

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Do sit down, Michael, and tell us all about your progress. Matthews is bringing morning tea. Tell us what you have been doing.”

“So long as I do not bore you,” said Michael noticing Angela's obvious and protracted yawn, “my telling you about mundane matters like surveying and engineering.”

“Well, so long as it is not as bad as those terrible industrialists,” Angela said, stretching to the full length of her thin wiry frame. “There was one at the de Vince party who attached his wretched self to me and spent half the evening going on about some factory line which will turn out hundreds of cars a week. They're building it on some marshes in east London. He seemed rather peeved when I told him that I thought it was the right location and that I trusted that both the factory and these awful cars would disappear into the swamp as soon as they left the gate. It's ridiculous! Who is going to buy all these cars? The working class, he said. That's ridiculous! They cannot even clothe or feed themselves, leave alone buy cars. I cannot begin to imagine what will happen next. Virtually all evening, that's all I had. I barely had time to converse with Herr Cerny.”

“Oh, Angela, do be quiet,” said her mother severely. “Now, Michael, what exactly have you been doing?”

Michael was pondering on the unwelcomed reference to the Austrian architect. So, this man had been at the de Vince party whilst he had not even looked at the invitation!

“We should have a party to celebrate the occasion of your going down to Kent,” Mark had said. “At the very least, we could use the de Vinci party. You are going? Everyone will be there, and Jenny has been asking after you. Apparently you were supposed to go to some photographic session with her, and she's a little put out that you did not turn up. You will have to make your peace with her, if no one else.”

“I am not sure how Christina would have reacted to me becoming involved with Jenny's photography. She told me she was to have no clothes on.”

“All the more reason for going, I'd say, except nearly everyone has seen Jenny with no clothes on as many times as they've seen her clothed, so there's no novelty there. Any way, are you going to go? You have received the invitation.”

“It is somewhere,” Michael demurred. He did not see any reason why he should celebrate either his new occupation or his move to Canterbury. In fact he saw no reason to celebrate at all. “I'm keeping it all very low key,” he told Mark. “I don't want any fuss or parties. I certainly don't want it announced in public! Will Christina go?”

“I expect so. Do you think Natacha would go if I asked her?”

“I doubt it. I doubt it very much. And neither shall I.”

After all, this was a world that he was turning his back on. He had never been an avid party-goer. He often found himself bored, or deafened, or drunk, or tired, or just plain ill. Here was super excuse to avoid at least one.

He caught a train at Victoria station. Mr Hiller, who had been awaiting his arrival with a combination of anticipation and dread, appeared almost breathless when he greeted him. “Is this your first visit to Canterbury? You must see the Cathedral whilst you are here!”

“I've already seen it,” said Michael. “On my way from the station.”

“You've been around the Cathedral? My goodness, you must have been down early!”

“I haven't been around it. Well not right around it. But I went by one side. Big, isn't it?”

Mr Hiller sighed. “Come along, then,” he said gesturing towards the inner office. “We've a lot to get through. And you'll need to find somewhere to stay down at Dover.”

“I think I may have already done that,” said Michael brightly.

“Really? My goodness, you have been quick! Whereabouts?” Michael caught the note of incredulity and suspicion in Mr Hiller's voice and was on his guard. “My girl-friend,” he began - that was how they were referred to, wasn't it? “She has a relative involved on the Newington Estate, and they were able to get me a rented cottage. I have to make all the final

arrangements and fix up all the details when I get down there, of course, but a bit of luck, I'd say!"

"So would I," said Mr Hiller, somewhat in awe and still suspicious.

"Well, Michael?" repeated Lady Helen.

"You should have gone to the de Vere party," said Angela suddenly. "Jenny Forbes was there, asking after you and wondering why you had not gone to see her being photographed in the nude."

"In the nude?" exclaimed Lady Helen.

"It is the done thing for young girls now-a-days," said Christina, glaring at her sister and then at Michael.

"Not for my young girls, it is not! Nor is it a suitable subject for conversation in mixed company! In any company!"

"Oh! I can see that I have embarrassed our would-be engineer!" said Angela gleefully, standing up. "I think I'll go into the garden before he starts talking about sewage."

The formal garden at Newington House was large, secluded, and to the West side of the house which stood on a grassy plateau, perched above a wooded valley through which ran a stream of fresh, pure, water which emanated, almost inexhaustibly, from a natural spring further up the valley. In common with similar phenomena in the chalklands of Kent, the spring had been known to dry up, but this was rare and was taken as an omen of ill-fortune by the workers on the Estate and by the small community in the village of Newington. The house was of Tudor origin and had been extended in the eighteenth century by a local architect on behalf of the third Lord Newington who had undertaken the Grand Tour and returned overbrimming with styles and enthusiasm. It was he who had constructed the long, tree and laurel-lined, drive which snaked across valleys through a series of picturesque glades and rides. But when he reached the house he forsook his plans for an imposing palladium facade, and settled for plain Georgian stone.

He extended the building by adding two wings at right angles to the Tudor structure and then joined these with what was intended to be the kitchens and servants quarters across the rear to create an enclosed garden in the style he had seen in Italy, replete with small shrubs and statues brought from that country, the centre feature of which was a decorative fountain with cherubs and dolphins spouting water piped and pumped from the spring. However, circumstances dictated that the structure he erected was never put to his intended use. Instead the kitchens and the servants' quarters were housed in a detached building which nestled, screened by trees, beside the stable block and which was connected to the main house by way of a dry, eerie, pedestrian tunnel. Of the servants, only Matthews, Lady Helen's maid, had accommodation in the main house.

It had been lavishly appointed inside but from the day of returning from her honeymoon, Lady Helen had taken a fastidious interest in the interior of the house, amending the decor, re-arranging the furniture, the portraits, the curtains, carpets and drapes, such that now there was no place which did not bear some mark of her exquisite taste. The third Lord Newington might have changed his plans for the facade, or the use of the accommodation at the rear of his extension, but he did add the enclosed garden, and it was into this garden that Angela stepped out on that fine morning.

"Take no notice of your sister-in-law-to-be," said Helen. "Now, Michael. Do tell us what you have been up to. Christina! What are you doing?"

"I was going to do some writing. I suppose I had better come and listen, not that it will make any difference or signify anything. I will come over and be brave and sit with Michael." Michael moved along the sofa to allow her room to sit beside him but she chose instead a solitary armchair from which she fixed her dark eyes upon him. "Well?" she said.

"I suppose that I had best start with my visit to Canterbury and Mr Hiller. He's a strange, almost miserable, man."

People who did not know Mr Hiller might have considered him miserable. His thin-lipped mouth, which cut a slit across the lower apex of his face, turned down at the ends,

giving him an appearance of permanent melancholy. But inside he was capable of feeling happy on occasions, especially when engaging in his pet vice and perversion, the scant treasures of which lay in a gold-coloured Coronation biscuit tin in his large, Victorian, house on top of a wardrobe, and those who had seen him smile said that the act transformed the whole of his face. Mr Hiller paid great attention to the needs of people and Michael would be no exception. He was quizzed for what seemed to him to be an eternity, although it probably lasted less than fifteen minutes, about his arrangements for lodgings, transport, expenses, the rail fare there, where he lived, who was at home, whether they depended upon him, whether he had brought enough clothes, whether they were the right kind of clothes, whether he went to Church either daily, as some did, or on Sundays, what denomination he was, what his father did for a living, what his interests were, whether he liked children, and how old his sister was.

Some of the questions for Michael were an ordeal. "I have tried to keep my connections concealed," he stressed to Lady Helen.

"I don't really see why you should be ashamed of admitting you know us, or that you are marrying into the family," said Christina, looking down at the note book in her lap.

"I am not," Michael protested.

"Of course you are not," supported Helen. "I think it is understandable that you do not want to make use of your connections."

"Mark does," says Christina. "And you don't find fault with him. It just seems to me that if Michael were to make use of his family name and relationships, he would achieve something and get somewhere quicker."

"I've been given an assistant!"

"An assistant? There, Christina! That sounds like a very positive achievement to me. And he could be quite an asset to you, Michael."

"Oh, he's quite green - has no experience. I dare say I'll have to show him how to do everything, especially sections. I think he's some kind of office-boy and they want him to get some experience so that he can better himself. I expect he'll find that pretty difficult with a name like his - Brown!"

"Yes," said Christina, looking at her mother, "there really are people with names like Brown, Jones and Smith, even if you think I should not write about them."

"I only said that your characters could have more exciting, aristocratic, names. Who wants to read about a detective called Brown, or a romance between Miss Jones and Mr Smith? They sound more like the kind who go to Brighton and who are reported upon in those dreadful Sunday newspapers. Still, Michael, you were saying that you have an assistant?"

He had knowingly taken some liberties with the truth. His assistant's name was Brown, but he did have some experience and it was not entirely accurate to describe him as the office-boy. However, Arthur Brown was not articled, nor an engineer, nor specifically training to become an engineer. He had started in the Canterbury office immediately upon leaving school and had brought with him little in the way of academic qualifications. He had worked hard, showed himself willing, and impressed Mr Hiller who now would have liked to think of him as an adopted son, although the Mrs Brown from whose loins young Arthur had tumbled eighteen years ago, and who would barely acknowledge Mr Hiller when she passed him in the street, would not have endorsed that position.

"Young Arthur can help you with the surveying. I trust you know how to use a level?" As "young" Arthur was there, Michael had nodded in response to Mr Hiller's question. "We'll have to sort out your mode of transport whilst you're doing the survey. A level is a bit heavy to try and carry about on a bicycle."

Michael froze. He had not ridden a bicycle for years. He had never ridden one in earnest, nor with any serious intent. He was not prepared to start now.

"You can borrow one of the cars," said Lady Helen. "Goodness knows, we have enough. Now, you will not wish to have anything too ostentatious, and I doubt that Mark's

sports car would be entirely suitable.”

“He could take the Austin Seven,” said Christina, sourly.

“Could I?” asked Michael, taking her suggestion to be serious. “It would probably be ideal.”

Lady Helen opened her eyes wide and smiled. “By all means!” she said. “As long as it fits the bill. It certainly will not appear to be out of character.”

“I can say I am hiring it.”

“We can say that we have loaned it to you, as a gesture,” said Christina. “That places us in a better light!”

“I think I'll hire a small car,” said Michael. Mr Hiller had looked at his pseudo son, who had looked back. “It will make things so much easier, especially when I have to get to and from the place we are surveying and the cottage I am renting on the estate. It is very reasonable,” he added, thinking of what his father had said about expenses and noting their reactions.

“I will cycle down, daily,” said his assistant. “I should be at Newington by eight o'clock each day.”

“Good, good,” said Michael, but thought something entirely different.

“We'll have to start early in the morning each day,” he told the ladies. “Its a bit of a bore, but it appears to be the done thing.”

“Poor Michael,” said Christina. “How early?”

“About eight o'clock.”

“Is it light at that hour? Poor Michael!”

“I suppose it is,” Michael said cautiously. He was preparing himself to describe further the Canterbury office and the limitations of his designated assistant, when the door opened and Matthews announced that a Mr Muir had called and asked to see her Ladyship.

“Cannot he deal with Barnes?”

“I did suggest that Ma'am, really I did. But he was insistent that this was a matter for her Ladyship's ears. Shall I send him away, or ask him to come back at another time?”

“Oh, no! Not if he has taken all the trouble to come up here. Show him in. I think we will receive him in the garden. Michael, you might like to meet him as he is a local contractor. You will eventually need someone to lay your pipes.”

“He is just a tradesman,” said Christina, rising and brushing down her skirt. “Angela's in the garden. She won't be at all pleased.”

“I beg you pardon, Lady Newington,” began Angus as he stepped out into the sunlight. He stopped when he caught sight of Michael.

“Would you like tea, Mr Muir? This is a gentleman from the consultants who are preparing that drainage scheme. He has come down to carry out the survey - a Mr - .”

“Bernstein,” inserted Michael, without too much thought. A perplexed look came over the newcomer's face and their eyes met.

“Bernstein,” repeated Lady Helen. “He has come to see me because it is necessary to survey part of the Estate. He was about to leave but I asked him to stay to meet you.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” said Michael offering his hand which was cautiously taken by the contractor. “You have a contracting business?”

“Aye, you could say that,” said Angus, shaking his head. “I'm sorry but I could have sworn that we've met before. But that canna be possible.”

“I don't think its likely unless it was in the last few days at Canterbury. I've just come down from London.”

“Mr Bernstein is also going to rent one of the cottages on the estate. I had in mind Rose Cottage,” said Lady Helen.

“Och, that's a sweet little place. My daughter adores it.”

“And it is very well appointed since Mr Muir modernised it,” added Lady Helen, triumphantly. “I was wondering if, with your local knowledge, you could spend a little while with - Mr Bernstein, going over the land, so as to speak? As a favour to me?”

Och, I would be delighted to do that, Mr Bernstein. I'll let you know how to get in contact with me or my lassie at the yard, and we can arrange something. We can go over the topography and the geological drift"

"That would be very helpful and greatly appreciated," said Michael, not having the faintest idea what the Scotsman was talking about, especially when he suggested he should contact his dog.

"And if I'm not at the yard, Moira can look after you."

"Moira?"

"My lassie. My daughter. A fine lass, even if it is me that is saying so."

Michael caught the full force of the glare from Christina as she noted an animated change in Michael's attitude. It was not the mention of the daughter that caused this reaction. Michael had succeeded where Angus Muir had failed. At the mention of his daughter, Michael had suddenly remembered where they had met, and was now feeling rather nervous.

"You have presumably met Jeremy Hiller?" asked the builder.

Michael nodded. "I worked with him on the Kingswood scheme, continued Mr Muir, seemingly oblivious of the expectations of the ladies present and temporarily losing sight of his objective. "He'll remember me well. I'm surprised that he has n' mentioned me to you already."

Mr Hiller had mentioned many things, many more things than Michael could now call to mind or even write down on a piece of paper given notice and the opportunity. In fact it seemed that in the relatively short time he had spent within the walls of the Canterbury office, Mr Hiller had never stopped telling him things. He had been booked in at the Stag's Head which was across the road from, and which therefore had been appropriated as an annexe to, the consultant's rooms. So, barely had Michael blown the dust from his shoes after his walk from the railway station, than Mr Hiller was warmly welcoming him, or so it seemed, taking his arm, and leading him across the street, past the large red brewery lorry which was hissing steam and laying red hot coals onto the road beneath it.

The Canterbury offices were even less imposing than those in Westminster. Their main virtue was their situation, above a baker from whom the appetising smell of freshly baked bread, as it was drawn from the ovens, percolated its way up to them for much of the morning. This aside, the rooms had little to recommend them other than being relatively cheap to lease. Located on the upper floors of a building of antiquity, the offices were hot in summer and cold in winter. This made its mark on the layout: in the drawing office seniority was a prerequisite to a board positioned near the fire.

Arthur Brown's position was sandwiched between a draughty window and the door. Although he had to wrap up in the winter and gripped his pencil or pen with fingers which protruded from snipped woollen gloves, he could breathe fresh air in the summer, and he could look out, in awe and wonderment, on the Cathedral throughout the year. "Its a monumental structure," he said as Michael crooked his neck to see the aspect across the roof tops. "Just imagine the task of designing it, making sure the foundations were adequate, ensuring that all the stones were cut correctly so that they fitted without dressing. All the problems that would have to be overcome."

Michael found that he could not.

"And the sheer engineering of it! Not just in the foundations, but in the vaulting and the buttressing. It is breathtaking!"

It became clear to Michael that Arthur Brown viewed the Cathedral as something more than a neatly arranged pile of stones kept in place by gravity, and he would have liked to make some kind of intelligent comment, but he could not find one. It should have been he leading the conversation between them, but he found that it was his assistant who was, in all probability, vastly inferior to him in education and etiquette, who was telling *him*.

"I am sure that you will find young Brown of great assistance," said Mr Hiller. "Especially in view of your limited experience." There was some rancour in the tone but, then, it did creep into Mr Hiller's daily conversation when he thought of his life's problems and frustrations. On this occasion it was more an expression of regret arising from the

sorrowful acceptance of the facts as they were, yet the words made Michael smart coming, as they did, only shortly after he had been regaled with a potted history of the City, St Augustine, and the Roman Invasion. He felt did not need goading into action, although he was still recovering from being told that it was normal to work on Saturday mornings as well as weekdays. "I expect that you will schedule the work to suit the weather," added Mr Hiller deriving pleasure from telling his new subordinate things which clearly caused him displeasure. "You know, surveying when it is fine and plotting when it is raining. Now, do not forget - gravity sewers do not run up-hill. They run down-hill and we need to avoid ejector stations. They are expensive." At the time Michael had resolved to ask Arthur Brown what ejector stations were, but he subsequently forgot the term and Arthur was later unable to identify what the "thingys" Michael was referring to, were.

"I honestly cannot recall him mentioning you," he said, "but that is not to say that he didn't. He seemed to talk about so many things."

"Well, as I said, just drop in at the yard and see me, dinna forget." Angus Muir rose to his feet and moved towards the rear of the garden and a door which led to the rear of the house. "I can leave by the servants' quarters, if that's in order, Ma'am?"

"Of course it is, Mr Muir. But what was the matter on which you called to see me?"

"Och, it was a wee matter to do with the routine maintenance of some of the Estate properties. I will take it up with Mr Barnes."

"Very well," said Helen.

"Dinna forget," said Mr Muir as he passed Michael, and was then gone.

"If he can take the matter up with Barnes," said Angela, "why did he come here, sully our day, and waste our time? What a bore!"

"Because that was not the cause of his coming," said her mother.

"Then why did he not raise it, what ever it was?" asked Christina.

Helen smiled. "Who, other than Mr Muir, is to know? Ordinary people sometimes act in such strange ways. But Mr Muir is a good man. I am told that he never over-charges. I am sure that he will raise the matter in due course and that Barnes will come to see me. You will go and see him, will you not, Michael? I am sure that he will assist you in every way he can."

"When actually do you start this - survey?" asked Christina, sounding as if she was not really interested in the answer as she resumed the perusal of her notebook. "And how long do you think it will take?"

"Actually, we start on Monday next. Mr Hiller said he thought it will take around three months, but I reckon I will complete it in half that time."

"Good!" This time Christina adopted her most business-like tone. "That means you will be able to return to London with us. And of course you will come and dine with us daily."

"Oh, I don't think I ought to do that. Not if I am to remain incognito. People would certainly talk if I started coming up to the house on a daily basis."

"I do not see why you should not, do you, Mama?"

"I think that Michael should feel free in that respect to conduct himself as he pleases," said Helen firmly. "You will join us occasionally, Michael. I shall say that want to see you regularly to be kept appraised of progress. That will give you the kind of excuse you need. Of course, if it does take three months we shall go back to London before you. And if it looks like taking longer, I should advise you that the winters can be very hard here. I am sure that Mr Muir will tell you that."

"Mr Hiller did say that it is necessary to try and finish before the weather breaks. And we shall!"

"And do not forget your sister's Concert. Mark will slaughter us should we miss it!"

I am unlikely to do that, what ever the circumstances! Is Mark planning to come down?"

"I do not think so," said Christina. "He seems to be spending most of his time in his studio, painting secretly."

"Secretly?"

“Yes. No-one is allowed in.”

“Not even me, Michael.”

“Not even his own mother! No-one, except Natacha.”

“Natacha has been in Mark's studio?”

“It was not with my approval,” said Helen, frowning. “Your father is aware of the fact. As for Mark, I do not consider that it is good for him to lock himself away like this, especially in the Summer. There are ample subjects for him to paint here, in the garden or around the estate. Christina, do show Michael the view over the Downs in a minute. If he wishes to have an exhibition, he will need a wide ranging portfolio, far greater than the one he is likely to create if he does not set foot outside of his studio. Young people do such strange things now-a-days. I really wonder what is on their minds.”

“I am supposed to show you the view,” said Christina as they went back into the house. “Come along - follow me!” He did as he was instructed, following her along a wide corridor, lined on one side with portraits, the other skirting the garden, past heavy panelled doors, and down a gloomier corridor until, at the end, they were confronted by a door which seemed to Michael smaller and less imposing than the rest. “We can go out this way,” she announced and let in the sunlight.

The door opened onto a small paved area covered by a vaulted roof supported on several slender pillars. A small flight of steps took them down to a gravel path and the large lawn which lay, like a becalmed green ocean, to the west and south of the house and in the centre of which stood a large, ancient, Cypress, the low branches of which kept the grass at bay and at a distance from its massive trunk. “There!” she said triumphantly. “What do you think? More than enough for Mark to paint, I would say!”

Before Michael, stretching across the horizon, lay a number of valleys and, between these, ridges, some of which were bare and thrust up into the sky like the backbone of some prehistoric monster, whilst others were surmounted with small clusters of trees. “Where is the sea?” he asked, shielding his eyes with his hand.

“Well out of our view. Not that it is far away. But if you follow that ridge, there, where it dips down,” she pointed in a South-Westerly direction, “before the next one rises again, that's Dover laying there, out of sight I am pleased to say. Do you not think it is superb? The view?”

“Yes,” he said hesitantly, not having any well formed views on the aesthetics of scenery. “And what is that on the ridge over there? Some kind of ruin?”

“That? That's the Monastery. The stones for the porch that we came out through came from there. No-one hardly goes there - there's no road and it's a difficult ride because there's only one path which is so narrow and steep in places. And it is a long walk, I can tell you! It is difficult for the public to get there as they have to cross the Estate.”

“Its on the Estate?”

“Not really. It would be more accurate to describe it as within the Estate. I suppose you could call it a kind of enclave, surrounded by our land but not a part of it. It is actually owned by a Trust of some kind, on which Mama has some important position, I think.”

“Have you been there?”

“No!” she laughed. “Well, not for years. Not since I was a child.”

“Perhaps Mark would find something to paint there?”

“I expect so. I cannot see him carrying his paints and easel all that way, though. As I said, the path from this direction is narrow and if you want to come from the town side you have to come across the fields and climb Roman Hill which is a virtual precipice. Some of the estate workers go up there in their spare time to tend to the gardens. I don't see the point of it. I mean, what is the point of maintaining gardens that no-one ever sees? You should hear Angela on the subject!”

“I would rather not. Why, then, do they do it if no-one sees the fruit of their labours?”

“Its shrouded in mystery and folklore, some kind of ancient tradition which is passed down from father to son. You know the kind of thing.”

“I do,” he said softly, thinking that he must be the exception. These people received a

time-honoured tradition from their fathers. What would his father pass him? There was no doubt that his father was rich, possibly very rich. Michael did not know, and could not begin to guess, how rich. There was no doubt that as the first and only son, he would inherit a substantial estate to add to whatever Christina brought with her. Many would have envied him. Yet, as he stood there studying the horizon, as a gentle breeze ruffled his hair and billowed Christina's skirt, somehow it did not seem enough. "And us?" he added, acting on an impulse.

"Us?" she said sharply. "How do you mean?"

"The arrangement. You are still happy with it?"

She turned to face him, this girl who had never appeared in his dreams, whom he barely knew, whom he had never kissed. He wondered if he had actually ever touched Christina, taken her hand, stroked her hair, been in the least familiar. "Should I have changed? Have you?" she said.

"No - no, I just wondered if there was someone - someone else?"

"Like?"

"Herr von Cerny?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"He has been paying great attention to you. I think he likes you a lot."

"That may be, but he is old enough to have been my father. And he is ridiculously pompous and arrogant. He would be better suited to Angela! And how about you? You and Jenny Forbes?"

"Jenny Forbes? And me?"

"I have said, and you agreed, that I want to be able to get on with my writing without distraction, scandal, or gossip. I will keep to my part and I expect you to keep to yours. And, anyway, I signed some papers just before we came down."

"Papers? What kind of papers?"

"They were brought by an odious, creeping, smelly little man who said he had been instructed by your father. He called himself Fishnet. He was a really horrible man and I was pleased to be able to sign them just to get rid of him, but I did make my position clear, and he said that if there was any problem, anything that disturbed me or threatened our relationship, I was to contact him immediately, no matter what it was. He said he would resolve the problems by whatever means were necessary, and I believed him. And I shall contact him, Michael! You should believe that. Let Jenny Forbes as much as look at you!"

Michael did not answer but scanned the furthest ridge. How far was it? It could not be all that far because Newington House lay less than six miles from the sea. His gaze drifted along the horizon and settled on the ruins. As he did, he felt an inexplicable tinge of excitement and anticipation, a feeling that there was a place that he had to visit, to explore, a place to which he had never been, but to which he would want to go again. An invisible, magnetic, force had reached out, touched him, and now he was in its power. "The cottage? The one I am staying in - where about is it? In relation to the ruins?"

"You should ask Barnes that, not me, but," Christina said, suddenly gripping his arm, "but I can tell you. It must be about - there!" Michael, aware that she had now touched him, rested his head on her outstretched arm and looked down the line at which she pointed, but could see only trees. "You won't actually see it from here," she added. "But it is there. I know - I used to go there when I was small. And, if I recall correctly, the path which runs beside it leads eventually up to the Monastery. It is probably about a two mile walk, at least, if you are interested. Are you? There's several volumes on the Estate's history in the library and I am sure it's mentioned in them if you want to read about it. Do you?"

"I do not know," Michael said slowly. It crossed his mind to ask Christina if she would like to walk there with him, but, no. Something told him that he had to go alone. Certainly for the first time, he should go alone. "It might be interesting to learn something about it."

Christina turned and looked at him closely. A faint smile appeared on her face. "I didn't realise that you had any interest in historical matters. In fact, I didn't know that you had any interests at all."

"I am not sure that I have. I was regaled at length the other day about Canterbury Cathedral and found it most tiresome. But there's something - I don't know what - there. Something to be discovered. I can feel it!"

She laughed. "Nor did I know that you could be so intense! Shall we go together?"

Michael's heart fell. He knew that would be wrong, that whatever magic the Monastery might hold would be exhausted if she accompanied him. He had to say so.

"I wouldn't want to distract you from your writing. And, then, people would talk if they saw us together, wandering around the Estate. Imagine it, Lady Helen's daughter gallivanting around with a young surveyor, and him fresh down from London! You have a reputation to protect!"

"We are going to be seen together some time."

"When I am back in London and established. By then you may have been published and I will be able to marry a leading novelist. And then we will spend the rest of our life together." She raised her eyebrows, so he continued. "I may not give many things more than a modicum of thought - I have never been a deep thinker, philosophy and all that, but I have thought long and hard about marriage and love. When I - we - marry, it will be for life as far as I am concerned. No annulment, no separation, no divorce. I will stay with you come hell and high water, until death."

"You are intense," whispered Christina, looking for the first time deep into his eyes. "So shall it be. I will remember these words as I will remember our marriage vows. I will never ask you for a separation or a divorce or annulment of our marriage. And should you ever change your mind and ask that of me, I shall refuse. It shall be for life. Is it agreed?"

"Yes."

"And you will keep your vow as I shall keep mine?"

"Yes. Shall we shake on it?"

"We should do better than that," she said lightly and, reaching up for the very first time she kissed him on the cheek. Then she bounced lightly back into the house leaving Michael to contemplate the view alone.