

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Natacha launched her musical career with a professional and technically correct performance. At least, that was said by the music critics who reported her appearance at the Royal Albert Hall. Some who were also present might have been less economic with their adjectives, but Natacha was not to be starved of praise. She received a prolonged ovation, was brought back onto the stage no less than five times, was then permitted to play a short Schubert Impromptu which she knew was a favourite of Mark's, and carried off a huge bouquet.

Michael travelled up to London by rail from Dover on the Saturday morning. He had declined an offer of travelling in Lady Newington's Rolls Royce, partly because to travel alone preserved his position of independence, or so he said, and partly because, possibly chiefly because, it would have meant him leaving Newington shortly after noon on the Friday. A letter had arrived from Mr Fishwick requesting his attendance at his office on Monday, which might preclude returning to Newington in time to visit the gardens on that afternoon. So he clung to the hope that if, on Friday afternoon, he walked up the long, steep, path to the Monastery, she would be there. He sent his assistant home early and ventured forth, in vain. If she had been to the gardens that day, she had departed some time before his arrival. For a long time he had stood, a lone, wind swept, figure, at the gap in the wall and scanned the hill, down to the fence and hedgerow, and beyond, but there was no sign of the girl who now seemed to occupy his every thought and dream.

Not that his preoccupation was permitted to interfere with his work! On Friday morning he had even gone as far as taking over the level from his assistant, insisting on setting it up and recording the figures. It was true that he could not always get the bubble to stay in the centre of the glass, but he rotated the telescope and twiddled the knobs, all for the benefit of his assistant who, no doubt impressed, was standing some way off, holding the staff. On most occasions he managed to get the device nearly level, and there might have been a further injudicious twist of a knob now and then when Arthur was not watching, presumably dreaming of the charms of Miss Muir, or otherwise occupied. Did it really matter? What was an inch or two when they were on a road which fell more than fifteen feet in less than one hundred yards?

He was uncertain whether or not his assistant was pleased when he announced, shortly after noon, that they had finished for the day. They went back to the cottage and unloaded the equipment. He watched Arthur cycle down the track, waited to ensure that he was not of a mind to return, saying he had forgotten his pencil or his bicycle clips, then started up the footpath. At one point, as he was passing through an area of woodland, he heard men's voices approaching. If he were seen, he might find himself having to explain to Christina what he was doing walking up the path at a time when he could have been sat next to her in the car, so he darted into the undergrowth and hid. As he crouched down, peering cautiously through the dense leaves and brambles, the fact that he had to hide added greatly to the excitement of the occasion. He could now see the two men. They had stopped and were looking around. He heard one of them ask the other if he had heard "that". There was something said about "something large" followed by speculation as to what it might be, which ranged from a deer to an escaped tiger. Michael ducked hurriedly when both suddenly looked in his direction, as if they had somehow sensed his presence, but they stayed on the path, saying they would report the matter to Barnes, and after a short pause, recommenced their passage down to the cottage.

To his disappointment, he found himself completely alone when he arrived at the gardens. Michael retraced the steps they had taken together, picked his way through the ruins, stood in the centre of the aisle and looked around at the damp, silent, shell, and made his way, several times, to the bridge and then the gap in the wall so that he could look down the hill and on the town. She was down there, somewhere; somewhere in those streets and houses, amongst the roofs and chimneys, perhaps at home, perhaps at a shop, perhaps walking or riding on a tram, or at her dancing. Perhaps she was sat quietly, drinking tea and thinking of him. Did she know how intensely he was thinking of her? Could she sense it?

Sadly, he retraced his steps back to the cottage. As he walked he resolved that he would have dinner and then he would drive down into the town and find out where she lived. He might even see her! He pictured them meeting on the pavement outside her house, seemingly by chance. What would he say? "I just happened to be passing"? Or perhaps he could say, "I hoped I would meet you." Or, "I had to come down to the town on business"? It would be just enough to see her, or simply be near her and know he was near her. And, perhaps, to verify that there was no-one else.

It was a warm evening. He had to ask for directions several times before he found the right road and parked the Austin safely at one end of it. He stood by the car and studied the rows of Victorian houses. It was along there, perhaps around halfway, that she lived. Maybe, just maybe, she was there, too. Cautiously he approached the house on the opposite side of the road and started his vigil. It looked quite ordinary. There was no indication, no plaque or notice, no flags or balloons, to indicate the immense importance of the person who dwelt inside. One day there might be, he thought.

Mrs Cerny's house overlooked a side road. She could stand in her best parlour and look out, not at other houses, but at two rows of mature trees and the Downs which lay beyond. She described this affectionately as "their view". And near the junction, but still very much in "their view", stood a telephone box and it was behind this that Michael took up refuge. He told himself that if anyone came out or went in, he could pretend that he was about to make a telephone call. He did not have long to wait. The front door opened and to his surprise a man emerged, followed by a young woman. For a moment he did not recognise Angus Muir and his daughter, but behind them, alongside an older woman, was his beloved. They were talking and laughing. It looked so inviting, and Michael was almost on the point of walking across and introducing himself, when a young man, a familiar young man, appeared coming down the street. In horror and disbelief, Michael saw him take his beloved by the waist, roughly pull her towards him, and kiss her! Then he disappeared into the house. He thought that she had put up a token resistance. Yes, she had tried to push him away, it seemed. But he did appear to be very familiar with her, this youth. Too familiar! And Michael now recognised him as the one who had greeted them at the builder's yard. Perhaps he was a relative of the Muirs?

Feeling disillusioned and crestfallen he waited until the Muirs were out of sight, the front door was shut and the curtains drawn, before walking slowly back to the car. She was in there, in that small, plain, brick house, incarcerated, perhaps a prisoner, a fair maiden, waiting for him to rescue her. Perhaps she was in the arms of a lover. No, no! He could not believe that of her. She was too pure and good to have a lover. That he would not believe.

"Did you see him?" whispered Angus as they walked along the pavement.

"See who?" hissed his daughter, wondering why her father was whispering when there appeared to be no-one to overhear what he might say.

"The surveyor."

"Him?" she asked incredulously. "Where?"

"Don't look around - I expect he's gone now, but he was standing across the road when we came out of Deborah's. Och, I saw him immediately. He did n' have the gall to hide himself!"

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, lowering her head. "He must be absolutely besotted."

"Aye," sighed Angus. "That he must be." They passed the remainder of their walk in silence. Moira's thought only of Felicity and this young man, wondering just what it was about her friend that so attracted men. She had to lead them on in some way, Moira concluded. It must be something she did or said, the way she opened her eyes, or shaped her mouth, some mannerism, some black secret that she, Moira, was totally innocent of, leave alone employ, it! And it would remain that way! Why should he be there, except that she had enticed him? The episodes with Kurt - Felicity's protestations had been for her onlooker's benefit. They were carefully crafted to provoke, tease and, perhaps, arouse him. Was she planning to open her window to him and admit him that very night when everyone else had gone to bed? Perhaps Felicity was not the kind of friend she should have.

So Michael travelled up to London feeling forlorn and distressed. What should have been an occasion for celebration and joy was, for him, an incongruous impediment, a tedious labour that had to be performed, and no more. He should not be in London, he told himself. He should have stayed in Dover. To all intents and purposes he concealed his true feelings. To Natacha he was brotherly and supportive, to Christina, Lady Helen and Sophie he was attentive and courteous. Inside him, fear and suspicion united and gnawed away. It may have been this cancer which provoked him into going out to the bar at the interval, instead of staying with Mark and the ladies and sipping port wine served by Matthews.

“Michael, darling,” said a husky female voice from behind him. “Where have you been hiding yourself?” It was Jenny Forbes, wearing a low cut dress that attracted the attention of most of the men present but which, to their female partners, appeared quite unsuitable for the occasion. “I have been hoping that I would bump into you!”

“Hello, Jenny,” he said lowly, and then took the unprecedented step of taking her in his arms and kissing her on the forehead. Later, when he thought about it, he was uncertain why he had acted so. But at the time, his impulse was just to enjoy briefly the warmth, softness and feel of a woman. It might have been anyone. It was fortuitous that it was Jenny.

“You did not come to see me photographed!” she scolded. “I was quite cross with you at the time, especially as I had taken off all of my clothes! Just for you!”

Michael smiled, sensing and enjoying a feeling of superiority over those whose eyes were watching the two of them, and who were close enough to hear what was said. “I am sorry that I missed it, but I had another commitment. Did you know that I am tied up at Dover?”

“Oh!” she said. “I do like the sound of that! Perhaps we could be tied up together, or I could arrange another performance of the session, just for you?”

“I don’t think that Christina would approve somehow.”

“Christina approve? There is something between the two of you, then, is there? There has been nothing announced.”

“We have a sort of understanding.”

“You and Christina? You are secretly engaged, then?”

“Not exactly, but - .”

“Then I can come and see you? There’s no-one else, is there?”

“I suppose not,” said Michael weakly.

“Good! We can fix something up. Oh, look! There’s Alistair! I must talk to him! Alistair, darling!”

He watched her move away, the crowd parting before her like the waters of the Red Sea before Moses. A visit from Jenny Forbes at Dover was not quite the worst thing he could think of, but it came close to it. If she did arrive, she could hardly stay at the cottage and there was no possibility of her staying at Newington House. “She just invited herself,” he told himself, and imagined what Christina would say in response to such a statement. There were other, more serious, complications. It would threaten his position of remaining incognito and his pursuit of his beloved!

There she was a rare, exotic, butterfly of great beauty which could sometimes be glimpsed in the Monastery gardens at Newington. Such was a privileged sighting, but he had made a sighting there once and preferred to think of her amongst the flowers or standing on the bridge over the lake, rather than on the threshold of her house or in the arms of another. What if she was married? These awful morbid questions materialised, unannounced and unseen, exploding in his mind like mortars from a distant cannon. She did not wear a ring - he was sure of that. Could it be that she removed it when, siren-like, she flew abroad and lured young unsuspecting and innocent men, such as he, to their fate? At least Jenny had left the arrangements for her intended visit vague and up in the air. Maybe she would forget all about it and he would hear no more.

“Well? Well? What did you think?” Natacha was bright and bubbly when she met them again. “What did you think? How were the tone and the tempi? Do you think that Clara would have approved?”

“I think that Clara, Robert, and Myra would all have approved. I thought that you were superb and so did the audience. It is as well that they did as I would have had them taken out and shot, every man, woman and child amongst them, had they not!”

“You were very good my dear,” said Helen. “Take no notice of Mark's comments. He is heavily biased and probably would have said exactly the same had you played Chopsticks! We all enjoyed the concerto immensely.”

“Mother was always given to the most frightful understatements,” said Mark. “If only I could paint you now - to capture all this vivacity and life! You are youth personified. We are all lackeys beside you, and yours to command!”

“You may consider yourself to be so, Mark,” said Christina lightly, raising an eyebrow at Michael as if to say, he thought, “why do you not say such things of me?” It was not in his character. He knew that Christina would only laugh at him if he did attempt to do so. Worse, she would probably tell Angela then the whole World would laugh at him. Yet he was made to feel inadequate by Mark's rhetoric. What had he said to Christina that was affectionate or flattering? Of more importance, what of these natures had he said to Felicity?

“What happens now, Nat?” said Mark, winking at his mother. “Apart from hearing the remainder of the concert?”

“Oh, Miss Crotchet had plans for recitals, further concerts, and a crack next year at the Nice piano competition. Oh! I see what you mean! I suppose after the concert we go home to bed.”

“It can all be very demanding,” said Mark.

“I hear that you turned down the offer of a ride back to Newington with us this afternoon,” said Christina when he called at the Bloomsbury house late the following morning.

“I have received a note from Mr Fishwick asking me - instructing me would be more like it - to go and see him tomorrow. I expect he has some papers for me to sign.”

“How horrid! I imagine that his office is every bit as odious as he is. And I hear that you have invited Jenny Forbes down to stay with you,” she said, coolly.

“Good grief!” exclaimed Michael. “News travels fast! It is not true. I did not invite her, she invited herself!”

“And you said?”

“I didn't think it was a good idea, what with you and me, and the survey. Anyway, no arrangements were made. I am hoping that she will forget all about it.”

“I will ensure that she does,” said Christina, firmly.

“We all thought that Natacha's performance last night was stupendous,” said Mark. “And I thought it was superb, also. I mean I have heard her in practice, but this was far above anything she's achieved before.”

“And I thought that the portrait was superb, too,” said Michael. “I am sure she was quite touched by it, although I am sure that she thought something was in the wind!”

“Of course she did. It is damned difficult to conceal that you are painting someone! Especially when you spend half of each and every day sat beside her sketching, when you're not turning music, that is.”

The presentation had been held at a small, discreet, gathering at Michael's home. His father had appeared, dark, over-bearing, but clearly proud and reservedly delighted by his daughter's success. Michael expected to be asked how he was progressing but his father said nothing except give him a curt acknowledgement. “He is getting worse,” whispered Sophie. “Not at all better. What he is up to I do not know. Such comings and goings such zat you never did see. And zat Fishwick creature, always here, creeping in and out of ze 'ouse.”

“I have to go and see him on Monday.”

Sophie pulled a face and breathed deeply. “It is vorst than ze dentist, I would say.”

When, at one point in the celebration, all four of them had stood together, Mark with Natacha, and he with Christina, Michael had proposed a toast to the careers on which they were embarking. To Natacha, first, for her music; to Christina for her writing; and to Mark for

his painting. And for him, was it really his engineering he thought of as he raised his glass? After their glasses had gently touched and been lowered, Mark proposed their continued friendship. Michael thought there was much more proposed in Mark's eyes when he looked at Natacha. Did Mark look upon Natacha in the same manner that he regarded the one he loved? Did his eyes, when he looked upon her, the girl who had once occupied his dreams and who now walked in the distant gardens at Newington, betray the same devotion? "To our friendship," he said.

Monday dawned dull and wet, as it was, and is, customary for Mondays to do so in order to meet all reasonable expectations. It seemed fitting to Michael as he made his way across to the City and to Mr Fishwick's office. Was it raining in Dover? Were the ruins glistening and the surface of the lake rippled? And, even if it stopped, would it be too wet and slippery for her to make her way up the hill?

He arrived early hoping that the unpleasant business, what ever it was, could be dealt with quickly and he could be on his way, on a Southern Railway train, down the line to Dover. As he approached the alleyway that led to the dark, foul-smelling, courtyard he encountered the Austrian architect. "Ah, Herr Bernstein? You have business here, too?"

"It is a small world," said Michael, not wishing to answer the question, but wondering what business the questioner could have there.

"It is smaller than you may think, Herr Bernstein," said Herr Cerny with an air of superiority and triumph in his voice. "I 'ave been invited to stay at Newington House with Lady Christina next week. I vill see you there, then, ja?"

Michael was struck dumb. He had been reprimanded, had he not, about the untrue suggestion that he had invited Jenny Forbes to stay, but not a single word had been said about the Austrian! Where was the justice in all this? Where would it all end? Did they still fight duels on the Continent? "Perhaps you will take Jenny Forbes with you," he said stealthily.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. If you will excuse me, I must go else I shall be late. It has been pleasant, meeting you."

"Indeed!" snapped the Austrian with a slight bow.

"Goodness," thought Michael as he opened the outer door to the office, "he even clicked his heels together! I thought only Prussians did that."

"Ah! Master Michael. As punctual as usual - punctuality to a fault! Do come in - here let me assist you and take your coat. And, your illustrious career - it is going well? I hear such glowing reports!"

"It is satisfactory," said Michael coolly. "But slow."

"Ah, slow? Yes, yes, indeed. I am sure that you would agree that if we to embark on a long journey, it is wise not to run the first half mile, is it not? Would you sign this?"

"What is it?" asked Michael studying, with some suspicion, the papers lain before him.

"It is your marriage contract. An oath of promise," said Mr Fishwick, handing him a pen. "Lady Christina has signed already."

"Lady?" queried Michael, sharply.

"You are right, as usual, to pull me up. A slip of my humble tongue - a figure of speech - my profound apologies, but it is the way she carries and conducts herself. Such deportation! Such breeding! She is a fine woman."

Michael found it distasteful, almost obscene, to hear Mr Fishwick singing the praises of the woman he was to marry, so he studied the document closely. It began with a large "Whereas". Then there was something about a number of parties, probably planned to celebrate the marriage. Then came a reference to an undertaking - to hold the parties, he thought. Clearly it was going to be a grand affair! "Is there a get-out?" he asked.

"Oh! Such a wise and shrewd question, I must say," beamed Mr Fishwick, coming uncomfortably close and pointing to a passage which commenced with the words "In the event" before deteriorating into a maze of words without verbs, punctuation or, as far as Michael could see, meaning. "The contract says," Mr Fishwick claimed, his breath making

Michael turn his head, "if you have not become formally engaged within ten years of the signing of this contract the deed shall be null and void unless the said period is extended by mutual agreement save in any event such extension should there be one shall not be for a period in excess of ten years."

"And is it binding?" asked Michael, hoping that his understanding of what had been said was correct.

"You mean, if I may humbly suggest, is it enforceable at law?"

"Yes, yes. Is it binding?"

"That would be for a court to decide. I know that you will find it inexcusable, but I have not looked up to see when the last breach of promise action was brought but, in principle, yes."

As Michael stared at the papers before him, the words slipped out of focus and blurred. It appeared that this would be an irrevocable step. Torches were to be put to all his bridges. He had given Christina some kind of oral undertaking, but since then he had learned that the Austrian had been invited to visit and stay with her. And there was this inescapable vision of his heart's desire in the arms of a blond youth which appeared to grow worse every time he pictured it. "Can I delay signing it for a few days?" he asked.

"I would strongly advise against any delay," said Mr Fishwick in earnest and showing his yellowed teeth. "I know that it is not my place to advise you but if I may, for once, be so bold - the other party has graciously endorsed it. If you do not, both she and your father will undoubtedly wonder if there is a reason, not that I am suggesting that there might be, you find yourself unable to sign. And, then, there is the question of extending your line of credit at the bank. It would be of great, I could say paramount, assistance if I was able to give you father a favourable report before I raise that sensitive subject. It would help immensely, but then as I said, it is not for me to advise you in such matters, merely to acquaint you with all the facts."

If only he could postpone signing and committing himself until he had time to seek out Felicity and find out the truth, but the truth was that she might be married. She might even have children! There he would be, making an absolute fool of himself and risking his future and his career! And all on behalf of a married woman! Five minutes with her would have resolved it. Why, oh, why, had she not been at the gardens when he went there on Friday? Why?

"Mr Bernstein?"

Michael signed.

He had told his assistant that he would be back at the cottage by early afternoon and said that they should meet there. When he arrived there shortly after noon there was no sign of it having rained, nor of Arthur. He was probably sat somewhere, eating his sandwiches, which gave Michael an hour at least, possibly more. The temptation to have a meal was strong. The temptation to take the walk up to the Monastery was stronger. On the way, as he climbed the path, he found himself continuously thinking about Herr Cerny's visit and about Christina's deceit in not telling him. It must have been plain to everyone there who saw it that the Austrian was infatuated with her and that she did little to discourage him. It was that infatuation that was the reason for his visit. Plainly there was one law for her, and another for him. Well, that was not how it was going to be! In view of von Cerny's visit, he felt fully justified in seeking to see, and seeing, Felicity.

There was the document he had signed that morning in Mr Fishwick's office. Why had he signed it, knowing that the Austrian had been invited? Surely that alone was reason not to? And, having signed it, he should have asked for a copy. He knew that now. Still, Christina had signed it also - or she had signed something. He assumed that it was the same. It would hardly be just if the agreement had a clause that allowed her license to see and associate with whosoever she pleased, yet restrained him!

It took a little over half an hour to reach the plateau. At first he could see no-one at all, and it appeared that he was alone. Then, suddenly, his heart leapt as he spotted her, sat on the dwarf wall, looking out over the town and the Channel. She must have heard his approach as she turned around when he was still some twenty paces from her. He was sure that there

was a smile of greeting, perhaps more, for a fleeting, precious, moment. "Hello," he said. "I was hoping that I might find you here."

Felicity looked away and back out to sea. On the southern horizon a ship was creeping, like a huge aquatic snail, towards the North, with almost imperceptible progress. She had hoped he might come, but now that he was here, how should she react to his presence, this man who had upset her best friend by asking for her name and address?

"I came up a couple of times last week but I didn't find you here," he said.

"I normally come here in the late afternoon, sometimes earlier, when the weather is fine. At other times I am practising, but Debbie does allow me some time off."

"Debbie?"

"Deborah? My sister. I live with her. She is my ballet teacher - she runs a small ballet school, but times are hard and it is very difficult to keep it going. She was once hailed as a world-class ballerina in her own right, but she abandoned her career and decided to marry. It did not work out. She has great hopes of me and plans for me to go to the Paris Conservatoire next year, or the year after. I shall not make the same mistake as she did. I shall never marry."

There! It was said! It had taken all of her courage and she regretted having to say it, but she had resolved he should know from the outset, this pleasant young man who had upset her best friend by asking for her address. He should know from the very outset, before he became involved and matters became serious, that his quest would be hopeless. "I am wedded to the Ballet as some are wedded to the Church," she added, still maintaining her gaze out to sea and not once looking at him.

Michael was crushed, yet there was an unexpected sense of relief, or release from a yet unspoken commitment, as if a potentially difficult and painful decision had been taken for him.

"My sister sacrificed her career for love and married, and it turned out badly for her. As I said, I shall never marry."

"May I sit down? Beside you?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, looking around at him. "Here," she indicated.

He praised the view. She said she was watching the ship. "You would never know that it is moving if you did not know also that once it had been over there. Life is like that boat. We suddenly emerge over the horizon and steer a course, making imperceptible progress, step by step, day after day, until we disappear again. It is strange. Have you ever thought about it? Do you believe in God? And go to Church?"

"I am supposed to," he said. "I usually find a good excuse why I should not."

"You are not a Catholic, then?"

"No!" he said emphatically, but was thinking that Christina was.

"I was," she said wistfully.

"Was?"

"Was! Something happened, something awful, something that prevents me from going back to the church."

"You haven't been excommunicated?"

"No!" she laughed and turned to face him. "But there are those who should be."

"I am not sure that I could bear it, going to a Catholic church. There's the matter of confession for a start. Having to go and tell a complete stranger all the things I had done that were wrong and not one thing that was right."

"God sees all the things that you do which are right."

"I suppose he sees all the things you do that are wrong."

"Yes," she said softly.

"And there's the praying to idols. I could not do that!"

"We do not pray to idols. And as for confession, it isn't difficult, normally. I do not think people are by and large inherently wicked. Not most of them. And confessing and receiving communion can give you immense freedom of mind, absolute inner serenity."

"But you say you cannot go? Is it a question of conscience?"

"Something like that," she sighed.

They lapsed into silence, neither quite knowing what to say to the other. Michael

watched the ship which had now crept through another degree of the compass. "There are people on that ship," he thought, "standing on the deck, looking at the shore, thinking that there are people here looking at them. They are oblivious of our problems. They have problems of their own. I wonder where it is bound. I wonder if it is one of Sophie's and what it is carrying."

"You *do* believe in God?" she said suddenly.

"I suppose so."

"You sound doubtful."

"Not really," he replied. The truth was since his mother died and he stopped being taken regularly to Church, he had hardly given the subject much thought. He had said prayers in assembly, attended services at school, and occasionally accompanied Natacha and Sophie. He had even gone once or twice whilst he was at University, although he could not recall the reasons. They were probably memorial services of some kind. He had been taught that there was a God in much the same way as he was taught that every sentence should have a verb, or two and two would make four. He had taken it for granted. "It is a little like asking me whether two plus two make four," he said.

"And sin?"

He wondered if she meant "sin" or "sinning". "How do you mean?" he asked.

"Do you believe that we can commit sin, in thought, word and deed?"

"I suppose so," he said again, wondering briefly whether she was a religious zealot of some kind. Yet, her questions were not asked with any fervour. He had been taught the ten commandments and could remember them, or some of them. "The ten commandments?" he asked.

"Keeping them," she said firmly.

Did she suspect that he had broken them? Where was this conversation leading? Had he become enamoured by an Evangelist? Or did she know more about him than he had told her? Did she know about Christina, or the papers he had signed earlier in the day? How could she? Yet guilt and despair were beginning to take root in his thoughts. This was not what he wanted to talk about. This was not how he thought they should spend their time together. "I try to," he said.

Felicity saw the look of bewilderment on his face and lightly, but reassuringly, touched his arm. "I am sorry. I am not referring to you or anything that you may have done. I am simply being selfish and thinking of my own troubles."

"Is there any way in which I can help?" he asked hopefully.

"No, I do not think so. I do not think that there is anything that anyone can do."

"You could try talking about them."

"I do not think that I could, at least not to a stranger."

"Please, do not think of me as a stranger," he pleaded, "think of me more as a friend."

She smiled and looked him full in the face, studying his features. "Somehow, I do not want to think of you as a stranger," she whispered, "so I shall think of you as a friend."

A further period of silence ensued. The ship continued its slow progress and crept even nearer to the limit of their vision. Michael contemplated how he could possibly turn the subject to her family. She had mentioned her sister and her dancing. He could ask about that, but there was also the question of the time. Arthur would be at the cottage by now. He would see the car and wonder where he had gone, but half an hour was neither here nor there. "This is pleasant, sitting here," he said.

"It is less pleasant in the Winter," she said forcibly.

"You come up here in the Winter?"

"When the weather allows, but in a bad winter there can be over a foot of snow. It sweeps in from the North Sea, straight from the Arctic, and drifts into deep pockets on the Downs. The lanes are quite often impassable. Then are the times when, I am afraid, I do not try to come up here. No-one does. The Monks are left in peace!"

"I am sure that you do not disturb the Monks. I expect they give thanks for your presence!"

"Flattery!" she laughed.

“Just the same, perhaps we could meet up here regularly? Just to walk and talk. It can get a little lonely down at the cottage and I don't know any of the workers on the Estate.”

“And I do not suppose that they invite you up to the House. They are there at present, Lady Newington and her daughters. She is said to be very beautiful and her daughters are said to be very aloof and proper.”

“Oh, I don't think they are both like that. I met the younger one and she seemed - almost human.”

Felicity laughed. “Well, I have met neither, nor want to! Everyone is aware of their reputation.”

“Are they both unmarried?” he asked, wondering if there was gossip about himself.

“Yes! And likely to remain so by all accounts!” Then she softened her tone. “I should not be saying things like this. It is uncharitable. Have you actually been up to the House?”

“Lady Newington invited me, when I first arrived down here, to go up and explain the drainage scheme to her and all the work I am undertaking. She *is* beautiful, and she was most kind and gracious.”

“Mr Muir says it is a beautiful house.”

“It is all right,” said Michael, trying to recall if there were any special features he should mention. “It overlooks a fine view. You can see the ruins from there. That means,” he went on, as a new truth revealed itself to him, “that you must be able to see the House from here!”

“You can, from the far side, beyond the chapel.”

How strange, he thought. Whilst he walked here, in the gardens with Felicity, Christina might be walking in the gardens at Newington. In a few days she might be walking in the gardens with Herr von Cerny. They could be in sight of one another, yet totally unaware of what the other was doing. “Sight is only a prelude to touch and feeling,” he said suddenly.

“I am sorry?”

“So am I. I do not know why I said that. It just came into my head. Forget it.”

“I must think about what you said. Sight is only a prelude to touch and feeling?” she repeated.

The ship was almost out of sight, still bound unswervingly on its journey towards its un-revealed destination. “I really ought to go,” he said regretfully. “I would stay here all afternoon with you if I could, but my assistant will be waiting for me. We ought to be getting on with the survey. When will you come here next?”

She smiled. “The day after tomorrow, if the weather remains as it is.”

“Then I shall pray for fine weather - for us both. It is most unpleasant to try and survey when it is wet.”

It was difficult to leave her, but she determined the issue by standing, brushing her clothes down, and announcing that she would have to go as well. He watched her descend and, once again, was still standing in the gap in the wall when she reached the hedgerow and disappeared from his sight. When he checked, the ship had gone, too.