

CHAPTER SIX

Michael dutifully reported the details of his interview with the ladies in the garden of Lady Newington's house in Bloomsbury. "It does appear to be an awful inconvenience for you if Michael has to go to Canterbury to work," observed Lady Newington. "It really will not assist in the two of you getting to know one another."

"Nonsense, Mama! We can see each other at Newington!"

"But, how will you travel, Michael? And where will you stay? What does your father say?"

"I haven't seen him yet," said Michael, "and the arrangements are not finalised. It was just the way that it was suggested at the interview. There's this chap called Hiller down at their office, who isn't getting on with the work in some way. They thought I could go down and sort it out - take over from him, I expect."

"For how long? I mean, Canterbury is a pleasant enough place but I don't think that Christina will wish to live there."

"Mama! I don't really mind where I live as long as I can get on with my work."

"But, Darling, there's no Society, no parties - ."

"Oh," Michael interrupted, "I don't think it will be for any length of time. There's a lot of things to be sorted out, but I think there's one particular task they have in mind." This was true. A great number of details did remain outstanding, but Mr Baillie had scampered back to his office and informed him that the consultation with the principal Partner had been favourable and that they were agreed that he should join the practice at the earliest opportunity. Mr Baillie had said something about the need to get a firm grounding in engineering before advancing, and rambled on about a position in the Canterbury office. But Michael's recollection of the interview was hazy because he had found himself picturing the work he might be doing and imagining what his father would say, and not listening closely to what was being said to him. "They are going to write to me," he added. "They will want me to start in about three weeks time. I will tell you all the details when I know them."

"To think that my sister is going to marry someone who works for a living," moaned Angela.

"Hush, Angela," said Helen. "It is very commendable that Michael is prepared to do this. It is proper and quite acceptable in this day and age that young men have a proper profession. I only wish that Mark had."

Michael resented the tone of Christina's voice when she announced that it was entirely due to the influence of Herr Cerny. He wondered whether it was such a bright idea for him to be at the far end of Kent and she be in London with the Austrian. He was even less happy when, having gained an audience with his father, he saw only a head bowed over some papers and was dismissed with the wave of the hand. "Fishwick will take care of it," he said. It was as if everyone suddenly wanted him out of the way.

"An admirable choice, Master Michael," exclaimed Mr Fishwick, laying a sinewy hand on Michael's shoulder from which familiarity the young man recoiled. "An admirable choice. One that would be worthy of your father! I will be drawing up the papers for your Agreement immediately. May I humbly ask whether you have agreed a day on which you will actually commence?"

Michael told him that it would be three weeks before he joined that practice in their modest offices off of Victoria Street. And then he found himself with time to kill as he waited for the three weeks to elapse and Mr Fishwick busied himself, buried, like a legal mole, in his damp little office. He was tied to London and to this commitment, and was suddenly aware of the licence and freedom enjoyed by those around him and whose company he shared. And then he witnessed, although no-one realised it at the time, the beginning of a monstrous project.

"I'd like to paint you, Natacha," Mark said, quite casually. "Will you sit for me?"

"Would it be like Picasso? Would I end up with two eyes on one side of my nose and

be blind on the other?"

"Goodness, no!"

"You would have to come and do it here, then, and paint me whilst I practise," she replied firmly.

"You wouldn't find that distracting?"

"I might find the portrait distracting, especially if it turns out to be like Picasso! But if I am to play before an audience of several hundred, I hardly think that I will be bothered by you and your easel!"

"We can practise together," he said and they both laughed.

"Will you wear a smock and a little beret?"

"I don't think so."

"And how will it be done? Will you just set up the easel and splodge away in front of me? I am not sure that Miss Crotchet will approve."

"She might if I tell her that you will have to stay at the piano for hours on end."

"Will I?"

"No, not really. First, I'd like to come and watch you, to see your expressions and to make some sketches. Then I'll start on the canvas. At that stage, if you insist on staying here and not coming over to my studio - its very nice, really - I will have to do some daubing here. But not all of it. And I'll be as unobtrusive as I can be."

So he came and sat, quietly working, covering sheet after sheet of white paper with seemingly endless patience, capturing every mood and nuance that her features revealed or betrayed, painstakingly exploring angles and details, sketch after sketch, until it seemed to Natacha that the floor must be ankle deep in paper and that the portrait would never be started.

Christina visited them, too. "He is absolutely infatuated with her," she said sourly. "Morning, noon, and night it is Natacha this, and Natacha that!"

"He is in love with my sister?"

"He is in love with her image. If he ever gets to hold an exhibition he will have nothing to show except your sister. He seems to be working on nothing else at present."

"There is a look," explained Mark. "A look of angelic bliss, yet mischievous, of beauty and purity, yet seductive worldliness, which the music brings out, and which I must capture. And when I do, it will be a masterpiece to hang in the Louvre alongside da Vinci! I have to sit here and watch, wait, be ready for it. It is fleeting, like a rainbow or a cloud formation, yet absolutely breathtaking for that moment of time."

"See what I mean?" asked Christina.

In confidence Mark told Michael that, despite appearances, he was working towards an objective despite. He wanted to be able to present the portrait to Natacha on the night of her first public performance. It would be a magnificent present!

"You haven't all that much time. Do you really think that you can complete it by then?"

"Of course I can! And a few other things besides."

"But the sketches and the sittings? Have you finished those?"

"More or less, but don't say anything other wise there will be no surprise. I have to keep on coming over and working so that Natacha will not suspect. When I am not sketching I am turning the pages of the music for her. I like to be in her presence, anyway. And how about you? Is it all fixed up - with Chrissie and about your job?"

"As far as the job is concerned, yes. And Christina and I have, it seems, an understanding."

"Angela doesn't think much of the prospect of having an engineer as a brother-in-law, but I don't mind. I say, why not announce the engagement after the concert? We could have a family party. I could make my presentation and you could officially announce your engagement."

"I don't know," said Michael dubiously, feeling that he was in danger of losing control of his destiny once again. "It will be Natacha's night and it would not be fair of us to try and steal some of her limelight. Apart from that, how would Helen or my father view it?"

“My mother would be immensely enthusiastic - will be! And she will be able to persuade your father, if anyone can. It's a wizard idea - what about it?”

Michael had thought that his first answer was quite a good one. After all, if there was a party, it would be because of Natacha's triumph. But what if the performance went badly, what then? A party would only rub salt into his sister's wounds. “Oh,” he said after a moment's hesitation, “talk to your mother and have her talk to my father. See what they think. I'll go along with it what ever it is.”

It was some two weeks later, on a bright, sunny, morning, that Michael once more strode purposely from St James's Park station, but now on his way to start his new profession. Mr Baillie had intimated that he should not arrive too early - not on his first day, so Michael had followed his normal routine of breakfasting mid-morning with the result that it was now closer to noon than it was to the time at which a mere mortal might be expected to present himself at the office.

In Victoria Street he found his way blocked by a small gathering of young people, mostly men, who were waving banners and handing out leaflets and, in doing so, earning the disapprobation of a lone constable. One of the gathering, a tall, blonde, not unhandsome, youth stood out and eyed Michael with hostility as he approached and appeared to step forward to confront him. Michael's heart leapt and he immediately checked the traffic, making it look as if he was crossing, and had always planned to cross, the road. Yet, there was something familiar about the face, something which made him pause on the sunlit pavement and look back into the shadows. The youth was still there, staring at him, almost as if he knew, or thought he knew, him. And as he stood there, bathed in sunlight, Michael felt very cold, as if a low, invisible, cloud had settle above his head. “Someone has just walked over my grave,” he heard himself say before he re-started his journey. What was it about the face which made it so familiar? It was one that he was unlikely to forget. As he made his way past the market stalls he could feel his stomach shaking. Several times he glanced behind himself to make sure that neither the youth nor his companions were, for some unimaginable reason, following him. Even though they were not, he felt relieved when he reached the cool sanctuary of the offices.

Mr Baillie was awaiting his arrival, beaming from behind his desk before negotiating it, hand outstretched. “Mr Bernstein! Mr Bernstein!” he exclaimed, “We were beginning to become a little worried!” His glance up at the clock informed Michael why.

“I was taking advantage of your suggestion that I could come in later this morning.”

“Just so, just so.”

“And I ran into some kind of demonstration in Victoria Street. Men with banners and all that kind of thing!”

“Oh, no! The National Socialists. It's quite alarming!”

“I shall be more punctual in future,” Michael added, stiffening himself and wondering at what time such demonstrations started. “Just what time does the office open in the morning?”

“Miss Baxter opens the doors at eight o'clock, but I wouldn't expect you before eight forty five.”

“I will endeavour to be here at that time,” said Michael weakly, wondering if his household actually had breakfast prepared that early.

“To be sure, to be sure - good, good. Do sit down and I will fetch Mr Nathan, our senior Partner.”

Michael sat where he was bid and watched Mr Baillie disappear through the doorway. All of this had happened before.

“Oh Lord!” cried Mr Baillie once behind the closed door of Mr Nathan's office. “He is here! I had thought - hoped - as the time crept on this morning and he did not appear, that he had abandoned the whole idea for some reason. Any reason! Perhaps his father had vetoed the idea of him coming here, or he had another offer - yes, a better offer. We were too generous! We should have demanded more! It's not too late - I could change the Articles now. But he is here, sat in my office! At this very minute!”

“Then I will come and meet him.”

“Shall I bring him in here?”

Mr Nathan shrugged. “It’s a case of mountains and Mohammed. No, I’ll come in to your office.”

Mr Nathan was a tall, well built, stocky, dark-haired, good looking man, often described as a ladies’ man, with a pleasant re-assuring smile and an easily communicated air of knowledge and confidence. Michael was unsure of this partner’s age but later reported that he was old, probably in his mid-forties, but clearly not as old as Mr Baillie. “I think all the formalities are done with and concluded with the exception of signing the Articles,” he said after the introduction had been effected. “We are signing you up for two years, including an option for a third should the parties agree.” Mr Baillie nodded and beamed his agreement.

“Two years?” exclaimed Michael with undisguised horror.

“Any shorter a period and we would be unable to recommend your entry into the Institution. Although you can get on in this profession without corporate membership, it is something our clients look for in our senior engineers and partners.”

“Even so,” muttered Michael, wondering how he was going to explain to Christina that he would be termed a pupil for two, maybe three, years. “It does seem a long time.”

“I expect it does,” said Mr Nathan sympathetically. “But you are starting out on a long road in a noble, respected and worthwhile profession. And, of course, I should remind you that the agreement does have a provision for severance after six months should you find the practice unsuitable to meet your aspirations. But I cannot imagine that you would need recourse to that provision, can you Mr Baillie?”

“Oh, no! No!” cried the other partner, shaking his head.

“Now, later in the week you will be able to meet our Mr Hiller who is in charge of our Canterbury office. He is due to visit us on Thursday. In the interim, whilst we finalise your training and experience curriculum, I would like you to address yourself to the rudiments of drawing and survey work. To this end I will leave you in the capable hands of Mr Harris, our Chief Design Engineer. He will explain the principles and show you the ropes, as it were. If you would follow me.”

“One thing,” said Michael as Mr Nathan headed towards the door, “I would appreciate it if I could remain, how shall I put it, incognito. I mean, I would prefer it if my parentage and connections were not generally known in your practice - that is assuming that this request is not already too late? I think I will fit in better, be accepted, and all that kind of thing, if no-one knows who my father is.”

The partners exchanged glances and Mr Nathan smiled. “Too late? Goodness, no! I think we can totally accede to your request, leaving you to make the announcement concerning your father - who is? No! Don’t answer that! I am having a little joke at your expense. We can agree to that, can’t we, Mr Baillie?”

“Yes! Yes, of course we can!”

Mr Harris appeared to be surprised to be introduced to, and put in charge of, him. Michael thought that perhaps the Chief Design Engineer had simply forgotten that he was due to start that day. He was led deeper into the small maze of offices, and into one in which three ancient, pin-marked, drawing boards were crammed. Through a semi-glazed partition Michael could see a further number of boards at which worked an equal number of young women. “The tracers,” advised Mr Harris. “Now, where has Smiley gone? He’s in, and his work is here, so he can’t be far away. Wait here - take a seat - and I’ll go and find him.”

Michael sat on a tall rickety stool. Beyond the glazed partition the tracers had suddenly formed a group and were staring at him, giggling. Clearly they were aware of his presence and when he half-heartedly waved to them they only giggled all the more. Then something, he could not tell what, sent them scurrying back to their boards.

Back in Mr Nathan’s office the Partners congratulated themselves. “That is the first hurdle successfully overcome,” said Mr Nathan. “Next comes Mr Hiller.”

“Will you tell him - everything?”

“I do not see any need to do so, and if young Bernstein is true to what he says, he won’t be saying anything either. He can probably keep him occupied down there for at least

nine months, even a year. Even longer if he uses him on the design. For the few days until then, will you keep an eye on our young protégé?"

"You can rest assured of that. I'll give them ten minutes then I'll look in on Harris to see how he's settling in. I won't let him out of my sight, figuratively speaking."

"And perhaps we could sow a few seeds about prospects?"

"Leave that to me. Oh, I feel much better now, now that he's here and we've got the first stage over. I will feel even better when he's in Canterbury!"

Mr Smiley was quite a contrast to Mr Nathan and Mr Harris. He was short, nearly bald, rotund, and appeared to have been taken from the same mould as Mr Baillie. His soup-stained waistcoat was tensioned to the safety limit of the thread and, like Mr Baillie, he viewed the world from behind thick-lensed glasses. At this moment his large eyes were viewing Michael with a mixture of disbelief and despair as he thrust an ancient, foul smelling, pipe below his untidy, sand-coloured, moustache. And he had a habit, as Michael soon discovered, of impatiently tugging his watch from one of his waistcoat pockets, examining it closely, shaking it vigorously, and then holding it up to his ear in the disbelief that it could still be working. Thus did Mr Smiley mark each fifth minute of the day.

His habits did not stop there. He also picked his nose. Not slyly in the way that Michael imagined compulsive nose-pickers would indulge themselves, but quite openly, inserting a finger with a great flourish which would have, only seconds before, been wagging about in Mr Smiley's ear. And he had a caravan. Or, to be more accurate, he had a bus that he was fitting out as a caravan, and on which he spent every available hour and most of his disposable income. "I keep it down in Kent," he told Michael, having introduced the subject of homes on wheels before they made their way around to talking about work. "It's a six-wheeled Karrier. Actually, it came from Huddersfield originally, and it's not all that old. When I retire I am going to tour the Country in it, perhaps even take it over on the Continent. I've set my heart on it. I'm dividing it into living and sleeping quarters. I'm even installing a wash-basin and chemical toilet. Did you know that some of the coaches to Bristol now have toilets?"

Michael did not. One of the girls beyond the screen caught his gaze and waved. The others laughed.

"Let me draw a plan of it. The engine's sound though I think I've got some problems with the transmission and I've got a couple of leaks to cure. Would you fancy a nomadic life?"

Michael would not. Three of the girls were looking now, smiling and nudging each other. One of them, obviously brasher and more forward than the others made a sign that Michael did not understand. "And the stove is here." Mr Smiley was saying.

"The girls through there?"

"The tracers? Stay away from them - they're real wild bunch. They're trouble! Now, I had a real problem with the chimney as to whether to bring it up here or over here."

"What do they look for? When they're tracing things?"

"Look for? Apart from trying to get young men into trouble, but not themselves, clear lines on your drawings. That's what they trace - drawings onto linen. Saves us having to do our own and they're cheap. Yes, that's the right word. They are cheap. All of them. You'll have to come and see the caravan when it's finished. You could come before. Do you ever get down to Kent?"

"I believe that I am going to work in the Canterbury office. That's in Kent, isn't it?"

"Mr Hiller? He's at Canterbury. That's some distance from Wilmington. Perhaps you could call in on your way? Still, for the present you want me to show you the ropes?"

"Yes, please."

"A nautical term, I imagine - to show someone the ropes. I expect the first job that new sailors were given when they went on board was to haul in the ropes. I dare say that's where the term comes from. I use to live near Greenwich - ever been there?"

Michael had not.

"Mother had a small house, nothing pretentious, just two up and two down. But she's passed on, now. How about you? Where do you live?"

“Me? Oh, over in West London,”

“I thought so!” said Mr Smiley with an air of self congratulation. “I can tell from the way you speak! I would guess that you've had an education - matriculated, even. There's a lot to learn but you'll pick it up quickly, I am sure. Have you done any before? This kind of work?”

Michael was now tempted to ask what kind of work. “No, I've just come down from University.”

“Hmmm. I am impressed. And your father? Is he in the profession?”

“No. He's - in business.”

“What? A commercial traveller? Insurance salesman? In the motor trade? Don't tell me he's a Karrier stockist!”

“No, no - nothing like that. He works - in a bank.”

“Oh?” Mr Smiley attended to the housekeeping of one ear and looked about him. “Now where shall I begin? Let me see, we are not all that busy at present.”

“Not all that busy?”

“Oh, you should have been here three or four years ago! We didn't know which way to turn! But its all dropped off - the slump, you know. I count myself lucky to be in a job, I can tell you! And you must count yourself fortunate to find a practice which would take you in! Now, what shall we start with?”

“How about the kind of thing I'll be doing at Canterbury? Do you know what I'll be doing at Canterbury? A bridge or a dam?”

Mr Smiley's watch was examined and shaken vigorously. “I assume you'll be helping on the sewage scheme.”

“Sewerage scheme?” exclaimed Michael with horror, as if he was about to be submerged by the substance.

“Call it a main drainage scheme. I don't know all that much about the commission except its down near Dover - a village scheme. I cannot see it ever being built, though you never know. We've had some on the books since the turn of the century!”

“Do we - the Practice - handle many main drainage scheme?”

“Little else besides. The occasional reservoir but they've mostly dried up! Excuse the joke,” he said laughing. Michael had not heard the joke. He was preoccupied with what Christina would say when he told her the type of work he would be doing. She would be bound to ask, and if she did not, Angela would, just to spite him. Why had he overlooked the fact that he had not asked what kind of work the office handled? He had never thought that engineers would be involved with drains. “Drains” was not a very nice sounding word. “Sewer” was even worse. Mr Smiley had seen his consternation. “Don't worry! The chances are you won't see any of the stuff, unless its your own. And designing a scheme is quite a good starting point - a foundation in surveying, drawing, some basic hydraulics and the design of a few small structures.”

“You don't do bridges?”

Mr Smiley did not appear to be at all perturbed by the implications of the question. “Major structures?” he said, trying now to enliven his pipe with the aid of half a dozen consecutive Vestas, “not here. You might get a gravity dam if you're lucky, or a reinforced concrete reservoir - in time.”

“Oh!” said Michael, quite unable to disguise his disappointment.

“It is nothing really. What you need to do is get a good grasp of the rudiments, if you'll pardon the expression. They'll be the same whether you're in dams, docks, bridges, or harbours, or drainage. Now, what was I saying?”

“About sewerage?” asked Michael, feeling completely bewildered and becoming convinced that he could now smell it.

“Ah, yes.” Mr Smiley made a motion which suggested he was about to thrust the stem of his pipe into one of his ears, but resisted the temptation. “Almost all of our work at present comes from local authorities, with very little from the private sector. In addition, there's some work from water companies. We have a number of regular clients who we work for - we cannot advertise, you see. But, as I said, there's not a lot of work coming in at present and

most of what does is getting out old schemes and dusting them off. The Dover scheme is different. Now, how does the work start, I imagine you are about to ask me.”

Michael was not, but did not say so.

“Usually the Clerk to the Council or the Borough Surveyor will write to the Partners. They go down - its a good day out - and come back with an outline of the scheme. If its a brand new one, the first job then is to go out and decide on likely routes for the sewers or mains, and survey these. Then you go back into the office, draw up the scheme, plans, sections and elevations, calculate the pipe sizes, design the works, the girls trace it.”

Michael looked again through the glass. One of the girls smiled and puckered her lips. “They are very forward,” he said quietly.

“They're all right as long as you keep the glass between you and them. Some of them will do anything for a laugh. You'll be all right because you'll be down at Canterbury. All you have to do is stay out of their way until you go!”

“I will do my best,” Michael said.

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