

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It came as a shock for Michael one day, several weeks after Christina had returned to London, to find a black-frocked priest waiting for him at the cottage. He was short, dark-haired, in his early thirties, Michael thought, and he carried a mark on his cheek which indicated a recently healed wound. "Mr Bernstein?" he said as Michael approached. "I am - ."

"Father Thomas?" said Michael, ignoring the proffered hand and pushing past him to open the gate. "What can I do for you?"

"Father William asked me to call and see you."

"You had better come in," said Michael feeling his anger rising. He knew he was being rude and wondered if it was rude enough.

"Father William is indisposed. It his age and rheumatism, you know. I understand that you are to marry Lady Newington's daughter, Christina?"

Michael nodded and spread out his survey plans on the table. "Do go on," he said.

"I am sure that you are aware that she is a member of the Catholic faith and, if I understand correctly, you are not."

"That is so."

"And you are not receiving instruction to enter into the Faith?"

"Goodness, no!"

"Then it will be a mixed marriage, something that the Church will not readily permit. She will require a dispensation if the marriage is to take place."

"Assuming that she proposes to remain a Catholic?"

"Proposes to remain a Catholic?" repeated the priest with incredulity. "Of course she intends to remain a Catholic. She could not leave the Faith. That would be unthinkable!"

"Well, I am not sure quite how you can be so certain. Have you spoken to her?"

"No, I have not. But Father William was instructed by Lady Newington and I do not think she would have done that if there was any doubt - any doubt whatsoever. May we therefore proceed for the present on the assumption that Lady Christina will remain a Catholic?"

"Very well," said Michael sharply.

"As I said, she will require a dispensation, and in order to achieve that you will have at the very least to be instructed in the Faith and upon the responsibilities of parents in a mixed marriage."

"And, if I refuse?"

"There could be no marriage."

"We could get married in a registry office. Everyone does it now-a-days."

"I would advise against considering it. It would not be a legal marriage in the eyes of the Church. Your wife would be living in sin and her soul and those of your children would be in great peril. The Church would not permit that. Almost certainly your wife would be excommunicated. I dread to consider the consequences."

Michael began to wonder about this priest who was not fitting into the stereotype that Michael had prepared for him. He had expected a Fishwick in Cloth, but he was encountering a patient, resolute man, someone that under different circumstances he might have taken a liking to. However, he had now charged himself with revenge. He could make Father Thomas's life as miserable and the instruction as protracted as possible. Yet he could not escape the thought that he owed this priest some gratitude. Had it not been for his unseemly action, he might never have met Felicity. "I do not see how the Church would be protecting any children we might have by excommunicating their mother. She could still go to Church and the children could still be baptised and brought up as Catholics. I wouldn't mind. I just don't see the point of wasting time going through some boring religious instruction!"

"You would be asking your wife to live in sin if you followed that course."

"So you would never take actions that might result in someone living in sin?"

Father Thomas stared at him wondering what had prompted such an obtuse question. "My rôle is to prevent my congregation from sinning and to save them when they do," he said

solemnly. "And you would be committing your wife to live in sin. The Church would not permit that. It is her experience that mixed marriages end in spiritual catastrophe."

"You are telling me that your Church would ex-communicate my wife rather than allow her to live in sin, as you put it?"

"Living in sin would be her choice, not that the Church. She would be going diametrically against the Church's teaching. Put quite simply, yes. Mixed marriages are not encouraged by the Church for this reason and dispensations are rare. Yours will be dependent on a number of conditions being fulfilled, one of which is that your wife remains a practising Catholic. Your children must be baptised and raised in the Faith. You will have to agree to that and Father William told me that you have already signed a civil agreement to that effect. Is there now some problem?"

Michael felt he was being out-manoeuvred. So that had been in the documents he signed! Perhaps he should have read them more carefully. And children? Christina had made no mention of children. "I do not think that there is one," he said slowly. "I just wanted to be clear in my own mind. How do we proceed with this business?"

"It will require a series of meetings between either you and I, or you and Father William. We will then assess your progress and advise the Bishop as to whether a dispensation should be granted."

"I would prefer to see Father William - an older man, you see."

"That may not be practicable. Father William is not in the best of health, but I will mention it to him."

Michael wondered how Felicity would react if he told her that he was to receive instruction from Father Thomas. But, if he was not able to get to see Father William, what could he do? Perhaps he should not mention it at all!

"It is a letter from Father William," said Helen, placing the envelope on the table beside her and smoothing the sheet out over her knee. "He says that Father Thomas has had an initial meeting with Michael which he describes as frank and encouraging."

"That means," said Angela, "that there are problems and that he made no progress!"

"He had better make progress!" said Christina.

"These things must be given time," said Helen, laying the letter on the envelope. "It is a huge step to take, marriage, in itself, leave alone being asked to accept the precepts of the Catholic faith for your wife and children. That is an even bigger one. It is easy for us to sit here, having been brought up in the Faith. For Michael it must be a particularly daunting prospect."

"I do not think I want children," said Christina.

"Oh, Christina! You really must not say things like that. It is the primary purpose of marriage."

"I always wondered what it was!" said Angela.

"I know, Mama, I know, but I feel that they would make such a distraction from my writing. They would be bound to want some attention."

"That is being very selfish and you must consider Michael's wishes in this matter. As the eldest and only son, he may feel he is obliged to have children. He may even want them! If he does, it will be your duty to bear them. Have you discussed this matter with him?"

"No! Nor do I really want to."

"Oh, Christina! You must! You must clear it with Michael before you marry. In any event, Father William is bound to raise the subject with the two of you when he sees you."

"Both of us? Together?"

"Yes, Darling. I told you it is necessary, especially as this will be a mixed marriage. Providing Michael has received the correct instruction and has responded in an appropriate manner, it should not take long."

"He had better respond in an appropriate manner!" said Christina.

"Are you going to the Halloween Dance?" asked Arthur Brown one crisp, bright, October morning.

“Halloween Dance? What Halloween Dance?”

“The office Halloween Dance! Has Mr Hiller not mentioned it? I expect he will. We have one at Canterbury every year. They also hold a dance for the London office just after Christmas, not that I have been to one of them. Our's is quite a small gathering which means that you can invite guests. I am going to invite Miss Muir!”

Michael thought that if his assistant was going to invite his girl friend, he could take the risk and ask Felicity.

“The Halloween Dance?” said Mr Hiller. “Why, yes, I was meaning to mention it to you. It is most economic, modest some might say, and we have a reduced rate for articed pupils anyway. I expect you to come, and to bring your young lady too. There will be some down from London, but not many. Usually both Mr Nathan and Mr Ballie come, but I am not sure what they have planned for this year. Mr Smiley sometimes also comes because he says it is as easy for him to catch a train to Faversham and change as it is for him to go to London. It is usually a great evening - you can even wear fancy dress if you like!”

“Fancy dress?” said Felicity. “What shall I go as then?”

“The Lilac Fairy,” Michael suggested.

“I would rather go as Princess Aurora with you as my Florestan.”

“Miss Muir may be there.” Michael used the words “may be” as he had learned that Moira, although flattered by the continuous attention she received from Arthur Brown, and despite the fact she had remained in Dover when Christina had returned to London, was given to prevarication when it came to committing herself. It appeared that the more he gave or offered to give her, the more she demanded, and the more he asked of her, the less she was prepared to give to him and the longer she would take over any decision.

“You may lose that young man,” said her father, alarmed by what he perceived as a hitherto unsuspected capriciousness on the part of his daughter.

“Never,” she said laughing. “He absolutely dotes on me. I think I could ask almost anything of him and he would comply!”

“And how do you feel about him, lassie?”

“Oh, I like him. I like him a lot, but I also like to tease him. He takes it so seriously! I just cannot help myself!”

“And what will you say when he proposes marriage to you?”

“I don't know. Refuse him, I suppose. Certainly on the first occasion. Has he spoken to you?”

“Nair a word. Aye, but there's some who'll n' come back a second time.”

“Not my Arthur. He'll come back! Anyway, first time I will ask him whether he has spoken to you, and you can ask him if he's spoken to me. The chances are that he won't have done either! Don't worry, father, I can read him like a book. I know what I am doing.”

“Like a book, eh? Just so long as you d'n' think that he's a character out of one of Lady Christina's novels.”

“I will not. I know just what I am doing.”

“I hope that you do, lassie,” he sighed.

“I have been thinking about it and I do wonder if I should go if Moira is there.”

Michael's heart fell at Felicity's words. He had been dreaming, building up hopes, picturing her at the Dance, opening the car door for her, taking her there, bringing her back. Little else had occupied his thoughts since he had confirmed to Mr Hiller that they would both be going. Now he had to decide - did he try and persuade Felicity to go regardless of whether Miss Muir was there, to try and convince Arthur that he should not take Moira. The latter seemed like a near impossibility. “I don't know,” he said. “You could look at it in a number of ways. I mean, if you stay away you are yielding the ground to her when you are in the right. Stay away and she has won. She might even think that your absence is an admission of what ever it is she accused you of! And she will be aware that you planned to go - I'm afraid that I told both Arthur and Mr Hiller.”

“So, you think I should go and let her call me a brazen hussy to my face? I am sure

she would be calling me that behind my back!”

“Perhaps we can effect a reconciliation, or a truce at the very least?”

“Perhaps.”

It then fell to Arthur to bridge the subject with Moira. “We do not want the two of them falling out, fighting, and spoiling the evening,” Michael told him

“Would they do that?” the assistant asked.

“By all accounts, very likely,” came the reply.

“Felicity?” said Moira, vaguely, as if the name was of someone she had long since forgotten. “Is she going?”

“As far as I know.”

“I see.”

“Will it be a problem? I mean, will it spoil the evening for you?”

“I have not said that I am going, yet.”

“I assumed that you were.”

“You assume far too much, Mr Brown.”

“Do I,” said Arthur, becoming concerned. “Perhaps it is all wishful thinking? Are you going to come?”

“I expect so.”

“Even if Miss Lightfoot decides to also go?”

“Yes.”

“And, will you make things up with her?”

“There is nothing to make up with her,” said Moira coldly. “I told her, as a friend, what I thought of her conduct and she took offence. I do not know if she has modified the way she carries on, I assume not. So, I shall be there. She will be there. We will probably be extremely polite to each other. No more.”

The Partnership's Halloween Dance was traditionally held in a long, poorly lit, low-ceilinged, room which stretched over a public house near to the Cathedral. So successful was the evening for the participants that it was customary for Mr Hiller to book the room a whole year ahead, usually immediately after the holding of the previous event, parting from the landlord with the words “see you again, next year”.

A number of square, foldable, tables, finely balanced, ever ready to over turn and precipitate the dinner, cutlery, dishes and condiments into laps or across the floor, were positioned around the periphery of the room. At one end a small hired group, consisting of a saxophonist, a pianist and a drummer who was incapable of maintaining a steady beat, was perched on a low, improvised, dais and gave wildly inaccurate renditions of the latest tunes by Porter, Berlin and Gershwin. It was an annual ritual for the office wag to suggest they should have a “guess the tune” competition, but no-one ever took him up on this as the band was cheap. The tables flanked an area which was described as the dance floor, the surface of which, largely due to the age and disposition of the building which had settled unevenly on its foundations, was far from being level. A notice on the wall therefore proclaimed that dancers who danced there, danced at their own risk.

The ticket included a three course meal chosen from a menu that was singularly lacking in choice, virtually unlimited amounts of fruit punch, and all the dancing that toes and ankles could bear. Between the dancing and the dinner, Mr Hiller arranged games and an informal cabaret, performed by some ticket holders for the benefit of the other ticket holders. The games were largely harmless. The cabaret was harmful only to the reputation of those who participated, but after a numbing quantity of fruit punch, no-one appeared to mind. Some of the acts were as traditional as the Dance itself. The sole tracer, robust Miss Tutze, who was believed to have once been Turkish in the days of the Ottoman Empire, could be relied upon for a rendering of “There's no Place like Home” in a deep contralto voice, which always produced debates as to whether the song should be called “Home, Sweet, Home” and which particular home she might have in mind. Mr Surfin would then rise to his feet and recite a

well lubricated "Charge of the Light Brigade" accompanied by improvised rolls from the drummer, usually in the most inappropriate places. Even Mr Hiller departed from his usual reserve to apply his baritone's voice to the Policeman's song, but his most popular activity was the telling of fortunes from those who would surrender their palms or who had, as was rarely the case on such an evening, a teacup that could be inverted.

The conservatives would declare that it was these traditional performances which underpinned the Dance and made it worth coming. The radical thinkers said that they should dispense with the pantomime, and have more Dixieland, or even real Swing. It was all said in hushed tones so as to not hurt feelings and, anyway, the radicals were vastly outnumbered by traditionalists and remained voices crying in a remote wilderness.

As it was his office's party, Mr Hiller positioned himself near to the door to the room and greeted every newcomer as they arrived. On this occasion he knew nearly everyone, but had to be introduced, separately it turned out because Michael had not had the courage to suggest that they should all travel together, to the two young ladies from Dover. "Felicity?" he said, holding her hand and looking deep into her eyes, "that is an unusual name."

She smiled and felt slightly flattered although his stare also made her feel nervous. "It is Felicity Joyce in full, but I am normally called Phoebe which is, I suppose, even more unusual!"

"Well, do you mind if I call you Joyce? You remind me of a sweet and helpful young girl I use to know who was called Joyce. In some ways you are very much like her. You decided not to come in fancy dress, then?"

"No," she said reflectively. "We had ideas, but it seemed so complicated, either having to change here or wear it all the way up from Dover."

"I suppose that is the case, but I am sure we could have got around the problem of you changing here."

"There is no Mrs Hiller?" she asked, looking around the room.

"No," said Mr Hiller sadly. He might have said more, but at this point the door opened and someone else entered. Michael seized the opportunity to whisk Felicity away to sample the punch and find where they were to sit. It was only then that he discovered that they had been placed on the same table as Arthur and Miss Muir who were, at that very moment, talking to Mr Hiller. It was too late to negotiate some form of swap. The most he could do was switch around the cards to ensure that the ladies sat opposite each other and not side by side.

But for all the coolness that bridged the gap across the table between the two women, all agreed that the evening was a convivial one. Michael was prevailed upon to kneel at Felicity's feet and sing "If you were the only girl" in his unfaltering tenor voice, a performance which earned a round of applause and comment to the effect that he had sung it as if he meant it! Arthur declined to give an imitative performance, but he did cling to Moira's hand for most of the evening when the hand in question was available for clinging to.

The most risqué game played was Blind Man's Buff during which an excessive amount of groping went on - certainly far more than was necessary to identify certain of the guests. Michael was a little apprehensive when Mr Hiller cornered Felicity, slightly intoxicated, at one end of the room whilst the other players huddled in the comparative safety of the other end, and assured each other they were pleased not to have to change places with the victim. "I am sorry," Mr Hiller said in response to her "Oh!" when he touched her. "It is Joyce, isn't it? You shouldn't really speak as it gives yourself away," he said removing the blindfold. "Now, you have a worried air about you," he added, softly as he placed the cloth over her eyes and negotiated her hair. "I feel some great trouble is threatening you."

"I am sorry?" she said, puzzled.

"I have an instinct, some might say a gift, for these things. I didn't see your hand earlier. Let me see it now!"

Mr Hiller had supplemented his rendering from Gilbert and Sullivan by his offering to read palms and had predicted great happenings and happiness for Arthur. In fact he had predicted long life and happiness each year for everyone who had held out his or her hand, and no-one expected him to change now.

"I don't believe in this kind of thing," she said nervously as she felt him take hold of her hand and turned it face up to him.

"May be not," he murmured. "You have a strong life line and a long love line, but it is weak. I see dark times ahead, times when you will need help and feel that you cannot turn to those who love you and who would normally help you. You will need new friends, new support, perhaps a haven from the storm when it breaks. Come to me when it happens. I will take care of you! Remember that - come to me. Now, you are it!"

Felicity found his words disturbing, but she dwelt upon them as she was inclined occasionally to dwell on morbid thoughts. She wondered what had prompted him to say them. Perhaps he was just trying to thrill her? Perhaps it was a part of the game? Whatever the truth, she did not tell Michael.

Moira noted, or thought she noted, the attention that Mr Hiller paid to Felicity and the sparse attention he paid to her. It all fitted in with her preconception of her former friend - should she still call her that as they had passed a polite and civil, if cool, evening together? As for attention, she had all she could possibly require from Arthur who was constantly at her side when he was not fetching or carrying for her. The evening was already growing in age, and some there were murmuring about having, reluctantly, to leave soon, when Arthur suggested to Moira that they might go out and get some fresh air.

They stepped out into a clear moonlit night, mild for the time of year, and after a short walk found themselves in the quadrangle of the Cathedral. "I thought that it was normally locked up at this time of the night," hissed Moira, looking up at the shape that loomed above them.

"Clearly not," said Arthur. "Perhaps there's a service or choir practice? Shall we sit down?"

"I wouldn't want for us to have to spend the night together here," she said. "Not here, nor anywhere else for that matter."

"No," said Arthur, contemplatively, "but may I ask you a personal question?"

"It depends on what it is."

"Do you like me?"

"Like you? What a silly question that is! Of course I like you. I wouldn't be here with you now, risking ecclesiastical incarceration if I did not like you!"

"Do you like me enough to want to spend more time with me?"

"I suppose so."

"Enough for us to spend the rest of our lives together?"

"What are you asking me?" she asked, eyes flashing. "Are you trying to propose marriage? I trust that you are, else what you are suggesting sounds lewd and improper. And, if you are you are going the wrong way about it! You should be down on your knees, professing eternal love and adoration. And, have you spoken to my father about it?"

"No," he said sheepishly. "I haven't spoken to your father. I thought I would speak to you first. I will get down on my knees if you want."

"It is a rather profound and serious question," she mused, ignoring his offer. "I will have to think about it."

"Have you noticed that they have disappeared?" hissed Michael as he led Felicity through a rather undulating waltz.

"Who?" she hissed back.

"Arthur and your Miss Muir. They are nowhere to be seen."

"You don't think they have gone home?"

"They didn't say good night if they have! No, I don't think so."

"Where then?"

"I really do not know. Perhaps they have gone for a walk."

"Would you like to go for a walk?" she said softly.

"No, not really. We might bump into them. It could be embarrassing!"

"Your Mr Hiller - he is strange, isn't he?"

"Is he? I suppose you could say so."

"He insisted on reading my palm."

"I thought you didn't believe in that kind of thing!"

"I do not."

"What did he say, then?"

"Nothing very much," she whispered.

"I ought to tell you," he said after a pause, "I am being instructed in the Catholic Faith."

"Oh, Michael!" she sighed.

"I had no choice in it. It is in the marriage contract."

"I see," she said, lowering her head.

"That is not the half of it! I am having to receive the instruction from Father Thomas!"

"No!" she exclaimed and stopped dead in her tracks just as he was about to execute an elaborate turn. "That is really dreadful!"

"I had no option in that either. Father William is, apparently, virtually house-bound on the Estate."

"You should have gone to see him."

"That was not an option put to me." They resumed dancing with Felicity deep in thought. "I am sorry," he said, shortly. "I have spoiled the evening. I should have told you some other time."

"No," she purred, "I have greatly enjoyed the evening, but what do you think of it?"

"Of what?"

"The instruction you have so far received?"

"I have been to only two sessions and it is a bit confusing. I mean there are some things I agree with straight away, like marriage being for life."

"I hope you realise what you are saying!"

"I do, but it seems to me that marriage and love as I understand them do not necessarily equate in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Father Thomas says that couples get married simply to have children. I said I thought couples ought to get married simply because they love each other."

"But you will not."

"I know. It is dreadful, isn't it? My arguments are riddled with inconsistencies. I would never make a good advocate."

"And what did Father Thomas say?"

"I didn't really understand what he said, although I cannot admit as much to him. He went on about my view being narrow, selfish, and self-indulgent, how our love should be bound up with the love of Christ. I think he lost me there. I think, though I dread the thought, that he was saying that there need be no love between husband and wife and that if there is, it should not obscure the love for Christ. Is there no love between Catholic couples? I did ask him if it would be simpler if I joined and became a Catholic. He didn't appear to think so!"

"I am not surprised," she said with amusement. "It is not like joining one of your London clubs. It is best to be born a Catholic, although that can also be the worst. What else have you covered?"

"Nothing much. He said that we would not move onto other matters until he was satisfied I fully understood the sacrament of marriage. I couldn't see what there was to understand until he quite stumped me by saying that pre-marriage courtship should not be allowed to arouse mutual sexual feelings!"

"Does ours?" The dance changed to a slow Fox-trot and they followed suit.

"I am not quite sure how to answer that question," he said after a period of contemplation.

"I am not sure that I should have asked it," said Felicity. "It was provocative. After all, ours is a friendship, not a courtship."

"I suppose friendships can stimulate mutual sexual feelings?"

"That would be wrong," she whispered. "That would be sinful."

“Are you then asking me if I think our relationship is sinful?”

“Moira thinks it is! She as much as said so!”

“But what do you think? I mean, you don't want me to do anything like that, do you?”

“No,” she said softly, letting her head rest upon his shoulder as he halted their progress across the floor.

“I am glad,” he said quietly, “because if you had it would have made things beastly complicated.”

“Well?” said Arthur.

“Well what?” asked Moira.

“Have you considered the question?”

“I have been thinking about it.” And that was true. She had contemplated delaying the decision, but what was to be gained by doing that? Oh, it was possible that Deborah would make up her mind and say “yes”. That would simplify the concern she harboured for her father's well being. There was the question of where they might live. She would be loath to leave the business whilst she retained the potential for a share in it, but if her interest were to be diminished or extinguished by her father re-marrying, that decision was greatly simplified. Then she thought of Felicity. It would give her a sign, a lead as to the correct moral path to be followed. It might save her from the inevitable bad end that her father had predicated for her friend.

“And?” said Arthur anxiously.

Was he really the sort who would not take “no” for an answer? Would he come back again and again, no matter how often she rejected him? Or would he ask once and that would be that? She thought he fell into the former category, but - . “Of course I will, silly!” she exclaimed.

Minutes later, flushed, fiancée in tow displaying a modest ring, Arthur strode purposely into the room, up to the band and stopped the music. “Ladies and gentlemen!” he announced boldly. “Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to inform you that Miss Muir and I are engaged to be married!”

It was the cause for celebration, for congratulation, for the proposing of toasts and the calling for champagne, the cost of which none of the Partners present appeared willing to bear and a call which therefore went unanswered. Felicity and Michael exchanged glances, then Felicity realised that Mr Hiller was looking at her, not the happy couple, one eyebrow raised slightly, and with the semblance of a rare smile which seemed, to her, to convey, “I foresaw this - now you wait and see what I predicted for you”. It made Felicity feel quite uncomfortable.

They wished the radiant couple all the success and happiness in the World, asked when the wedding might be - not yet - not for a while. Moira was gracious. Felicity was generous. However, there was no sign of them re-establishing their long-standing bond. Moira had another relationship now.