

CHAPTER THREE

“Is it good news, father?”

Angus Muir raised his head from his almost obsessive contemplation of the single sheet of paper which lay at his side at the breakfast table and looked at his daughter. As she spoke, he heard that unmistakable soft accent which the years in the South had not eradicated. And how she looked like her mother as she stood by the window bathed in the soft fresh light of an autumnal sun!

His emotions at this sight were mixed and confused. He felt nostalgia for his youth and the days of courting the fine lass who was to become his wife. And there was regret, at the hours and days wasted, hours when they could have been together and sharing each other's company. But he had lived the dawning days of his youth as if there would be an infinity of tomorrows. That was the way it was done. It was only now, approaching his twilight, that he would dwell and think of the opportunities missed.

Angus had turned his back on his native soil and gone into business with his brother in the South. The Great War had ended and a prosperous new life was about to unfold. Indeed, their fortunes had prospered. The brothers leased a bankrupt builder's yard in a channel port, bought, renovated and sold war-surplus lorries, started a haulage company and a small building business, even been allowed to run an omnibus service on a route along the coast where it would not interfere with the activities of the municipal tramway department. As the company grew, they divided the activities between them, Angus concentrating on the building activities and his brother on the road haulage.

And once it was secure, once he felt sure that the whole enterprise was not going to fall about his head cascading him into financial ruin and possibly prison, he wrote to his wife who was waiting patiently with their small daughter, waiting in the Lowlands where she had waited for the heavily obliterated letters from the trenches throughout the tense, fraught, perilous years when he was across the water, and for letters bearing details, initially, of the fragile state of the business or, later, the successful contracts won or property bought and, at last, the one that implored her to make the long journey south and join him

He bought a small, detached cottage a little way out of the town and some short distance from the yard. Diligently he improved and modernised it and prepared it for her arrival. In retrospect, why had he not done it earlier? Why had he not taken the risk and asked her to come down straight away, rather than make her wait until he felt everything was secure and safe? Why?

Then came a crop of disasters, as if the plague had followed his wife out of Scotland and visited them in their small refuge set in the English downland. They had been to Bognor Regis by train for a week's holiday. Shortly before they were to leave the hotel to return to Victoria, she complained of a headache; a sharp pain behind one eye. A local doctor was summoned but he dismissed the matter as one that arose from a normal woman's biology. He comforted her as best he could on the journey, but once home the headache became almost unbearable. At one point she pleaded with him to kill her there and then, to put her out of her misery. The prescription of their local doctor had no effect and when next morning he found his wife, haggard and wild, in desperation beating her head against a wall, he took the doctor's advice and sent for a prominent physician. The eminent man did not examine his wife for more than ninety seconds. He peered into the eye, felt the insignificant swelling that had appeared under her hairline above her ear and, outside, declared the case to be hopeless. He prescribed her an immense dose of morphine, and left.

Distraught, unbelieving, Angus sought other opinions and someone who might cure the affliction that was squeezing first the sanity out of his wife, and then her life as he stood by, helpless, and watched, but in vain. In two weeks her suffering was at an end. In the dark days that followed the business suffered. His brother maintained his half as best he could but something had changed, and his thoughts and aspirations were now elsewhere. Perhaps he was cleverer or more perceptive, or more far-sighted, but shortly after the funeral he declared that there was nothing to keep him there, in England, and that he intended to emigrate to

Western Australia taking the proceeds of his half of the business with him.

Angus had not recovered from the sense of shock and outrage at his elder brother's proposal when the road haulage side of the company was stripped away by a smooth-talking weasel who came down from the London banker who had been recommended by one of his more important customers. He had not the strength, nor the will, to resist. Nor could he raise an argument and defend himself when the weasel announced that the value of the building business, including the work in progress and property, which was to be retained by Angus, was still worth considerably more than the proceeds of the sale of his brother's interests. He was presented with a demand for a not inconsiderable sum, a sum that he did not possess, and this from his own brother! But then the weasel had foreseen this eventuality and had the solution prepared and ready there in his burrow.

Regret, yes, at the thought that he might have mortgaged his and his daughter's future. It had not required much of the property to cover the collateral for the loan. And it gave him a temporary respite. But it left the business short of cash at a time when investors were jumping from windows high above New York, and the economy around him was sliding into depression. It was not long before he had to borrow more. And now, as work continued to decline and he continued to mortgage, he would spend the evenings watched by his precious, caring, daughter, pouring over the Books, trying to extract the last possible penny, or deciding what sacrifice next to make, whilst all around him the sea was littered with the possessions he had been forced to cast overboard as his little ship inexorably sank lower, and lower.

There was fear, too. A dreadful morbid terror that it might be congenital. He could not help his eyes as they wandered along his daughter's hairline. He could not help his hands as they felt their way over her scalp when she was sat before the fire. Of course, she had no idea why he did it. It was to soothe her, he said. It was mortifying, yet he had to do it.

"Your letter?" she added sweetly. She could clearly see that it was not a cheque. Had it been one, or any form of legal tender, her father might have been brandishing it triumphantly and calling for one of the now rare "wee drams" which he reserved for exceptional occasions.

"It is and it is not, lassie," he said proffering the letter. "Ye can read it." Moira read it carefully, studying each word individually before considering them in context as she was convinced there was a hidden meaning. "Read it carefully, as I've taught you," added her father, as if that was not what she was doing. He started to pour himself another cup of weak tea. "The pot!" she cried, dropping the letter in a safe place on the table. "Let me replenish it!" But he waved her away and gestured that she should finish her task. The letter was not long and her digestion of its contents was brief. "Surely it is good news?"

"Ay," he said pressing the cup to his lips. "May be it is. May be it is to a degree."

His daughter's features hardened. "You really must get people to pay up. We are owed - it must be thousands of pounds in rent and payment for work."

He looked up and shook his head. "Hundreds, maybe. That's a fact. If I could clear all the debtors I could repay all the loans, the interest, the lot. An' I suppose that while that's the case we need no' worry that much."

"But could you not be more firm? I mean there's all the rents. The income from them should amount to a tidy sum."

"Ay, lassie, you're right up to a point but how can you get money from folk who have nay the means to pay? Would you have me send in the bailiffs or evict them? What would you think o' your father then?"

"But - ."

"An' these are folk who are poorer than you, who have a struggle to feed an' clothe themselves and their bairns. What would you have me do? I'd as sooner bleed a stone."

"But, I have been going over the Books. There's Mrs Cerny for instance. She appears to be living rent free !"

"Mrs Cerny is a good, honest, upright, poor woman who stood by and helped us when - she helped nursed your mother. And during that time she would n' take a penny, not a penny."

"And what about her dreadful, arrogant, detestable son? You have no real need for

him yet you continue to employ and pay him? It seems to me that you are repaying her twice over!”

“Och Moira, Moira, do n' be so hard! There are debts which canna be paid by money alone and those which canna be discharged by any means known to living man, no matter how long he lives. And being a landlord places a heavy responsibility on me. I canna just walk away from, it like your uncle did. These are real people, not just names in a rent book. They are poor people, each one of them struggling, but honest, worrying every bit as much as you do about the money they owe. When the time, comes when things improve, they will pay me. I know that. Until then I canna help but help them through their difficulties - carry them.”

“I doubt if they would take the same view,” she said moodily, pointing at the letter. “And I do not for one moment think that Kurt Cerny deserves or, for that matter, needs to be carried.”

“You seem to have it in for young Kurt. Has he offended you in some way?” She turned away. She did not want her father to see the colour that raced to her cheeks and infused the roots of her hair. How could she repeat what he had said or the suggestion, no - demand, he had made? So she shook her head slowly as she looked out onto the garden.

“It just seems to me,” she said, her voice trembling, “that there are too many people for you to carry and it is a load which is forever increasing.”

“Then I will have to just broaden my shoulders to take the weight.”

“Even if your daughter goes barefooted in the bargain?”

“I'll go barefooted before any daughter of mine!” he shouted, scowling at her. “You've not worn out or lost your shoes, have you?”

She smiled and sat down opposite him, her hands resting on the newly ironed tablecloth. “I don't mean it - at least, not that way. I just worry about you - that's all. The money, why it really is incidental. It's that it worries you, and that's what worries me.”

“I know,” he said gently. “You're a good girl, like your - . There's no point in us both worrying, but I think it would be a good idea if you were to go out next rent day and judge the situation for yourself. Ye could take the rent ledger and the purse.”

“I would like to do that, father, but - .”

“Is it the money you're concerned about? Och, there's nothing to worry you there, lassie! You're nay going to be robbed for the pennies that you'll collect on rent day. Now, about that tea pot, and what we need to do to comply with the terms of the letter.”

Michael could not avoid the scheduled meeting with Mr Fishwick. Much as he might like to defer it, a meeting was inevitable. He would not get the advance from his father without it. So, he thought, it was preferable to have it, get it over, and then he would know where he stood. He snatched some sleep, washed, shaved and changed, forewent breakfast, and walked to Sloane Square station. A District Line train conveyed him to Mansion House from whence he walked up, in the direction of St Pauls.

Mr Fishwick's office lay off of a rectangular courtyard which was accessible from three directions along damp, dark alleyways. A man could approach it one way, leave by another, and remain undetected by someone watching the third. It had a unique smell, a fetid stench which ensured that no-one lingered in its area. Anyone who did would carry this, if nothing else, away with him.

Michael knew little of Mr Fishwick. He came rarely to the house near Sloane Square. When he did, he was dressed in black and reminded Michael of an undertaker, a financial undertaker. He assumed that most of his father's communications with the man he was about to meet were carried by messenger. They appeared to meet only if something was exceptionally confidential. Michael had the understanding that Mr Fishwick was an accountant, although he could not determine from whence or when that understanding came about. There had been those occasions when he had caught sight of the man's sallow face as, tall, lean and stooping, he shuffled across the tiles towards the study door. Occasionally he had heard his thin, subservient, rasping voice as it agreed, and confirmed it agreed, to some demand or instruction from his father. Yes, he was an accountant. If he was not a lawyer, that is.

What ever Mr Fishwick's true profession, assuming that he had one, he appeared to act as his father's general factotum, a faithful servant of the bank and his father, and possibly his father before him. It gave Michael no pride, or sense of well being, to think that there had been a Bernstein there, in London, handling money, involved in usury of one kind or another, for at least four generations. His satisfaction came from the thought that he would be the first to break with tradition. As he stepped out of the sunlight into the darkness of one of the alleys and passed between the bulging, iron-braced, green walls, Michael felt pleased by the thought that Fishwick would never be his servant.

"Master Michael, Sir," rasped Mr Fishwick, opening the door himself. Michael thought that there was a boy or youth who was apprenticed and who conveyed messages to and from the house, but he was nowhere to be seen. "So punctual, too! There are some who would consider that to be a fault in a gentleman, but I do not. Not for one minute. I find it a matter to be admired. But, then, I am no more than your most humble servant. If you would come this way - do mind the step and the low ceiling."

A dry dusty odour struck Michael as he followed through a low opening in a wall into an outer, airless office which, although sparsely furnished, revealed signs of recent occupancy, and over another threshold into an inner chamber. "You have no brought a coat? Do sit down."

The room belied its appearance. Although the single high lattice window was covered with grime and the daytime world viewed through it appeared to be in a constant state of twilight, the office was tidy and comfortably furnished. A number of large intrusive safes lined one wall above which was shelving to the ceiling neatly stacked with bundles of documents and ledgers. "We cannot be as smart and comfortable as the Bank, not quite so plush and accommodating," continued Mr Fishwick passing to the far side on an ancient desk, "but we do our best under the circumstances. And it is private here, very private, if you understand my meaning. No prying eyes or ears, no public places. Ideal for the customers who do not want to go to the Bank to conduct their business. Of course, it is but a short walk away, you understand. Very convenient. But your father thought that you might prefer to come here."

"I wouldn't have minded going to the Bank," declared Michael. "I am not - ."

"Just so, just so. It is exactly as I would expect. You believe that a gentleman's business should be conducted in the open, in full public view, but - alas - that is not always the way things are. And I am sure that your father wanted to avoid any embarrassment."

"Embarrassment? Whose? His or mine?"

"Both, I would most humbly suggest. He is, of course, deeply embarrassed by the fact that you wish to put your financial situation on an independent and commercial footing. Not that I would for one moment begin to suggest, even so much as hint, that your actions and motives in this affair are anything other than highly commendable. Too many young people today are content to live off their parents' fortune, driving them and their estates, deeper and deeper into debt. You have chosen a different course and, if you will allow me the liberty and permit me to say so, I am your greatest admirer. Please, do sit." Michael sat, feeling that he had joined and lost a battle without being aware of it. "Now, sir, regrettably I have to turn away from the pleasantries of the moment, appetising as they might be, and address the business at hand. Your father's note indicates that you have decided to become a Civil Engineer?"

"Yes. I - ."

"An upright, admirable, profession, I must say, although a most unusual choice for a gentleman. But, yes, admirable, if I may presume to say so. You have acquired a position?"

Michael caught the gleam in Mr Fishwick's eye and recognised the danger. "I have a small number of opportunities in mind. I have yet to chose one."

"May I enquire, by way of interest, which practices you are considering?"

"I would rather not say just at present." Mr Fishwick raised his eyebrow and smiled revealing an incomplete set of yellow, uneven teeth. Michael had no doubt that they were sharp and thought that he was brave and was actually doing rather well. "If I were to tell you," he continued, sounding confident, "you would seek to advise me, and that would be

unwarranted as that is a privilege I have denied my father.”

“I see,” said Mr Fishwick, slowly rolling a pencil under his hand across the desk top. “Again I perceive that you are to be congratulated in being quite proper and correct in your conduct. You are right, of course, and I am wrong. But, I am to assume that you are going to buy into a practice?”

“Yes, but I have yet to decide at what level. On the whole I think it would be better if I were to start at the bottom and work my way up. Spend a couple of months learning the rudiments, you know.”

“Purchase a pupillage?”

“Something of the kind - perhaps not a pupillage ...”

“In any event, I will need to know which practice you settle on in order to sanction the payment.”

Michael was stunned and stared at the speaker for a short while trying to grasp the full significance of his words. “You mean - .?”

“Your father has sent me instructions to draw up a facility which will allow you to draw up to two thousand pounds to cover your premium and to also make you an allowance whilst you establish yourself. Furthermore, he has instructed me to act as your financial advisor and ensure that you have the very best advice that one in my low and humble position can give. I must say on my part how honoured I will be to act in that capacity!”

It was a short while before the full impact of what had been said struck Michael. So that was it! His father was to retain control of his expenditure and in that way monitor his every move through the offices of this obnoxious creature. What was the point of becoming excited? He should just accept that he had no means of becoming independent, certainly not in the short term, not until he had established himself in a career. Or had become married. For the present he did not know how much money he would need, nor how long it would take before he earned enough to support himself and redeem what ever debt he had by then accrued. An idea suddenly crossed his mind. He would not make it easy for his father. “You can advise me in one respect. Whereas I do not wish to burden my father with the choice of practice and position, he did indicate that you would be prepared to draw up a short-list of the better consultants to add to the meagre options I am considering at the moment.” There was some truth in this as his list contained none.

“But of course! Nothing could give me greater fulfilment and pleasure. May I crave your indulgence until this afternoon? I will have it brought to your father's house - no later than three?” Michael nodded and signed the legalistic document that Mr Fishwick placed in front of him without reading a word further than the elaborate opening “Wherefore”. He could have signed away his future prospects or his very soul for all he knew or cared. His sole wish was to escape, out, back into the world of sunlight, back among real living people. He now though he knew what that smell was. It was gradual decay, putrefaction. It was a living death.

A clock was chiming noon when Lady Newington came out into the enclosed garden of their London house. Christina was sitting, her feet raised, in a pleasant stupor, half asleep, half awake, a cheap detective novel having slipped from her grasp, a cup of tea beside her, cold, un-tasted. Helen was at first uncertain whether to disturb her youngest daughter, but Christina's eyes flickered, then opened, and were all but closed again by the brightness of the light. “What time is it?” she said lazily allowing a yawn and wriggling into a kind of sprawled position which was not at all in keeping with her breeding or position in Society.

“It has just struck noon,” said her mother sitting down nearby then studying her intently. “I now discover that Angela did not go last night and that you went alone to this, this - party.”

“Mark went too!”

“Mark? Mark? I wouldn't trust him to chaperon his own shadow!”

“Oh Mama, don't be so puritanical! You don't have chaperons now. It just isn't done. No one does!”

“There are ways to behave.”

“No-one there had anything approaching a chaperon or a duenna. It was just young

people - or relatively young people. And modern girls know all about the world - know how to look after themselves." Christina checked herself and thought briefly about her elder sister. But, no, her mother would not contest her statement. "Anyway, you tell me that my future is settled!"

"If I were to say that I thought that the arrangement would be upset by your behaviour, it would only cause you to behave all the worse!"

"So it is to be a double-headed penny? Regardless of the effect I may behave as I please?"

Helen looked at the ground and folded her arms. "I do not understand young people now-a-days," she said sadly. "I just do not. When I was a girl I went to Balls with Mamma and Papa, marked my card, danced and had a wonderful time, and went home afterwards. It was all very proper. Why is nothing like that done now-a-days?"

"Oh, Mummy! Don't be cross! I was only teasing. You know that I shall behave exactly as you would have me do - without the presence of my big sister to keep an eye on me!"

"Did you talk to him last night?"

"Only to pass pleasantries," replied Christina reflecting that Michael had made but a little impression on her memory. But there had been distractions.

"Did he attempt to talk to you?"

"Nno," she said. "But, then, Alistair arranged a treasure hunt and we were split up. I had to spend most of the evening in the company of an Austrian architect who would demolish Newington if he had his way, and who was an absolute bore."

"I am sure that Mark would have talked to him by now," Helen said pensively.

Christina had the impression that her mother was on the brink of saying more, but a silence descended upon the small sunlit garden. And sat there, in the warmth, beside the rippling ornamental pond, dazzled by the bright flashes of the changing leaves of the potted azaleas brought back from the Far East, Christina found it hard to believe that she was in central London. The crowded streets, packed with their pushing, shoving, boring, people, the buses, the cars, taxi cabs and trains, all might have been a million miles distant. "When?" she said suddenly.

"When what, Darling?" said her mother, shaking off her preoccupation and becoming bright and her normal self again as if she had undergone some internal metamorphosis.

"When will it happen?"

"Oh, not yet - not for a while - not until after your coming out. And there are some financial matters to be resolved."

"We are paying him?"

"There will have to be a settlement."

"And it will take all that time? It doesn't seem that there will be anything to come out to. And he could find someone else during the interim."

"Oh, he won't do that," Helen said confidently. "But do you think that he likes you?"

"It would be very unjust of him to not like me. He hardly knows me. And it would be more appropriate if you were to ask whether I like him."

"And do you?"

"I hardly know him," Christina muttered, thinking to herself that Jenny probably knew him better by now than she did.

"Well, then, Darling. You have all that to look forward to - all that time in which to discover and find out about each other. It will all work out just as we have planned. You will see."

"I hope so, Mama. I hope so."

Mr Fishwick was true to his word. That afternoon, just before three, a small packet, marked for Michael's attention, was delivered to the house. It contained the promised list of consulting engineers' practices written in a large, almost child like, hand and not the small, mean, handwriting that Michael would have expected. So these were the concerns to avoid? But, how was he to go about finding a practice which might take him? Where should he go?

Who could he ask?

A sudden idea struck him. Why not ask the Austrian architect? He had clearly missed the opportunity at Alistair's party and, anyway, it was not the most appropriate location to discuss personal matters of this kind with a friend leave alone a complete stranger. There was one tiny snag. Where would he find this architect? How would he find him? Perhaps Mark might know.

Yes! That was the place to start, with Mark, and he would start right away! After all, he was only fifteen minutes away in a cab. So, with no further thought, but in great excitement, he put his head around the door to the music room where Natacha was thundering through the final movement of a late Schubert Sonata and announced to the astonished pianist, her vexed tutor, and his placid stepmother, that he was going out but that he did not expect that he would be long and, in any event, he would be home in time for dinner.

Lady Newington's maid opened the door. She knew his face from his occasional visits to Mark but could not recall his name. Nor did she appear to recognise it when he informed her but she showed him onto a sitting room and told him that he was to wait whilst she went in search of Master Mark. It was a superb room, cool, comfortable, relaxing, effused with Helen's unimpeachable taste in decor and furnishings. As he stood there, pregnant with admiration and wondering whether Christina had inherited this talent, his friend entered.

"Goodness," said Mark. "I didn't expect to see you up yet. In fact I didn't expect to see you at all today. I have only just got up!"

"I didn't go to bed!" grumbled Michael. "At least, not properly. But it's like that when a chap is setting out to be self-sufficient and independent, earning his own living - that sort of thing."

"Are you earning your own living already?"

"Not exactly."

"But you've found a position?"

"Well, no. That was one of the reasons that I've called around."

"Oh?"

"I need a bit of guidance, you know - pointing in the right direction - and not my father's direction."

"I suppose that any direction that isn't your father's direction is the right direction?"

"Exactly! Now it occurred to me that your architect chum who was at the party last night might be able to give me a few leads."

"He wasn't my chum. He was more like Christina's chum."

"That may be so, but would you know where I could find him? Have you any idea how I could contact him? And why are you laughing?"

"I - I am sorry," said Mark, full of merriment, "but he is here right now!"

"Here?" Michael leapt to his feet, unable to disguise his astonishment and dismay. "Here? Why?"

"To pay his respects, I suppose. I haven't actually seen him."

"Respects? To whom?"

"To my mother, I suppose. And Christina."

"Christina? She's not alone with him, is she?" It was a silly thing to say and Michael regretted it, but he could not help regarding the Austrian as a rival and an enemy although he could not exactly understand why.

"I suppose because he's a bit smitten with her. Don't worry. It won't affect her. Chrissy is far too level-headed to be taken in by a smooth talking foreigner. But you ought really to talk to her - get some kind of understanding. That sort of thing."

"I suppose I should," said Michael ruefully. "I feel awkward about it. Especially as I have no real prospects at present. I would rather get my future settled first."

"As you wish. I don't know what Chrissy will think of becoming hooked to a trainee or apprentice."

"I am not going to be a trainee or apprentice! At least not for more than a month or two whilst I master the rudiments. I expect to have a senior position fairly quickly."

"I'm sure that thought will impress her. But you must come through and meet

everyone!”

“Before I do, can you arrange for me to have a few words with the Austrian - what's his name?”

“Cerny.”

“First?”

“Of course. Wait here and I'll send him through to you.”

“I am sorry to drag you away from the ladies,” said Michael uncomfortably when the tall Austrian appeared, “but I need some advice.”

“If I can be of service!” said the architect abruptly.

Michael explained the background as far as his chosen career was concerned. He was tempted to refer to his intended relationship with Christina but the thought struck him that if he were to antagonise the man he might not get the assistance he was seeking. “I wondered,” he went on, “if you have encountered any likely practices during your period here.” Even as he said it he became alarmed by the futility and thoughtlessness of the request. How was he to know, why should he assume, that Herr Cerny was in the country in his professional capacity? And on what grounds did he assume that in his professional capacity Herr Cerny would come into with consulting engineers? Nevertheless he had started and he was now bound to continue through to the end, and possibly make himself look foolish in the eyes of this potential rival into the bargain. “Any that I might approach?” he added.

“I will ignore the question of your prudence in posing a question such as this to me,” said the Austrian stiffly, walking to the window and standing with his back to Michael. “But it is so that I have encountered such a practice. I have been doing a little work for them and they have had some involvement with interests in Vienna. I have been most impressed by their solid and efficient approach to engineering problems. Here, I am writing their name down for you. But, remember, I am not recommending them to you. You must judge their suitability for yourself.”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” said Michael hastily. “Nothing like that. I just want a lead. I am terribly obliged to you.”

“It is nothing.”

“There is no service - nothing - that I can do for you?”

“No - except - there could be one thing. The Lady Christina.”

“Ye - s?”

“If you have the opportunity, would you be so kind to put in a good word for me. I am not sure where I stand.”

“A good word? Me?”

“It is so that she appears to hold you in great esteem.”

“Esteem?” echoed Michael, feeling he had to try to stop repeating mostly everything the architect said.

“I could tell by the way she reacted when your arriving now was announced. If you could - well you know what I mean. We are both men of the world, ja?”

“Well, yes. If I can, I shall. But I doubt that my recommendations can carry any greater weight with her than yours with me.”

The Austrian suddenly glared at him and appeared to move to snatch back the card on which he had written, but Michael held firmly on to it. “I think that we understand each other,” he said.

“I think we do,” said Michael, smiling. “Shall we go and see the ladies?” In company Michael felt safe. But the day would soon come when he and Christina would be left alone. And that thought, which had relished only a day earlier, was beginning to frighten him.