

## CHAPTER FIVE

Michael was allowed out on parole. Once the young couple had presented themselves to the delighted Lady Helen who acted as if it was all a great surprise and told them what a fine couple they would make, and to Angela who had sarcastically referred to Herr Cerny, he was permitted to leave and go to Westminster. He had explained his purpose to Christina and promised to return later in the day to report upon his progress. "If there is any!" Angela had commented with a dismissive laugh that had provoked a scowl from her sister.

"Can you speak to Angela, Mama?" Christina had asked later.

"What about Darling?"

"About her attitude to Michael. I mean, it is all very well my going along with father's wishes and your wishes and agreeing to marry someone who is not of my choosing, but I am not prepared to put up with Angela's jibes every minute of the day!"

"You do like him, don't you?"

"Michael? I hardly know him. And he is a little odd - I mean, this obsession about having a career. In engineering, too - of all things! Why couldn't he be like Herr Cerny? Established?"

"But you say you want to have a kind of career of your own, Darling. You cannot properly deny the same of your husband."

"He already has a career mapped out for him," Christina protested, "in his father's bank."

"But Michael wants to do something different and I expect Herr Cerny had to start somewhere. I believe he comes from a good, aristocratic, family. You must be patient. I do not think that Michael will let you down. And I will speak to Angela for you."

Although he did feel like a probationer and although he had been told that he should, henceforth, forsake all others, Michael found himself studying every pretty girl he saw. Only the day before he would have passed them all by without a thought or so much as a second glance. Now everyone had to be scrutinised closely and held up to comparison with Christina. The pretty girls did not suffer. Indeed, a fair proportion came off well in the comparison. And they were used to such treatment and one or two even went so far as to smile alluringly at him. The hussies! But, then, Christina did not fare badly either, not in this competition. He knew that it would only be when he laid back, closed his eyes, and slowly became detached from his limbs and senses, that a different kind of order of beauty would appear - she who strolled through the sunlit arbour of his dreams.

By the time he had reached Victoria Street, Christina was ahead on points and he was feeling better about the whole business. He knew he would never meet the girl from his dreams and what could then be better than to marry someone with above average looks?

Michael had to ask a policeman the way to the address that Herr Cerny had given him and he found himself spoiled for choice in this respect as there were a number about. It lay nearer to the Abbey than the station, in a short, narrow, dingy, road that ran parallel to Victoria Street on its south side. He approached it through a crowded street market where the air was thick with cries of the stall holders and the smell of fresh and decaying vegetables and fruit.

The building was Victorian or earlier, with an ornate facade composed of blackened red brick and decaying Portland stone. Above the grand porch which was set on one corner was the eroded remains of a name. Michael could make out the word "Mansions" but little more. Below, on one of the columns, a number was neatly painted in brown on a cream disc. It looked fresh and out of keeping with the overall appearance of the building. A dark stained board inside the porch indicated that the consultants were not the sole occupants of this imposing structure. Other names were precisely picked out in gold paint although some of the lettering was less bright than others and there was evidence of recent deletions. As he casually scanned the list, wondering who these practices were and what they did, Michael found the name he was looking for.

The office was on the second floor. The lift looked as if it predated the building by a considerable margin and exuded doubts as to its capacity and reliability. Michael took the stairs, coming upon a pair of semi-glazed doors on the second landing above which was emblazoned:

“Baillie, Nathan, Hiller and Partners - Consulting Engineers.”

It was something to dwell on, something that could be played with. “Baillie, Nathan, Hiller, Bernstein and Partners”, maybe? Or “Bernstein, Baillie, Nathan, Hiller and Partners”? That sounded better. Any way, this was it. Michael paused for a moment, gathered his thoughts and composure, and went in.

He found himself in small reception area and the subject of attention of a white haired woman who was sat behind an ancient typewriter at a desk beside a large potted plant and outside a semi-glazed office. She raised her eyebrows as he approached. “Is Mr Baillie in?” he asked, hopefully.

“He is,” she said crisply. “Have you an appointment?”

“Well, no,” he murmured, not considering for one moment that an appointment was necessary and that even had he made one the chances were he would not have kept it. “I was passing by so I called in on chance. He is the senior partner, isn't he?”

“He is,” she asserted, as crisply as before and regarding him with suspicion. Clearly she did not believe the “passing by” line. “But he never sees anyone without an appointment.”

A feeling of gloom descended upon Michael. It should have been so easy. It was supposed to be easy, but here he was faced by a dragon guarding the person he needed to see. “Perhaps I could call back another time?” he said hastily, edging back towards the door. “Or write?”

“I will ask if he will see you,” she said curtly. “Who shall I say is calling?”

Michael gave his name and added, almost without thinking, “I am the son of the Banker.” It was a foolish thing to say as he was now attempting to use his father's influence. And there was the strong probability that Mr Baillie had never heard of Bernstein the Banker, although something appeared to register on the woman's face. He could not tell whether the reaction was favourable.

“Please wait here,” she said and crossed the wood panelled corridor, disappearing into a door a little way along on the left. He barely had time to consider his position before she had reappeared and was beckoning. “He will see you right away,” she said urgently. “Would you like tea?”

The office was not dissimilar to his father's study and Michael at once felt uncomfortable in there. But it was lighter, brightened by a hint of the sun which had managed to somehow struggle its way down between the tall buildings and in through the large dingy window. Mr Baillie rose as he entered and extended his hand. He was a round man, a round head on a round body, looking out on the world with round eyes from behind round glasses, almost as if his own pair of large compasses had been at work at his creation. Michael immediately thought of those toys that could be knocked over but which always bounded upright again, no matter how hard you hit them. Mr Baillie was one of them and he was beginning to wonder how they worked when Mr Baillie's moon-like face beamed. “Mr Horatio Bernstein?”

“Michael! My name is Michael Bernstein. Horatio is my father.”

“Oh, yes - of course. Mr Michael Bernstein, this is, indeed, an honour. I cannot claim to be acquainted personally with your father but I know of him by repute and that he acts as Lady Newington's adviser. You have come about the Estate, I assume?”

“Well, no,” said Michael, immersed in puzzlement as he sat in the chair indicated, only to leap to his feet again as the white haired dragon entered with a tea tray.

“No? Not about the estate?” Mr Baillie looked slightly uncomfortable but settled back in his leather chair as the dragon manipulated the teapot and the tiny china cups. “On someone else's behalf, then?”

“Indeed!” said Michael, waiting until the door had clicked shut again. “Upon my

own! Mr Baillie, I would like to join your practice.”

Mr Baillie gave a little choke, seemed for a moment to be short of breath, and fished in his pocket for his handkerchief which his wife had carefully ironed and folded the previous evening. When, over the wrought iron gate, he had kissed her good-bye that morning and left his neat, new, suburban house at Stoneleigh, planning his day in the Southern Railway electric train as he turned over the pages of a specification and examined a report for his approval, and reviewed some budget estimates, he never, for one moment, not in any of his wildest day dreams, anticipated that he would be confronted with such a request, or posed such a dilemma. It was true the train unaccountably had omitted to stop at Earlsfield, which had left some potential fellow passengers stood in anger and bewilderment on the platform and caused a small number of others to join him in his journey to the Junction. Perhaps that had been a sign, a traveller's omen. He would pay better attention to such auguries in future. If he carried a small notebook with him in future he could record the events. When the carriage sailed through Earlsfield he would go over the bridge at the Junction and back home with a painful sore throat or a twenty-four hour cold! Yet, what would Mrs Baillie think when he told her he had returned because the train had missed out a scheduled stop? He would be firm. “It is a very bad sign!” he would say, drawing himself up to his full five feet seven inches. “I have proved it to myself empirically. And that is why I have come home!”

“I wish to become a civil engineer,” Michael added.

“Dear me,” gasped Mr Baillie attending to the small beads of perspiration that were beginning to crop his brow. “Dear, dear me.”

“How much will it cost?” said Michael rather too forcefully for Mr Baillie's well-being.

“A pupillage?” the Senior Partner whispered. “You mean purchase a pupillage? I really cannot readily say. I would have to consult my principal partner - yes! That's it! I must consult with Mr Nathan - right away!” He rose and removed his glasses. “Will you excuse me for just one moment? I must discuss this matter with Mr Nathan.” And, hopefully, he pushed a couple of magazines across the desk towards Michael then disappeared through the door.

Mr Nathan sat in the adjoining office amidst a confusion of plans and documents. If Mr Baillie was the engineering brains, Mr Nathan was the workhorse. He ensured that the little work that did pass through the practice was undertaken thoroughly, efficiently, and on time. And at that time the level of activity was so low that he did much of it himself. “Why, Benjamin!” he exclaimed looking up from his drawing board. “What is up? You appear very flustered.”

“It is a catastrophe!” cried Mr Baillie. “A catastrophe of the first order! I knew one would happen today! The train went straight through Earlsfield without stopping!”

“What is a catastrophe, my dear chap?”

“You will never guess who I have next door, in my office?”

“Not Kate Meyrick?”

“Worse than that. Far worse than that! It's Bernstein's boy. He is asking for a pupillage!”

Mr Nathan's pen slipped from his grasp, rolled down the board adding unplanned additions to the linen as it did, and embedded itself in the floor close to his feet. “What have you told him?” he asked slowly.

“Nothing! Nothing at all. I said that I had to consult you. What are we to do? Oh, this could be the end of the practice and me and Mrs Baillie just having moved into our new house. After all these years!”

“Do you think then that he has been sent here with a specific purpose?”

“As a spy you mean? I don't know. How can one tell? But it does appear rather odd - I mean, why us? Why not someone else? What are we to do?”

“We shall keep calm to begin with.”

“Yes, yes, of course - you are right. But I cannot leave him in my office for ever. Perhaps if we did leave him he would just go away? Or could we be called out on some urgent business? If we did that perhaps he would lose interest?”

“If he is sent here as a spy I doubt if he'll lose interest. Let us consider the problem. Whether he has been sent or has just come here by chance is immaterial. He is here and I do not think we can send him away without the risk - .”

“But if he stays?”

“Let me finish, Benjamin. As I was saying, if we turned him down we would have to give a sound reason and he would be bound to tell his father. We could hardly say we had insufficient work for him!”

“What if we said we were too busy?”

“What better reason for taking on another pair of hands? No, if we say, no, his father is bound to become suspicious.”

“But we cannot take him on, can we?”

“I do not think we have any option in the matter.”

“We are sunk, then,” said Mr Baillie slowly sinking into a chair. “It won't take him five minutes to find out how little work we really do have!”

“Not necessarily,” said his colleague striking his palm with a clenched fist.

“But - .”

“Suppose we were to keep him here for, say, four weeks. I think that I could keep him busy for as many as six weeks and I can certainly make it look as if we are fully occupied during that period.”

“And you are hoping that something turns up during that period? What if nothing does? What then?”

“Whether it does or does not, we send him to Mr Hiller!”

“To Cant-er-bur-y?”

“Indeed. The office is small and is busy with the jobs at Dover and Herne. We could even send him out to do the RDC Survey. What better start for a young trainee? And out in the field he will not have the faintest idea what is or is not going on, as the case may be. In fact, the sooner we can get him down to Mr Hiller, the better!”

“That's brilliant!” exclaimed Mr Baillie, his round face lighting up like a belisha beacon. “Absolutely brilliant! I thought I was the brains! Should we charge?”

“Should we charge? Of course we should charge! Perhaps we'll recover some of our interest!”

Mr Nathan was also the business man in the Practice.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned.” It was the voice rather than the words which aroused Father Thomas from his after-lunch doze in the warmth of the confessional. Even in his relatively short career since ordination he had heard those words countless times. But not that soft, clear, voice. He had heard that voice only two or three times and although he could catch a brief glimpse of the woman's face and the black lace veil she wore over her head through the grill, he had been unable to determine exactly who amongst the congregation she was. Previously she had presented herself at peak times when there would be a queue following, giving him no real, decent, chance of escaping, or even looking, out through the curtain. But today, a weekday, with the sun indecently high and bright, sinning or, at least, the declaration of it, seemed to be at a low ebb.

“What is it, my child?” he whispered gently, leaning his head closer to the grill than normal. Her confession was full of the trivia of innocence and it struck him like a cool fresh breeze in the confessional. She was one of the blessed few who found their life so simple and so far from indulgence and temptation that she seemed to have a struggle, he thought, to find sins to confess. If only his life was that simple!

“Is it a sin, Father, to think of sin?” she asked with a tiny quiver in her voice.

“Only if you dwell upon the thought,” he said and his heart gave a small leap. “If you enjoy and relish the thought of sin, or promote it, turning it over and over in your mind, then you have sinned. And a sinful act may lay but a small step away from the thought. It is easy to fall.”

“But thoughts come, unwelcomed thoughts. I do not seek them.” Indeed that was so. Thoughts came, dark thoughts, thoughts hammering at the door on evil nights, demanding

attention, insisting upon entrance. Thoughts came un-beckoned, un-summoned. Thoughts came.

“That is natural my child. You do not control your thoughts. But Our Lord Jesus said that we have free will and freedom of choice. That freedom is to reject sinful and un-comely thoughts.”

“But still they come,” she said softly, her face lowered and turned away from the grill. He wanted to ask what kind of thoughts, to know, to gratify himself. “Is it sinful, too, Father, to dream of being great? To want to be famous?”

“Not so long as it is done with all humility. Never place yourself above God, my child.”

“Oh, no Father,” she whispered. He gave her absolution and a small penance. No-one followed her into the confessional so he parted the curtain to see her. He saw her slowly move towards the front rows of pews and settle near to the central aisle. When her face turned towards him, he immediately recognised her and felt an overwhelming urge to go and talk to her. He knelt in the row behind her and looked up at the suns rays as they struck the stained glass above the altar and refracted onto the tabernacle. “My child,” he said softly as she rose and prepared to leave. “Come and sit here beside me for a moment.”

Felicity nervously clutched her rosary and did as he bid.

“I wanted to enquire whether you have been confirmed. If you have not, maybe we should start thinking about it for this Visitation if not the next.” He expected her to tell him that she had been confirmed years ago. He would have expected this to be the case. But she did not.

“Do you think that I am ready?”

“I cannot imagine anyone else in this congregation who is in a better state of readiness.”

“Even so,” she whispered and looked down at her feet.

He looked too, at her neat, slim ankles and her shapely calves. There was something in her manner, something that she was holding back on. He had that impression in the confessional, as if there was something behind her line of questioning that she could not bring herself to tell him. He could have warned her further about mortal sin and the appalling consequences, but for a reason he could not quite isolate and understand, he was reluctant to do so. Yet he had no desire to see harm come to her and felt a compulsion to protect her. “Have you ever thought of giving your life to God?”

“To God?”

“To devote your life to him. To retain your purity.”

“I cannot,” she said softly, but with a slight tremble in her voice. “My sister expects so much of me.”

“She expects you to sacrifice your love for Jesus Christ?”

“I cannot argue with you, Father. I know only that her entire life is devoted to one end - my ballet career.”

“Then she is making a false idol of you,” he said sternly

“You must not say that,” Felicity replied, colouring and turning her head to look him full in the face. “It is her mission in life and it is the cross that I must bear. In my heart I know where my duty lies.”

“And your duty to God?”

She lowered her eyes once more and looked tearful. “I am too weak - I couldn't.” she breathed. “I could not.”

Father Thomas watched her as she genuflected and moved slowly down the aisle. Would God forgive him for his questions and the motives that prompted him. The more he saw of her the worse it would become. Where would it end?

Another letter had arrived for Kurt. Mrs Cerny had nervously fingered the envelope before she placed it on the mantle-shelf to await his homecoming. She nervously watched him open the envelope and read the contents. He appeared to be pleased and announced that he had to go to London. Money for the fare had been sent.

“To London? Why? When?”

“My father is over here to further the Movement. He wants to talk to me. I am to go immediately”

“But what about Mr O'Brien and your job?”

“You will explain it to him. Say that I am ill, or have had to go on urgent business. You know what to say and he will not mind. He will do what ever you ask him to. And I shall need some more money which you shall give me.”

“I will?” she said hoarsely and turned away to face the sink. “Where do you think it will come from?”

“You will find it. You have it, I know. I expect he will refund it. This is important.”

“It will lead to nothing but trouble,” she said sadly.

“Trouble?” he laughed. “I don't think so. It depends what he has in mind and what the authorities' attitude is. But I don't expect trouble, except from Jews, Niggers, and Communists.”

Her heart fell and she became afraid to continue the conversation. She had read accounts in the papers, of demonstrations and meetings. Some were peaceful but others had been violent with numbers of casualties. Heads had been broken and blood had stained the pavements and run into the gutters. She had read of worse abroad. Of murders and unexplained disappearances. And then, it was said that only a fortnight ago two girls had disappeared from the centre of the town and the words “white slave” had been whispered, though she had not seen any account in the paper. She really had to be firmer with Phoebe regarding her habit of going on long, unaccompanied, walks. If only Kurt would go with her! But he was too busy reading the papers, lapping up these terrible reports. There were some which made him very angry, but most seemed to fill him with smug satisfaction.

What did she understand of all this? Politics were of no interest. They were, it seemed to her, a past-time for people who had wealth and property and who were seeking the means to protect and increase it. They were not a preoccupation for the poor who had to spend their time in securing their next meal and ensuring that there would be a roof over them and theirs that evening. No, politics were not for her, but what could she do about Kurt? How could she bring her influence to bear in order to over-ride that of his father? She did not understand the terms “right wing” or “left wing”, nor the way that he would hallow one and sneer at the other. Why should everyone be expected to take sides? Why should anyone take sides? That had, in her view, led to the Great War, and they were no better off for it!

Could she stop him going to London? Could she take a stand against him? He was a well-built lad and strong. He had no difficulty pulling his weight in Angus Muir's yard if he had a mind to. And if she did provoke him he was not beyond using violence, maybe only token violence, but violence none the less against his mother, to achieve his end. If not against his mother, then against Phoebe. “How can I reason with you?” she pleaded.

“Reason with me? You?” he snarled. “You? You don't understand for one moment the issues at stake. This is bigger than you or me or your silly Phoebe and her stupid dancing. This is a global movement. Now the time action has arrived - action! Just as they have done and are doing in Germany!”

She had read a little of what had happened in Germany but she did not understand it. The Government had changed in some way and there had been something about there being a new Chancellor. But governments seemed to be changing constantly. There was nothing unusual in that. What was the action he referred to? “It worries me so,” she murmured.

His tone suddenly changed. “You must not worry,” he cajoled. “You must not concern yourself with these things. You are a woman and these are matters for men to decide. A woman's role is to be in the home and raise the family, not interfere in politics. That's man's business as they showed that stupid Rosa woman in Germany. Now, may I have the money?”

It sounded just like his father, the tone, the stress, the cynical, mocking edge to his voice. It took her memory back, back to Vienna, back to the eve of the Great War. Golden memories, of blossom and scent, of sunny spring-like days, of applause and adulation, and the flattering attention of the handsome Austrian, who was both young and fair and who sweet-worded his way into her heart. Ah! She had never danced so well as she did when she knew

he was in one of the boxes. But that was all past now. It was no more than memories. She had to think of Phoebe, only of Phoebe, to guide her, protect her, and secure her career. She would not let that go.

"I would like, too," he continued, "the "von" reinstated in our name. If I have an aristocratic name, I do not see why I should not use it!"

She shook her head sadly, not in denial but in vain protest. How could she make him understand that von Cerny was not an aristocratic name even if his father did come from an aristocratic family. "Won't they laugh at you at Mr Muirs?" she whispered.

"They'll laugh on the other side of their faces if they do," he said savagely.

She had danced the role of Aurora in the Sleeping Beauty that night. The applause was still ringing in her ears and the flowers had barely left the cradle of her arms, when the knock at the dressing room door had come. Outside stood a short, plump, dark haired woman who she instantly recognised as a Polish Countess to whom she had been introduced a few evenings earlier. Beside, and eclipsing her, stood a tall, blue eyed, sharp featured Austrian, immaculately dressed, and with a small moustache and an overwhelming smile. "Ma chere," cried the Countess, sweeping in with an extravagant flourish. "I 'ave brought you an admirer - Count Ludwig von Cerny!"

"Not really a Count, Mademoiselle," he said, filling the doorway.

"Oh, Ludwig! Ludwig," remonstrated the Countess. "Your father is a Count and your brother is a Count. Were he to die, you would be a Count. He is a Count in all but title," she added.

She was dazzled and dazed. Suddenly her wardrobe assistant appeared to have evaporated and she found herself alone and at the mercy of these two predatory visitors. "Madame la Comtesse described me as one of you admirers," Herr Von Cerny continued in his perfect English. "That is an understatement of the greatest magnitude. I must state here and now my claim that I am, without question, your greatest admirer."

This speech was accompanied by sweeping gestures which quite confused her. She could not take her eyes from this blond Adonis. "I am - honoured, Herr, Herr," was all she could manage to say. For once she felt totally inadequate and vulnerable.

"Von Cerny," he asserted. "But since we have been introduced I would be happy if you would call me Ludwig."

The Countess made a strange noise and looked sharply at her companion before swinging around to confront her again. "But you must be exhausted, ma chere," she cried. "We 'ave not come to stay or pass the pleasantries. We 'ave to ask if you would become a guest at a petite ball at chez moi on this Saturday. I would normally be sending you a formal invitation, but the Count here said that you might ignore it and he is so impetuous, this one!"

"I beg you to accept. I also beg the honour to escort you, Mademoiselle."

Why, oh why, was her mind in such disarray with caution and all her common sense scattered in the wind that this strange pair had conjured up? What was it in her chemistry which caused the feeling of pleasant, seductive, intoxication and prevented her from firmly rebutting the proposition on the spot? Why did she dissemble, prevaricate, and gradually allow herself to drift into a commitment? "I have to dance on Saturday," she whispered apologetically.

"And you will 'ave to rest afterwards? Zat is no worry, "exclaimed the Countess, holding up her gloved hands. "I vill put a room and my maid totally at your disposal, yes? And I vill send my personal carriage to convey you from the opera house. It is settled, yes?"

She felt like a small, vulnerable, uncorked bottle, drifting downstream on a current of lassitude, always seeming likely to sink in an ocean of grief. She had no power to stop the way she drifted, nor any means of avoiding being submerged, should it happen. She did not stop to consider, or wonder, why these two had arrived and precipitated her into the stream, or why the Countess was so eager to invite her and have her present at her function. True she was dancing a leading rôle, but her name hardly ranked alongside Pavlova. She did, later, ask a few discreet questions about Herr von Cerny, apprehensive as to what the answers might be. She was told that he came from a highly respected family. He had earned a reputation but,

then, what man with his looks had not? Indeed he was, in her eyes at least, just the kind of man to whom honour was everything, who was chivalrous, who would fight duels, and who would respect one such as she. That was what she thought and that was what she told herself, over and over again as the wind-swept waves grew ever nearer

The Ball was a breathtaking affair, liberally effused with royalty and nobility. As Europe rocked and staggered to the brink of calamity, she danced with abandon, with one man who would never let go of her, or never let her go, on until and beyond dawn, never leaving his arms, nor his side. The essence of that night, the sound, the sights, and the smells of that mild evening, lingered with her, still.

As the day for the company's departure for Prague approached, von Cerny became even more attentive, and shocked and delighted her by kneeling at her feet and pouring forth his professions of love, begging her to stay with him in Vienna. On that occasion she was terrifyingly firm, citing her contract and her career. But even as she refused him, she knew it was acting and she was Violetta to his Alfredo. How else could she have appeared so strong, to say it, to confront him in this way? It tore her apart when he left her, woeful, protesting that as he could not bear to see her leave, he would not be at the station to say goodbye.

Perhaps he wanted her to run after him. Perhaps, had she been able to bring herself to run after him, things might have turned out differently. But there was this awkward streak in her when she had been young, a characteristic which would allow her to watch the thing she wanted most in the world ease and slip through her fingers, and she felt unable to do anything, not one thing, to stop it. After he had gone her remorse was unbearable, but she would not follow him, or send a message. Did she hope and believe that he would be at the station? Certainly she frantically scanned the crowd searching for his presence, not dropping back, tearfully, into her seat until the carriage had cleared the end of the low platform and was out in the daylight. He had not been there. There had been hundreds of faces, some smiling, some sad, and his had not been amongst them! She might never see disarming smile again.

She had tried to drowse, but felt unable to. When the door to her compartment had slid back she had waved the person away, thinking it was the dining car attendant. How could she even think of eating? "But ma chere," said a familiar voice. "I 'ave to travel, too, to Prague. I 'ave business there. I 'ope you do not mind if we travel together?"

She shook her head. How could she tell the woman that she resented the intrusion and her presence and that she would be a constant reminder of a recent episode in her life she was now desperate to forget? She could not. The truth was that she was secretly thrilled by the Countess's presence as, even though it was coincidental that they should both be leaving Vienna by the same train, it seemed to throw out a slender lifeline and one that she would readily grasp if it came within her reach. She could not say anything. She had no courage with which to ask. So she sat, hoping, praying, looking out of the window, but not seeing the view.

"You are very brave," said the Countess as the train gathered momentum under a bridge and soot and steam filled the compartment. "You 'ave made a brave decision. You 'ave placed your career before love. Ah, ma chere! Von Cerny, he is 'eart broken, you know."

"Is he?" she whispered, still pressing her face against the pane.

The Countess did not hear. "But I say to him, she is a young and beautiful woman with a great career before her. She must follow that career. She cannot dally with these affairs of the 'eart. That is what I say to him. That is so?"

She swallowed and nodded slowly. "That is so," she said lowly, asking herself why she should be subjected to so much torment.

"And I say to him, how is it that you know she loves you? I ask him that, ma chere. He is speechless - words, they are lost and do not easily come to his lips. So I ask him, 'as he told you his love for you? He tells me, no. He 'as not said 'ow he loves you."

"He loves me," she echoed reflectively, dwelling upon the words as if they were the cipher to an as yet unravelling mystery.

The Countess sat opposite her and pulled the window up on the strap. "You see?" she cried. "He 'as not told you! You are asking this question of me. It is not the way things should be. It is not right!"

"No, it is not right."

“But, you? You love him?” asked the Countess after a pause. “I am right in this, Deborah?”

The sound of her Christian name being spoken gave her a small shock, but she did not answer.

“You may tell me, ma chere. You may tell me.”

“He does love me?”

“Why!” cried the Countess raising both hands in an exaggerated gesture. “He loves you with all his heart. He adores you. If I could bring him to you, he would tell you so himself!”

“And I love him,” she averred, not grasping the significance of the Countess's words. “I love him.”

“Is that so? I knew it!”

“But it is over. I will probably never see him again.” She looked up into the older woman's dark eyes and was puzzled by her expression. It was a cross between mischief and intrigue.

“He would wish to marry you, ma chere,” the Countess said suddenly. Deborah felt herself colour and turned her head away. But still she did not see the countryside, or hear the wind as it whistled through the cracked-open window. Instead she saw the Danube and heard the sound of a waltz. “Would you marry 'im?”

She winced and felt as if her heart would break. “It is impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible, nothing at all. If 'e was to come and ask you this, what would you say?”

She could not answer. She almost felt angry at the woman's impertinence. Why had she appeared in her compartment and asked such unfeeling and indelicate questions? Was it her intention to torture her all the way to Prague? “Your answer,” pressed the Countess, “it is of zee greatest importance.”

Oh, how she hated the woman, then and now. That short, fat, be-furred, jewelled, Jewess! How she would have liked to have opened the window and pushed her out. Or have leapt herself!

“If I were to bring him to you now, what would you say?”

It happened so quickly! She tried to stand but, as she did so, Deborah felt the carriage floor give way below her feet as if a trapdoor had opened up revealing a dark bottomless pit. When she once more opened her eyes to the daylight he was there, patting and caressing her hand. “So pale,” he whispered. “So pale, delicate and beautiful!”

The Countess hovered behind him, grinning. “Do I get the money, yes?” she said triumphantly, not realising that Deborah was awake.

“Do I get the money? To go to London?” The dream crashed again, as it had many times before. Perhaps she could have gone back to her career after the war, but competition was fierce, and there were those who still remembered the lurid headlines, and the claims of breach of contract. No, it was never practicable, not at any time. She had made her mistake there, somewhere near the Austrian border. It was now incumbent upon her to ensure that Felicity did not make the same error.

“The money?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she said resolutely, turning to look at her son. “But do be careful.”

He ejected his short sharp laugh and turned to look at Felicity who had, at that moment, entered the room. “I am to be careful, Phoebe! Am I not always careful?”

“I do not know,” she said, colouring. “I do not know whether any of us is as careful as we ought to be.”