

CHAPTER FOUR

Angus Muir, like many other kindly, good hearted, well meaning mortals, had his little faults, but he did not count his prodigious memory amongst these, although many of his friends, acquaintances and business associates might not have entirely agreed with him. Thus it came as no surprise to his daughter to find herself presented, with little ceremony, with the rent ledger and a leather cash bag when the next rent day came. "Are you sure that this is wise, father?" she asked, nervously flicking through the pages and being reminded, with dismay, of the lengthy catalogue of arrears which she, in her role as acting book-keeper, knew so well.

"Och, Moira, there's n' harm in it. You'll probably collect n' more than two shillings at most and only then if you're lucky. I suppose that there may be some who'll give to a waif of a lass that which they'd n' give to her father. But they'll not be many. If I meet with nay success, what d'ye think you'll achieve?"

"Perhaps if I were to go in rags and bare-footed?"

"Away with you! You'll be back in good time for tea so there's nothing to concern your head over."

The afternoon was hot, unusually so for the time of year, Moira thought, and she found that she was quite exhausted when she reached Mrs Cerny's house which lay close to the end of her round. "My goodness! Miss Moira! You look just about all in!" exclaimed the good woman when she opened the door to find Moira on her threshold. "Come along in and talk to Phoebe. What have you been doing?"

"A pretty hopeless task," said Moira wearily and dejectedly, too tired to think too much about the susceptibility and feelings of the older woman. "Trying to collect rents where there is not one. I doubt that I have got more than two good shillings, which is all father said I would collect."

"Why? Is your father all right? He's not ill or - ."

"Oh, he's fine. I expect he's laughing at me over one of his drams at this very minute. Only it will be a very wee one. No, he sent me forth to teach me a lesson and I think that I have learnt it."

"He is so short of money? Oh, how dreadful - he should have said! I am sure I can manage something."

"No, no!" cried Moira suddenly conscious of the direction which the conversation was taking and anticipating her father's wrath. "Please, Mrs Cerny, I did not mean that. I called in only because - I mean the things I've seen - it was the third or fourth house - that was the worse. You know, the row of terraced cottages past the tram garage. Father owns five of them and at one, yes, it was the fourth, the woman who opened the door, she could have been no older than twenty, but her face! It was bruised and blue, her skin was wrinkled and yellow, and she looked so emaciated - her large eyes, which seemed to hang loose in their sockets, were fixed on me, and her hair was just a wild, filthy, tangled mess, almost indescribable. I swear that she wore nothing but old rags. I wanted to take my clothes off there and then and give them to her!"

"You mustn't do anything like that, Miss Moira!"

"And she asked me in! I wanted to refuse and just run away, but I couldn't. So I just followed her. Then she didn't seem to be able to walk upright but limped as if she had a permanent disability. I could hear this child crying somewhere upstairs, but she took me into the front room which was virtually bare and told me her story. Oh, Mrs Cerny! I think we have a difficult life at times, father and I - ."

"I am sure it could be made easier."

" - but this poor woman. Her husband was upstairs in bed, also disabled. He had worked on the Newington Estate and was injured in an accident with some farm machinery. She doesn't know the details and her husband has not been very communicative, but the Estate Manager said that the accident was entirely his fault and he's received no compensation whatsoever. No solicitor will take up the case - I mean, seeing her, who would? And I expect

that they are all afraid of alienating Lady Newington!"

"She's a good customer of your father's."

"That may be. But this poor creature is now resigned to slow starvation. Honestly, Mrs Cerny, I would have given her all the rent money I'd collected, only I had none at that stage. And it isn't mine to give away. I now see clearly why my father acts as he does sometimes and what will drive him into debt and bankruptcy. And there are those who call my father wicked for being a landlord and employer! Him, wicked? The wickedness is rooted in a Society which permits such atrocities."

"There are many thousands like your poor woman," said Mrs Cerny, softly. "I will go and see if I can help."

"Would you?" said Moira, brightening.

"I will go and see if there is anything that can be done. It may be very little. Perhaps you and Phoebe would like to come too?"

"I would. And I will speak to father about legal help. There must be someone. But it makes your blood boil when you see something like that. They say it will need an enormous upheaval in society - a complete revolution - if poverty is to be eradicated."

"You should remember that the Bible says that the poor will always be with us. And you sound just like my Kurt."

"Do I? I do not mean to! Oh, I don't know why I said it, or if I really understood what I said. Words are easy, are they not, Mrs Cerny?"

Mrs Cerny glared momentarily at the young woman, wondering if the searing words were aimed at her, but Moira's face told her that the utterance was introverted and self-reproaching. "I'll put on the kettle and call Phoebe," she said, moving towards the sink.

"How is she? I should have asked when I came. I have no need to ask how Kurt is," she added lowly. "I see him quite often in the yard although I rarely have time to talk to him. He has grown, hasn't he?"

"He's growing just like his father," said Mrs Cerny over her shoulder and unable to see the grimace that appeared on the young girl's features. "And, like his father, he worries me. He says such awful things some times. And he's becoming very secretive of late. I am worried that he will get tied up with one of those dreadful political movements and no good will come of it if he does."

"Not the communists?"

"More likely that other lot. I don't pretend to understand it at all. The world is a bad enough place without having mobs rampaging about waving banners and shouting slogans. There was a demonstration by the miners in the town last week. I find it very disturbing and no good will come of it!"

"Did Kurt go?"

"Not to my knowledge. He should have been at work. He does turn up regularly, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes," Moira said meaningfully and, wishing to turn the conversation away from the particular topic, added, "and Felicity?"

"My little Phoebe? I was going to call her, wasn't I? Oh she's coming along wonderfully even if I do say it myself. She will be everything I wanted to be, and would have been had it not been for - had I not got married. She will be great, famous. I've no doubt of it. She has the poise, the energy, the strength, the timing, a marvellously subtle rhythmic sense of the music, dedication, hard work - I could go on. I hope to get her into the Paris Conservatoire if - ." She stopped and a look of guilt spread across her face. "Oh, Miss Moira," she cried. "It makes me feel so ashamed. There's us talking of poverty and the dreadful lives that some people lead, and the arrears of rent and the trouble it causes your good father, and here's me talking about sending my sister to Paris. There's no denying that I've been saving all that I can. It's a secret that I've kept from everyone, from your father who has not asked for my rent since the day your poor mother passed on, and from Kurt. I've tried nearly every honest way I know to supplement his income. I have a small annuity and I've taken courses in hotel management and cooking in the hope I might one day be able to go into catering. I mean, people have to eat. But Phoebe has so much talent. She is so gifted! It would

be such a waste, such a criminal waste, if it is not developed and put to use. I owe it to her. In a way I am more than a sister, I am her mother and father rolled into one. I had my chance and didn't make the best use of it. I must give her her chance and make sure she takes it."

A faint smile crossed Moira's face as she began to appreciate the irony of the situation. "I am sure that my father understands," she said lowly. "I am certain that if the matter was put to him he would agree with your actions and motives. But I shall not tell him."

Mrs Cerny stared at her for a moment. "I am not sure why I have told you this, now. I suppose have never really thought clearly about it before," she said levelly. "I've always considered it to be Phoebe's money, a kind of repayment of the investment that was wasted on me. But now, no - I think you should tell your father. I shouldn't lead a double life, but I can't decide between my loyalty to Felicity and my debt to him. I'd rather that you told him. I would feel a lot happier if he knows."

"He won't do anything," Moira said sullenly. She looked down at the scrubbed top of the table and felt overwhelmingly miserable. It had turned out to be a rotten idea, this afternoon. First the woman with her crippled husband who beat her, now this unsolicited admission from Mrs Cerny which avoided the real issue and left the judgement to her father. And how could she tell him without sounding as if she were carping? How could she attempt to deprive Felicity, who was still upstairs, reading, innocent of the fragility of her future, of her main opportunity in life? It was always the same where money was concerned. Why was there so little to go around? Why did they just not print more so that everyone would not have to challenge and fight one another for the little there was?

"Is she upstairs?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Who? Phoebe? Yes, she is and look at the time! I almost forgot! I must call her! Phoebe! Phoebe! She is going to church - a special vigil. I am afraid that she takes her religion to heart far more than I do. Once a week will suffice for me, but Phoebe - Phoebeeeee! She has been going two or three times a week recently. Kurt pulls her leg about it. He sometimes sounds a little cruel but I don't think he means it. And I can't criticise her. How could I?"

"I suppose not," murmured Moira, feeling little pangs of conscience about her religious habits. She could hear Felicity on the stairs and suggested that it was time she was going. Mrs Cerny said that Phoebe would be going out at the same time - perhaps they could walk part of the way together?

"I am relieved to have someone to talk to," said Felicity in earnest as soon as they were outside the house. "My sister is fine for most matters but, there are some things - ."

Moira glanced sideways at her with curiosity. "Talk? About what?"

"I wondered - I am not quite sure how to put this without it sounding absolutely awful - but, have you had any trouble with Kurt? Has he been bothering you?"

Moira's heart leapt as she recalled a number of incidents about which her father would have been furious had he known of them. "Bothering me?" she asked, trying to sound calm. "In what way? I don't really like him if you must know." Moira could see that this answer pained her companion and regretted it.

"Has he - has he tried to kiss you? Or touch you?" Moira wondered how she should answer this question without making some kind of admission she might regret.

"Has he you?" she asked sharply.

Felicity coloured. "I have to bolt my door at night. I haven't told Debbie as I don't know what she would do. But he started coming to my room in the dark. He didn't do anything, just stood there for a moment and went out when I called out to him. I was petrified. I mean, apart from anything else I am his aunt! And I don't really like him, either."

"Has he tried to kiss *you*, then? Or anything else?"

"Oh! Its repulsive, the very idea of it, him being my nephew."

"What else has he done?"

For a short way they walked on in silence, one searching for words and the courage to say them, the other in anticipation of those words yet fearful as to what they might be. Then Felicity stopped and turned in earnest. "I have to tell someone," she said with passion. "I don't

think I have the courage to confess it although I am sure that I should."

"Confess it? I don't think I could confess anything - not to anyone. Certainly not to a man. Confess what?"

"Well, he touched me - touched me in certain places - sensitive areas. Of course I repelled him and told him that if he touched me again or made any kind of suggestion I would mark him for life."

"That doesn't sound too bad. I have experienced as much!"

"But was there anything else? Anything more?"

"Anything more? Certainly not! I did nothing to encourage him in the first place leave alone allow him to go on to do anything else! It is unthinkable!"

"I didn't mean exactly that," said Felicity lowly. "Did you feel anything else?"

"Apart from revulsion? No!"

"That's just it. I felt revulsion. I felt that I wanted to be sick. But there was something else. I felt excited - stimulated. I can't explain it - I am so ashamed of it - but there was this feeling which threatened to overwhelm me - a kind of longing or desire which set my nerves on edge. It was almost as if I - or something inside me - wanted him to go on. And, as you say, it is revolting. And I feel so ashamed!"

At this point Felicity burst into tears leaving Moira desperately looking around for somewhere to go or sit with her distraught friend whilst she calmed down. She wanted to pour words of comfort over her but did not know what to say. As far as she was concerned, the things that men did to women were repulsive and far removed from the kinds of actions that women should feel excited or stimulated about. She had long resigned herself to the thought that if she married, she would have to accommodate her husband as a matter of duty. It would be her lot to suffer in this unspeakable way. How was she then to comfort her friend who was displaying disturbing signs of immorality? There were some small gardens a short walk away so she took Felicity's arm and guided her there.

"Oh I must look a state!" Felicity exclaimed as they sat. Moira produced a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "I am all right," Felicity added. "I'll be all right now."

"I do not know what to say," said Moira softly.

"I know. It is unnatural. That is what you are thinking. You felt nothing but revulsion at the time, but I - oh, what am I to do?"

"Why must you do anything, Phoebe? I do not understand you?"

"It is a sin. It is a grievous sin - one which I will have to confess. I suppose I would have felt some comfort to find that there were other sinners in the world."

"But you don't surely mean that you were tempted to - with Kurt?"

"Oh! Good glory, no! Oh, how could you think that? How could anyone think that?"

"I am sorry," said Moira, now completely confused, annoyed, and not a little alarmed, "but what then?" But Felicity had lapsed into reflective silence again. And Moira, out of sympathy with her friend's concerns would not, for one moment, attempt to guess what she was thinking.

Moira made no mention of this conversation when she later described the afternoon's events to her father. She could not say anything without running the risk of presenting her father with a difficult decision regarding Kurt's employment. Nor did she want to raise, for her, the indelicate subject of what she saw as Felicity's basic and unnatural instincts. She did describe her attempts to collect rent and his reaction was much as she had anticipated. She also raised, with some misgiving, the matter in which Mrs Cerny had confided although, on this subject, her father surprised her a little.

"I am delighted to hear it!" he exclaimed. "Everyone says the lassie is exceptionally gifted and deserves every chance to develop her gifts. Everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their talents if they are exceptional. Everyone, and its n' credit on our society that some have to scrimp and go short in order to achieve this. In fact I am glad Mrs Cerny told you to tell me as you have removed a wee problem from the back o' my mind. I had wondered whether she would need assistance in getting Felicity to the Paris Conservatoire - assuming that she passed the scholarship - as it will require a considerable sum of money. Now,

hopefully, she will accumulate enough.”

He lapsed into thought and stared out of the window. His daughter could not help but feel pangs of jealousy. If only she could have told him all that Felicity had said as they walked together! How different might his view of her, which was clearly more favourable than that in which he held his own daughter, have been! He would have said that she wanted watching and that no good would come to her! Paris would have been the last place to send her! More likely it would be a convent!. But Moira remained silent.

“All I need to do now, “he said after a while, “is to remove her worries about the rent - but to do it in such a way she'll nay feel obligated to be - how?”

“Father?”

“Nothing, my dear,” he said pensively watching the last of the crows lazily making its way across the pink sky. “Just a problem to solve - one to which I have to find the right solution. It will come.”

When she lay in bed that night, staring at the stars which looked in through the gap at the top of her bedroom curtains, Moira felt saddened when she thought of the day's events. She had handed over the small amount she had collected. Her father had refrained from reminding her that he had “told her so”, but he had asked quite pointedly whether she now understood his problem and she had been forced to confess that she did. When she thought of the poor woman who lived near the tram garage, and her brutish crippled husband, it was impossible to harden her heart and pronounce that her father should be firm.

Then she thought of Felicity. Why was it that some people were bestowed with talents and genius whilst others were not? She had no gifts that would carry her to fame. True, she could keep house, cook, sew, add up a column of figures, look after her father, and promise to be a wonderful wife to the lucky man who was eventually able to ensnare her, just so long as he was not too demanding. No doubt one would. One was out there on this moonlit night, probably lying on his bed, thinking similar thoughts about the girl he would woo and marry. No doubt they would set up house and they would have a family. Perhaps her father would come and live with them? There was the sum total of her talents. Yet here was Felicity, gifted, destined by all accounts to become a ballerina, a prima donna, something that her sister had failed to achieve. And this was the same Felicity who confessed to having entertained carnal thoughts - carnal, what an awful word! And then there were the long walks on the downs that her friend took, alone. What if she was - oh, it did not bear thinking about! On reflection she would rather Felicity had not raised the matter and fostered all these doubts and misgivings. Moira was sure that she would never again view her friend in the same light as before.

She had once heard her mother and father talking about Mrs Cerny's story. She had been young and her recollection of it was now vague, but she recalled that there had been something sad. She could remember her mother saying, almost bitterly, that it was better for a girl to be born with no exceptional talents for then there was nothing for her to lose when she embraced motherhood. But, if she did remember the story correctly, for Deborah Cerny the choice had been made. An injudicious action and the consequences had curtailed her career. Her father had said it was the stuff books were made off and she recalled wondering how this lady's life could be reduced to sheets of paper. And now Felicity was to tread the same path, become famous - and?

The renewed thought of Felicity prompted thought of religion and a renewal of a feeling of guilt. Perhaps it was wrong to attempt to judge her. Almost unconsciously she breathed a silent prayer for her friend into the pillow, and fell asleep.

It was the next morning, and all traces of breakfast had been cleared completely from the room when Michael came to examine the piece of paper handed to him by the Architect. The address, written in Herr Cerny's neat efficient and thorough style, was in Westminster, which sounded impressive when said out loud. “City of Westminster,” he repeated into the mirror. It appeared to be safe from the influence of his father as when he checked the name of the practice against those on Fishwick's list, it was not there.

So, how now to proceed? Should he write? No, they would only write back and his father might intercept the letter. At the very least he would see from whom it came. No, a direct attack was called for. He would go to the office, present himself and ask for an interview with a senior partner. It would be immediate and effective!

In the hall he met Sophie who took him to one side. "Lady Helen is here!" she hissed. "She's in with your father now!"

"This early?"

"She telephoned yesterday evening."

"What about?" It half occurred to Michael, in a muddled kind of way, that the Architect was behind it. Perhaps he had asked for Christina's hand in marriage - that was the way he would have put it. No, he would first have asked permission to pay his respects to the young lady. What ever approach he adopted, the message would have been the same, and Michael could not make up his mind whether he was pleased or angry by the prospect.

Sophie looked even sadder than was usual. "I don't know. He does not confide such matters in me. He does not even tell me zat he has chartered one of my ships to carry armaments to Spain despite he knowing zat I 'ave said they are not to be used for military reasons. This I 'ave to find out for myself. I sometimes wonder what I am 'ere for and why he did not marry her instead of me."

"I would have thought that was obvious," said Michael without any thought. "Anyway, I am off out!"

"No! No!" she cried, catching his arm and restraining him. "I was given strict instructions zat you were not to go out until he 'as finished with her and seen you!" Then her tone of alarm moderated and she added, "now, come and talk to Natacha. Miss Crotchet, she is arranging her first public engagement."

"A recital?"

"You must ask her yourself."

Natacha was radiant and bubbly. "No! Not a recital - the Schumann Concerto! I have wanted to play it ever since mother took us to hear Myra Hess play it! And Strobowski is to play the new violin concerto! We will finish with the Rhenish - you must come! You will, won't you?"

"Of course I shall. And I'm sure that Mark'll want to come, too. There will be such a bank of clagues as hasn't been seen in London this century! But you don't sound afraid, Nat. Doesn't the prospect of being out there, in front of all those people, scare you? I would be scared stiff! Wouldn't it be better to start with something small and simple, easy to play like Mozart? A recital in the Wigmore Hall kind of thing? Something to get your hand in?"

Natacha laughed. "Afraid? No! And Mozart isn't easy - far from it. But I am excited - ecstatic! I mean, I have been working for this for over six years. If anything, I may be taking the plunge a little too late according to Miss Crotchet. Stanui made his first public appearance at the age of twelve and Albert Chartland played at the Carnegie Hall when he was ten! Here am I at the ripe middle age of eighteen and only just starting! Oh, I expect that I'll have butterflies on the night. Miss Crotchet says that's the case - that you won't perform at your best unless there is some nervous tension. But she also says that when you start, when you go da da-da da-da da-da da-da da, you forget all awareness of the audience or the occasion and become totally immersed in the music. I can hardly wait!"

"I am very pleased for you," said Michael thinking that it was odd that his sister, four years his junior, was about to go out and make her mark on the World and here he was, not even started. He would have been, of course, had Sophie not intercepted him in the hall. He went downstairs and was still pondering on the vagaries and injustices of life when the figure of his father filled the study door and he was commanded to go in.

Lady Newington was there, sat beautiful and decorative in one of the more comfortable chairs, transforming the atmosphere of the room. Michael could not imagine that his father would say anything unpleasant whilst she remained. She smiled as he entered and beckoned him to her whilst his father remained leaning against the door, pressing it shut behind him. "Do sit down Michael," she said sweetly. "That's all right, is it, Horatio?"

Michael gave a little start at the unfamiliar sound of his father's Christian name. Even

Sophie rarely used it. Horatio Bernstein uttered a sound like “pah” which Helen took to be an affirmative and communicated her interpretation to his son by indicating the chair opposite. “I came to see your father about you and Christina, and I have made a request that I should talk to you in his presence, simply to clarify the arrangement. You should not construe for one moment that I in any way doubt your father's word, but I do know that he can be, and is, a very persuasive person.” Saying this she looked and smiled radiantly in the direction of his father who, in submissive response, issued a kind of satisfied grunt, indicating his concurrence with her appraisal of this particular virtue. “You will be aware,” she continued, “that it was agreed between your father and my dear departed husband, indeed it was his dearest wish, that our families should be joined in marriage. Indeed this proposal was agreed in principle before Christina was born, Angela having been the first choice. But I have always believed, and you have heard me espouse this principle, Horatio, that a wife should be her husband's junior in age even if she may be his equal in everything else. Hence the coupling of your name with Christina. Now that the time is opportune to broach this matter, your father and I agree that the matter should be placed on a more formal footing, possibly by the announcement of the engagement, especially now that my youngest darling is beginning to receive attention from others. But I must ask you first, before we move on with this, and you must excuse me if I ask the question in a direct, almost indelicate, manner - is there anyone else?”

“Anyone else?” echoed Michael forming a sudden, arousing, mental picture of Jenny. “I don't understand.”

His father coughed in an irritable manner but a smile and a small gesticulation from Lady Newington silenced him. She lowered her eyes, almost as if to suggest that she should be excluded, naturally, from consideration when Michael gave an answer. “Another woman,” she said softly and coaxing. “Not any woman, but one with whom you may be in love.”

“Goodness, no!” Michael said with so much emphasis that she gave the tiniest of starts and regarded him quizzically.

“May I also assume that you are a willing party to the proposed match? That is to say, and I will find it hard to believe should you answer in the affirmative, that you have no intrinsic dislike of my youngest daughter?”

“Christina?” he said hastily. “I haven't, but what does she think about me?”

“She has no true knowledge of you, nor you of her, of course. And we think, your father and I, that is, that this is a matter which should now be remedied.”

“Just so,” said his father curtly.

“And I would like to say to you exactly that which I have said to her. I expect that your father has said it to you already, and I beg your indulgence for repeating his advice, but it will do no harm hearing it from my lips. Do not be afraid of an arranged marriage. Marriages are not made in Heaven, but they are avowed before God. Marriage is a state of mind, a solemn acceptance of your partner and you of she, and a life-long submission to the sacred bond and duties that arise out of it. Do not be misled by romantic love, or the concept that a marriage should be based upon it. How can you love someone of whom you have absolutely no intimate knowledge? Passion is no foundation for a partnership which has to last through all the whims and pressures of your lives as you grow older. Love, a true love, born out of mutual respect, trust, admiration and understanding, will grow, given honesty and the right attitude of minds. It may take years, but one day you wake up and it is there, and you wonder how it is that you have never before realised or recognised the fact.” She sighed, then added in a low voice, “you have never experienced an infatuation, have you? I can tell.”

Michael felt hot and quite uncomfortable. He smiled sheepishly and thought of the girl who slunk through his dreams and enlightened his waking moments, but could not find suitable words with which to answer. His father grunted and left his post at the door in favour of his desk and for a short while they remained in silence. “We are to go forward, then?” said Lady Newington brightly and, without waiting for an answer, went on. “Then the most important thing is to get the two of you together, is it not?”

“The sooner the better,” grunted his father. “A bargain delayed is a bargain forgone.”

“Would you like to come back with me now?” asked Helen, sweetly, extending a

gloved hand in Michael's direction.

He took a deep breath. Why stave off the inevitable? Christina was not a bad looking girl - better than her older sister in any event. True, she was a little plump, but she did have an interesting figure and a pretty face; certainly one he thought he could bear to look at, morning and evening. After all, he might have been presented with a Medusa. And he could always go on to Westminster afterwards, or this afternoon, or -

"Answer, will you Sir?" snapped his father.

Lady Newington was smiling apologetically and this encouraged Michael. "Very well," he said softly.

It was a great thing to ride in the back of a Rolls Royce alongside a woman who was acknowledged to be one of the most beautiful in London Society. Yet Michael had this disturbing, overwhelming, feeling that he had been kidnapped and was about to be held to ransom. Throughout the entire journey, Helen talked and he made suitable, intelligent, replies although afterwards he could not recall a single word either of them had said.

He was shown into a sitting room and Christina was sent to him. She entered demurely, her eyes lowered, and sat opposite him, first smoothing her glistening green skirt, then folding her small hands in her lap. Michael felt even more awkward than he had in the study as his cheeks flushed. What was he to say? How should he address her?

"I do know why you have come," she said suddenly in a level, controlled voice. Their eyes met and Michael saw the same look of defiance he had seen several nights before.

"Cards on the table, then?" he said hurriedly. "Perfectly frank with each other?"

"You had better be!" she said firmly.

"As I see it, we are supposed to get to know each other better - somehow," he added.

Christina moved in her chair as if something had made her feel uncomfortable, crossed her legs and rested her hands on her bare knee. Michael thought the newly exposed leg was shapely with a nice slim ankle. He started to study the other to ensure that it was the same. "So I understand," she said crisply. "I think it is unfortunate that I am denied the wooing and courtship that I would have enjoyed in other circumstances."

"I could woo you if you wished."

"That would be pretty foolish as things are," she said coolly.

"You are very level-headed, Christina," he said admiringly.

"A girl has to be if she is to make her mark on the World. I can be ruthless, too."

"Your mark on the World? What do you mean?"

"No! You should answer that question first, on your behalf. What is this quaint notion that you should become something other than what your father wants you to be - rich, I suppose?"

"I want to make my own mark on the world. I want to be a civil engineer!" Michael said proudly.

"What, like Herr Cerny?"

"He is an architect, not a civil engineer."

"I suppose he is," she mused. "But, why?"

"Why?" he echoed.

"Why do you want to do something else, something different?" she asked, sounding irritated. "And why a civil engineer? Is that a suitable career for a gentleman?"

"So that I can earn some self respect," he said pompously and mentally feeling the size of his father's feet. "And your respect, too!"

"I shall respect you more for the person that you are rather than what you do. After all, Michael, you have been born with that silver spoon. I was born with land, and debts. But you, you could do almost anything you fancied."

"If I was born as you describe, the spoon is firmly in the grasp of my father. I have nothing by right and - ."

"Please do not give me that silly nonsense about renouncing your birthright. Mark talks about it, but he spends too much time listening to Paul. And I have yet to see him commit himself to such a course of action - you know, lay down his life for his principles. He

is perfectly happy to allow Mama to borrow to set up his studio and introduce patrons to purchase his paintings.”

“But he's good!” exclaimed Michael trying to muster his own strong points.

“And he'll expect her to pay for his exhibitions. He won't turn a single hair. And Paul will dream up some contorted Marxist principle to justify it all!”

“Well, I do intend to act differently. I intend to earn my living.”

“And keep me in poverty?” Christina sounded serious and there was not the slightest trace of a smile that Michael hoped for as she continued. “I do not see that as a very bright prospect to present to your future bride.”

“I had not thought of that,” he said slowly.

“Clearly,” she said flatly. “As for myself, I will declare that I intend to become a writer and I will use every influence and means that I can lay my hands upon to help me succeed. Make no mistake of that!”

Michael stared at her, slightly in disbelief of her stated objectives, partly in incredulity at the forceful tone she had adopted in expressing them. “A writer?” he asked pensively. “Of what?”

“Of what ever it takes. Oh, not some idealistic left-wing rubbish or some right-wing propaganda as is all the vogue at present. Neither will last, although either might be a good way on getting established. No, I fancy the romantic novel. I shall be to the romantic novel what Edgar Wallace has been to the detective novel.”

“You have ideas?”

“Thousands of them! Just think of all the possible settings - historical - Elizabethan, Commonwealth, French Revolution, Victorian - as well as contemporary. Earlier, if necessary. George Elliot wrote a long novel set in mediaeval Italy - have you read *Romula*?”

“I haven't read very much,” Michael confessed.

“Well, you should. You really should. Of course, I will write under a *nomme de plume*, to protect the family name.”

Michael wondered how writers, who wrote under assumed names and never revealed their identities, made their mark in Society if no-one knew who they were, but he did not feel this was an appropriate time to question the point. “You appear to be very sure of yourself.”

“I am! I know that I can write. I feel it in me, in my bones. In here!” she said indicating her chest. “Just as you feel that you are going to be a civil engineer rather than a banker.”

“What I feel,” he said slowly and not without feelings of guilt, “is that I do not want to become like my father.”

“There you go again!” she cried with a little laugh and standing. “You did it the other evening! Why do you so decry your father? You can have no justifiable cause especially seeing he has provided you with the best education and - .”

“An admirable wife?”

Christina laughed again, this time more genuinely. “Maybe. And he is allowing you to follow the career of your choice as well as putting up the money.”

“I intend to repay it - all!”

“Oh? I see that we shall live in poverty! No doubt of that!”

“I'm sorry,” Michael said glumly.

“There's no need to worry about those things now. We each have a couple of years to get ourselves sorted out - you to pay off your family debts, and me to get established and independent of ours.”

“I don't quite understand.”

Christina laughed sharply. “Surely you do not think we are going to get married straight away?”

Michael's mind was in a whirl. This wife-elect of his appeared to have thought of everything whilst he had thought of nothing further than the immediate prospect, he assumed, of the ceremony. He had not considered where they would live, what they would furnish the house with, nor how they would pay their way. The mysteries of married life lay far, shrouded from the view of the uninitiated like he, on a far bank as he wandered along the river of life.

Now he thought about them, he had no clearer a picture than he had of the far side of the moon, except there was another side to the satellite just as a river had two banks no matter how wide and unbridgeable it might appear.

“What I thought,” she continued, “is that we should become formally engaged this Summer with a view to marrying in eighteen to twenty-four months time. I will be of age by then. I am sure that would be better, and that our parents will agree to such an arrangement. It will give them time to plan and complete all the arrangements. And it will give me time to get started on my career - and you on yours?”

“Two years? Oh, I should be well advanced by then,” Michael said, thinking that it would help just to get started.

“And there is one other thing. I expect absolute fidelity. I do not want to hear that you have been messing about with the Jennies of this world. No rumours, no scandal, no wild flings, do you understand?”

Michael wanted to ask about Herr Cerny, but dared not. He also thought about the young lady who captivated his unconscious self. But Christina would not seek to have control over his dreams, would she, even if such a thing were practicable? “I understand,” he murmured. “And in the meantime, we get to know each other? In a platonic sense?”

“We do!” she said firmly and positively. Her pronouncement had the sound of a large, steel armoured door slamming shut. There was no doubt about it. He had been kidnapped and taken hostage.