

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Michael embarked upon a blissful Summer he was never to forget. It was not that everything went his way. There were rainy days, as is the custom in any English Summer. The survey did not progress at all well. It advanced in fits and starts with a number of sections having to be re-surveyed several times. In a way he did not mind, so long as Mr Hiller did not conclude that he would be better served by placing someone else in the field, and recalling him and Arthur to the office, perhaps to do no more than plot sections as a punishment. So he was always ready with plausible excuses when Mr Hiller drove down from Canterbury and anxiously announced that as the survey could not do other than run into the Winter, it should be suspended in the Autumn and re-commenced in the following Spring.

Such a plan would have suited neither Michael nor his assistant upon whom Michael had devoted a fair amount of energy encouraging his courtship of Miss Muir. He found his assistant particularly vulnerable to the stories he would invent after his dinners at the House and, as a consequence, Moira found herself inundated with flowers, chocolates, cards, small presents and a stream of invitations to the cinema or the dance hall, anything that poor Arthur could afford out of the little he had left after giving his mother the bulk of his wages for his keep. The prospect of a suspension of the survey only made Arthur exert greater effort to produce a climate in which his adored would not hesitate to refuse a request from Lady Christina to accompany her back to London at the end of the Summer. He never discussed the subject with Moira so she was never aware that it was not in her mind to accept such an invitation, even if it were made. Nor did either he nor Michael know that the Partners refused to allow Mr Hiller to suspend the survey. They considered it imperative that it was completed as early as practicable, and if that meant running into, even completely through, the Winter, so be it. After all, the cost of the survey was not part of the basic design fee and would be recovered in full from the District Council.

Michael was regularly asked by Mr Hiller to estimate how much of the survey had been completed and how long it would take to complete the remainder. This he did faithfully, but on some occasions between these requests the amount of completed work actually decreased and the time required to complete increased. Mr Hiller would be at his wits' end. "Perhaps if you saw less of this young woman," he said one day, "things would improve!"

Michael was dismayed. "What young woman?" he asked, wondering if his assistant had been liberal with his tongue.

"The one you are seeing. And that goes for Master Brown as well. Work comes before pleasure! Remember that!"

Michael had no intention of seeing less of Felicity, but he was concerned that the news of their meetings had spread as far as Mr Hiller. Obviously Arthur had blabbed. Well, two could play that game! "I think that part of the problem is that Arthur's mind is on other things," he said. "He is completely besotted with this girl and spends all his money upon her! You should see what he buys her - flowers, chocolates, cards, all manner of small presents, and he is for ever taking her to the pictures or going dancing!"

"Well, you are in charge!" snapped Mr Hiller. "Get him into line and get the survey completed!" Michael was unaccustomed to taking orders from anyone other than his father and immediately felt resentful towards Mr Hiller, his tone, and his position. When he was a partner, Mr Hiller would have to go!

What Mr Hiller did not appreciate was that what Michael said of Arthur could be said of Michael, too. True, he did not ply Felicity with flowers, chocolates, cards or small presents. Nor did he invite her to see Greta Garbo, or accompany him dancing. The truth was that whereas Arthur plucked some fruit as a result of his labours, held Moira close in the back seats at the Regal and whispered terms of endearment in her ears, Michael's relationship did not advanced beyond the occasional holding of hands, a position that he thought he had reached remarkably quickly given his total lack of intimacy with Christina. Exceptionally he was able to slide his arm around Felicity's shoulder when they sat together. He even once managed a fleeting kiss on her cheek when she was about to commence her descent, but

mostly she was content to sit or walk and talk, and he was content that she did.

Gradually she told him more and more about herself, about her fears, her likes and dislikes, her family, her favourite music which Deborah never tired of playing for her on the piano, her aspirations. Michael reciprocated in kind, never being untruthful, but never being entirely truthful. Gradually, as more was said and as the details became more personal and intimate, each realised that the other was holding something back. The subject would be approached in conversation and touched upon, but each would, in turn, draw back at the brink.

Michael was conscious that he was living a lie as far as Felicity and Christina were concerned. At times he could dismiss it with a mental shrug of the shoulders, but as the survey advanced and the Summer passed, the weight of his falsehood increased. He thought that when Helen and her daughters returned to Town the load might diminish. To his dismay, it did not because the nucleus of his guilt was directed towards Felicity, and not Christina. Several times he tried to muster his courage and tell Felicity the whole truth, about his family, his family's wealth and position, and his commitment to Christina, but on each occasion he failed to go through with it. Back at the cottage, afterwards, he would debate the issues. He would argue that it did not matter and then counter with the thought that if there was to be a full relationship with Felicity, that had to be based upon honesty, trust, and not deceit, if it was to mean anything. Yet how could he have a full relationship with Felicity whilst he had a commitment to marry Christina and, if this was so, what purpose would be served by telling her everything?

Then there was the question of how Felicity, herself, saw their relationship. Did she think of him as a mere acquaintance, or at best a friend? If either was true, again there would be no purpose in telling her the whole truth. Which ever way he argued the point, he came to the same conclusion - there was no point in being open with Felicity, he told himself. Yet he continued to feel uncomfortable. No matter how much he tried to argue against it, he knew he should, and would, tell her everything in time.

It was Felicity who broke the ice and dipped her pointed toe into the cold, deep, still, pool. The vestiges of summer were waning, as the trees in the woodlands adopted their Midasian appearance and deposited their treasures into pockets in the ground. "It will soon become too chilly to come here and sit like this," she said one sharp, bright, day.

"We will have to find an alternative venue. Would you be happy to meet at the cottage?" Felicity did not answer at first but submerged herself in deep thought. "A penny for them," he said lightly.

"I never told you what it was that was troubling me on the day we first met here," she said solemnly. "I have never told anyone what happened to me - not a living soul."

"You do not have to tell me," Michael said gently.

"I think I would like to. You will soon be returning to London and I may never see you again."

"I don't think I'll be returning to London for several months yet, and as for seeing you again - ."

She shook her head. "We should not deceive ourselves. It has been a wonderful Summer, the best of my life in some respects, and the worst in others. Had I not met you when I did I do not know what I would have done. Knowing you has made the difference, but I know that my Autumn will come and Winter will follow."

"And Spring after that."

"Not for me."

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"I mean that this has been the Summer of my life and only an Autumn and the Winter will follow. And during this Summer, I have been able to talk to you, honestly, frankly, in a way that I haven't been able with anyone else. But there is something I have not told you, something I have told no-one, something that I need to tell to some one. Something I need to tell to you."

"Concerning the thing that was troubling you?"

She nodded and swallowed. "Something happened that day which turned my world

upside down. Something which was, and still is, for me, the most awful thing that has happened to me.”

Michael listened in silence as she calmly described how the Church had been the centre of her life, how she had attended Mass and received the Holy Sacrament almost daily. “It gave me such a feeling of absolute inner serenity, of being at peace with the World, being in a state of Grace. I doubt that you could possibly understand what I mean?”

“I think maybe I can. Had you asked me that when first we met I probably couldn't, but meeting and knowing you, being with you, thinking about you every hour of the day this past summer, has given me the kind of feeling that you describe - a feeling where everything else pales into insignificance. Being with you has done that to me.”

She turned to him and smiled. “Knowing you has affected me in much the same way. But I must tell you.” She told how she went to confession daily, not a practice that her former best friend found acceptable, and that she was normally heard by Father William. “He is the main Parish Priest, but he is old and none too mobile. He lives in a house near the chapel on the Estate and I think he now spends most of his time there. So Father Thomas, who is much younger, has gradually taken on most of the Parish duties. It was Father Thomas who heard my confession and said I was so pure that I should go into a convent.”

“I am glad that you did not.”

“In some ways, so am I,” she said lightly, then grew serious and recounted the events of the day they had first met. “I have not told another soul this - not a living soul,” she repeated. She had gone to the confessional as was normal and confessed. Michael wondered how she could find something to offer up in confession on a daily basis. What could such an angel find to say? He knew that Helen went to the chapel almost daily, and that Christina went to Mass on Sundays. What did they find to confess? If he had to go before a priest, not that he ever would, and had to confess, what would he say? There were a few white lies, some omission of the truth and breach of trust, but nothing there that was likely to result in him being cast into the inferno. It was not as if he had murdered someone. And how could he keep his word to Christina? It had been rashly given. He had been hasty, swept along on the tide of events and emotions at the time. After all, he had been more or less blackmailed into the position in the very first instance by the conspiracy between his father and Lady Newington. He was the victim, not the perpetrator. Yet it had been given in full view of the Monastery. The all-seeing, all-seeing, wise, Monks had witnessed his solemn undertaking to Christina. It would have to be honoured, in part if not in full. This was all hopeless, was it not?

Felicity's account had suddenly changed course. She was telling how she had been woken one night to find her nephew standing over her in bed, after which she had bolted her bedroom door right up to the day he departed for Austria. Sometimes she would hear the handle being turned and the door tried, and he had made advances towards her, his own Aunt! And towards Moira! Of course, these were repugnant and were repelled, yet they aroused in her - how could she put it - a magical excitement, something that she tried to repress and something that she was bound to confess if she were to remain in her state of Grace.

After this particular confession she had returned to her favourite pew to say her penance when he, Father Thomas, was suddenly alongside her, breathing heavily, almost gasping for air, placing his arms around her, pulling her towards him, now trying to kiss her, now disturbing her clothing, now with his hands on her flesh. “I struggled. I turned my head away. I do not know what would have happened had I not dug my fingernails deep into his cheek. You must believe me, Michael. I found it absolutely repulsive. To be violated, there, in God's House, in front of Mary and the baby Jesus, and by a man in whom I had invested all my trust and with whom I had shared all my most sensitive secrets. Even now it makes me shudder to think about it! I have not been back to the church since that day, nor have I seen Father Thomas. He did come around to the house and try to see me, but either I was out or I refused to see him. I could not have faced him then, nor could I face him now. And, now - now I imagine that you will hate me, but I am not wicked, Michael. I am not, what ever Moira may say. I did not provoke him. Please tell me that you do not hate me.”

“Of course I do not hate you. How could I?”

“People do when women fall victim to men's passion. They are always the ones to be

blamed, the ones who are made to pay. Daughters are turned out of home, wives are estranged. But I did nothing to provoke him - nothing at all, except tell the truth as I was bound to do. I thought that there, in the sanctuary of the church, I would be safe, but I was not. He attacked me!"

"I could never do anything like that," said Michael softly. "I would never take anything from you that you were not prepared to give."

"I know," she murmured. "This Summer has been wonderful for me, being here with you. I have come to be so dependent upon our meetings. I do not know what I will do when they have to end."

"That is one of the reasons why I suggested that we start meeting at the cottage, especially when the weather gets worst. It may be more difficult for you to get to, but I could always pick you up in the car."

She did not respond but turned from him and looked out to sea. Once they sat there and watched a ship glide purposely across the horizon. At least the captain and crew had known their destination. They had carefully plotted their course. If only she could see her destination so that she could plot hers. "Are you sure that you will not turn against me and come to hate me for what I have told you or because of what I have done?"

"Hate you? Never! Not as long as I live, but there is something that I must tell you and that, when you hear it, may make you hate me."

"You are leaving soon? Not today? This is not our last meeting? Oh, don't say that it is - I would like to prepare for your departure, to be ready to say "goodbye"! At the very least we should part friends. I could not bear it if we did not!"

Michael waved his hands vigorously, but she carried on talking. "I am not leaving!" he emphasised. "I do not expect to return to London until after Christmas, and that's the God honest truth! It could even be some way into next year. And, we are friends. I hope that no matter what happens, and no matter what we may say or do to one another, we shall always remain friends. But there is something that I must tell you which does, coincidentally, have something to do with me going back to London. You remember when we first met you asked me about my family, and I told you I have a step-mother, my father works in a bank and my sister is learning to play the piano? That is all true, but it is not the whole of the truth concerning my family. There is more besides. My sister does play the piano except she is an up and coming concert pianist. And my father does work in a bank. He owns it. I am not sure how wealthy he is but, he is probably one of the wealthiest men in the Country. Just for good measure, we have a large house in Belgravia and my step-mother owns a shipping line."

"You are a Prince Charming?" she said lightly. "But why did you not tell me?"

"Why did I not tell you? I could have done, I think. There came a time - but when we met, I had this silly, fanciful, idea, a kind of pretence that once I started living it I found it difficult to stop. When I started work - I am an articled pupil, that at least is true - I wanted to achieve something for myself instead of relying on my father's wealth and influence. No-one was supposed to know my true background, not Mr Hiller, not Arthur, not Miss Muir nor her father, and therefore not you."

"Ah, you are one of these fairy tale Princes who walks incognito amongst his subjects to discover what they think of him."

"No, not really. I suppose it was really some form of vanity, but no-one here knew, except Lady Newington and her daughters."

"Why should they know?"

"Because they know my father," he blurted. "Because I am contracted to marry one of the daughters! I am to marry Christina!"

"Oh Lord! Lady Christina?"

"Just Christina."

"Oh dear Lord!"

"I know I should have told you weeks ago, but I was afraid that if I did, you would no longer wish to meet me and talk to me. It is an arranged marriage, arranged by our parents."

"Do you love her?"

"Do I love her?" said Michael reflectively. "No, I do not, but I have given my word

and signed some form of marriage contract. But, I do not love her. I love you. I think that I have been in love with you since the day that first I saw you. I think I loved you even before I saw you. And I shall always love you, no matter what happens to the two of us, no matter where we go, or what we do, whether we are together or apart.”

“Oh Michael!” she sighed and lightly planted a kiss of the opposite cheek to the one that Christina had kissed. “I am in love with you, too. I cannot bear the thought of us having to part.”

“We could always run away together, but then my father would disinherit me, you would sacrifice your career, and the very least that Christina would do would be sue me for breach of promise.” Suddenly he found himself thinking, once again, of Jenny Forbes and pictured her face, wrinkled and burnt. “It would be romantic, the kind of thing that happens in books, but I do not think that would be a wise solution. We could lose everything.”

“We would have each other,” she whispered. “Oh, it all seems so hopeless. I knew that you were going to say something awful. I thought that you were going to simply say that you were going back to London, and I was wondering how I could bear that. Now you tell me that you are, and you are to marry a woman that you do not love. So you will be miserable with her and I shall be miserable without you. I do love you so very much, so very much. I had hoped that even if we were separated, we would be able to see each other occasionally, but if you are married, even if it is to someone you do not love, there is no hope of that. It is impossible! Oh, it all seems so unfair!”

“Life is unfair,” he said soothingly as she rested her head in his shoulder. “Look at me. I have had the best of educations and I really need for nothing. I could have virtually anything I want, yet I am to be denied that one thing in the whole World that I do want - you! Life is terribly unfair, but we will have to try and make the best of it. Sooner or later Christina will pull the strings that bind us and tie the knot tight. Until that day we should make the most of the time when we can be together.”

“Does she know about me?” Felicity asked suddenly, with suspicion.

Michael paused before he answered. “She does not know about us,” he said lowly. “She knows your name because your friend, Miss Muir, did mention it once, but she has never said anything, nor dropped the slighted hint, so I assume that she does not know that we meet.”

“Or that we love one another?” she sighed. “It is strange, though. Do you know, I think I may be being followed.”

“Followed?” he said with a jolt. “Surely not! You must be imagining it!”

“A man followed me today. I am sure of it,” she said emphatically, but did not move her head from its rest. “All the way from the end of our road right up to the Estate boundary, he was behind me. I am also certain the same man followed me from home to the ballet school yesterday.”

“You must be imagining it.”

“I am not!” she said sharply, moving her head so that she could look him straight in the face. “A man followed me, I am telling you.”

“Well I cannot think of any reason why Christina would have you followed. Me, maybe. That I could understand.”

“Perhaps she does know about us? Perhaps Moira has told her?” It was possible, he thought. It would have required only a chance remark. She would tell Christina that she was going out with one of the surveying team and that her former best friend was seeing the other. “No,” he said, firmly. “If Christina knew I think her response would be far more direct. It is not Father Thomas following you, is it?”

“This is not a joking matter,” she said, crossly.

“I am sorry. I will be serious now. If you really think that someone is following you, you should tell a policeman and point him out. That will stop him, whoever he is.”

Felicity did not answer but contemplated all that Michael had just said to her. She had always assumed that he would return to London and had never assumed that he would wish to take her with him, or offer to marry him. She had hoped. She had lain in bed and romanticised, dreamed of him bearing her off, of a quick wedding - no, no! She would have it

a white wedding, with Deborah and Moira as the bridesmaids. Would it be a Catholic wedding? She would form the words on her lips. Would the priest ask Michael to pledge himself before her? Oh, in these moments of rapturous fantasy she had hoped that he might ask her to marry him! Yet, in the sober light of day, had he asked her, she had no idea what her reply would be and sometimes dreaded the question. Now, he had told her that he was to be married to someone else, a bride who was chosen by his father, a woman whom he did not love. She imagined that she should have felt rejected, even betrayed. She would have done had he said that he loved Christina, but she would have drawn some consolation that, at least, he was happy and with the woman he loved, even if she was not with the man she loved. But as the marriage was arranged, he would be unhappy! They would both be unhappy, together yet apart.

“At least we love each other,” said Michael, placing a protective arm around her. “We have that knowledge to cling to and it may give us the strength to meet what ever life throws at us. Even if we are apart, we must cling to that thought - that we love each other. That will give us strength.”

“I suppose so,” she murmured, “but will you still think of me when you are married to her? Will you still love me in ten years time, when you are far away, possibly with her children?”

“Of course I shall! Will you still love me and think of me when you are famous and have the whole World at your feet?”

“Yes,” she said, “but this prospect, of you leaving me to marry a woman that you do not love and who probably does not love you, it is barbaric! Does she love you?”

“I do not think so. She has never suggested that she does. Really, we hardly know each other!”

“It is barbaric! Marriages are made in Heaven, not in London drawing rooms.”

“We must hope that she may meet someone she does like and will then want to be released from the commitment to marry me.” Michael thought of Herr Cerny and how ironic it was that it was not long since he resented the attention he paid to Christina. Now he would welcome, no - encourage - it! Except, Christina had made it rather plain that she had no inclinations in that direction.

“If that happened,” she said slowly. “If, by some divine intervention, Lady Christina found someone else and freed you, and we married, would you allow me to follow my career as a dancer?”

“You once told me that you would never marry because of your career.”

“Things are different now. Would you?”

“Yes,” he said, without considering what the implications were. “And for the present we must make the best use of our time and see each other as often as possible. Are you happy with that?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And, would you like to come to the cottage once the weather precludes us from meeting here?”

“Yes!” she said, without the slightest reservation.

Michael continued to go up to Newington House at discrete but regular intervals. He told himself it was his duty and, in any event, if he did not he was likely to receive a summary demand for his presence from Christina, something he could not refuse without running the risk of arousing her suspicion. After Miss Muir had commenced her labour of Heracles, he expected to be confronted over Felicity at any time, but the days slipped by and aggregated into weeks and still nothing was said. Clearly Arthur had talked to the Muirs and they had decided to keep quiet. Unbeknown to Michael, one of the weakest links in his chain was Matthews who knew his true identity and was in a position to reveal this to those in her charge or with whom she exchanged gossip, but she was also capable of maintaining a confidence and, when asked to do so, she did.

Michael remained uncomfortable and was never more so for the period that Herr Cerny was staying there. He was not disturbed by the things the Austrian said or claimed he

believed in. When he proclaimed his new Order for the World, that everything and everyone should be subjugated, sacrificed if necessary, for the sake of Nationalism, for the Country, or for the King, that this could not be achieved within the present constitution or in a democracy, and that laws would be change to legitimise whatever excess was deemed necessary to achieve the required ends, it did not make Michael feel uncomfortable or threatened. It could not happen in England, for a start. The Austrian said all this in one breath, then announced that he did not intend to change the status quo. This was all unlike Paul Durrant and his kind who talked of world revolution, emancipation, and the reduction of everybody to a new, singular, classless, possession-less, society. On balance, on the days when he permitted himself to make an effort and think about it, Michael thought that the Austrian's creed offered something positive whereas the Internationalist offered nothing. He could not understand why Mark so strenuously opposed everything the Austrian said.

"Because it is wrong!" Mark stressed. "It will not right the World's wrongs. It will not reduce inequality or eliminate poverty. It will not increase personal freedom."

"It appears to be working in Germany and Italy," said Michael, "and would you be prepared to give up all this?"

"I do not need all of this!"

Michael looked around at the gilded frames, the polished furniture, the brocade wall coverings and tapestries, and at the ornate ceiling and fireplace. "Do you not see this all as your heritage? Something that you will become the custodian of, to preserve and pass on to future generations?"

"No, I do not," said Mark sharply. "Heritage is a matter for the State. However, if you see it that way, and Christina sees it that way, marry her and when you do I will forego my inheritance and you two shall have this house and the Estate when Mother dies. You can become the custodians of all this heritage. Better still, I will ask mother to transfer it to you. It can form part of the marriage settlement!"

"I cannot believe that you are serious. And what about Natacha? Where does she fit in all of this?"

"As a pianist she will be lauded and will be fulfilled by bringing culture to the proletariat. Neither she nor I will need any of this."

"I still do not believe you are serious."

"I am! And to demonstrate it, I will go and talk to Mother about it this very minute!"

Michael remained seated. He pictured the House, then let his thoughts ramble through the Estate until they passed the cottage, climbed the path up to the gardens and the ruins. When his thoughts returned to the House, it was not Christina that he saw there, as mistress, but Felicity. It would never happen. Apart from anything else, Mark would change his mind. He would never give up all this.

"It's done," said Mark, later. "I have spoken with Mother. I suggested that she should retain a house on the Estate until her death, but that you and Christina should reside here once you are married."

"I do not think that either of use would want to turn your mother out of the house once we are married, or at any other time. Certainly not after all the work she has invested in it."

"That will be up to you and Christina, but be warned. As a rule, longevity runs in the family."

"If your revolution comes, all that will be academic, or are you counting on that?"

"As a matter of fact, I am not, but I suppose that you are right," said Mark sharply.

The tall Austrian did not arouse anger or impetuosity in Michael, but he did provoke animosity. "I detest him, and he doesn't like you at all," Christina told him some time after his departure. "Our architect thinks you are weak, uncommitted, and not a match for me. He says I should really marry someone better!"

"I suppose he is right," Michael said. "Does he have himself in mind?"

"If he does, I do not!"

"I suppose he thinks I am a Jew, deep down, despite my Christian upbringing."

"I told him that you were not."

"Did he comment on how difficult you might find it in his new World as Mrs Bernstein?"

"No, and I didn't ask him. Anyway, I will be known under my pen name."

"Which is?"

"I cannot make up my mind. I thought that Moira Muir sounded catchy, but I can't use that. How about Loretta Nicholson?"

"Where did you get that?"

"Just made it up," she said.

"And how is the book coming along?" It was not as casual a question as it sounded as Michael was beginning to see this novel as a Damocletian sword which would, when the novel was completed, published, and the great success that Christina maintained it would be, descend upon him and sever his lifeline to Felicity.

"It is coming along," said Christina, unintentionally being unhelpful. "Miss Muir is a super boon and I rather like her."

"When will it be completed?"

"You mean, when will we be married?"

"That depends on more than the publication of your novel and your success. I have to get myself established, too."

Christina smiled mysteriously. "I do not see that as an impediment. I rather suspect that your path is well beaten. Your star is already in the ascendant."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said quixotically. "You will see! And as for the novel, publication before Christmas!"

"You think we may be married before Christmas?"

"Don't sound so horrified! Is it really that dreadful a prospect?"

"I am not horrified," he said defensively. "Just surprised that it will be completed that quickly."

"It is Miss Muir. She seems to be able to type more quickly than I can write. So, it could be before Christmas! You had better acclimatise to the idea."

"Not before Christmas, Darling," said Lady Helen. "That really is not practicable. There would be so many things to arrange."

"I do not want a society wedding. I detest the whole idea, all that pretension. I will leave that to Angela. I would be quite happy to be married here, in the Chapel."

"Wherever you are married, it has to be undertaken properly. And you must not forget there is still the matter of Religion to be resolved. Even if we have an understanding that there will be a dispensation, Michael still has to receive instruction. Father Williams said that it could take up to six months, depending on how Michael responds."

"If that is so, he had better start right away!"

"I had thought that you might both prefer to wait until you are back in London. At some point you will both have to go to see the priest."

"I would have thought it could be started locally down here. Surely Father William can see him? And me, too, if it comes to that?"

"I will speak to him about it, if you wish. He may say that he has not the time available to do it himself, but he has a junior priest who could probably be prevailed upon. I would not have thought it mattered if it is a junior priest."

"I certainly do not mind, so long as he is ordained."

"So, you would like me to speak to Father Williams and see if he or his assistant can instruct Michael?"

"Please do so, Mama," said Christina.

"Then I shall speak to him before we return to London."

"And tell him from me that he is not to accept "no" for an answer from Michael. In fact I will talk to Michael myself to ensure that he does not!"

"Very well, Darling," said her mother. "You see Michael and then I will speak to

Father William.”

Michael went up to the House on the day that Lady Newington and her daughters were due to return to London. The Rolls Royce was laden and the Daimler was prepared to follow behind with Matthews and the luggage.

“You are to receive instruction from Father William,” Christina hissed as they stood together in the drive waiting for the final adjustments to the luggage. “He has been told not to accept “no” from you as an answer.

“Instruction? What about?”

“Didn't that Fishwick creature explain it? So that we may be married! Father William will explain it all to you when you see him. Mama has spoken to him.”

Michael thought it his duty to wave as the cars left a cloud of dust lingering over the drive. He did not think that Christina even looked back, leave alone waved to him. For several ensuing days he lived in the expectation of a visit from, or a summons to, Father William, but none came. He started to wonder if Christina was wrong, or if Lady Newington or, perhaps, Father William, had forgotten. As he reflected sadly on the family's departure and the prospect, the last of these possibilities seemed to be the most likely. Felicity had told him that the priest was old and infirm.

“What instruction does a non-Catholic have to receive when marrying a practising Catholic?” he asked her.

“I am not a practising Catholic,” she said with a note of regret.

“I think you would - should be considered one,” Michael said, feeling embarrassed and not wishing to say something that would hurt her feelings.

“It can be quite lengthy and difficult for Catholics to marry non-Catholics, but it is not impossible. Just very difficult.”

“But, what kind of thing has to be dealt with? What would be discussed at this instruction?”

“For a start, the non-Catholic has to become fully acquainted with the Faith, the services, beliefs, and all the obligations it places on the Catholic partner. This stage can become so detailed that the non-Catholic ends up knowing more about the Catholic religion than the Catholic herself!”

“So, would it be easier for the Catholic to become a non-Catholic?”

“Easier? I do not think so. If you have been brought up in the Faith it becomes ingrained in you. It would not be at all easy simply to give it up whilst you retained your faith. It would be like living some kind of lie every hour of the day, every day of the year. If you lost your faith, well that is a different matter.”

“But what about Catholics who lose their faith whilst they are Catholics?”

“They would be advised to continue going to Church and to pray for their faith to return. God willing, it would.”

“So, its a case of once a Catholic, always a Catholic?”

“I suppose so - something like that.”

“And you are still a Catholic,” he said triumphantly.

“I suppose so,” she said sadly.

“And you still have your faith? I do not imagine it helps if I point out what happened to you was at the hands of a man, a mere weak mortal, not the Church, not even at the Church's instigation. Father Thomas is a man, a weak man, but no more than flesh and blood, just like the rest of us men. What do you think the Church would do to him had you gone to see Father William?”

“That's the irony of it,” she said lowly. “Father William will have heard Father Thomas's confession. He must know, but he will feel bound by the rules of the confessional to remain silent. I know what you say is correct, but it is more than that. What can I say? It was such a shock. I simply could not face him again. I would have to walk out of a church if he were there. In fact I am not sure that I could trust any priest again, and it is trust. It isn't like being with a friend - .”

“ - or a lover?”

“ - or a lover. You tell your priest the most intimate things at confession in absolute confidence. He betrayed that confidence.”

Michael started to wonder just what Felicity might have said in the confessional, but did not ask. If she wanted to tell him she would, in time. “Couldn't you go to the Chapel on the Estate? I believe Father William holds a Mass there most days.”

“I could, but it is a difficult journey for me. And he wonder why I was going there and not to St Margaret's. Why are you so concerned about my going?”

“I am concerned for you. If going to Church was as important to you as you have said, the loss must be affecting you. It would be like losing a limb. And I think that you are unhappy as result.”

“I am happy when I am with you,” she said.

“And I with you. But, this instruction. It can take a long time?”

“I believe it can. The Church doesn't look kindly on mixed marriages. The priest has to be satisfied at each stage that all the matters discussed have been fully understood. It may take weeks.”

“Months, even?”

“Months, even. It depends on how well you respond. But I would help you!” The offer took him aback. Had he compromised himself? What could he say now that would not hurt her? Could he remain silent and hope that it might be forgotten? Sophie had said that Catholics were obliged to try and convert all those they came into contact with. Felicity had never appeared to try to do that and he had felt he should be safe in discussing her religion with her. Now that was appearing not to be the case. “I hope that it may not come to that,” he said. He was pleased with the prospect that instruction might last months and that their duration might depend to a large extent on him. He could prove to be quite awkward should the need arise.