

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the days grew shorter Mr Barnes proclaimed that they were in for a hard winter. He did this nearly every night in the Newington Arms to a small audience of those who he probably could have addressed during the working day. All the signs were there, he announced, red berries, flame-breasted robins, a particular sequence of leaf fall. "As my old grandfather use to say - and his before him - when beech and sycamore fill the yard then for sure winter will be hard".

"Never heard that before," said a voice from the bar.

"Its a common saying," said Mr Barnes, slightly defensively, unused to facing a challenge to his accepted authority.

"Ar see those two surveyor people are still 'ere," said another. "Ar saw 'em over yon chalk pits come last Tuesday."

"Don't know what they be doing up there," said a third. "Likely they've done their survey thing everywhere an' more than twice. Why my Rosie says they've been past the cottage a dozen times if the've been once!"

"It is something to do with the way they have to check the survey," said Mr Barnes. "One of them explained it to me one day."

"An' did ye know that everything thing is turned arse over tip when they look through it. I told my Rosie that she was to hold her skirt down when she went out if they were around!"

"They'll each 'ave a black eye if they start looking up my Betsy's skirt. Its a public disgrace, an insult to working folk!" said the voice from the bar. "And they're slick, too. One of them has gone and got engaged to Angus Muir's girl, and them not having known each other for a year yet!"

"Not to be trusted, these City folk! A'll have another, Jed."

"Is that him who's living at Rose Cottage?"

"No, the other one," said Mr Barnes. "And Angus Muir's daughter is working for Lady Christina now."

"There, Daniel!" said the voice from the bar. "It's all happening around here now."

"Tis indeed. An' tis hard to keep up with the times some-a-days."

"There was also some talk of Miss Muir becoming Lady Christina's companion," added Mr Barnes, "but I think that's all petered out now."

"Suppose that would be difficult, what with her getting married an' all that."

"Ah see the other un 'as a fancy woman."

"Now, Daniel! You shouldn't be saying things like that."

"Ol right, ol right! No need to get on my back. But it's true. Ah see 'em meet up at Monks' gardens."

"So have I, but she used to be there long before he came here. It fair gave me a turn when I saw her first, I can tell you. She was standing on the spot where that vision is said to have occurred. I thought I was having a vision of my own!"

"Too much of this, eh John?"

"Not enough I would say!"

"Say what you like, she is a vision. She is a very attractive young woman by all accounts and if he is a-courting her, he's a lucky fellow, no doubt of it." Upon this proposition, Mr Barnes's gathering were agreed.

"Still ah 'aven't seen 'em up there for getting on a while."

"No, nor have I. Perhaps he's stopped seeing her?"

"A girl like that? No!"

"And Angus Muir is setting out to get married to some woman from the Town."

"That's right," said the voice from the bar. "I heard that too. But there's some trouble. She won't say the word!"

"Ah haven't seen 'em up thar for a while."

"No, nor have I. Perhaps he's stopped seeing her." At this they laughed, downed their

drinks and went back to discussing the impending Winter.

Michael had not stopped seeing Felicity. Perhaps he thought he should have done. Perhaps he should have been brave and suffered the pain of parting and separation, for their's was a hopeless course. But was it hopeless? So long as he could remain down there, away from London; so long as they could continue to see each other, there was hope that something might happen that would release him from his promises and commitments. Now he collected her in the Austin from the end of her road and took her to the cottage where they sat, talked, drank tea, and looked out on the trees as they gradually shed their leaves.

It was inevitable that their conversation would continue to drift around to religion and Michael's instruction. At first Michael found Felicity's response hard to understand as she seemed intent on checking, even correcting, everything that Father Thomas said told him. "I sometimes think I am trapped between two religious fanatics," he would say.

"I am not a fanatic and as for Father Thomas, well, you know perfectly well what I think of him, the despicable creature. I am simply anxious that you receive the correct instruction and accurate advice."

"Are you trying to convert me? Father Thomas said that is the duty of all Catholics."

"No," she purred. "I do not believe that anyone can convert another. Only God can show you the way and give you the insight that gives you faith and allows you to completely assent. I cannot do that and it would be sinful of me to claim that I could."

"I think I have mastered original sin. It is something to do with Adam and Eve, but I am not that sure that I understand about the Immaculate Conception."

"Ah, that's easy. If Mary is the mother of God, God cannot have been conceived by man. In addition, God would not have been conceived by a woman who had known man."

"You mean Joseph didn't touch his wife for all that time? Isn't that somewhat contrary to Catholic teaching, being celibate in marriage?"

"You are learning! It was an exceptional circumstance."

"And they made him a saint on account of him abstaining for all that time!"

"Does it take a saint to abstain from touching a woman?" she asked lightly.

"I think so," he said. "It feels that way sometimes. But is that what women expect of men? What do you think?"

"I think that you should continue with your saintly duties. It must be good for your soul."

"What, notching up points for Heaven?"

"Something like that."

Michael's instruction was also a frequent subject for discussion in Bloomsbury where every report received in Father William's spidery hand was studied with great interest. "He says that he thinks that Michael is beginning to make progress at last," announced Helen in late November, "although he goes on to say that he is still having some trouble with some of the fundamentals."

"Which?"

"That he does not say."

"I cannot see why he should," protested Christina.

"Come now, darling, be fair. As I said, it must be really difficult for someone who is a non-Catholic to suddenly have to come to terms with and master two thousand years of philosophic, metaphysical, and theological argument. I am sure you would find it just as daunting."

"It didn't appear to take Cardinal Newman long to master all that!"

"Cardinal Newman had something of a head start. He was already an established and respected theologian before he came to the Faith, but I expect he spent years agonising over his decision before he finally made it."

"Michael has no decision over which to agonise! Why cannot we announce the engagement, Mama? At Christmas, maybe?"

"We must be entirely certain that there will be no problems with the dispensation,

darling. It would not be wise to make any kind of announcement until we are absolutely certain.”

“But we signed an agreement, both of us!”

“That, my darling, if you read it, is conditional on Michael receiving instruction - “

“Which he is doing!”

“ - which he is undertaking, and upon the receipt of a dispensation from the Church.”

“But Father William said - “

“Father William said he thought there should be no problem, given Mr Bernstein's generosity, and providing Michael received proper instruction, made the right responses, and gave the necessary undertakings.”

“Which he will do,” said Christina, firmly.

“It sounds to me,” said Angela, flicking over a leaf of her magazine, “that being married is more trouble than it is worth.” Christina glared at her sister and fumbled with the papers heaped untidily in her lap.

“What is it you have there, darling?” asked her mother.

“It's the final proof of my novel. I was wondering whether to send it down to Moira for a final reading.”

“It sounds like a good idea. Perhaps you should check with her to see if she has the time now that she is engaged to be married.”

“Lucky her!” muttered Christina.

“I'll read your silly book!” said Angela, brightly.

“No you won't! You'll only pick holes in it, here, there, and everywhere. I am not letting you anywhere near it before it is published.”

“If it is published!”

“It will be published. And I will soundly beat Mark in our race. Does he have a date for the exhibition yet?”

“Not as far as I know, darling.”

“It seems to me,” said Angela haughtily, “that we should see some of this work that he is supposed to be doing. We should see what kind of return we are getting on our investment.”

“I do not see Mark's career as an investment, Angela.”

“More than enough is spent upon him and you keep telling us we are hard up.”

“Not hard up, Angela,” said Helen with infinite patience. “I have said that we have to be careful. It is expensive running the two houses.”

“We could always consider selling this one and go and live at Newington,” said Christina. “I think that I could work there, until I am married, that is.”

“Sell our London house?” exclaimed her sister. “I would rather die first!”

“There is no need for anyone to die, Angela.”

“Has Mark said any more about Newington House, Mama? About making it over to Michael and me as part of the wedding agreement?”

“Not as far as I am concerned. He did see Mr Bernstein and I believe that it was all agreed with him.”

“And he wants none of it? Nothing more than his studio?”

“Nothing more, it seems. He says that you and Michael shall have Newington and Angela shall have this house - “

“There you are! It is my inheritance you are selling, Christina!”

“ - but it all worries me. I cannot believe that it is wise for him to renounce all his inheritance at his age. He could very well change his mind later and regret it.”

“It is these silly political beliefs,” said Christina.

“It's that girl, Michael's sister. She has cast a spell upon him!”

“What Natacha?” said Helen. “She is a sweet child, good-natured and so unaffected by her talent.”

“I know,” said Angela. “That is what I dislike so intently about her.”

“Not like you, then, Angela?”

“Nor you, for that matter,” snapped Christina's sister. “You are a fine one to talk. I

believe that you invented the concept of the long knives.”

“I do not know what you mean,” said Christina pertly.

If Lady Newington saw Mark's good side that was not because he was largely a one-sided person. What none of them saw, not his mother, not his sisters, nor the young and precious woman he loved, was the developing, dark, brooding and uncertain person who occasionally crept out from underneath. This Mark was reserved largely for periods in private when he shut himself in his studio or the political meetings he attended over the rooms of the Crimson Flag.

The cell was small, and the members lacked predetermined responsibilities except for Stuart who worked at the Foreign Office, had been to Moscow, and who was charged with assuring political correctness and full adherence to the ideals of International Marxism. Most of the time at most of their meetings was taken up with reports of the position in the United Kingdom and in Europe, much of which came from or found its way into the Crimson Flag. Once the review was over they would have a short session setting out how society would be changed to achieve the ultimate Utopia. When Mark joined the cell and first started attending these meetings he was passive and accommodating, but as time wore on he had become increasingly frustrated by the absence of any action resulting from their meetings. “I have taken some action,” he announced at one of the cell's meetings, hoping that if he did something it might galvanise others. “I have renounced all my inheritance.”

“That accords with Marxist principles, except I assume that you have not vested them in the State,” said Stuart.

“We do not have a Marxist State for me to vest then in,” complained Mark.

“I am not so sure that what you have done is that good an idea anyway,” said Paul. “What you should have done was to liquidate all of your property and donate the funds to the movement.”

“I couldn't do that! The inheritance in the property properly passes rightly to my sisters. It is their's by right.”

“We must be prepared to sacrifice others for the Cause,” said Stuart, “even sisters.”

“I couldn't do that.”

“They will lose everything when the Revolution comes.”

“I still couldn't sacrifice someone else. That's a decision for the State to take. I *would* sacrifice myself for the Cause, my life if necessary!”

Stuart shook his head at what sounded akin to heresy but Paul waved him aside and stifled his response. “We are all, I am sure, ready to make all the sacrifices that are necessary for the greater good when the time comes!” he said.

“And when will the time come, and where?” asked Mark.

“Well, we've lost the battle in Italy, Austria and in Germany following poor Rosa's death.” He paused for a moment and then continued. “We are gaining in strength in most of the rest of Europe but the jewel in the crown, if you will pardon the expression, is Spain. There we have a proper power base. There, if we can sweep the Anarchists aside, we can demonstrate what Marxism is by building a new, fair, benevolent, society. Spain is something we must defend. It will be our springboard for Europe. When others see what can be achieved, they will follow, and the Right will be swept away for ever!”

“I thought there would be difficulties with the Anarchists,” said Mark.

“None that cannot be overcome one way or another.”

“And what can we do?”

“Just wait and be ready for the call when it comes.”

“That is all very well, but if we remain inactive the Fascists will simply overrun us. They are not sitting waiting for the call. They are out on the streets, handing out leaflets by day and breaking skulls at night.”

“They were stopped in Paris,” said Stuart, stoutly.

“Just the same, they have a lot of support here and in America.”

“America? Pah!” said Paul. “America does not enter into the equation. This is Europe we are talking about! Our day will come, and soon! Possibly sooner than any of us think.

Now, can we get back to finance. Your sister's book is nearly ready to go to press?"

"It is not political," complained Mark. "In fact it is absolutely bourgeois but, then, so is my sister."

"How about this friend of yours, the one I met, the one who is to marry your sister? Where does he now stand?"

"Michael? Oh, he is not in the least political and he's as bourgeois as Christina, possibly more so. He thinks I have duty to maintain Newington and preserve it for prosperity."

"We do have a duty to preserve cultural works for the benefit of the masses," said Stuart, "providing they comply with our ideals. Does it?"

"I don't think so. And, I don't think we could count on Michael for anything but, then, neither could the others."

"Remember, Mark, if he's not with us, then he's against us, like your sisters. You may have to make some difficult choices and some sacrifices. You do understand that?"

"Of course I do!"

"Now, returning to the book. I know I originally asked her for a novel with a political slant which we could use to influence minds, but this one will not be published under the Crimson Flag banner, so the absence of the political dimension is not important. What is important is that a third of the net proceeds will go to the Movement."

"Will it sell?"

Paul paused and looked thoughtful. "There are one or two risqué passages but if we do not run foul of the censor, it will. I think that your sister has a real talent for writing, in her chosen genre, that is."

"And when will it come out?"

"Early December, in time for that pagan festival some call Christmas. I have been in contact with all our main stockists and our friends in the media. I think they now understand the potential benefits that should result if this book, and any that follow it, is a success. It is guaranteed a favourable review in a number of quarters and that should be enough to influence the uncommitted. Why, some of the review have been written already."

"It is important that we are not associated in any way with its publication or success," said Stuart. "It would not look good if we were seen to be promoting a book which is overtly bourgeois."

"No-one will know our connection, not even the author - unless you are going to tell her, Mark? I am sure that you wouldn't do a thing like that."

"No, I wouldn't. But we are still not going to do anything? Go out ourselves and crack open a few fascist skulls? Give some of them measure of their own kind?"

"Not just yet, Mark. The time for bloodshed will come, although I trust that we will be directing matters, not cracking open skulls as you put it. Someone else can be trusted to do those kinds of things. Now, we have all read Leone's paper that I circulated covering proposals for a constant staff review for those engaged in the new State on nursery education? Have we any comments?"

When Mark was neither plotting violent revolution, nor with Natacha, he was in his studio. And when he was in his studio he worked vigorously and painstakingly, his mind on one subject and devoid of any political thought. With money provided by his mother, he covered one canvas after another, consumed paint, and gradually filled the whole area, leaving himself little more than the room he needed to stand and set up the easel and palette, or his make-shift bed. The studio had a small kitchen which sufficed for rudimentary meals but, as the canvasses threatened to fill even this, he ate out at irregular times at a small cafe off Sloane Square. No-one now was allowed in the studio, not to look or clean, not even Natacha who complained to him and to anyone else who was prepared to listen, about this obsessive secrecy. And still he said that he was not ready for the exhibition. "But you just wait," he would tell her, clearly elated by the thought. "It will be an exhibition like no other! There will never have been an exhibition like it! I dare say that many will imitate me afterwards."

“But when am I to see all these wonderful things?” she cried.

“When? When I am ready! I am an artist, a creator, not an automaton! I am not to be bound in by the trappings of time and other people’s expectations! I am sure that God did not worry about the time when he created the Universe and located Paradise upon the Earth.”

“He did take only six days,” she said stubbornly.

“Well, I am not doing anything in six days, six weeks or even six months! I may not be ready to exhibit in six years!”

“But you are painting, these times when you lock yourself away?”

“I am painting! I am painting a lot. But I am not ready to exhibit. Now, enough of me! What about your plans?”

“Let me see,” she said, pushing one finger up under her chin and compelling Mark to hastily reach for the sketchbook. “I have concerts and recitals in Birmingham and Manchester, a couple in London. Then we go down to Bristol and on to Cardiff in the New Year. But the main event, the one I have my eyes on, is the Nice Piano Competition, next May. My application has been accepted so it is definitely on!” She smiled and the pencil worked all the harder. “Miss Crochet has relatives somewhere nearby and she’s talking about turning it into a kind of holiday. We would stay at the hotel in Nice whilst the competition is on, then take a couple of weeks in the French Alps, sampling the air!”

“It sounds most attractive! May I come?”

“You should come. Perhaps you could do with a holiday. Yes, a trip abroad might do you good, and give you some fresh subjects to paint.”

“I don’t have to go abroad to find an subject to paint. But when she goes abroad, herself.”

“I wasn’t suggesting me, silly!”

“I could paint you in the French countryside, of half way up a mountain! It sounds very attractive.”

“So, will you?”

“No,” he said firmly. “I would be a distraction before the competition and I would only get in the way and demand all of your time!”

“Oh, Mark!” she implored.

“Well, let us think about it, then. We can make up our minds nearer the date.”

“What are you planning to do at Christmas?” They were sat together in front of the first log fire of the winter, one which Michael had patiently coaxed into life and was now feeding with ash drawn from a large, dry, internal store next to the larder. He had not thought about heating the cottage through the Winter until two of the Estate’s workmen had arrived with a large cart laden with cut timber and drawn by a weary horse.

“Mr Barnes, he says that y’ll need plenty o’ this, this Winter, you see,” said one as the horse started to de-head the last of the roses. “Its gonna be hard, that it is.”

“Christmas?” said Felicity dreamily. “I don’t really know. I do know that it is nice just sitting here. Here, have a cream bun.” Michael had made the tea whilst Felicity had brought some fruit with her and this unexpected bag of cream buns.

“Are you having one?” he asked. “I thought that they were for me and the fruit for you.”

“I like to be naughty every now and then! I will give you one of my apples.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh! It is so snug here! I must make sure that I do not get chilblains.”

“Chilblains? Do dancers get chilblains?”

“We are not immune to them, if that is what you are suggesting.”

“About Christmas?” he asked again, anxious to discuss not the susceptibility of ballet dancers, but to return to the subject that had been on his mind.

“I don’t know. The ordinary things. Except Kurt won’t be there so it will be just Debbie and me. We normally go around to the Muirs on Boxing Day. I suppose we will do so this year, though nothing has been said. That will be fun.”

“Matters have improved between the two of you, surely?”

“They have, I suppose, but it’s not the same.”

“And what is the latest on the wedding?”

“Which one? Debbie and Angus Muir? He talks of a double wedding, but she has still not said “yes” to him. I don't think she has made up her mind. She still remembers the disaster that her previous marriage was. It is a nice fire.”

“It is nothing like the fire they will have up at the House. We could probably warm ourselves on it from here, leave alone see it!”

“Oh, no thank you,” she said lowly. “I detest Guy Fawkes night. They all act as if they are burning Catholics. I wouldn't be surprised if they are marching around with no-popey banners as they do in Sussex. I find it very menacing.”

“I somehow don't think they'd be carrying anti-Catholic banners at the House! On the contrary. And, Father Thomas has nothing complementary to say about it.”

“They could burn him,” she said, darkly.

“I would like to cook you a Christmas dinner.”

“You? Cook for me?”

“Why, yes. Except it couldn't be on Christmas Day because I expect I will be invited up to the House and it would be difficult to refuse.”

“You are not going home for Christmas?”

“I will try not to. If Lady Newington and her daughters are coming down as they usually do, that will be an excuse for not going home. I would much rather be here. Now, if you are going to the Muirs on Boxing Day, and I am likely to have to go to the House on Christmas Day, how about Christmas Eve? I know it sounds unconventional, but most office Christmas parties are held before Christmas.”

“And you are proposing that you will cook me a Christmas dinner?”

“Yes.”

“On that Range in the kitchen?”

“Well, yes.”

“Do you know how to?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Then, I will tell you what we will do. I will prepare a shopping list of things to get. You can do the shopping - get all the food and wine, and I will come over and cook the meal.”

“But I want you to be my guest, not my cook!”

“I can be both your guest and your cook. Did you never consider that I might like to cook a meal for you, just as I would if - .”

Michael did not know what to say. Felicity's face had become flushed and he thought he could see tears gathering in her eyes. He knew what she was on the verge of saying and felt wretched himself. Should he say now that it was hopeless and that they should stop meeting and tormenting each other?”

“I would like to have the privilege of cooking a meal for you,” she said calmly, “instead of plying you with cream cakes and apples.”

“You think you can master the Range?”

“Of course!”

“On Christmas Eve?”

“We will make it Christmas Eve,” she affirmed. “Oh! It has just occurred to me that I will be unable to go to Midnight Mass. I will miss that.”

“You could go. I could take you. I could even come with you. I know a bit about it now and I am sure I could leap up and down at the appropriate times and not embarrass you.”

“If I went in Dover it is bound to be Father Thomas. I could not face him, not even at Christmas.”

“What about the Chapel?”

“On the Estate?”

“I believe there a Midnight Mass held there. I think Helen goes as well as some of the workers from the Estate. They wouldn't know who you are.”

“Father William would. And I suppose that no-one would recognise you should you

come with me?"

"Well, there's always Deal or Folkestone. There must be Catholic churches there. I could take you in the Austin."

"At that time of night? And what if Lady Christina asks you to go with her? I would if I were she."

"If she did, I would probably refuse. There's been nothing in the instruction that said I have to attend Mass with my wife."

"But you would go with me?"

"That is different."

They lapsed into silence, each watching the flames licking the surface of the logs. "I do like it here," said Felicity after a while. "It is so idyllic. I would love to live here. Not all the time, but just to have this as a retreat, somewhere to come to escape all our worldly troubles."

"Perhaps a kind of love nest," suggested Michael, thinking that he appeared to escape none of his troubles when he was there.

"I did not say that," she said, firmly, drawing her feet away from the fire.

"It might be nice to live here but, of the two, wouldn't you rather live up at the House?"

"At Newington House? I suppose there is little chance of that happening! No, on reflection, I think I prefer it here, cosy and snug and intimate. I do not fancy living in a stately home."

"It isn't really a stately home. It is not large enough to be stately, for a start."

"Nor would I think that it is much of a home," she said, now stretching. "Having all those valuable paintings and furniture everywhere, and thinking that you dare not put a cup down! It would be like living in a museum and it would be more than large enough for me! No, I do not think it would suit me."

A sudden gust of wind disturbed the trees, dashing a flurry of leaves against the window and forcing a puff of blue smoke up the face of the chimney breast. Michael responded by adding another log which sent a cascade of sparks flying up the chimney.

"And how is Father Thomas?" she asked suddenly. "How is his face?"

"The scar is still there. I think you may have marked him for life."

"I think he may have marked me for life! But I would do exactly the same to anyone who touched me against my will!" she said passionately.

"I must admit," said Michael, trying not to dwell upon her declaration, "I am often tempted, not to ask him about it, but to drop an innuendo or two. Just to see how he reacts."

"I do not see it as something to be treated in a light-hearted way, Michael. Has he talked about the celibacy of priests? You would have an opportunity to make a serious point then."

"No, he hasn't. I suppose I have that to look forward to. He is back on mixed marriages for some reason and just when I thought I had everything straight he has made things very confusing again. I cannot understand why the Church would consider a registry marriage as binding between two non-Catholics, but not so if between Catholics. It seems terribly inconsistent to me."

"It has to do with the vows that are made and who hears them," she said softly.

"But the vows are the same and what does it matter who hears them as long as they have some official position? I mean a captain on a ship may marry couples."

"Marriage vows between Catholics must be witnessed by an ordained priest. The rules are simply stricter for Catholics," she said. "Being a Catholic is a cross to bear."

"I do not understand why it should require an ordained priest. One is either married or one is not. To make sense of what Father Thomas is saying I would have to conclude that Catholic marriages are superior to other marriages in some way."

"It is a superior religion," she said softly, "so perhaps they are. Marriage is the most solemn vow you are ever likely to make. It has to be made with total assent, it has to be mutual, and it has to be made before God. And to be binding and properly made, for Catholics it must be witnessed by a priest. That is simply the way it is, whether it is two Catholics or a

Catholic and a non-Catholic. For the Catholic there is no turning back. It is for the rest of your life.”

“It might be better to live in sin.”

“I wouldn't suggest that to Father Thomas. For a practising Catholic that would be nigh on impossible.”

“And for a non-practising one?”

“Have you something in mind?” she asked, smiling.

“No. That was unkind, forgive me.”

“When you marry your Christina, it will be for the rest your natural life or hers.”

“I know. I keep on thinking that. It is not a comfortable thought. Where does it leave us?”

“By us I assume you mean me. With nothing! To the victor, the spoils. To the loser - . But I shall go on with my career, immerse myself in my dancing, and accept what ever fate throws me.”

“I thought Catholics did not believe in pre-destination.”

“Father Thomas again,” she sighed. “I can hear him speaking through you. It was Fate that we met. Fate that my encounter with the wretched man that morning led to me being in the gardens on that day, at that time. Fate that you, too, were there. It cannot have been by chance. It must have been by design, God's design. Perhaps this is his way of testing us as Christians and human beings.”

“Yes, it is strange when I think about it. I would not have seen the ruins and come up here had Christina not insisted on showing me the view from Newington. They say that God moves in mysterious ways.”

“You see, he does. We are victims of his Will. But what are we to do?”

“I don't know, that's the plain truth of it,” he said hopelessly. “Continue on our separate ways when the time comes. But for the present, continue in our present paradise.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “This is like Paradise.”