lingered in the doorway, looking at Michael yet not seeing him, her mind occupied with some unspoken problem. She was short, pretty, with an olive, oval, face and straight dark hair swept back and fastened behind her head. In her neat symmetrical features and her posture lay an unmistakable air on melancholy, a kind of sadness which seemed to radiate and impregnate her surroundings. She was to many who knew her the kind of person they would not wish to leave alone. “I think it is time that you went in,” she said, suddenly becoming aware of his continued presence. “Lady Newington has been gone these five minutes, and - ,” She stopped Michael at the doorway and momentarily took hold of his hand. “ - you could not wish to follow anyone better. There could have been, there have been, many who would have been infinitely worse. I know. Unless she brought bad news, no one, not even Natacha, could put your father in a better frame of mind than Lady Newington, mon ami. Now go, go quickly, and go with all my well wishes!”

“Thank you, Sophie,” he said. “I will need every one I can get.”

He descended the sweeping staircase and paused outside the massive panelled doors that led into his father's ground floor study. Even now he could recapture some of the awe that these doors engendered when he was a child. He recalled how his mother or the nurse would whisk him away if he was found near to them, and how servants were instructed to tip-toe past. Over the years, before he had first gained entry, he had built up a mental picture of what lay beyond, drawn from glimpses stolen when he had been in the vicinity and the doors had opened for one reason or another. It was a patchy image; of a dark room, sparsely furnished, but containing the various instruments of torture with which he credited his father as using in the extraction of money from his clients. Some of these clients were as mysterious and elusive as the room itself, arriving at odd hours of the day and night. Michael would sometimes creep from the nursery and crouch on the landing, peeping from behind the safety of the banisters to watch grown men emerge, ashen and shaken. On other occasions he would see beautiful women, tearful, clutching their handkerchiefs as they were ushered into the street. But no sounds ever appeared to issue from the study. Whatever demonic practice his father pursued, it was relatively quiet.

The fear of himself being dragged into the study and tortured had more influence on him than did his mother's or nurse's remonstrations. Ah, his mother! Those women might have been beautiful as they made their mournful exits, but none was as beautiful as his mother.

A sharp curt “come” did emit in response to his knock. Slowly, cautiously, silently we went in. Michael could count on one hand the number of times he had been in that room. It held no pleasure for him. Very likely it held no pleasure for anyone other than his father. Nor did he relish interviews with his father. He was capable of torture, Michael was certain of that, but he now realised that his father's brand of torture did not involve the rack, or entail the breaking of limbs, severing sinews, running water, or the installation of lighted matches at the various extremities of his victims' bodies. It was more subtle, silent, and effective in draining the victim's fiscal blood down to the very last farthing.

His childhood had been spent in fear and awe of this man. To be taken from the nursery floor and be exposed to the rigours of dining under his strict censorious gaze had been terrifying. No ogres or bogey men lurked in the dark corners of the nursery or stalked his dreams; only his father. Even now, mature and at the prime age of twenty-two, he had to steel himself and control his thoughts simply to avoid the onset of utter panic and a minor brainstorm.

Yet his father sat in the middle of the large, not uncomfortable room, surrounded by books and ledgers, diminutive behind the enormous partners' desk which gently sagged under the weight of the papers it supported. How could anyone be afraid of such a man?

“You may sit,” his father said curtly, not lifting his head from the ledger in which he was writing. Michael sat before the desk on the very edge of a chair. It felt uncomfortable yet when he leaned back it felt more uncomfortable. He found that it felt uncomfortable no matter what posture he adopted. Could this have been where Helen had sat? Or had she sunk and reclined in one of the three comfortable-looking armchairs that were set around a small, polished, oval table nearer the cold empty fireplace?

A copy of that day's Times lay open before him. There was a photograph of an incomplete bridge being constructed somewhere in Central Africa. Two slender arms were extended, reaching out towards one another, tentatively, feeling the empty air, yet not meeting. What if they did not meet? As Michael mused on this unlikely problem his father stopped writing, studiously replaced the lid on his pen, closed the book and reached for a file of papers close to his left hand. “Well?” he said sharply, flicking open the file and examining several papers.

“Sir?” whispered Michael.

His father did not even raise his head when he responded. “I have arranged for you to go and see Fishwick at ten-thirty tomorrow morning. Do be punctual. He will start you off - in a small way.”

The closing words were said with such menace that they sent a shiver through

Michael. But he must speak. He must speak out now. He must speak and it must be now. "If you please, Sir," he faltered, "I have thought it over and I would rather not go into the bank."

"Mmmmmm?"

It was a non-committal kind of sound which gave Michael the courage to continue. "I do not think - after giving the matter considerable thought - that I am cut out for a banking career."

"I see," said his father turning over some correspondence and making pencilled notes in the margins. "And what career are you cut out for, Sir? Not the Church?" he hissed.

Michael swallowed and felt his courage evaporate. He sought inspiration from the room and found it, unexpectedly, on the desk, right in front of him. "I am thinking of taking up Civil Engineering," he said boldly.

"No doubt you have given the matter considerable thought, eh?"

"Indeed," stammered Michael.

There was a pause. His father remained engrossed in the correspondence and appeared to be doing calculations. Michael was not very good at mathematics and hoped there would not be much need for it in his new chosen profession. Not once did his father raise his eyes to look at him. Mercifully the pause gave Michael time to regroup his thoughts, rearrange the ranks and prepare to defend his newly eschewed position.

"And how do you propose to launch yourself in this illustrious calling?"

Michael knew that his father was familiar with engineering, with the Institutions, with contracting, financing and investment. No doubt his father knew influential engineers and would be prepared to promote his son's interests. That possibility had to be circumvented. He would have to take the initiative. "I am planning to join a small practice - when I can find the right one for me - as a trainee engineer - with a view to becoming established in that practice and rising to the level of partnership. I have been looking around and I have my eyes on two or three. In the long term I hope to become entirely self sufficient but, initially, I would need an advance to purchase my position and cover other expenses."

"Very well," snapped his father, suddenly looking up and staring at him through his wire-rimmed glasses. "I will authorise immediate credit for you up to five hundred pounds - will that suffice? At commercial rates," he added lowly.

There was another pause and Michael started to rise to leave. Was it really that easy?

"With one condition," said his father suddenly. "I will comply with your wishes in this matter, no matter how nonsensical they may appear, provided I have your unqualified acquiescence to my plans in the other matter. I think we are both aware of the matter to which I refer."

In the small number of discussions of any length with his father that Michael had suffered he had come to realise that it as part of the banker's stock in trade to rarely refer directly to any particular project or problem. Instead everything was bargained for obliquely, discreetly, as if the object was in itself dirty or blasphemous, incapable of being brought out and examined in company in the cold light of day. Now was such a case.

There was a brief moment when Michael's feelings threatened to get out of control. He wanted to confront his father and tell him that this was his son, his own flesh and blood, presupposing that bankers consisted of flesh and blood; that he was not dealing with another client; nor was he an asset from a balance sheet to the liquidated and re-invested elsewhere. But he regained his composure. The execution of the other matter, as his father termed it, lay, inevitably, some two years or more in the future and a great deal could, would, happen before then. It seemed to be a small price to pay now to win total freedom in the operation, choosing and execution of his career. A small voice called out from the darker recesses of his mind telling he that he was mortgaging his life. Perhaps he was Faust making his bargain with the Devil, except that in his case his Marguerite was the object of the matter, not the reward. It was a gamble. He would take it. "Very well," he said boldly. "You have my agreement but I assume that the matter is subject to the other party's acquiescence?"

It sounded all very grand and business like but it produced no visible effect on his father's countenance. "You need not concern yourself. That contingency has been taken care

of. I will require you to sign some documents regularising your position. It will be in a few days time. Fishwick will arrange it. That is all.”

Michael left the room as pale and shaken as some of the other unfortunate victims has had witnessed from his vantage point on the landing. What did his father mean? Documents? Legal documents? With wherefores, whereupons and notwithstanding? He had tried reading some of these at college and did not like them. He had not read very far because his head had begun to ache. Could they be enforced at law? Whatever was in the banker's mind, there was no going back.

Sophie, clearly awaiting his emergence, stood at the bottom of the stairs and smiled sympathetically at his approach. Even her smile was wistful. “Ah!” she said. “It is over. He has been hard on you. I can tell. He can be a very hard man but I do not think that always he means to be. It is like a habit with him - a kind of cloak that he has thrown about his shoulders over the years and now does not know how to throw it off.”

From above came the strains of Brahms as Natacha negotiated her way through one of the concerti under the watchful ear of Miss Crotchet. It was clear that the study must be soundproof. He had not heard a single note whilst he had been in there. So not even the most piercing scream might be heard outside.

“It was bad? It was that bad?” pressed Sophie. “Come and have tea with me.” Michael forced a smile and his step-mother shrewdly sensed what was in his troubled mind. “Ah ha!” she murmured sadly. “You are wanting five minutes alone whilst you collect your thoughts. C'est ca? Very well! Come to me when you are ready, but do come. Is that agreed?”

After Michael had slowly closed the doors of the study behind him, his father had looked up and sat for several minutes staring at the wood panelling, minutely dissecting and analysing what had passed between him and his son. He had given way - to a degree - in one thing, a practice to which he was unaccustomed, but he was an accomplished and experienced tactician and he knew that wars were rarely won at the first skirmish. He could wait, wait longer than could his son, if necessary. He had virtually all the ammunition. He would have his way, completely, in time.

He returned his attention to the file of papers before him and, after a further period of reflection, endorsed a form, “agreed, subject to the usual collateral” before laying it on one side. In one of the ledgers he wrote the account number and the name “A G Muir & Co”. It was one to be monitored closely, very closely.