

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was several days into the New Year before work on the survey was able to recommence. It was several days into the New Year before Arthur could make the perilous journey down from Canterbury on his bicycle. He was still enthusing about the Ball and remained curious about the way the Lady Christina had crossed the floor and greeted Michael. "Did you tell Moira?" Michael asked.

"I did, but she said I was talking nonsense. And after all, she should know, what with her working for Lady Christina. But the weather spoiled our Christmas. I was hoping to come here and spend one of the days at the Muir's. You know what happened! I suppose I should count myself lucky I was able to get down for the Ball. I wouldn't have missed it for the World. A great evening!"

"The weather was bad. My cottage was completely cut off on Christmas Eve. Some of the Estate workers came and dug their way through to me on Christmas morning, but even then it was difficult, if not impossible, to get off the Estate. Certainly I would never have got the car out. Just as well I drained the water. At least we should be able to get some work done today."

"Yes," said the assistant, "and I was wondering whether, as it is our first day back, so as to speak, we could finish early. I would like to be able to pop 'round to see her."

"Let's see how we get on." The truth was that Michael now felt anxious to press ahead with the survey and complete the work. If it had to be done, let it be done quickly. Let them get it all over and done with!

He had not seen Felicity since Christmas morning and when they had parted they had made no firm arrangements for their next meeting. Strangely, this absence of a date, of a firm time and place, no longer concerned him as much as it had once. However, the fact that it did no longer concern him did worry him. If they finished early he could drive down and call around at the house in Dover, and see how she was.

Except, what was he now to tell her? What was he to say? How would he explain the gathering doom, the all-prevailing force which like a fateful juggernaut was bearing down upon him. How was he to say "goodbye", or could he just say nothing and, one day, simply disappear? Now he thought about her, the concerns reappeared. He was in the tumbrel. Could he bring himself to bear to as much as wave to her should he catch her face amongst the crowd?

His desperation was increased by the discovery of a familiar, yet unexpected and most unwelcome figure, lurking dark in the porch, awaiting him at the cottage after they had packed up for the day and Arthur had gone on his way. A figure which slunk in the shadows but when Michael saw it, he recognised it immediately. "Ah! Young Master Michael! Here you are at last!"

"I didn't expect to see you here," said Michael gruffly. "You are very lucky to have caught me as I am going out again and I only came back to the cottage to drop off the surveying equipment. What do you want?"

"Ah!" said Mr Fishwick. "To the point, yes, indeed, straight to the point! I came down here because London, it seems, is not exactly the best place to conduct matters of a sensitive and intimate nature. It is much better here, away from prying eyes and attentive ears. How unfortunate such an idyllic place should have to be used for such a sordid business!"

"It is the middle of Winter," said Michael, looking around at the naked trees and the patches of stained snow, "and I fail to find anything idyllic about that. You had better come inside."

"I have come on two matters," said the visitor as soon as Michael had put a match to the fire. "One, the first, is quite straight forward. I simply require your signature on this document."

"Document? What document?"

"It not a matter that need concern you unduly. It is the revised marriage agreement."

"Revised? Revised in what way?" asked Michael, both hopeful and fearful.

"The agreement now provides for the whole of the Newington House and the

Newington Estate in fee simple, and all the chattels thereupon together with the income thereof, to be made over jointly to you and your wife, Lady Christina, upon your marriage. Master Mark has finally abandoned his rights."

"Goodness," said Michael softly, trying to come to terms with all the implications. "He has gone through with it! And what about Lady Newington?"

"The agreement provides that Lady Newington may continue to live here for so long as she wishes and you and your wife agree."

"As far as I am concerned she may live here for the remainder of her life," said Michael forcibly. "And may it be a long one!"

"A commendable sentiment," said Mr Fishwick. "A truly commendable sentiment!"

"May I have a copy of this agreement that I am to sign? This time?"

But of course," beamed Mr Fishwick, bowing his head. "Nothing could give me greater pleasure but to be of service in this way." He paused for a moment and looked around the room, at the furnishings, the sideboard, the wall plaques, the china in the dresser, and then at the settee.

"You said that you have come on two matters," said Michael, beginning to see his opportunity of calling on Felicity slipping away.

"Indeed I did! How perceptible of you to remember and remind me of that fact. I was just thinking how pleasant this all is, how cosy it is or could be, ideal for, shall we say, a love nest?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know all about the young lady, and a very pretty young lady by all accounts."

Michael sat down rather heavily, almost lost for words. "Young lady?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes," beamed Mr Fishwick. "The young lady that you have been meeting. I thought it simpler and more effective to come straight down here and discuss the matter rather than have to drag you up to my office and have questions asked, with eyes seeing and ears prying. And this is a delicate matter."

"Go on," said Michael, thinking that the real reason for Mr Fishwick's decision to visit him was the hope that he might catch the two of them together.

"This young lady," said Mr Fishwick slowly producing a small red notebook from his pocket. "It is of no avail denying her, although I dare say that you may be tempted to do so. Indeed, that is the course adopted by so many that find themselves in your position. I could not begin to tell you of some of the cases I have dealt with, or some of the confidences I have entered into with quite prominent people. A word from me in the appropriate quarter and, puff! They would be finished! I have all the details here, times, dates, locations over a period of some months. That is more than long enough."

"What do you want?"

"I want? Goodness me, Master Michael! What ever can be in your mind? What I want? I am merely the humble messenger, the instrument through which the act is executed, you might say. It is not what I want, it is what your esteemed father wants. And what he wants is for this illicit and ill-advised relationship to end! He is quite content that you have, if you will pardon the expression, sown your oats, but he is of the view that given the impending announcement of your engagement to Lady Christina, this philandering should cease."

"Cease? When?"

"Forthwith!"

"I am not philandering, nor am I sowing wild oats as you like to put it," said Michael bitterly.

"Just a turn of phrase."

"I will have to see her again to say goodbye. I cannot just leave her without a word."

"I am merely conveying your father's words, not negotiating. His words, his very words, were that the relationship must cease."

"It would have ended anyway," Michael said lowly. "It will have to come to an end when I finish the work down here and return to London."

“And how long is that expected to take? Your father is concerned that your work here has become protracted and has taken far longer than originally envisaged. He expressed the sentiment that this might have something to do with the presence of this young woman.”

“How long? About six weeks, maybe. Possibly eight. It depends so much on the weather. But I have no intention that it should be protracted any longer than essential. You may tell my father that my relationship with this young woman will cease before that period is up.”

“Not forthwith?”

“It will cease,” said Michael, struggling to retain his composure, “before I return to London.”

“And that will be an end to it? I may tell your father that?”

“Yes!” snapped Michael.

“Very wise, very wise,” said Mr Fishwick, smiling unpleasantly. “Very wise of you, if I may as bold to say so. To let the other party down gradually, so as to speak. To avoid complications and recrimination. And then, a nice clean break. That is what is needed. Are there likely to be any loose ends, any untidiness that will need attention? Do you think she will cause trouble? Some of them do, in my experience, although a modest sum usually suffices.”

“No!” emphasised Michael, catching a suggestion of a hidden threat in his visitor's voice. “No, she will cause no trouble. You may rest assured of that. Not if I am permitted to handle it in the correct manner.”

“Very good!” said Mr Fishwick, rising to his feet. “I must say, and I shall report, that you have handled this matter very well, and in a most mature fashion.”

“Thank you,” said Michael, lowly. “How did you find out?”

Mr Fishwick smiled and shook his head.

“Does Christina know?”

“Not as far as I know, and there is no reason why she should ever know, providing you keep to your word.”

“Who then? Who does know? You have to tell me so I know who I dealing with.”

“The whole matter? I suppose there is no harm in telling you that. Apart from me, and anyone that you may have told or informed by your conduct, only your father.”

“And how did you find out? Surely you can tell me that? What harm can it do?”

“This is against my better judgement,” said Mr Fishwick, relenting. “It started with some questions, some mystery to do with Miss Lightfoot last Autumn. A story circulated that she was to be supported financially in her career by Lady Newington. You may have heard something of the kind yourself at the time. The story reached Lady Newington who, of course knew it to not be true, but sought your father's advice.”

“My father,” groaned Michael. “I might have known he would be behind it.”

“Now, Master Michael. Do not let us rush our fences. Your father merely advised Lady Newington that any contribution to advance Miss Lightfoot's career would be misplaced. However, quite independently, Lady Angela asked me to find out what I could about this Miss Lightfoot. I use a good and experienced agency. Miss Lightfoot was watched, and you know the rest.”

“So Lady Angela knows?”

“No, Master Michael, she does not. I told her no more than I thought was fitting, that Miss Lightfoot was a promising young dancer living in Dover who was in need of someone to finance her passage to the Paris Conservatoire. No more. She does not know, nor does Lady Christina. And it may well remain that way. It is very much in your hands.”

“Are we still being watched?”

“No,” said Mr Fishwick, looking closely at Michael, “you are not. The cost would not be warranted. I have all the details I need down in the notebook, times, dates, places, everything. More than enough! A comprehensive catalogue. Once the situation was clearly recorded, there was no point in the agency carrying on.”

“I see. And the notebook? Need I ask what happens to that?”

“To this?” asked Mr Fishwick, holding it up before him. “I retain it as a guarantee of

your compliance and continued good behaviour.”

“Is that a threat?”

“How perceptive you are! It is, indeed, a threat, but like all deterrents it is only of value when it is not called into use. I trust that you will not give me the slightest justification for using it. As for its future, I shall place it in a sealed envelope marked “confidential” and addressed to you, and place the envelope in my safe. And, as have intimated, I humbly trust that it may so remain there.”

“Concerning the young lady, Miss Lightfoot, you do understand that I will see her again at least once between now and my return to London.”

“Ah, you still have oats to sow?”

“It is not at all like that!” said Michael sharply.

“Yes, yes, as you said - . “

“I simply wish to say goodbye to her properly.”

“As you have said. Well, I have dutifully conveyed your father's words to you and I shall convey yours back to him. I cannot acquiesce to your request or demand any more than I can anticipate what his response will be but, as I have also told you, the agency is no longer engaged in watching you so neither your father nor I will know what you actually do, or who you meet, unless you are patently indiscreet. I may report back to your father that it is your intention to cease meeting or communicating with this young woman?”

“Yes,” said Michael, feeling close to desperation.

Michael remained slumped in the armchair for a long time after Mr Fishwick had let himself out and disappeared along the track. He had been out-manoeuvred again! Worse than that, the decision had been taken for him. He had no choice. His future was still being determined and he was to have no say in the matter. He explored the well worn argument of him and Felicity eloping, running away together, marrying in secret, and then presenting themselves. It sounded exciting and romantic. It might have happened had they occupied some of the pages in one of Christina's books. But he could see no future for them. In fact he was now thinking that he could see no clear future for himself. He supposed that he would become engaged, then married, to Christina. She would become a successful novelist, famed and fêted. He would remain carrying out surveys and drawing sections. All his life, just imagine it!

Why should they get married? Would it not be better if he remained at the Canterbury office and simply did do that kind of thing for the rest of his life? Then he could marry his Felicity, if she would have him, if she had not become a great ballerina, famed and fêted. If that became the case, he could find himself in exactly the same situation as he was likely to find himself with Christina! But, then, with Felicity, he would at least have married the woman he loved.

No, there was no future for him. Which ever way he thought of turning, the result would always be the same. He would make no mark in the World. He would have no great achievement or accomplishment to look back upon, to arouse the admiration of his children or the wonderment of his grandchildren. If Christina had her way, there would be none of them. And that thought, for the first time, saddened him. It would be for Natacha to marry, probably to Mark, and carry the blood forward.

He lit a lamp as it was by now quite dark and attended to the fire. There seemed little for it but to take each day as it came, say “goodbye” to Felicity, and return to London as soon as possible. Christina would see him as a failure and would tell him so. So be it. It was she, after all, who was insisting on pressing ahead with this ridiculous engagement and separating him from the woman he loved. Having married him, she would be stuck with him. If in time that brought her anguish, discomfort and embarrassment, so be it. No divorce, no annulment, stuck with him until death. In a grim way he began to feel that he might actually get some satisfaction out of the modicum of revenge he might reap.

Two further days passed before he was able to call at Felicity's house in the late afternoon. “Michael!” she exclaimed with a mixture of surprise, relief, and pleasure. “I was

worried that something had happened!"

"Something has happened," he said. "Can we talk?" Her smile disappeared.

"I'll get my coat," she said. "We can walk, if that's all right with you."

They walked down the street and into the nearby park where she sat on a cold bench, in silence, as he told her of Mr Fishwick's visit. "I told him what he could do!" he exclaimed when he reached the end of his account. "I told him what he could do with his book! I said that I would have none of it! At least, that's what I should have said."

"So you have now come to see me to say goodbye?"

"No!" he said emphatically. "I gave no such undertaking. All I did was to agree that we would have to cease meeting when I have to return to London. That's all, and that won't be for weeks yet!"

"But, Michael, I am worried about you, about your position. What if we continue to see one another and you are found out?"

"Found out? How?"

"Well, you have said that I was being watched - you recall, I said that was the case, remember? What is to stop him putting someone else on to watch me, or you, or the two of us? What would your father do if he discovered that you were continuing to see me after he had said that you are not to?"

"What has it to do with my father?"

"You have told me many times that it has everything to do with your father. What do you think he would say?"

"I don't know. Who is he, anyway, to dictate what I do? I am over twenty-one and a male!"

"But think of your position and your future," she implored. "I could never forgive myself if I was the instrument of your disgrace - if your meeting me ruined your career and your life! You would never forgive me. I could never forgive myself. I could not bear that!"

"It will not be like that," he murmured. "Providing we are discreet we can go on meeting. And that is what I propose we do." Yet even as he said this he felt as if there was no reason why they should continue to meet, as if there was now nothing left for them to do together or talk about. "That is assuming you want to be with me," he added.

"Of course I do," she said softly. "There is no-one else who I want to be with. It is just that I am concerned for you and your future."

"Very well. Would you like to come up to the cottage tomorrow? I could pick you up at the usual time."

"I would rather not," she said defensively. "I think we should make some other arrangement."

Michael stared at her, trying to see what was in her eyes and gauge what was in her heart, but Felicity was looking at the ground and did not turn to look at him. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, still defensively. "I would not feel comfortable there. Perhaps we could take the bus to Deal, or Folkestone, or even Canterbury. We could buy return tickets - have a walk around when we get there or even just go for the ride together." For a moment he stared at her in disbelief. It was not the thought of travelling on a bus that perturbed him, it was the thought of being together in public. It was true he had taken the risk of taking Felicity to the Canterbury Office Party but that aside, their meetings had been in secret, or were meant to be. There would be no intimacy on a bus.

"We can talk," she added. "And admire the view."

"We could always ride up and down on a tram for that matter," he said unkindly. "Does the Corporation sell daily tickets?" He felt this was far from what he wanted but, then, he was no longer sure what he did want or, at least, not prepared to put it in focus and certainly not into words.

Felicity coloured and lowered her head sadly. "It was just a suggestion," she whispered.

They walked back to her house in silence. "Well? Where do we meet?" he said as they arrived at the door.

“Meet?”

“For our char-a-banc trip.”

Her face brightened. “You cannot miss it. It is in Market Square. I will see you there.”

Their meeting may have left Michael feeling puzzled and frustrated, but it comforted Felicity. The days since Christmas had been full of doubt and fear, of confusion and dread. She had been plunged once again into uncertainty when he did not return to the cottage on Christmas Night, and had rightly assumed that he had been asked to stay at the House. It was all very right and correct, exactly what one would expect under the circumstances, she told herself. He was amongst his family and friends, people of his class, somewhere where she had no place and no business going. It was only right and proper that he should stay there.

It was at dawn on Boxing Day morning that she started her walk. Tractors had cleared a wide path along the track as far as the drive where men were shovelling snow. She walked past them, not unseen because who could miss the pretty girl who suddenly appeared in their midst, but, smiling as she stepped between the small heaps of snow and looking as if she had every imaginable business to be there, she went unchallenged. That was the easy part of the day. She dreaded her homecoming. Both at the end of the road and outside the door, she hesitated and had to summon up all her reserves of courage before she would let the knocker drop. She heard the dreadful thud echo through the house, then footsteps and the bolts being drawn. She was almost on the verge of running away before the door opened, but Angus Muir suddenly appeared behind her and blocked her retreat. And where, oh where, would she run to?

Debbie's initial reaction was one of joy and relief; that she was safe and home; but as the morning passed Felicity found herself gently interrogated as to the details of the two nights she had spent at the cottage. How could she possibly tell the truth? “How strange that your young man was invited up to the House for Christmas,” said Debbie. “You would have thought that they would have only had family there, wouldn't you, Angus?”

“Aye, that's true.”

“They seem to think a lot of him,” said Felicity. “And I - of course - I had to wait until the snow was cleared enough for me to get through. Otherwise I would have been home on Christmas Eve as planned. And I thought it was sweet and considerate of Michael to battle his way through the snow to get the message through to you that I was all right. It must have been awful for him.”

“Och, lassie,” said Angus, thinking of his own daughter. “You couldn' have foreseen the weather.”

“And the policeman who called did say that it was the worst he had ever seen,” said Debbie. “But, Phoebe, what will people say?”

“What people? Who is to know? You surely wont be telling everyone, will you? Have you? Does Moira know?”

“Aye. Your sister was worried and told the two of us when we came around yesterday. I would have gone up to collect you but the roads were not clear.”

“I doubt if your could have even got up there today,” said Felicity, defiant and vexed. “I had quite some difficulty on foot.”

“It was very kind and thoughtful of you to offer,” Debbie told the Scotsman, thinking that her sister was sounding a little ungrateful and ungracious. “And we are still coming to you for dinner this afternoon?”

“Oh I don't think I can!” exclaimed Felicity. “I don't think I can face Moira! Cannot you say I have a headache? I am sure I have one coming on!”

“Oh, Phoebe! You might as well face her now. Go and have a lie down. You may feel better later.”

Felicity felt relatively safe in the reassuring, familiar, surroundings of her bedroom, comforted by not having to lock the door and by the feel of her own bed. When she looked at the fire crackling in the small grate and the red glowing coals, her heart filled with compassion towards her sister. How could she have been so wicked and unkind to someone who had lit the fire in her bedroom so that it would be ready, not knowing when, or even, if

she would be home? And how could she now face Moira? But she would have to go and brazen it out. Of course, they would have discussed what had happened and would have agreed that she was now compromised - that she was no good, that Michael ought now to marry her and make a decent woman of her. He make her decent! Yet she loved him! How she loved him!

Why was she like this? Why was this all happening to her? A year ago she was happy, with a promising, planned, future, enjoying the moral strength and support of her Faith. The worst she had to face were the unsolicited, clumsy, approaches from Kurt, and her dark thoughts that came in their wake. Now, all that had been swept away. She found herself alone, adrift, facing a future which was no longer clear. Her heart warmed when she thought of Michael and wondered what he was doing, but now she had to resign herself to losing him, to the thought that she might never see him again. She had stood in the cottage and watched him ride away. "If he returns before I set out for home we may have a future together," she told herself. "If he does not, she has won him and it is all at an end." He who could walk through the snow every bit as easily and effectively as she, did not return.

Felicity sat very quietly at the Muir's that Boxing Day afternoon. Angus had said some words of comfort and consolation, describing the degree of impossibility of the snow by mentioning trapped cars and buses and a long list of places that could not be reached. They made complimentary remarks about her bracelet and said what a nice and generous young man Michael must be to give it to her, but she knew all the time what they were thinking, what was on their minds, what they dare not say. She could see it in Moira's eyes coupled with a message of smug superiority. She had told her so. She had predicted what would happen. The bad end was upon her.

As they walked home that evening, she prepared two resolutions for the New Year. The first was simple and easily achievable. She would now immerse herself in her dancing. If she was a woman who was to be considered ruined in the eyes of men, she would dispense with them. She would remain single and dancing would be her master.

The second would be the less easy to keep, but it was every bit as important as the first. She would let Michael go. She would do everything she could to ensure his future and happiness which, she now accepted, lay elsewhere, with his family, with Lady Newington's daughter, and not with her. She would let him go. No fuss, no recriminations. There would be a clean break. At some point in the not too distant future, they would meet and then part, to go their separate ways. She would not look back. Their parting would be final and once parted, she would never, never, attempt to see or make contact with him again. It would be hard, but she would be resolute. The absence of any contact or message from him either side of the New Year reinforced and confirmed her decision. He might already have gone. If he had not, it was only a matter of when and how. A voice in her head told her the sooner the better. The sore longing in her heart said otherwise.

"Have you come to say goodbye?" was the first thing that she asked him when they met at the bus stop.

"Goodness me, no. We won't have to do that for weeks!" exclaimed Michael, eyeing two buses, neither of which appeared to have any intention of climbing the hill on the road to Deal. "It was Deal we were aiming to go to?" he added.

"It doesn't matter where we go," she said fancifully. "Deal, Folkestone, Ashford, Canterbury, we will always end up at the same place. We will always arrive at the same conclusion." Michael studied her, trying to determine her mood. He found it confusing. One moment she appeared to be sad, the next almost carefree. It was not something he expected or understood.

Felicity sat next to the window and looked out on the dull winter landscape as the bus slowly climbed up out of the town and passed dangerously close to the Newington Estate. Michael wondered if she had suggested the Deal route knowing this would happen. She had said it could be any route, so that probably was not the case.

"I would ask one favour," she said suddenly, still studying the view and not turning her head towards him. "When we do have to part, when we do come to say goodbye, we do it

in the gardens. We can dedicate them as a living shrine to the memory of our love. I would hope that both may last forever.”

He reached and took her hand. “I may have some power to influence both things. I haven't told you yet that the marriage contract has been revised. Christina and I are to receive Newington, the House and the Estate, upon our marriage. I will therefore be in a position to ensure that the gardens are maintained, come heaven and high water.”

She turned. “You and your wife will become the owners of the whole of the Newington Estate upon your marriage?” she asked with a mixture of sorrow and incredulity. She could never compete with that.

“Yes, but not the gardens, of course.”

“What would happen if Lady Christina died? What would you do then? No!” she exclaimed. “Don't answer that question. It is a wicked question and it was wrong of me to ask.”

“I will answer it because I can. I would marry you, if you would have me. And you could live at the House. Would you like that?”

“I would rather live at the cottage.”

Michael laughed. “That would hardly be suitable for the Lord and Lady of the Manor!”

“Would I be a Lady?”

“I don't think so, not unless my father purchases a hereditary peerage. I wouldn't think he'd do that as it would probably offer poor value for money.”

“But what would happen to Lady Newington, supposing she was still alive?”

“Oh, yes, Helen. I have said that she could remain at the House as long as she likes. It has been, and is, such a large part of her life, I couldn't see her dispossessed. The London house is to go to Angela so she could not go there. I wouldn't turn her out. You would like her.”

“You are suggesting that I could live at Newington House with Lady Newington? I?”

“Why ever not? You might be famous by then. And, again, you might not want to live there at all! You might not even want to marry me. You might even be married yourself!”

“Never! I have made a vow, a New Year's resolution, to eschew men. I have no intention of marrying anyone else if we cannot be married. I will pursue my career and remain single. I will probably die an old maid. But you will promise me this one thing. We will meet at the gardens when the time comes?”

“I promise,” he said.

For the next few weeks Michael and Felicity became regular passengers on the omnibuses of the East Kent Road Car Company. Michael did not again suggest that they should meet at the cottage, although it often crossed his mind to do so. He knew from the way Felicity reacted when mention of the cottage drifted into their conversation, from the things she said, and her nuances, that he would meet with refusal if he did. In some ways these days witnessed a renaissance in their relationship. In other ways, something was lacking, something that neither of them could isolate and pin down, something that neither of them wanted to discuss. It seemed as if they were simply serving out the remaining time available to them, as if each had a duty to perform for the other. That the survey slowly progressed and moved towards what both Michael and Mr Hiller saw as a completion both pleased and dismayed Michael. Whenever she asked about it, he would be evasive and gave Felicity no indication of how close its end really was.

As the survey approached its completion, so, too, did his periods of instruction with Father Thomas. But, as they sat on the bus as it crawled uncertainly between hills, they no longer discussed what he had learned from the priest nor what he had said which was contentious. Nor did Michael report his final interview to his travelling companion.

“Well,” Michael had said as the priest wearily collected his papers and books and prepared to leave the cottage for the last time, “do I pass?”

“I will be reporting to Father William that I have completed your course of instruction. He will then wish to see both you and your bride-to-be in order to confirm jointly

that you both understand the gravity of the step you are taking, and that you intend to carry out Mother Church's obligations. He will arrange that. My work is at an end." Michael was not discouraged that these sessions with Father Thomas were at an end. He had commenced them with hostility, then had thought them something of a laugh, but more recently they had become rather tedious. They had left in his mind an image of a Catholic, pious, loving, caring, generous and forgiving, qualities that seemed to be largely lacking in the woman who had been the root cause of him forming this picture, although he thought they were largely present in the woman he loved. He did not like exclusiveness of the religion, its arrogance and aloofness. "It is the true religion," Father Thomas stressed, "founded by St Peter. Its lineage, its origins, goes back that far, more than a thousand years before Luther, some seven hundred years before Islam. It has withstood the assaults of two thousand years of persecutions, schisms, criticism and heretics. It is the only true Faith."

It was, towards the end, easier by far to accept and concede all the points made by Father Thomas rather than contest them. The priest might well have been more than a little suspicious at the change in attitude of his pupil had he stopped and thought about the fact, but both men were weary and anxious to bring the series of meetings to an end.

He was summoned to appear with Christina before the aged and decrepit Father William. "I don't understand why he has to see us both now," Christina complained to her mother. "Why cannot it wait until nearer to the wedding?"

"I think it may be necessary for him to see the two of you before the dispensation is issued," said Helen. "And it is only a day. Hanson can take you straight there, picking up Michael on the way, and bring you straight back. You could even drop in on Miss Muir if that is convenient."

"I will think about it. I have been thinking that I may have to change my arrangement with her, anyway. It works well until I find that I have to change something that I have just sent to her or, indeed, simply check what I have written. It can be most inconvenient to have to wait a week."

"You could always stay down at Newington and write. Think of the peace and solitude you would get down there."

"What? With Michael about to return to London? It would look rather odd - as if I was trying to avoid him whereas it is he who is trying to avoid me!"

"Oh, I am sure that is not the case."

"Even if it is not, I am not prepared to play a mountain in respect of my secretary. I might go and see Moira," she said petulantly. "I will think about it."

"Well?" said Christina as Michael eased himself beside her in the back of the Daimler.

"Yes, thank you," he said.

"Your sessions with Father Thomas. You have now completed all of them satisfactorily?"

"I assume so. He said they were at an end and he didn't make any further appointments to see me. I certainly do not want to see him again!"

"And are you going to become a Roman Catholic? Has he talked you into it?"

"I might have talked him out of it," Michael retorted.

"Well I want no nonsense of that kind with Father William. Just sit there and say "yes" to everything. I want this over quickly."

Father William initially addressed the two of them in his feeble, sing-song voice that he reserved for masses. Michael soon formed the opinion that he had heard all that Father William was saying from Father Thomas, and was about to contradict him on one point when he caught Christina's forbidding eye and stayed quiet. And, anyway, surely Christina should know all of it? She clearly thought that she did know it all. He could tell from her look of exasperation.

"I must implore you two young folk who are about to embark on the greatest and most wonderful adventure in life to humour a poor old man," he wheezed. Michael tried to

remember what Father Thomas had cited as the reasons why priests did not embark upon this great adventure themselves, but Father William had gathered himself and was moving on. "Do the two of you love one another, may I ask?"

"No," said Christina, positively.

"I see," said the priest, not seeking Michael's affirmation. "No matter. Love is not essential at the start of a Catholic marriage. Some might argue that its absence might be a virtue in itself. It was the Victorians who gave us this mistaken concept, that couples should love each other rather than share a love of God. If you respect each other, treat each other with kindness and humility, a true, lasting, love will grow in time and your bond will be all the stronger for it."

Michael felt uncomfortable at hearing these words. He was uncertain that he actually wanted to fall in love with Christina. If he did, was there a danger that it would surpass and eclipse his love for Felicity which was, after all, about the only thing in life that was really precious to him? A nudge from his future wife alerted him to the fact that Father William was demonstrating remarkable mental agility for his age and had passed on to a new subject. "Yes," he answered to the question of whether he intended for his children to be baptised and brought up in the Faith. "Yes," he said again to the notion that he should support and not hinder his wife in the pursuit of the Faith. It all reinforced the impression that Father Thomas had left him with - the Church was arrogant, dominant, and demanding.

It was with a saddened heart that Michael packed his belongings and tidied the cottage for the last time. He would miss being there. He would miss the roses and clematis coming into bloom that year, and the butterflies flitting over the nettles and thistles. He would miss the industry of the bees outside the window and the confrontations of the robins who had disputed ownership of the small patio. For him the cottage was important, unique. Perhaps he could reserve it after they were married, just for his use. He could say it was for sentimental reasons. He could hear his future wife declare that she thought his request was rubbish and that she did not believe in there being sentimental reasons for doing anything.

He met Felicity at the end of her road on a Sunday morning under a grey March sky. "Is this it?" she asked when she saw his face. Michael did not reply but took her arm and they started to walk.

"I think you know the way better than I," he said after they had walked about half a mile. She led the way through the hedge and the hole in the boundary fence, but thought this was somehow unfair. She was conducting her executioner to her own execution. Michael seemed more anxious than she to get to the top of the climb. Perhaps he wanted it over and done with? She did not, and it became increasingly difficult with every step as she neared the top. She did not need his cajoling or comments about her fitness. Much as she was reluctant to do so, she would reach the gardens. It was inevitable.

And then, after their, Oh, so unsatisfactory and painful parting, she had to stand there and watch him descend, fixed to the spot, not moving until he had passed through the hedge and was no longer in sight. She noted that he did not stop and look back to see her. Nor did he once wave as she had done, so often, from the gap in the hedge. Instead he kept on until he was gone and she was all alone and the tears were again falling. Miserable and forlorn she sat on the wall and waited. She did not want to bump into him as he went back to the car, nor have him see her as she made her descent, vulnerable, exposed, across the barren windswept hillside. She did not begin to move until long, long after he had vanished.

For Michael, the sense of desperation, of defeat and failure, had never been so strong. There seemed nothing left for him now except to go on living, from day to day, with no clear objective, without hope. He would submit to his father's plans. He would marry Christina, remain childless, and see her succeed. He would watch Natacha and Mark and see them succeed. He might even be allowed to watch from afar as Felicity's star made its ascent. Arthur would marry his Moira and they would start a family. They would be happy. They would all be happy. And he? He would marry Christina. He had drunk from his cup of hemlock and his fate was now clear.