

CHAPTER SEVEN

Michael thought that the third, junior, partner in the Practice must have been chosen with an eye to his dissimilarity to the other two, for Mr Hiller was tall, thin, slightly bowed, so that he would appear hollow-chested, and prematurely grey. He spoke in a soft, high pitched, whine of a voice, sometimes sounding monotonous but choosing to pronounce his consonants with great care and precision.

There had been a somewhat heated Partners' meeting before Michael was summoned from his drawing board, where he was trying to stay awake, to Mr Baillie's office where he was handed over to Mr Hiller with little ceremony. The partner from Canterbury had protested at the meeting that he needed an experienced engineer and that he could recruit any number of inexperienced people locally at a nominal salary. He later conveyed these views to Michael. "We virtually had to take him," Mr Baillie had said. "We really appeared to have no alternative. And he is costing us nothing. Not even a nominal salary."

"It is most definitely in the long term interests of the Practice," added Mr Nathan, "both that we should take him and that he should be posted to Canterbury." Mr Hiller disagreed and said that he might not be costing them something at present, but he would if things were messed up as a consequence of his inexperience. It seemed to him that something of significance was being held back from him, and he politely intimated as much.

"Nothing that is of any material significance," Mr Nathan assured him. "As for his lack of experience, give him an experienced assistant. I suggest young Brown." But Mr Hiller continued to whine his protestations as to the apparent inadequacy of his newly allocated assistant engineer and the obvious lack of trust placed in him by his fellow partners. So they, in their turn, pleaded necessity and innocence up to the point at which Mr Nathan became irritated and called upon the man of Kent to cease his equivocation. The man of Kent capitulated.

"In fairness, and so that you fully understand the position, I must say that I really need someone with experience at present," Mr Hiller said softly as soon as he and Michael were left alone. "But we will have to do our best, will we not? How soon can you come down?"

"Virtually immediately," said Michael, wondering if he ought to say that people had to start somewhere and that he was sure that Mr Hiller had been inexperienced and started somewhere, once. "I will have to make some financial arrangements - banking, you know."

"I would expect the Practice to reimburse your out-of-pocket expenses."

Michael had not expected this as a reply and it seemed to warm him inside. "And I'll have to find somewhere to stay."

"We can arrange that. I was thinking of putting another, more experienced, junior engineer with you - young Arthur Brown. He could steer you through the early stages."

"Thank you. Exactly what will my duties be?" If he were to tell the truth, Michael had rapidly become bored stiff with the work that Mr Smiley had given him. He had appeared to do little other than plotting sections, and once he had plotted one he thought he had become jolly proficient at it, and considered himself an expert upon the completion of the second. A week and a half of sections were rather over the top. There had been moments in that period when he had considered going to confront the partners with the fact that he had got stuck in a rut and that his career was already at a standstill. After all, after you had plotted one, you had plotted jolly nearly all the sections there were! It didn't add one single iota if he kept doing them. Who wanted to become an expert section-plotter? Not he!

"I will be sending you down to work on the Braham scheme, near Dover. We haven't even begun the survey and the RDC want proposals within a timetable that would allow work to start next year. Not that I can see it going ahead - problems with landowners, or one in particular."

"It will be good experience?" asked Michael, seeing sections floating before his eyes.

"Invaluable," groaned Mr Hiller, disheartened.

Michael was over the moon. There appeared to be only one disagreeable thing that had to be done. He sent a note to Mr Fishwick, but in it he was very affirmative. The note stated that he would call at Mr Fishwick's office the next day at eleven to discuss banking and financial arrangements. A credit account at a clearing bank, in either Canterbury or Dover, would appear appropriate. Having sent the note, he felt very much at ease and it was only much later that it occurred to him he really had missed the opportunity of asking Mr Hiller whether there would be sections to be plotted on the Braham scheme. If there were, he would get the assistant (what was his name?) to do them. And if he did not know how to do them, why then, he would jolly well lose no time in showing him!

"You can stay with us, at the House," said Christina rather coldly when he reported his day to the women in Bloomsbury. He had come to enjoy this little diversion which had been inserted into his day in which he sat with them, and described choice, censored, events that had taken place at the office. He would miss it once he left for Kent. "We will be down there in two weeks and I am sure Mama will let you move in before we arrive if that is necessary, won't you, Mama?"

"Of course, my dear. You will be most welcome, Michael, although I must express my doubts about the necessity of this proposed scheme. So much expense!"

"That is very kind of you but I cannot accept. I am acting incognito. No-one knows who I am nor my connections."

"How quaint," purred Angela, tucking her knees beneath her.

"I see," said Christina in a quite different tone, one which slightly unnerved Michael as he had the impression that she was both pleased and cross by his statement.

"It's because I do not want to make use of my connections. I am sure you'll understand. And I will only be down there whilst the survey is going on."

"But have you got somewhere to stay?"

"No," he said vaguely, as he had no idea how to go about it, "not yet."

"Perhaps you could stay on the estate," said Lady Helen. "That should not arouse any curiosity. There's an empty cottage, a very pretty place, about a mile or so from the house. It used to be a keeper's cottage but I no longer have the need for game keepers. I could get it opened and aired for you?"

"You won't want to travel daily from Canterbury, surely?" asked Christina. "Not all the way to Braham!"

"I expect it will only be for a couple of weeks or so."

"There, then! That's settled," announced Lady Helen. "There should be no problem. We can say that you have rented the cottage for a short term and I can pass it off as a gesture to assist with the scheme, much as I disapprove of it. And we can invite you up to the house as our guest - when you are not working, of course. I will make all the necessary arrangements this evening."

"Isn't there the risk that someone at the house will recognise you?" asked Christina.

"Not if we don't invite him very often," said Angela sourly.

Michael really had no idea how he was going to go about finding somewhere to stay other than a hotel, and had hoped that details of a vacant furnished property would suddenly be presented to him by someone. Now it had happened and he was not prepared to energetically resist the offer. Once at home he sought to see his father. "He is not in a good mood, I must warn you," said Sophie. "It is some problem with a shipment from South Africa."

"Oh, well, I might as well get it over and done with," said Michael resignedly.

His father was sat at his customary place behind the desk. He listened patiently and in silence, but he was unusually attentive and dispensed with his usual habit of shuffling and examining papers as his son addressed him. Michael related the whole proposal: about the work at Canterbury, living on the Newington Estate, working in the field, so as to speak. To his surprise the banker maintained his demonstration of interest, nodded a couple of times, and appeared to be generally satisfied with the content. "I think that you are perfectly correct

in not revealing your family connections,” he said. “I would request that you should continue to do that. Secondly, on balance I would think it is excellent experience. You should try and work right through the project should the opportunity arise.”

“But that could take several years. What about the engagement and the wedding?”

“Engagement? Wedding? Oh, I see. You mean from a point of view of being incognito and timing. I think we can make some adjustments to suit. Yes, I am sure we can. It will be invaluable experience. Thank you for informing me. That will be all.”

He had reached the door when his father looked up from the papers he had started to study. “There is one more thing. You will pay an open market rent for the cottage on the estate. I am sure that you can recover it in expenses.”

Michael went slowly back to the sitting room, perplexed. His father's reaction was totally unexpected. And was his father now seeking to delay or even negate the arrangement agreed with Lady Helen? No-one had said anything. Christina had not as much as dropped a hint. And he had been to the house in Bloomsbury every day that week. Surely if there was a problem, there would have been a hint, if only a weeny one. Angela could not have resisted it!

“What was it like, mon ami, bad?” Sophie asked.

“You should have waited for a better opportunity,” said Natacha looking up from a score. “I'd have gone to see him after dinner, I think. He would be in a better humour then.”

“There was no problem,” said Michael haughtily. “He even encouraged me in what I am setting out to do. Invaluable experience, he said.”

“Mon dieu! That is excellent!” cried Sophie, coming across and embracing him. She was warm and soft, softer than he thought Christina would be, although he had never embraced her, and, as for Angela!

“Congratulations,” said Natacha, planting a sisterly kiss on his cheek. Had Christina gone that far? The girl in his dreams had already gone much further. “You see, you've kept your bargain. Father is keeping his. But this Canterbury thing, you will come back for my concert?”

“Of course,” he said, dismissively.

“Promise?”

“I will promise if you will promise to be nice to Mark whilst I'm away.”

“I promise!”

“Then so do I.”

Michael slept fitfully that night. He dreamt vividly, a dream which clung still, like the morning mist, to him as he sat in Mr Fishwick's office. He turned it over in his mind, trying to recapture or revive various scenes. They had been at the cottage, he and his Princess, lovers set in a paradise of greenery and flowers, bathed in warm sunshine, loving. But then it had been transformed. Darkness had approached and descended, black, unimaginably evil, destroying their idyll and bringing the walls of the cottage tumbling down before them. And out of the darkness had strode a blond haired youth. She had mentioned his name, in fear and awe. The ground had trembled as large rocks fell from the sky. Suddenly she was being taken from him - or was she simply going? He did not know which but, with terror, he realised that they were being separated and that he might never see her again.

Sweating and calling out her name he awoke, then tried to fall back to sleep to find her, to rescue her, to drive back the forces of evil and destruction. In vain. He was still awake when dawn edged over the horizon and gave form to the objects in his bedroom. He wished he could go to sleep now and find her. It was a more attractive proposition than being where he was. In fact he had arrived very early and had thought of waiting out in the street, but it was chilly and the dream seemed remote in the cold morning light. He knew Mr Fishwick had a few hard and uncomfortable chairs, and asked if he could sit on one whilst he waited.

Michael was a little surprised to find a young, dark haired and attractive, woman already sitting there. He sat opposite and, when the opportunity arose, put the dream on one side and smiled at her. She was not the girl from his dreams, but she would make an acceptable, temporary substitute. “Are you waiting to see Mr Fishwick?” he said, finding himself unable to construct any reason why she might be.

“No,” she said softly, “My father's in there with him now.” She spoke with a gentle lilt, an accent, but one from which the accentuation and natural stress had all but been removed. Michael could not place its origin but found it pleasant to listen to. “Are you here to borrow money?” she asked suddenly and provocatively.

Michael hesitated before he answered. There was disapproval in her voice and he felt instinctively that he wanted to please her, to appear favourable in her eyes, and not expose himself to her censure or reproach. “No,” he said lowly. “Just business.”

She did not respond but tilted her head to one side as if she had heard a noise or voice behind the dull panelling. Perhaps she had, for shortly afterwards the door opened and a short, grey-haired man appeared. “Is it done, Father?” she said anxiously. He looked at his daughter, then at the floor, with the look of one who is ashamed both of those things he has done and the confession he is about to make.

“Ay, its done, Moira, my lass. Now, let us leave this place.”

Her stare fell on Michael, her eyes full of reproach. It was clear to him that she assumed him to be one of those who had wrecked torment upon her father. It would have been better, on reflection, had he answered her question truly. Michael was about to follow her into the street when Mr Fishwick emerged from the office, greeting him and bowing with every other word. “Ah! Master Michael,” he began. Michael was trying to see whether the young lady and her father were now out of earshot. Mr Fishwick was sure that they were, but he pushed against the outside door nonetheless, seemingly fearful that it might burst open and his sordid business tumble out on the street. “I was deeply honoured by the receipt of your note and I will be pleased to be of further service to you. Do come in - after you!”

Michael explained the proposal that he would go down to Canterbury and then on to Dover, and work from there for a short while. “Only a few weeks,” he stressed.

“May I enquire whether you have informed your father? Not that it necessarily concerns me, of course.”

“I have,” said Michael slowly, “and he approves.”

A strange look passed over Mr Fishwick's thin face, a frightening look, a smug look, of greed, scheming and corrupt. “That is good,” he hissed. “Very good. And you will now need some funding?”

“For lodgings initially. I'll probably need to hire a car.”

“It is yours to command. I will arrange facilities at both Canterbury and Dover. And if I may be of any further service?”

“Oh, no,” said Michael, feeling that it really was time for him to make an effort to escape and getting to his feet.

“So far,” continued the financier, “if I may presume to say so, you have conducted yourself and your affairs in the most responsible and mature manner. Your father has taught you well. If it should be possible for me to be of any further service, I beseech you to contact me. Anything! You will contact me?”

“I expect I shall,” said Michael, weakly and reluctantly. Mr Fishwick's beaming smile followed Michael out of the building and into the street. As soon as Michael had disappeared from sight in the direction of Blackfriars, Mr Fishwick's appearance changed. He stormed into the lobby of his office, fists clenched. “Where is he?” he screamed, striking the air with rage. “Where is that abominable creature?” The pale, wizened, face of a white haired man, who had clearly been cheating the grave for years, appeared at the top of the steps into the cellar. “Where have you been?” snarled the financier.

“But, you asked me to take the deeds to the bank straight away,” stammered the old man.

“And whilst you were dawdling and dallying on the way, two of my clients met, face to face! Met I say! Do you understand? Met, face to face! It's unheard of, unprecedented!”

The white haired man began to shake and moved his lips, trying to speak, but other than a strangled croak, no sound emerged.

“You know my rules! It may be that no harm has been done this time. If that turns out to be so, it'll be no thanks to you! If it ever happens again I'll see your bones rot in the gutter. Do you understand?”

"I, I," gasped the old man.

"Oh, get on with your work!" snapped Mr Fishwick, leaving and slamming the outside door behind him.

The doctor was a young, soberly dressed, clean shaven Scotsman, by far the most junior, and therefore the least expensive, of the practice to which he belonged. The group of woman who now eyed him with considerable apprehension could afford no better. "Well?" asked Mrs Cerny, getting to her feet.

"Please do not stand," he said, snapping his smart black bag shut.

"I would rather," said Mrs Cerny, thinking that now she had stood up she realised it was more comfortable than sitting on the settee with the other women. The room was nearly bare and sparsely furnished with decrepit and sorry items which she had quietly described to Phoebe as being rag and bone men's rejects. The walls were dirty, with plaster split by cracks which ran up and across the cob-webbed ceiling. A half-light filtered through the panes of discoloured glass, partly obstructed by sheets of yellowing newspaper that had been pasted over them.

The doctor looked down at the floorboards as he addressed the women. "I'm afraid that you've called me too late," he said sadly and not without a tone of reproach in his voice.

"Too late," repeated Moira in a whisper. "We could not have called you much earlier."

"Whatever," continued the doctor with a solemn shake of his head, "there's nothing that can be done other than to relieve his suffering."

"What is it doctor? What is wrong with him?" asked Mrs Cerny coolly. "I have had some experience of terminal cases." She saw Moira's head droop and momentarily regretted her words.

"I would describe it as bronchial-pneumonic pleurisy, which would have tasked a fit and able man. But this poor wretch has no chance. And there's evidence of an earlier injury to his chest which has only made matters worse."

"His leg, surely?" exclaimed Moira. "It was an accident on the Newington Estate."

"I am the doctor, Miss," he said severely. "He has suffered a severe accident to his chest at some time. Two of his ribs have been broken and have reset themselves naturally although incorrectly. He must have been in a great deal of pain. There's no telling what other internal injuries may have been caused."

"His wife did say that he had been down the mine and was invalided out. That is how he came to be working on the Estate," said Mrs Cerny. "I think he was offered the job as compensation. Have you told her?"

"I did, but there was no need for me to do so as she knew already. He knows too. I will call in daily until the end which, in my opinion, will not be long. And she and the bairn are likely to follow him if something is not done about this place. Look at it! The landlord rakes in the rent and does n' spend a penny on it. Its criminal!"

Moira coloured and felt tears swelling in her eyes as Phoebe's arm slipped around her shoulder. Mrs Cerny looked down and started as if to comfort her, then turned to the doctor. "I'll see you out, then, doctor," she said. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

"Its no trouble."

"And you will send the bill to me?" The young man stopped on the steps and looked up to her, screwing up his eyes as he shielded them from the light.

"I'll be charging for n' more than the medicine."

"But?"

"An' I can see what you may be thinking. Dinna worry. I will give him the best attention I can, regardless. You might chase up the landlord. He ought to be locked up."

"He didn't mean it," said Phoebe. "He had no idea that your father owns the house."

"He did mean it. And what he said is true," sobbed Moira. "Except there's no money to pay for the repairs because there's no rent. Father's had to mortgage further properties this week. I know because he took me to London with him."

"You went to London? What was it like?"

“Horrid. We had to get up ever so early so that we could get a workman's fare, and he took me to this slum of an office where he met this horrible, odious man who arranges these things. Father said that as I was taking an interest in the rent collection and kept the books, I ought to see how business is done. And after saying that and dragging me all the way to London, he went and left me in the waiting room while the business was done.”

“Did you see the Tower, and Tower Bridge?”

“From a distance. I also encountered a handsome young man who was also in the waiting room. You would have liked him except it was clear that he was just as bad as the man Father went to see.”

“I?” exclaimed Phoebe. “Why do you say that? I do not like any young men.”

“That's not what you led me to believe the other day,” said Moira, brightening.

“Oh, Moira, that's not at all fair!” But before Moira could develop her point and drive it home into, possibly, her friend's heart, Mrs Cerny came back into the room.

“The doctor is most concerned about the baby and feels that it ought to be taken into care,” she said. On cue, above their heads, the baby started to cry.

“I'll have to talk again to Father,” Moira said softly. “But I don't know what he can do. And I know what he'll say. He'll tell me that I should not be taking on the cares of the world and other people's burdens. But someone has to!”

“Perhaps I could come and talk to your father?” said Mrs Cerny.

“Oh, yes! That would be much better.”

“I'll come over early evening, then, if that's all right. For the present I had better go up to see her and the baby, and see if there is anything that can be done to make them more comfortable.”

“And,” said Phoebe, pointedly, once her sister had left the room, “what was this young man like?”

“Oh, very good looking and smartly dressed. A largish nose. probably a Jew. Sadly, as I have said, he was one of them.”

“One of them? Who?”

“A money lender, I assume. I asked him if he was there for a loan and he said he wasn't. He was there on business. I assume that he was a money lender.”

Phoebe looked away. “How sad,” she murmured. “A young, handsome, man and already trapped in usury.”

Angus Muir was surprised to find himself confronted by three anxious women that evening. Mrs Cerny and Phoebe had left their terraced house and walked along the road which followed the floor of the valley. In the growing dusk the smooth chalk hills loomed high above them, mysterious and menacing. Dark crevices were developing and spreading out towards them. Places which in daylight appeared innocent and innocuous were now sinister as the gloom enveloped them and night took hold. “Its a lovely evening,” said Mrs Cerny.

“You really should come up to the Monastery gardens with me. They are really beautiful.”

“You know I don't like you wandering around the hills on your own. Anything could happen.”

“Then you should come with me.” The elder sister snorted but did not answer and instinctively cast her eyes up to the sky line before them. “Ah!” continued Phoebe, as if she were reading her sister's mind. “That's the secret of it. You cannot see it - any of it - from down here. I dare say you could live all your life down here and not know they were there unless someone told you. The ascent this side is very steep. There must be a path up from the Estate as the gardens are beautifully attended, but I have rarely seen anyone there. It's like a wonderland! I sometimes feel that I am in a dream when I'm there, the Sleeping Beauty waiting for the prince to come along and wake me with his kiss! You really should come, if only for the view across the Channel!”

“No thank you,” grumbled Mrs Cerny. “I have enough of hills as it is without adding to the burden.” They fell into silence as the evening mist began to gather its skirts and oozed into the air like the exhalation of some mighty prehistoric dragon.

Mrs Cerny had timed their departure so that their arrival at the bungalow would coincide with the clearing of the table after dinner. She knew that Angus was a creature of habit, and that Moira strove to meet the unspoken demands of his daily timetable. But even the simplest of plans - dinner had been delayed, and Angus was still sat at the table when Moira opened the kitchen door to them. "Come in, come in," she said softly. "We're running a wee bit later than usual but - ."

"Who is it, Moira?" called her father from his dinner.

"Its Mrs Cerny and Felicity, Father."

Suddenly he was at the door, wiping his mouth and gesturing. "Do come in, come in and sit yourself down. Is it about Kurt's birthday present - the cigarette case?"

"No," said Deborah. "It is something else altogether, but I am sorry. We have arrived too early. Shall we come back later?"

"No, no. This is a great honour. Would you join me in something to eat?" The truth was he felt slightly vexed at being disturbed. Moira could see that and he was aware that she could. Coupled with the vexation and consequential guilt was the dawning question of why they had come. Moira was studying him intently and was clearly bursting to say something.

"Oh, no!" cried Mrs Cerny. "We ate a little while ago." That did not sound all that good. He could have taken it as criticism of him having his dinner at an hour when any respectable working man would have long finished his, and allowed his wife to wash and clear up, to boot. Or it could be taken to make it plain that they did have enough to eat?

"Then you'll take tea with me? And tell me, Deborah, to what reason do I owe this honour? Is it about Kurt?"

Mrs Cerny glanced at Moira who shook her head. She took that to mean that she had not been able to broach the subject with her father. "No. It's not about Kurt. It's about something else, entirely different. But first you should finish your meal, just as if we are not here."

Angus chuckled. "That would be a wee bit difficult. I'm rare pleased to see you, both of you. Now what was that about you arriving too early? What have you two - you three - been plotting?"

"We will talk about it over tea."

"And cake, eh, Moira?"

"And home baked cake," his daughter confirmed.

As the skies grew dark and the moon hid behind the hills, Angus listened politely and diligently as Mrs Cerny recounted their story. "Aye, its a might sad tale," he said when they had finished. "A might sad. An' there's many a one like it."

"I have good reason to know that," said Mrs Cerny firmly. "I was conscious of having to come and ask another favour of you."

"Ah, well, you can do that anytime, Deborah, and its not exactly a favour for yourself, now, is it? But what is it you are asking me to do? What the doctor said is right. Those houses do need a lot of work done on them, but there's little coming in the way of rent money. An' I am struggling to keep the business going as it is. I dunna see how I can help."

"How about Lady Newington?" said Phoebe softly. Her sister reached out and took her hand as if to caution her. "Perhaps she could be approached," she went on.

"Yes, Father. After all the accident did happen on the Estate."

"That's what they say, Moira, but - ."

"She is noted for her charitable work," said Phoebe.

"And the earlier accident happened down one of the mines in which she has a major interest," added Mrs Cerny with less than charity in her voice.

"Could you go up to the house and see her, Father?" Angus dropped his piece of cake and it fell with a plop into his teacup. The suggestion was clearly unexpected. "Father?" she pressed, holding out her hand.

"You'll pour me another cup?" he said after some reflection.

"But what about our idea? About going to see Lady Newington. We must do something."

"About me going to see Lady Newington, you mean. Its really a job for a solicitor."

“Oh, Father! The poor woman has no money for food leave alone for a legal man. Even if she had, such a formal approach would be bound to be fought tooth and nail. It probably would never even reach her Ladyship, or certainly not be presented to her properly if it did. It needs someone to present her case personally. Lady Newington will listen to you.”

“I don't know why you think that, Moira. After all, I only go there to repair the lead or mend the drains.”

“Oh, Father! You speak to him, Mrs Cerny!”

“Deborah?” he said, starring at her and then at his daughter. It was unusual to see her so resolute. “You feel strongly about this - this - woman?”

“Her name is Margaret Cross and she has a small child, a boy, about eighteen months old, and is expecting another. The doctor says that her husband's condition is terminal and both of them could die if something is not done. We cannot just stand by and do nothing.”

“Aye, that may be the case, but it does n' make it any easier for me. It would be very difficult.”

“Difficult? Why?” asked Mrs Cerny sharply.

“Perhaps I could speak to Jack Barnes?”

“The Estate Manager?” said Moira. “Oh, he's useless. That would never do! He would never take a decision on anything as important as this.”

Angus lapsed into silence, studying first his daughter, then the two sisters who were sat on the edge of their chairs, waiting for him. There was something in the passion in Moira which reminded him of his wife. And whereas he found that pleasing, he resented their representations, feeling guilty that he had not found out about Mr Cross's condition and attempted to do something earlier. “Would anyone like another cup of tea and some more cake?” he asked the women.

“Father?” said Moira in a tone that was not without a degree of censure.

“I can see that you all feel very strongly about this,” he said calmly. “As for you, Moira, I will excuse your momentary omission of the courtesy due a father from his daughter - .”

“Oh, Father!”

“ - but this is no easy matter. I would say that it requires careful thought and deliberation.”

“Oh, Father!” This time her tone was one of dejection. She stood the kettle on the range and looked at the two other women. “I'll have to mash some more,” she said falteringly. “This'll be stale.”

“Angus,” implored Mrs Cerny. “Is there nothing you can do? Are you saying that you will not go up to the house, or that you do not think your reception will be favourable? Surely Lady Newington would see you if you asked to see her?”

“That she would, I think. That's not the problem, Deborah. It is how to present the case in the best possible light. How to make her react positively. How to make her feel responsible, even obliged, to do something, without appearing to criticise her. I am sure that had the main drainage scheme been put to her properly she would have agreed that. Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. As it is now dark, I will walk you two home.”

“Oh, that's not necessary, Angus, not that we are ungrateful regarding your offer, are we, Felicity?”

“Oh, no, Mr Muir,” Phoebe replied. “I am not afraid of the dark.”

“Ay, lassie. That may be so, but its not the dark I have in mind, but what may be lurking out there! And we can discuss your Mrs Cross on the way. Do you not think that's a good idea? But first, you must have the tea.”

“Oh? I am to be left out of it, now, am I?” cried Moira, a little flushed.

“Och, I think you've done enough already, lassie. I'm proud of you, but I think the time has come to put the older heads together and see what we can come up with. But if you really insist you can walk along with Phoebe, eh?”

Moira immersed herself in matters domestic when they returned to the bungalow an hour later. She had walked with Phoebe, whilst her father had taken Mrs Cerny's arm and followed several paces behind. They spoke in low voices and neither her nor her companion

could catch the conversation. On the way back she felt she detected a spring in her father's step, a kind of lightness and buoyancy about him and his attitude. "It is all settled," he announced as they turned the corner and started up towards the bungalow. "Lady Newington is due down in a couple of days and I will go up to see her as soon as she has arrived and settled in."

"Oh, Father!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and bringing their progress to a temporary halt under a gas lamp. Quite suddenly a dark figure slunk out of the gloom into the light and muttered something guttural and incoherent before disappearing again. "That was Kurt," she said with dismay. "Where on earth could he have been?"

"I dunna know, and at the moment I dunna ken. Up to some mischief, I dare say. Why, you're trembling! What is it? This affair? Or is it Kurt? He's not been troubling you, has he?"

"No," she whispered. "I think I just feel chilled by the night air."

"Then let's be getting you home quickly, then, as it seems you've omitted to wear anything warm enough. And as to the matter we were discussing, I am not promising anything, you understand. We must take things as they come."

As she later stood at the deep kitchen sink and washed the evening's dishes, she realised she was feeling jealous. During the walk her father had talked long and with earnest to Mrs Cerny about the visit to Lady Newington. He had talked to her, taken her into his confidence, but not his own daughter. She was simply handed down a decision. There was more. He had spoken quite sharply to her and put her in her place at one point in the evening, and this in front of Mrs Cerny and Phoebe. She felt almost that he resented her. Later still, she sat before the range and waited for him to come over and stoke her hair, but he did not. Why? What was amiss? Nothing from his outward demeanour, yet her impression was that he was cool towards her for the rest of that evening, an impression she carried to bed with her and contemplated until sleep cut short the debate without any resolution being found.

Mrs Cerny, too, had matters on her mind. She stayed downstairs alone long after her son and sister had gone up to their beds. She sat at the table directly under the gas light and drafted and re-drafted a very important letter. The number of rejections gradually mounted until, long after the clock on the mantle-shelf had struck one, she settled on one and, with an air of weary triumph, carefully copied it out, dated it and signed it. Having done so, and satisfied herself that the ink was thoroughly dry, and then read and re-read it a dozen times, she placed the letter in a long white envelope, which she addressed and placed it silently in the top sideboard drawer. It was done.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, in the darkness she thought she heard a door handle turn above her, then the sound of a door gently clicking shut. When she reached the landing all was still and quiet and both Kurt's and Felicity's doors were shut. Concluding that it must have been her imagination, given the hour and her fatigue, she went to her bed and awaited the morning.

Felicity's mind should have been on one thing alone. The church was her favourite and, save one other location, her only place of refuge. It was true that she had that other sanctuary, a place that she would flee to in times of stress and anxiety, a secret from most, but that was at some distance and by no means as convenient as the local church. As she genuflected before the altar and walked slowly down the aisle, treading through the early morning sunbeams, she found herself preoccupied with a number of thoughts.

One affected her more than the others. She had been quiet and thoughtful the previous evening at the bungalow. And earlier that day she had found herself lethargic and inattentive, unable to concentrate and adequately work through her exercises. Her sister had been remarkably patient, being engrossed in something herself, something that she was not prepared to confide in her younger sister, something her younger sister was sure had been discussed the previous night with Mr Muir on the way home. What ever it was, Debbie was good humoured and remarkably forgiving. Even Kurt had escaped lightly at breakfast.

Felicity's main preoccupation was not good by nature and it did not put her in a good

humour. For the third night in a row someone had tried to open her bedroom door. The attempt was made quietly and stealthily, and finding the door bolted against them, they, whoever it was, had gone equally quietly and stealthily away. Whoever it was? It had to be Kurt! She knew it was Kurt! It was his presence one night in her room that had compelled her to bolt the door. Had it been Debbie she would have called out, not sneaked away in the darkness. She wondered just how many times he had tried before. Perhaps he tried her door every night, waiting for that occasion when she, exhausted, overlooked the bolt. And then he would be in.

“It is not a sin to bolt your door my child,” Father Thomas said. “You might have found yourself exposed to temptation had you not, or worse. Are you thus exposed? Are you thus tempted?”

“No. But why does he come, Father?” she whispered. “I am his aunt. He surely cannot think that - .”

“You are developing into an attractive young woman,” the priest whispered. “You must expect to receive, and be on your guard against, attention from all kinds of young men. That is the way of the World. You must pray for Our Lord to give you the strength to resist their advances.”

“Yes, Father,” she murmured.

“Tell me,” he said after a pause, “has he touched you, attempted to violate you?” The voice trembled and rose in pitch as he reached the end of the sentence. Father Thomas knew about sin. He was aware of the deep and black pit into which sinners tumbled. He knew that as they fell, contact with its slime covered walls, yea, even the inhalation of its evil vapours, increased one's capacity for sin and greater evil, until a point was reached from which even a supreme effort might not save one. “Has he attempted to commit a carnal sin?” he added when no answer was forthcoming. The word “carnal” petrified her and for a moment she felt dizzy. The priest's voice became distant yet she heard it and understood it. “You must tell me, my child,” he hissed. “Only then may I give you complete absolution.”

“I do not know what is in his mind,” she said quietly, trying to direct her thoughts away from the subject. “Nor what is in the minds of others.” It was to young men in general that she referred, but the reply provoked a pained gasp from the priest.

He ceased his interrogation at that point and blessed and absolved her. As she knelt at her penance and wondered if her answer had been, in part at least, a lie that would render it an un-confessed sin, Felicity became aware that Father Thomas had left the confessional and was watching her. Even later, when she had changed her place and moved to the back of the church, she was uncomfortably aware of his continued scrutiny.

An attractive young woman? Was that so, or was it vanity and pride to consider herself in that way? Or was it a virtue? It was said that Debbie's looks, when younger, were such as turned men's heads and broke their hearts. What benefit had she derived? Yet, it was also pleasant to linger there and to dwell upon, and sample, the romance in the concept of being regarded as beautiful, of having men paying court, of being able to have the world, or a sizeable proportion of it, at her feet. Pleasant indeed until her gaze once again fell upon the priest who was still stood, motionless, as if gripped and frozen by some supernatural power, staring at her. Then she was suddenly shocked, frightened, and ashamed.