

## CHAPTER TWO

"Is that you, Kurt?" called Mrs Cerny in response to the sound of the scullery door being opened then slammed shut. It was her customary greeting and sufficiently superficial not to warrant a reply. After all, at that time of the evening, with Phoebe already in and upstairs, reading, who else would it be? Her eyes strayed and fell, momentarily, on the letter high on the mantel shelf above the range. There was no mistaking the hand, the neat down-to-earth, methodical, matter of fact way in which the address was printed. For her to now receive such a letter was unusual, but this one was addressed to Kurt, not her, and that was ominous. And it was postmarked in South East London which meant that he was back in the Country. Several times that day, since the postman had brought it innocently to the door, she had been poised on the very brink of ripping it open and reading the contents. And then, maybe, dropping both letter and envelope into the fire. After all, Kurt was not yet of age. She had some responsibility, some rights, surely? But he would be persistent. If there was no reply to this letter, another would come, and then maybe he, the writer, would come and that she could not face. And here the doubts and fears seeped in and flooded her head.

The boy entered, dusty, lanky, in ill fitting, well mended, clothes. Without uttering any more than a groan he flung himself into the single ancient armchair beside the range. He had not noticed the letter, yet.

"Is something wrong? Has something happened?" she cried seeing the look of anxiety in his features. "You haven't - ?"

"I've done nothing," he muttered, tugging impatiently at the long knotted laces of his boots before he kicked one from his foot and halfway across the kitchen. "There's nothing you can do. Step out of line and there's fifty, no, a hundred waiting, ready to take your place. No - its just rumours."

"Rumours?"

"Rumours that the firm's in trouble and that the old man is likely to go broke unless he gets some money from someone. God, I hate this work. I hate this country. What we need is a revolution. Someone at the top who can really sort it out and get rid of - ."

"Please, Kurt, not now. Not all that. Not again."

"Well the flipping work gets me down. Lift that, shovel this, push something else over there. I hate building work."

"It is better than going down the mines. That's where half the young men of your age have ended up. Now, you go and get washed and I'll get your dinner ready." She bent and collected both boots, placing them by the range ready to be polished.

She had turned to the sink when he suddenly called out fiercely. "There's a letter for me! Its from my father! Why didn't you tell me earlier? Why? Do I count for nothing in this house? I, the only breadwinner? Where would you be without my wages, you and you airy-fairy sister?"

"You are not the sole breadwinner, Kurt. Don't you forget it."

"Who else is earning any money, then? Not my starry-eyed aunt, if I can call her that. You're not counting the pathetic sum that you wring out of your silly school? I mean, no one ever pays you! They turn up all wide-eyed and say that they can't pay this week, again. They will pay when times are better. And what do you do?"

"Kurt, I would remind you who you are talking to. The school is my business. I take them, and I have no cause to justify my actions to you. I treat you fairly. You get the lion's share of everything whilst Phoebe and I make do as best we can. We are allowed the use of the hall free of charge at present so there's next to nothing in the way of outgoings. And there's all that talent to be nurtured and developed."

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "I would have thought that you could have put your energies to more productive matters, especially Phoebe, with her looks."

"Kurt! I am sure you wouldn't want - ." She stopped. Her son was reading the letter and the sullen look was wiped from his face by a broad, captivating, smile, the very winning smile she had seen on his father's face in Vienna many years earlier.

“This is good!” he said aloud but to himself. “Oh, this is good. This is very good!”  
“What does he say?” she asked, trying to appear, and sound, casual as she set the table.

“Oh, nothing, nothing. It is all political. You would not understand.”

A new fear crept into her heart as she studied his determined, arrogant, face. Why had his father written? Why, on this occasion, to him and not to her? Kurt was re-reading the letter and, afraid to ask further she moved to the door and called out to her sister to let her know that dinner was ready. She would have to be patient. Kurt would tell her all, in time.

Phoebe, alone and chilly in her small, un-papered garret, closed the book she had been reading and looked out of the window at the darkening evening. The sun had already set behind the chimneys which dominated her view and she would have been unable to read much more without artificial light. Rising, she tucked the book under the mattress and paused before the crucifix, studying her image in the mirror above it. If Kurt saw the book he would only pour scorn and ridicule upon her in his rude and arrogant way. She would not take it down.

Yet although she had laid the book aside - indeed, it was not even in view - she could not suppress the tremors of alarm that it had generated in her mind. And throughout the meal, as Kurt cast sideways glances at her, touched her knee under the table, and made innuendoes that she did not really understand, one passage obsessed her. As soon as she could, she slipped back upstairs, lit a candle, and recovered the book from its hiding place. Yes, there it was, in black and white, the words, the awesome, terrifying, damning words,

“and it follows, therefore, that the thought, the very act of thinking, of committing a cardinal sin is in itself a sin, and dwelling on the thought is a mortal sin.”

This was dreadful! To think that her immortal soul, to think that she, who had offered herself in supplication to Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary every day for most of her life, could be damned and cast inexorably and for ever into the hands of the Devil. To think that anyone could be tripped and tumbled headlong into Hell, by a mere thought!

Father William had been right. She had to be on her guard at all times. “Satan is always there, waiting, poised, ready to exploit the tiniest weakness.”

“Always?” she whispered through the grill.

“Always! As an angel - a fallen angel - he is immortal. The merest indelicate or impure thought, no matter how trivial it might seem, no matter how attractive it might be, it allows him direct access to your immortal soul.”

“But how can I suppress my thoughts? They come to me - I see something or someone and they just come. And they do not seem wrong at the time.”

“You must try, my child.” She liked the way he called her his child. He could not have been much older than her, and he was dark and good looking. “Satan is infinitely clever and will always try to outwit you. He can make evil thoughts seem pleasurable and the prospect of evil deeds appear desirable.”

“Is there no hope, then, for us, Father?”

“There is always hope for us. Jesus laid down his life that there might be hope and salvation. But only through an act of true contrition and the blessed communion of the Saints can eternal peace and salvation be attained. Remember, God knows your thoughts and sees what really lies in your heart. Pray to him and our Lady at the onset of impure thoughts. Pray, my child.”

“Yes, Father,” she whispered and bowed her head even lower as he gave her absolution. It was awesome, it was unbelievable yet believable, this concept of infinite goodness and benevolence, the holy hand that was extended towards her, held out to guide her past the snares, pits and traps of the evil world. She took the hand and embraced it. How else could she explain the serenity that followed, the purging of her mind of all unworldly matters? The overwhelming surge of love for Jesus, Mary, the Saints, her sister, even Kurt, that possessed her?

It had been a gradual awakening, this transformation that her body and mind had

undergone, and her reaction had been slow. Now, as she contemplated the future, a potential conflict of interests, secular and spiritual, was emerging. She knew only one place to turn for guidance.

“Mark and Christina have arrived,” hissed Sophie. “I have put them in the Drawing Room.”

Michael tried to arouse himself out of his post-dinner stupor. He had been dreaming, confused images, of large structures, dams, bridges and docks. But there had been more in the dream than that. A vision - a girl - no, she was not Christina. She was more beautiful. She was graceful. And she was most desirable. Not that Christina lacked any of these attributes. But there was something - something elusive - a smell - a touch - something which penetrated his senses to the heart and affected him in a way unlike any other.

“He said that you are expecting him,” continued Sophie. “There is something about a party?”

Slowly a vague recollection crept into Michael's head dispelling the essence of the dream. Really, he wanted to go back to sleep, to go where she was. To comfort her and be comforted by her. But Mark had mentioned something about going out somewhere. Was it tonight?

“What about dress? Do you want me to arrange anything?”

“I don't think its a formal affair,” he said slowly and slowly standing. “I think its supposed to be an impromptu gathering at Alistair's. Something like his birthday or engagement, or something. I suppose it will be utterly boring.”

“It is a shame that you cannot take Natacha, but her head, it is aching so.”

“Mark will be disappointed. He agrees with me. She works too hard.”

“But it is that she must. Practice and dedication. Only that way can she achieve perfection. As for Mark, I expect he will have no difficulty in finding someone there who is not attached and who will accompany him.”

“And I have to take a bottle,” added Michael, scanning the room.

“I cannot imagine you will find one here. Speak to Parkins.” She turned to go, yet paused in the doorway. Sophie was always finding something additional to say and stopping in doorways to say it. This time she forced a wistful smile. “Christina is there. You will be nice to her, won't you, Michael?”

It gave him a short, sharp, shock as if he had placed his hand on a live electrical terminal, and a painful tug at his heart, the heart which only moments before had been the possession of the girl in his dreams. He realised the moment of her words and felt like a devotee before the juggernaut.

Sophie left Michael and went to the Dining Room finding, to her surprise, that Natacha was sat there in the place she had occupied throughout dinner. Without thinking she sat in her place and stared down the table at her husband who was finishing his cigar. “I thought you were resting, Natacha?” she said, still watching the Banker. “Have I interrupted something?”

Nothing was said but he stood, turned abruptly and left the room. Sophie watched him go and mentally pictured him making his way to his study and closing the door firmly against her. “What is it, Natacha?” she cried. “Tell me what it is I am to do? I try to make him happy but, you see how it is. What am I to do?”

Her step-daughter's face hardened. “I am sure I do not know,” she said and followed her father out of the room.

Christina was dark, pretty and short, a feature which led to her being unjustly considered plump when seen alongside Angela, her taller, older, more worldly, sister. In fact Michael found her quite attractive and was slightly attracted to her. But she was not the girl of his dreams.

She was sat, cross-legged in a chair by the window, her short skirt hitched recklessly high above her knee, when he went in. She made no attempt to adjust her clothing. Mark was leaning against the wall by the fireplace, thumbing through the pages of a book which he

dropped as soon as Michael approached. "You haven't forgotten?" he cried. "And where's Natacha?"

Christina looked up and her eyes met Michael's with some hostility. "No, no," he said, looking away from her. "I hadn't forgotten. It has been one of those damned days when - and Natty's got a beastly headache and has had to rest. She won't be coming with us."

"Oh!" Mark was obviously disappointed and at any other time Michael would have offered some words or gesture of comfort to his friend, but on this occasion Christina's look had annoyed and unsettled him and now he felt hostility. After all, it was just as bad for him as it might be for her. Perhaps she did not see things that way. If that was the case he would soon tell her otherwise! He would put her straight!

"We can talk in the car," he said and went to the door.

"Oh, all right. Come along Chrissy. We don't want to miss the fun!" Christina was now on her feet and smoothing down her skirt. Michael found himself wondering what she was really like, as a person. He wanted to talk to Mark, about the interview with his father, about his proposed career, about the other matter. He wanted to talk to Mark alone, yet it seemed important that Christina was there. An element of compromise was achieved when Mark sat between them on the back seat in the Daimler.

"Well, then," said Mark, shaking off his disappointment concerning Natacha and abandoning his long-cherished dream of an evening with her, "how did it go? Are you going into the bank?" His words provoked a reaction from Christina who turned her attention from the passing pavements and shops and now eyed Michael as if he were an object of some curiosity.

"No," said Michael, directing his answer past Mark and across the car to Christina. "I told him that I did not want to."

"You did what? You said that? Great Scott, that was damned plucky of you, don't you think so, Chrissy? That took real spunk! But what will you do? I mean you were right in saying that he would expect you to do something?"

Christina's eyes seemed to narrow and her stare sharpened and pierced him. For a moment he felt more afraid of her than he had of his father at any time. "I was right. He made it very clear that he expected me to be industrious and to earn my keep. I am not sure that he expects me to earn enough to keep me in the manner to which I am accustomed, but then I can muck it with the next, you know."

"There is to be a sum settled on you when you marry," said Christina coldly. Yes, it was a statement, not a question. "Yes," said Michael trying to sound casual. "Something of the sort."

"Don't worry about that," said Mark, addressing his sister. "It's only money and he's got plenty of it."

"My father? I suppose he has. It is not to be relied upon. Not by me, at least."

"Yes, yes. What did you say? What are you going to do? Not the Church?"

Christina let out a little gasp and sighed. Michael tried to picture her as a vicar's wife, homely, baking, arranging bazaars and what ever else vicars' wives were called upon to do as a result of the clerical duties of their spouses. She did not fit, but then no more did the girl of his dreams. Did Christina know? She must! She had mentioned the marriage. But just how much did she know? He would have to find out before the evening was over. But how? It was a difficult, almost indelicate, question to have to ask. Perhaps Mark knew, and knew how much his sister knew. If only they were alone! "Not the Church. I decided that I am going to become a civil engineer - build huge bridges and dams - and things like that.

"How very enterprising," said Christina flatly.

"Really?" exclaimed Mark. "He's going to get you in somewhere? I mean, he must have contacts all over the place and at the highest level?"

"That's just it. He has got contacts everywhere. I have got to find someone where he doesn't have any influence or pull. Otherwise - well, you know my father. My life wouldn't be my own."

"So you are doing it the hard way? Good for you!"

"Truly enterprising," added Christina, with sarcasm.

Michael ignored the comment. "If that is the hard way, yes. I'm going to do it out of sight or reach of my father and that fiend Fishwick. Do you know Fishwick? He's in league with the Devil!"

"You appear to take a perverse delight in making your life difficult and more complicated than it need be," said Christina dryly, turning to once more study the pavements. "If I had a golden spoon I would not think of going in search of one made of tin."

"Shush, Sis," murmured Mark, gesticulating. "Michael's father is a very powerful man."

"I am more than aware of the power and influence of Mr Bernstein, and of the fact that he does not hesitate to wield it," she said coldly. "I would just have thought and hoped that his son had enough backbone to stand up to him."

"He is, I think," said Mark. "Aren't you, Michael?"

"It sounds more like running away to me," she said, then lapsed into a brooding sullen silence for much of the remainder of their journey.

"And what about you," asked Michael. "What did your mother say about your plans?"

"Its absolutely stupendous news! She's had reports about my work. She even saw your father to get his assessment as to my potential. And its all agreed. I have found a tiny garret flat not far from our London house which is being converted into a self-contained studio for me. It will be a little small but I can come and go as I please, and so can my models and subjects. At least I have something to thank your father for!"

Michael shook his head. "I wouldn't be too sure of that. Just beware - what do they say - Bankers bearing gifts?"

Christina suddenly turned and their eyes met again. What was it he saw in them? Quizzical, querying, challenging, even hostile? "Oh, I am sure that your father isn't as bad as you make him out to be," she said deliberately. "As far as I can understand his advice to my family has always been above reproach."

"There you are!" cried Mark failing to catch the note of sarcasm in his sister's voice. "What better testimony could you have other than that of Cassandra herself? Anyway, we are there!"

The Daimler had stopped in a crescent-shaped drive to a large house. Michael was conscious that he had lost track of the route that they had followed, thought they had crossed the river, and guessed that they must be somewhere around Putney. Mark was already ringing the bell as he ushered Christina out of the car.

The door to the house was opened by a young, blond, man dressed in a bright green suit. "My dears!" he exclaimed throwing his arms wide open in greeting. "How perfectly delightful of you to come! Christina, my dear, you look simply splendid, ravishing, even - except perhaps just a touch more mascara? You could use my dressing table. And a little less rouge - yes - you know how sensitive I am to these matters and I like to be able to see you blush when I say that you have lost a little more weight, as you do it so charmingly." He stood back holding her at arms' length and eyed her up and down. "Most definitely," he exclaimed. "And this," he added, clapping his hands, "this is Mark's mysterious - no, I should say, mystery or Christina will pick me up on it - you are just waiting to do that, aren't you, darling - guest. Mark has told me all about you and, of course, we all know of your illustrious and benevolent father. Welcome! Do please come in and meet everyone!"

As they passed through, into the expansive hall Alistair threw his arm around Michael's shoulder and pulled him to him. "I hope Mark has put you in the picture. My gatherings are an open house and I always cater for all tastes - all tastes! What ever you want you may find here. And you will find all kinds of people, people of all sexes, artists, musicians, writers, film producers, architects, trollops - yes, even the sons of bankers. My doors are open to all political and religious persuasions and perversions. I believe only this way can one engender the great Debate and find the true meaning of life and cure the world's ills."

"Michael intends to become a great engineer - a builder of great things, you know," said Mark from behind the two of them.

“You do? How absolutely wonderful. You can build the new Utopia. I must introduce you to Ludwig. He's doing some terribly exciting things with town centres, concrete, and environmental cities of the twenty-first century.”

“Ludwig?”

“Ludwig von Cerny! Have you never heard of him? He's an Austrian but they're very advanced in this kind of application on the Continent, particularly in Germany. You must meet him!”

They had proceeded through the large hall and now stood a little way into a long, high-ceilinged room in which were standing, under clusters of chandeliers, clusters of people, engaged in highly animated conversation. Michael found himself looking at Christina who was slightly in front of him and who now appeared to be scrutinising the guests as if she were searching for someone in particular. Before Michael was able to decide whether this was the case, Alistair strode forward and clapped his hands. There was an immediate silence. “Hush, everyone,” he cried as they turned to look at him. “I would like to introduce a newcomer amongst us - as is our custom, you can make your own introductions at the appropriate time. Here he is, Michael Bernstein, the son of the illustrious banker. No, no,” he added, waving his hand and lowering his head slightly in response to a number of groans. “It is not as it seems. Mark tells me that Michael has declared his independence from and renounced his father's wealth, possessions and power, which is more than could be said in respect of one or two of us here, isn't it? I am sure that you will all make him absolutely welcome. Thank you my darlings!”

Michael was sure that his face turned crimson as Alistair turned, smiled, and dropped his hands on his shoulders. “There! That is all the formality of the evening over and dispensed with. Am I not good to do all this for you? What will you do in return for me? Never mind - not now. Later. For the while, just circulate, my dear. Off you go!” Obviously feeling that Michael had been suitably launched into the pool Alistair turned and caught hold of Mark's arm. “A tiny weeny piece of business,” he said as he led Mark away and Michael was left quite alone in the middle of the crowded room.

“Hello,” said a soft voice at his side. “I am Jenny - Jenny Forbes.”

“Jenny Forbes? Haven't I heard that name before somewhere?”

“Oh! Do say you have!” she cried with child-like glee. “That would be simply super!”

“Are you an actress?” It was an inspired guess.

“Oh, you are simply wonderful!” she cried throwing her arms around him. “To think that someone has heard of me! And I know all about you,” she added with a tinge of reproach.

“About me?” said Michael, enjoying the feel of her body and not wishing to remove her arms.

“You're going to marry Christina, aren't you?”

“Goodness!” he cried, looking around to see who might have heard, but still not breaking her embrace. “Who ever told you that?”

“Angela did,” she murmured looking down. “Have I boobed? It seemed to be simply a piece of juicy gossip and so, so dramatic! I mean, an arranged marriage and all of that! It is really too pagan! And you tell me that it's not so. That's just like Angela. She'd do anything to spite Christina.”

“Does Christina know - what her sister is saying about her?”

Jenny opened her blue eyes wide and looked up imploring into his face. “Am I in your bad books now? Do tell me that you will forgive me. I think I would prefer it if you are unattached. And promise me that you won't tell Christina what I said. I don't want to get in her bad books, too. In fact I would like her to write a play for me. Am I forgiven?”

“Of course,” he said smoothly, “so long as you do not go around spreading rumours about me and Christina.”

“Oh, I won't,” she murmured, laying her head on his shoulder. “Do you know Paul Durrant?”

“The fashion photographer?”

“Yes. I want him to photograph me. Nude, of course.”

“Nude? Without clothes on?”

She stepped back slightly but still retained her hold on him. “Yes, nude. Naked! Anyone who is anyone nowadays is photographed naked. Oh, you do look shocked!”

“I’m not,” he said feeling confused and embarrassed.

“The trouble is,” she added wistfully, “I wonder if my breasts are too large. Do you think they are too large? Do you like large breasts?” Once again she drew close and pressed herself against him.

“I? I suppose so,” he murmured, being unable to disguise the attention he was giving to her cleavage.

“Christina’s are not very large. She complains about it from time to time. Would you like to see mine? You could come to the studio. I wouldn’t mind. Or, perhaps - .” She gave a little laugh and stepped back, releasing him. “I can see I am embarrassing you, poor darling. We’ll change the subject. Is there anyone here amongst this milieu who you particularly would like to meet?”

“Ludwig von Cerny,” he said with relief. It was the only name he could think of. It was the only name he knew.

“Why! He’s over there, talking to Christina at this very moment. I expect he is proposing to her - he appears to be very sweet on her, at least she thinks so. And he’s an absolutely darling, super, man, even if he is a little old. Christina calls him dignified. Come along!” And so saying Jenny dragged him across the room to meet the Austrian.

“What do you think of Herr Cerny?” said a new, smooth voice at Michael’s elbow. The speaker was the stocky dark haired man who had appeared, to Michael at least, to have monitored his movements all evening. “I am a friend of Mark’s,” he added. “Paul Durrant.”

“The photographer? I have been talking to someone earlier who wants to sit for you in the - who wants you to take her photograph.”

“You must be thinking of Jenny. Quite exceptional isn’t she?”

“Jenny - yes, Jenny. Mark has mentioned your name quite often.”

“He has? Always favourably, I trust? Now, our Herr Cerny. I ask you because Mark places great store on your ability to assess and judge people.”

“He does?”

“Oh, yes. And I have my doubts about the architect. I suspect that he is not one of the true calling - not one of us.”

“Which is?” said Michael hesitantly, almost afraid of the answer.

“You are,” continued the photographer ignoring Michael’s question. “Otherwise you would not have renounced your father’s wealth and influence. You may not wish to be classified as such openly - many do not. But at heart you must be one of us. Otherwise you would not have acted as you have. Perhaps it is still latent inside you and you have not recognised it as yet. It needs something to bring it out, something said or done, some experience which will make you face the facts about yourself. Come the revolution you will be safe. The proletariat will need men like you - engineers who can design and build the new machines of production for the fulfilment of the workers. You will be needed, but your father and his kind - they are marked men.”

“Revolution?”

“You must have heard about it? When you were at Oxford. Don’t tell me that you were never a member of a cell? Never contacted by one? Oh, that is hard to believe.”

“Well, there was some sort of political activity,” Michael said vaguely. “Some kind of fringe meetings. I didn’t really understand what they were about. But I don’t recall talk of a revolution.”

“It will come - and soon I hope and trust. Make no mistake, it will come. It is inevitable. The deprived working classes will rise and cast off the capitalistic shackles of wealth, class, and influence. Only then will a true classless egalitarian society emerge. Each man will stand by the sweat of his brow and the toil of his hands. It has happened in Russia. It will happen in China, in India, in America and in Europe. Do not be misled by temporary aberrations in Germany and Italy. The long term trend in history is to the left, away from the

concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a tiny minority. They are dinosaurs, these people, people like your father. They will be swept aside by the movement as it cuts a swathe across the World, destroying everything that stands in its path. It will be irresistible. Not tanks, not guns, not gas nor bombs will stop it. It will spread right across the World! You will see - and you should be a part of it. Mark will. But, our Austrian - you were going to say?"

Michael was trying to grapple with this vast threatening concept. He was also trying to accommodate this vision with the world of the fashion and society photographer who had presented him with it. "I do not think that I would trust him," he said after a short period of reflection. Then he became confused as he wondered what grounds he had for saying this. Why did he feel that way? Was it the courtly, suave, attention the man had extended to Christina, or the fact that she had been described as liking him? How he had made her listen, smile, and sparkle in his presence, as if he was polishing a fine diamond! How she had appeared to dote on his every word, looking up into his face with devoted attention! Oh, he did have grounds - but, then, perhaps Herr von Cerny did not know - perhaps Christina had not told him. Perhaps Christina did *not* know? He really needed to talk to her, urgently, but privately. Michael found the contemplation of this and the Austrian tiring and painful, and became anxious to change the subject. "Are you against the possession of all wealth?" he said. "What about people like Lady Newington? She does an immense amount of charitable work?"

"Her homes for destitute gentlewomen?" cried Paul mockingly. "Mere bagatelles! Hand-outs of largesse to salve the class conscience! How on earth can anyone attempt to seek justification for giving to the proletariat that which is theirs by right? Who earns the wealth if not the working class? It is a nonsense and it will cut no ice with the revolutionary committees. Lady Newington may be beautiful but she will be fortunate to save her neck!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Michael, feeling a tinge of alarm and thinking of the aquiline neck that Paul Durrant had been quite prepared to happily photograph on a number of occasions, and be paid for it.

"Christina may be different," the photographer continued. "She is prepared to embrace our principles and incorporate them in her writing. Propaganda is everything. And we do hold, incidentally, that marriage is an institution that should be preserved. We are at variance with the orthodox view there. But religion, capitalism, industrial democracy, they have all had their chance and they have failed. It is our turn next. We are the children of tomorrow, you and I!"

"And Christina?"

"You'll see."

"Cocktails, everyone!" announced Alistair in his loudest falsetto. The double doors swung open and a huge negro, wearing an immaculate white suit, entered pushing a trolley laden with all manner of exotic liquor. With the ritual of a priest saying the Ordinary he measured, mixed, shook, and elevated aloft a unique recipe. It was the high spot of Alistair's evening. One sip of the concoction sent Michael's senses reeling.

"Fantastic, isn't it?" said Jenny clutching hold of his arm as she addressed him. "Have you ever experienced anything like it?"

"I don't think so," Michael murmured, scanning the room for Christina to see if she was watching. It was strange that she had not come and talked to him, but then there was the architect.

"Let's have a treasure hunt!" someone called out.

"Yes! A treasure hunt!" the cry was taken up.

"Play, now," said Paul reproachfully. "The serious work and the day of reckoning is yet to come."

"Oh! Is he in one of his morbid moods?" cried Jenny giving the photographer's arm a tug. "Is it catastrophe and world war again? What do you think, Mark?" she added as Michael's friend was eavesdropping on the conversation. Mark shrugged and gave Michael a look that he did not fully understand.

"It will never come to that," asserted Michael, vaguely recalling that earlier he had the impression that she did not know the photographer. Perhaps this mercurial little actress



got to know people rather quickly, or was given to making ambiguous statements?

“When the forces of the proletariat rise it will be Armageddon,” muttered Paul. “It can only be through force and violence, bloodshed, death and extermination.”

“Here we do have the great divide,” said Mark suddenly. “On the one hand there are those who believe that in time and with persuasion and enlightenment we will be able to bring about the revolution peacefully and - .”

“There isn't time!” exclaimed Paul, irritably. “You don't believe that! And it is a fallacy to believe that any ruling class will voluntarily renounce their power and wealth. It has never once happened. It will never happen. They are a self-protective and self-perpetuating breed. It will come, but in bloody revolution - a holocaust. One spark will set the whole of Europe, no - the World - alight!”

“God forbid,” whispered Jenny.

“Amen,” murmured Mark, who was under scrutiny from Michael, and who did not sound as if he meant it.

“A treasure hunt, then, is it, my loves?” cried Alistair, quite unable to contain his joy. “As always, I am prepared. Groups of four, then. Your envelopes are on the large table in the hall. You must be back by three o'clock as then the clock will strike and those who are not will be turned into pumpkins!”

Michael hung back as the room began to empty and tried to keep close to Mark. He hoped that Christina might over and join them, but she showed no inclination to do so, barely looking in his direction. But Mark caught hold of a pretty dark-haired girl around the waist as she was passing, extolling her to join their circle. “What's this,” cried Alistair, “a quintet?”

“I'll drop out,” offered Michael.

“No, no. I'll drop out,” said Paul. “I was never one for childish games.”

“Oh!” said Jenny, looking disappointed and appealing in Michael's direction as if she expected him to renew his bid.

“That's settled that, then,” said Alistair, ushering them towards the hall. “We can occupy ourselves, can't we, Paul?. You four trot away, then. Off you go!”

The dark-haired girl was introduced as Sally Jane who described herself as an out of work actress. Michael immediately wanted to ask Jenny whether she was in work but felt that if he did so he would immediately be teamed up with her. He took little interest in the list of outrageous items required for the treasure hunt and was beginning to feel his senses becoming numb as exhaustion overtook him. There was also the need to talk to Mark, alone, about the evening, about what had been said, and about the interest Christina had demonstrated towards the Austrian.

“You'll feel better outside,” his friend promised. “I see that Paul has been continuing your education. I mean there was that trouble at Oxford.”

“I wasn't involved,” moaned Michael, feeling anything but a bright young thing. “I was trying to work.” That was untrue, he knew, but it was better than saying he had been idle.

“Or not to work? Look where it has got you! Come along girls!” he called to the two who appeared to be indulging in a private argument. “If we don't get a move on we will still be here when everyone else comes back! We are last away as it is!”

Later, as the sun was rising and probing through the gap between his bedroom curtains Michael, fully clothed, sprawled out, limp, on his bed. He could recall only vague memories of what had transpired in the hours following their joining the treasure hunt. They had not won. He was not even certain that they had returned to Alistair's party. He did recall that, against his wishes, he had ended up with Jenny at her flat after Mark and the dark-haired girl had suddenly disappeared. He could vaguely recall agreeing to coffee and asking for a cab to take him home. Nothing else had happened, had it? Surely she had not fulfilled her earlier offer - no, had she done anything like that he would have remembered.

He tried to picture the inside of the actress's flat. There were glimpses of walls, pictures, crimson velvet curtains. He could recall the bijou bathroom and a bright pink washbasin before his face, and there had been a glimpse of her bedroom and a small dressing

table with a mirror reflecting the compacts, tubs and bottles. Perhaps she would have rather ended up with Paul? Would he have rather ended up with Christina?

He studied the ceiling as, although his body was paralysed and his limbs had ceased to function, his eyes were incapable of remaining closed, and his brain would not stop picking over the small number of clear recollections he had. It was not the pleasures of the night which now occupied his involuntary day time thoughts. It was the ominous pronouncements from Paul who, he learned from Jenny, was not only a photographer but was also the clandestine co-founder of the Crimson Flag, a fringe underground newspaper which had been singled out by Lady Helen as being one which threatened her and her kind, and caused her, she admitted, many sleepless nights.

Then there was the tall overbearing figure of the Austrian who must be old enough to be Christina's father, except he appeared to be acting towards her in anything other than a fatherly manner. Was his spectre about to cause Michael the first of his sleepless mornings? What was it Paul had said? A holocaust? Perhaps it would take the Austrian with it? But would it, could it, happen? He had heard pronouncements like this at university and he had ignored them as he would have the thunder of a distant storm. It had not disturbed him before - why should it do so now?

But that architect had spent so much of the evening amusing Christina while he, Michael, he of all people, had no chance to talk to her. Nor had he talked to Mark. He had failed in every respect. He managed to roll over onto his side and contemplated the thin shaft of sunlight which was striking a table close to his bed. As he tried once again to extinguish the view his gaze fell upon an envelope which had been left, propped up against his small, electric, bedside clock. For a moment the fact that it had not been there the night before did not register. Then, with a seemingly super-human strength, he reached out and brought it closer to his face. On the outside he could make out his name, type-written. Curious he ripped it apart, removed the single sheet from inside and, not without difficulty, read

“Dear Mr Bernstein,

Your father has instructed me to open a credit account in your favour. Would you kindly call upon me at this office at eleven thirty sharp tomorrow to allow the paperwork to be finalised.

Yours truly

O Fishwick”

Michael groaned and at last closed his eyes. Mr Fishwick's tomorrow was already today.