

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The arrangements for Christmas were discussed in both of the houses in Belgravia and Bloomsbury. Helen and Christina agreed that it would be appropriate if Michael was invited to spend the holiday at Newington House so that they could continue to get to know one another. No decision was reached initially on the question of Mark and Natacha who agreed they would both like to spend Christmas in the same place - neither went so far as to use the term "together" - but could not agree whether it should be in Kent or London. It was left to Helen to step in and resolve the situation by inviting the whole of the Bernstein household to join her and her daughters at Newington. "The house is large enough," she declared to an astonished Mr Bernstein. "And I am sure that there will be plenty of things to occupy you and Sophie. I think we will be able to leave the young people to arrange their own amusement, but if you are able to stay, I would propose a small ball on New Year's Eve, to see the year in. We have not had such an event at Newington since my dear Albert passed on."

Mr Bernstein said something about engagements and pressing work, but Helen waved her hand and dismissed his protests. "I shall expect you to come, if only for Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and the New Year. You have been a good friend to me and my daughters since my loss. I would like for you to be there."

She returned to Bloomsbury and her daughters with an understanding that he would, at the very least, travel down on Christmas Eve, return to London on Boxing day, and go back to Newington for the New Year. Matters were further complicated when Christina announced that as Marguerita Eliza Gascoigne would be required to autograph copies of her new, sensational, novel in Holt's book-shops all over London during the latter half of December, she would not travel down to Newington with the main party.

"Who is Marguerita Eliza Gascoigne?" asked Helen. "She sounds like some dreadful American woman! And how does it affect you?"

"It is me, of course, Mama!"

"You, Christina? Where on earth did you find that awful name?"

"I just made it up. I rather like it."

"Well I can see nothing in it to commend it. Did you really invent it?"

"Yes! Just like nearly everything else in the book."

"I though writers were supposed to write about their real life experiences in order to write good fiction," said Angela, lazily.

"I am not proposing to write good fiction," retorted Christina, pulling a face at her sister. "I am just setting out to make a name for myself. And I shall!"

"It seems to me, then, that writing under such a *nomme de plume* is somewhat counter-productive, but I assume that you know what you are doing."

"I do, Mama."

It was later agreed that Christina should travel down to Newington on Christmas Eve with her prospective father-in-law who, she observed pointedly, she had yet to meet.

Michael was alarmed when he heard the plans for Christmas. It had been bad enough when Mark and Natacha visited Newington. He had felt that he was in mortal danger then, but that was nothing compared to the possibilities of exposure that a full family visit presented. And there was to be a New Year's Eve Ball! There seemed every possibility that Moira Muir would be invited, which would mean that Arthur would go as well! There seemed to be little or no chance that he could avoid going, unless he broke a leg. No, that would not be enough. They would still have him there, plastered up amongst the wall flowers. Perhaps he could contract some awful contagious tropical disease, just for the days over the New Year? No matter how he tried, he could think of no conceivable way of preventing everyone referring to the honoured guest as his father, or of stopping Arthur or Moira saying too much to Christina. It seemed that his life, as he knew it, was destined to come to an abrupt end in some dreadful denouement over the Christmas holiday. Worse of all it threw the projected Christmas dinner

with Felicity into doubt. But, then, it would be their last, their very last, supper, a profane requiem mass said in honour of a pure love that was.

This was not correct. Their love was not about to die. What ever happened over Christmas, no matter how terrible the scenes or brutal the words, their love would go on, eternally. That was the nub of it. It was everlasting. That was where the tragedy lay. They would simply go on loving, the embers of a fire that would never be extinguished, smouldering away inside each of them, ever likely to be re-kindled. "I don't think I will ever stop loving her," he told his image in the dusty, cracked, mirror in his bedroom.

He did not tell Felicity of his perceived impending doom. Instead he studied and then pressed ahead with the shopping list she provided in dribs and drabs. "Some things," she said, "we will have to get at the last minute. Now, let me see the larder." As it faced North and was already the object of a biting North wind, it met with her approval.

One day, not long before the members of the main party were due to arrive at Newington, Michael received a thick envelope which had arrived for him at the House. It was post-marked in London WC. It had to be papers from Mr Fishwick. Gingerly he held it between his fingers as if it might be contaminated and hovered close to the range for a while, thinking it would be easy simply to drop it in. If only all his worries could be dismissed that simply! Still, he would have to face it and open it. They knew up at the House that it had been received and delivered to him. It would be pointless denying it.

When he did open it he found a large bundle of newspaper and magazine cuttings accompanied by a note from Christina which said "now it is up to you!" They were reviews of the novel, all very complimentary and positive, couched in flowery language and commonly using terms like "gripping" and "exciting". So Christina had made it and had now thrown down the gauntlet! How he wished that the reviews had been bad and that she had failed abysmally! Now he had to accept that she really was a good writer and would be successful. Perhaps there was some glory in being married to a highly successful author. He would much rather he was the husband of a highly successful ballerina.

And where was he? He was stuck down there, treading water on this survey, going out on mornings when he was so numb with the cold he could barely hold a pencil, being alarmed when his cycling assistant arrived purple-faced. He was not progressing at all, and success in his career seemed no nearer now than it had been when he first came down to Canterbury. Yet, despite all that, despite the lack of prospect, the cold, the privation, he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Christmas Eve arrived. At Newington House the tree and decorations were up and lights and fires blazed. The whole house seemed to come alive in a manner not experienced when only Helen and her daughters were there. Michael was pressed to go up but he said there was no point whilst Christina was still in London. As she was bound to be tired when she arrived on Christmas Eve, there was no point visiting them then. He would be up on Christmas Day, he assured them. Christina would have recovered from several hours' exposure to his father by then.

Mark and Natacha thought this very odd, but then they had each other to keep company. Helen busied herself, Sophie played Patience, and Angela rejoiced at the temporary absence of her sister.

Felicity said that she would come up to the cottage mid-morning at the latest. "There's a great deal to do," she explained. "And I will want it done to perfection!" Michael was concerned, not just by the fact that she had decided to walk all the way from her home to the cottage, but by the low, yellow clouds that were rolling across the sky from the North when he drew open the curtains that morning. He had offered to collect her. It would be no trouble. She had firmly refused and given him a list of tasks for him to do in readiness for her arrival. She thought the risks were too great. Someone - anyone - might see her in the car and he would be compromised. She would walk and if she came in from the gardens, she would pass unseen.

The first flakes of snow started to tumble as Michael was preparing breakfast, settling on the window pane, peering into the kitchen. By the time he was back at the sink, rinsing off

the dishes and placing them in the wooden rack, the lawn wore a white carpet and the flurries of flakes were so thick he could not make out the line of trees beyond. Would she come in this? He had no way of knowing. What he did know was if she did set out and walk, both the climb to the gardens and the descent to the cottage would be unpleasant if not treacherous.

Michael fretted until ten o'clock, debating whether to risk going down to the town and collecting her in the Austin. There would be the risk, of course, that she had already set out on foot and that she might arrive at the cottage whilst he was still out. It would be ironic if she did, and went home on finding that he was not there. No, she would not do that. She would wait for him to return.

At ten o'clock he stoked up the fire and the range, put on his coat and boots, and stepped outside. It was not as cold as he had expected it would be, but the snow stung his face and melted on his lips. He looked towards the Austin which was already losing its distinct colour and shape, then started up the path. If she was coming, he would meet her half way. But how far should he go should he fail to encounter her? He resolved he would go to the opening in the wall. From there he could look down and survey the hill, perhaps see as far as the black hedge, to see if she was coming. That was ludicrous! Under the present conditions he could barely make out the path!

He reached the gardens without difficulty. The freshly fallen snow was firm and less slippery than he had feared. There was no sign of her. There was no sign of any other living creature and the woods and the gardens hung in silence but for the gentle hiss as flake fell upon flake. There was no sign of her until he reached the opening in the wall. There he could just make out a small, dark, figure perhaps twenty feet below him. "Felicity? Is that you?" he called.

"Yes! Oh dear! I am slipping!"

A few seconds later he had slid down the slope and had her in his arms. "If we slip," he said, "we will slip together."

"I did slip," she insisted.

"Are you all right?"

"I am, but I hope that nothing is broken!"

"Broken? Where are you hurt?"

"Nothing in the baskets!" she shouted. "I hung onto to them in case they slid away! Goodness, have you ever seen weather like this?"

"No! What is in the baskets?"

"Wait and see," she said firmly. Minutes later they stood together on firm ground in the relative safety of the gardens.

"I was wondering if you would come," he said,

"Oh, yes!" she said brightly, feeling calm now that the immediate crisis had passed. "It is really only a little snow. Mark you, I did have some difficulty persuading Debbie who thought that I should spend the day at home with her, anyway, but I assured her I will be home for tea this evening and that I'll go to the Muirs on Boxing Day, and behave properly. So she will get more than her fair share of me!"

"If that is the case we'd better make tracks for the cottage," he said, taking the baskets from her. "I would also like to get my fair share of you. And if we don't hurry, we may not be able to find the path!"

"It is beautiful, though," she reflected as they picked their way through the glistening woodland. "So white and pure, as if the Earth is cladding herself in purity and cleansing herself before the Spring. It is such a shame that it will have to be spoilt and adulterated."

"Come along," Michael said, more intent on reaching the cottage than admiring the view.

"No. You should enjoy these moments, moments when Nature gives you some inner vision as to the wonder and the meaning of life, something you cannot express or put into words. They may only come once in a lifetime."

"If we stand here for much longer we may not last a lifetime!"

"And we are leaving footprints!" she exclaimed. "Look! They are side by side, yours and mine. You can clearly see that they were made by a man and a woman! If you came upon

them, would you guess that they were made by lovers?"

"I don't know. Let's hope that no-one does come upon before the snow fills them. Otherwise we might be discovered."

"What? As the two lovers who steal to their secret rendezvous in the snowy woods?"

"If you like."

As they made their way down to the cottage their footsteps penetrated ever deeper into the snow. "It shows no sign of abating," said Felicity as they reached the gate. "Exciting, isn't it?"

Michael was still more intent on getting inside to warmth and relative comfort, to be dry. "Come along," he said, "before someone does come along and sees us together."

Once inside, Felicity busied herself. As their coats hung side by side over the range and dripped and steamed, she filled the cottage with a variety of appetising smells, one after the other. "I must aim for us to sit down at around one o'clock as it is likely to get dark quite early. I will have to set out back at around three."

"Don't talk of your going when you have only just got here," Michael said, rubbing condensation from the window to reveal that the snow was still falling. He carried more logs into the living room and stacked them in the grate. "We are going to need them," he told her. "And it is still snowing."

"I will be all right," she called. "I managed to get here and going back should be easier as I won't have the weight of the baskets. They unsteadied me. Don't forget that I am a dancer, with poise and balance! Anyway, I can slide down the hill. Have you set the table?"

Michael found a table cloth in a drawer in the small, dark-stained, sideboard and spread it across the table. "How is that?" he asked as he positioned two brass candlesticks that he had found in a cupboard.

"It looks most romantic! What is happening up at the House today?"

"Hopefully they are all too busy to think about trying to walk down here. Christina and my father are travelling down from London today and I was asked to go up there this evening. I did not say that I would, though. I would expect Christina to be tired after her journey. And with the weather the way it is - . I will have to get up there tomorrow."

"Still, we will have had some time together. And I think I have mastered the intricacies of the Range. No two are ever exactly the same."

"This is delicious," he said, later as they sat opposite each other, "and it is all the better for having been cooked by you. I am sure I could not have done this well. I shall remember this dinner."

"It has come out well," she said, lightly, "but Debbie has always said I have a flair for cooking! I suppose, if I fail at ballet I could always take it up."

"But you won't, will you?"

"No. And when I look at my Florestan or Siegfried, I shall always see you," she said wistfully.

Michael smiled nervously. He was wondering whether Christina could cook, or even knew how to cook. Did they teach such things at Lausanne? It seemed unlikely. When they were married, all their meals would be cooked by someone else, someone who would be paid to do it, and who would do it because they were paid, not out of love.

"It is sad," she continued, "to think that we may never do this again. This may be our one and only dinner together."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. You never know. I will be down here at least another two months. It could even stretch into the Spring if this weather keeps up."

"What ever happens, it will not be like this. The two of us here, in the middle of the woods, hemmed in by snow, together. Listen to the silence. We might be hundreds of miles from the nearest mortal. We might be on an entirely different planet. This is our moment!"

The snow was still falling. It was tumbling down, flake racing flake, as they stood together at the sink, washing and drying the dishes. "Oh dear! It is getting late," she sighed, "and I have no real wish to go. What is it like out there?" Michael stared out of the window. It was hard to gauge how deep the snow was as objects were losing their customary shape. "And

it sounds as if the wind is getting up," she added.

"Perhaps I should take you back in the car?"

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head slowly, "I have been through far worse than this."

A little later, as the light grew progressively dimmer, she dallied as they sat before the fire, eating the last mince pies and emptying a bottle of port wine. Felicity appeared to be very contemplative and Michael dreaded that at any moment she would declare her intention to leave. When the clock struck three, and Michael wished he had omitted to wind it that morning, it seemed to do so with a fresh urgency, the same degree of urgency that it might have adopted when sounding midnight.

When the following half hour tolled, Felicity stirred. "I don't want to go, but I must see about going," she said, rising and brushing the crumbs from her lap. Michael was sorely tempted to say "must you? Can't you stay for another half hour, or fifteen minutes?" But he was also concerned for her well-being and that nothing should happen to her.

"I will take you," he said.

"Oh, no. We might be seen. I have been through far worse than this."

"Then I will come with you and see you home. I cannot let you go out alone in this. At the very least, I will come to where we met this morning." She started to protest, but he had already put on his coat and was now placing her coat over her shoulders. A waist-high wall of snow faced them when the front door was opened, driven into the porch by the north wind. "We had better go out by the back door and around the side of the cottage," he declared.

"Oh! Its coming over the top of my boots!" she cried when they reached the gate.

"I wonder if I should get a shovel?" said Michael as he contemplated the featureless plateau of snow before them. "How deep do you think it is? I wonder if it *is* wise for you to try and walk home. I wonder if we will be able to find the path!" As if to demonstrate the point, the wind suddenly whipped through the branches of two nearby trees sending an avalanche of snow thundering to the ground. "We must try the car."

"And go where?" Felicity said, indicating. When Michael looked he saw a level, unbroken, white expanse where he thought the track leading to the cottage should have been. None of the features that identified the centre, or the ditches that edged it, was discernible. The car was reduced to a large, cold, white mound. For a moment they stood in the half light and looked at each other as further flakes descended around them and settled on their heads and shoulders. "This is perfectly dreadful," she said.

"It's impossible. We are not going to get through that in a car. We would probably run into a ditch within a hundred yards and even if we did make it to the main drive and out off the Estate, there's no knowing what the lanes are like. They could be impassable under these conditions."

"But what am I to do? Debbie will be expecting me home. She will worry if I do not return!"

"Is she on the telephone?"

"Goodness, no! Is there one here?"

"There is one up at the House," he said, suddenly picturing Felicity's sister crossing the road to the telephone kiosk on the pavement opposite her house and telephoning Newington House, asking if someone could go down to Rose Cottage to make sure her sister was all right. Such a thing could so easily happen! And he had no way of preventing it! "Has any of your neighbours a telephone?"

"No-one that I know of," she said, brushing several flakes from her eye lashes. "The only person I know of with a 'phone is Mr Muir. He lives quite close and I am sure that he would be prepared to go around home if we could call him."

"But what should I say? That you are trapped here and will be spending the night at the cottage? There is no alternative to that, you realise."

"Oh, dear! That will only confirm all of Moira's views concerning my morals, or lack of them."

"Are you lacking in morals?" he asked, anxiously.

“No!” she said scornfully. “It is just that Moira thinks that I am! Anyway, you cannot 'phone Mr Muir because you have no telephone and you can hardly go up to the House with your father and Lady Christina there and tell them you need to use the 'phone to let your lover's sister know she is all right!”

“Are you my lover?”

“Be serious!”

“All right. I may not be able to go up to the House, but there is also a 'phone in the gate-house. I could walk there and I am sure that they would let me use it.”

“But it is right over the other side of the Estate! It must be well over a mile as the crow flies!”

“More like two along the track and up the drive. The alternative is the House. I could say you were out walking, or visiting, and you knocked on my door because of the terrible conditions.”

“It doesn't sound very plausible to me.”

“Then it is the gate-house, or nothing. And I feel that we have to do something.”

“But if you 'phone Mr Muir he will tell Moira, and Moira may tell Lady Christina, especially seeing that I am stranded on the Estate. It is no use! Which ever way we turn we are compromised!”

“I cannot accept that. How about the police? I could call them from the gate-house and explain your predicament. I am sure that they would send someone around to your sister with a message to say that you are safe and well. That is it! I will walk to the gate-house and call the police!”

“Oh, Michael, no!” she exclaimed. “Look at the conditions. How will you find your way? What happens if you get lost?”

“Oh, Michael, yes!” he retorted. “Now, you go back into the warmth of the cottage. I can head off in the general direction of the track. I know that at some point I must strike the Drive, whatever I do, providing I keep in a straight line. I shouldn't be much more than an hour.”

He ushered her back inside the cottage, wrapped a yellow scarf around his neck and set out. He had not progressed more than a couple of hundred yards when he began to doubt the wisdom of what he was attempting. What had happened to Scott in the Antarctic? The snow was falling as heavy as ever, and he started to wonder if he could find his way to the Drive and, even if he did, the find his way back to the cottage. For a moment he paused and looked back. He could no longer see its friendly, reassuring, light. He had left Felicity lighting the oil lamps. She would have all of them lit by now and would be poking the fire or the range. And here he was, potentially lost!

He continued heading in the direction he thought was away from the cottage. The critical point was where the track, if he was still on it, met the Drive. He thought he should recognise the drive by the avenue of trees, but how would he detect the track on his return? If he missed it, he would eventually end up at the House, and have to explain his presence there. He tried to visualise the junction but the landscape had become virtually featureless, a smooth white cloth through which the black trunks of trees protruded.

Michael was on the verge of abandoning the search and turning back when through the trees, he caught a glimpse of the headlights of a slow moving car, heading towards the House. Perhaps it was Christina and his father. Perhaps it was someone else. It did not matter. The tyre tracks would show him where the Drive was and, if he was quick enough, lead him to the gate-house. On reaching line of tracks he took off his scarf and tied it around a tree trunk. That, provided he could find it again, would show him where the track led off. With luck he would be able to find his way back.

The occupiers of the gate-house were surprised to find him, wet and frosty, on their doorstep. “Why!” exclaimed the wife, a thin, sharp-eyed woman, “Its the young man from Rose Cottage! Whatever brings you out on a night such as this?”

“Have you a 'phone that I could use?” he asked hoarsely. “I need to get a message to a colleague. I was delivering some important papers to them today but had to abandon the attempt because of the weather. I wouldn't want them to think that I was stranded somewhere,

nor wait up for me.”

“Good gracious!” said the wife. “Of course. Come in straight away and let's get something warm inside you. Now, the phone's in there if you'd like to make you call whilst I am getting you some soup.”

“Thank goodness you are back safely!” exclaimed Felicity. “I was beginning to get very worried that you might have got lost and I was wondering what I should do.”

“No. I did not get lost. I am wet and cold, but all right. The worst that happened was that I fell, face first in the ditch a couple of times. Have you seen how deep they are? It is not to be recommended but it would have looked quite comical to anyone watching - a bit like walking into a lamp post when you're looking in the other direction. But there was no-one there to see me. And it is still snowing. I do not believe that it has let up since this morning.”

“Did you make the 'phone call?”

“I was able to speak to a very helpful sergeant who wished us both a Happy Christmas. He was dispatching a constable around to knock on your sister's door - “

“Poor Debbie! It will give her quite a turn to open the door and find a policeman standing there. She is bound to fear the worse.”

“ - to reassure her that you are all right, and staying the night here in safety. Apparently there's one living not all that far from you and he was about to go off duty. So that is all taken care of. We can relax.”

Michael did not mention that he had leant at the gate-house that the car that he had seen crawling up the drive had taken nearly the whole of the day to reach there from London. He could imagine that Christina would have had a most uncomfortable journey entombed with his father in the back. Perhaps she would want to sever their relationship now she had met him. He wondered what they might have talked about, or how they would have passed the time on such a journey. No, thinking about it, he could imagine what Christina had said. He still had to complete his instruction and the survey. Well, as far as he was concerned, neither was an activity that should or could be hurried.

He went into the bedroom to change. It was cold and he wondered whether to light a fire in the tiny grate. “I have lit all the lamps,” announced Felicity, “and I have prepared us something warm for tea.”

“Tea? What time is it - I've completely lost track.”

“Just after seven-thirty! That is why I was so worried!”

“Well, I am here now,” he said.

After supper they sat once more on the settee pulled up in front of the fire, both wondering how many more times, or whether, they would be able to do such a thing again. Outside the wind began to whistle through the tiles and whine its way around the chimney. Snow flurried against the panes. It was not a night to be at sea, but they were safe, warm, protected and cocooned.

“Is this real?” Michael asked as the flames sent their shadows flickering around the walls, “us being virtually imprisoned here together? We may never find ourselves like this again - together yet completely alone. Out of the reach of the World. Let it all go on out there, the drinking, the merriment, the decorations, the parties. We need none of it. There is just the two of us, here, and nothing else matters.”

And there, as the wind gathered strength and furiously blew the snow into man consuming drifts, as the boughs of the trees bowed lower and lower, and yielded under their burden, as the lights at the House gradually dimmed and gave way to the snow-filled night, slowly, carefully, lovingly, with mutual consent, and in silence they surrendered to each other. Except Felicity whispered, almost inaudibly, “Father, forgive me.”