

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Michael travelled back to London on that Sunday afternoon having closed the door of the cottage for what he hoped would not be the last time, but what he knew would be the last time for a good while. He delivered the small Austin, to which he had become quite attached, back to the House and into the safe hands of Mr Barnes. And, as is the way with such things, having started out later than he intended, a mechanical malfunction in the track over which the train scheduled to take him to Victoria was to run, delayed his arrival home late into the evening.

“We 'ad almost given you up as lost,” said Sophie, greeting him in the hall. “Ave you eaten?”

Michael shook his head wearily. “Don't bother anyone now. I think I am past eating. I have got to go into the office tomorrow. You'd think they'd let a chap have a few days off to recuperate, but, no, I have to be there. I haven't been there for months. They have managed to get along perfectly well without me, but I've to be there first thing tomorrow. So I think I will go straight to bed!”

“There is some post and messages for you in the library,” said Natacha, pausing on the stairs. “Do you want me to fetch them for you?”

“No, no thank you,” said Michael, waving his hands. “I wouldn't read them this evening in any case. They can wait until tomorrow.”

“Well, your room is all ready for you. *Bonnes reveries!*” said Sophie.

The next morning Michael dragged himself from the comfort and safety of his bed and made the journey to the office in Westminster. By some miscalculation he arrived early and well before nearly everyone else.

“Goodness me!” said Mr Smiley when he arrived and found Michael sat at the drawing board he had last occupied in the previous year. “I almost didn't recognise you! And you have arrived about a week too late! You should have been here last week. There was such a rumpus! I've never seen anything quite like it! Comings and goings, partners shouting and at each others' throats! It was like something out of the pictures, you know. Talk about you dirty rat! Rumour after rumour went around the office. At one point it was said that Mr Baillie and Mr Hiller were to resign, but as far as we can make out they're all still here, even if they aren't all talking to each other! Then we heard that the partnership had run out of money and they would have to sell their homes. Miss Prentice went around the office sobbing until it was flatly denied. As long as they pay us I don't really care, I must say. And so on - you've never seen anything like it! A real eye-opener.”

Michael listened and nodded at appropriate spots but he did wonder why Mr Smiley was telling him about all these matters which seemed of little relevance to an artiled pupil whose thoughts were centred on someone who was now far away. Of course he would be concerned if the partnership broke up. What would happen to him? Perhaps Mr Smiley, having told his postman, the milkman, and the man who had checked his season ticket that morning, needed someone else to tell.

“Did you find out what it was all about in the end?” he asked, thinking it was polite to say something like this.

“Now that's the rum thing. No-one seems to know for certain what it was about. Of course it might all be all over now. I am just waiting to see who comes in.”

“Mr Hiller will be in Canterbury?”

“Who knows? Anyway, there's a large parcel arrived for you from Canterbury. I assume that it is all the papers and drawings for the Newington job. How did you get on down there? It seemed to take a pretty long time. More difficult than everyone thought?”

Michael nodded. “I suppose that I better get on and unpack them and finish the sections and the general arrangement drawings.”

As he undid the string he thought of Felicity. He had been thinking about her when he had tied the knots. What would she be doing now? What would she be thinking as she faced

her new life without him? Would she be thinking of him?

“Mr Bernstein!” exclaimed Mr Baillie when he came upon him some twenty minutes later. “Oh dear! Oh dear! We did not expect you here quite so soon! Oh dear! Oh dear! Have you been to see Mr Fishwick?”

“No? Should I have?”

“Oh dear! You were supposed to see him first thing this morning. He was supposed to have sent you a note asking you to go straight to his office before coming here. Didn't you get a note?”

“I don't think so. I might have done. There was some post waiting for me when I arrived home late last night. It might have been amongst that. To tell the truth, I didn't look at it, being late and all that. And there wasn't time to look at it this morning. Should I go and see him now?” Michael asked the question though he was apprehensive concerning the answer and the implications.

“No! Oh dear! If only Mr Nathan were here. He would know what best to do! You had better come to my office.”

This sounded bad. Michael followed the partner along the short corridor, feeling like a schoolboy removed from his class by the headmaster and being taken to his study. He invented a dozen alarming and dreadful scenarios as he sat in the relatively comfortable chair facing Mr Baillie's desk, each successive one worse and more bloody than the one before. All had a common theme. His pupillage was at an end. It was only a question of why and what the consequences might be.

“Oh dear,” said Mr Baillie. “How shall I put this? If only Mr Nathan were here. He would know what to say, but he won't be here until later. What should I do? Perhaps you had better go and see Mr Fishwick.” Michael wondered what Mr Fishwick could have to do with the termination of his pupillage. Perhaps his father had cancelled his financial support or was about to re-negotiate terms for the loan? Or perhaps the Partners had simply asked for more? “No!” said Mr Baillie, quite suddenly correcting himself as Michael was about to rise to his feet and leave, “I will tell you, as best as I can. We have - we have decided to dissolve the partnership!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Michael, feeling disappointment at the news although comforted by the thought he was not likely to be the only person to be singled out for punishment.

“And we are merging with two other practices, one being Morris Spencer who concentrate largely on water supply and who have offices in Maidstone, Epsom and Winchester, the other being Parsons, Caspar and Parsons who have a strong industrial base in Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle. I expect you have heard of them?”

“No. I cannot say that I have.”

“No matter. I should explain that the deal was suggested and brokered by Mr Fishwick at your father's instigation. And most attractive it is, yes indeed. For us it greatly increases our area of activities, both geographically and functionally. And for the other practices, it gives them access to a London office, a facility they each lack. It will produce a much larger, stronger and versatile practice and there is something in it for everyone.” Mr Baillie paused and recovered his breath. He was unused to saying so much in so short a space of time and quietly congratulated himself at his achievement. It was definitely something to tell Mrs Baillie over dinner that evening. Michael wondered what, if anything, there would be in it for him. Probably nothing, and he waited for the blow to fall.

“And?” he prompted, desirous that it should be over and done with as soon as possible.

“And? And - oh dear! That brings me to you - your position - oh dear! I am going to find this very difficult. Perhaps you had better go and see Mr Fishwick. Yes, that's the best thing to do! He will explain it all to you - far better than I could have done. And Mr Nathan will be here by the time you get back. He can explain the merger to the rest of the office.”

Michael was uncertain as to whether he should draw comfort from the notion that he would be returning to the office after seeing Mr Fishwick. He walked slowly up from Mansion House station, thinking that he should be deep in thought but not knowing what to think. So there was going to be a merger with some other practices to make one bigger unit.

What was that to him? Where were the offices that Mr Baillie had mentioned? Leeds? Nottingham? Certainly they were up North. Surely they were not thinking of sending him that far away? What would Christina say? He could not begin to imagine. He did not even want to try.

“Ah, Master Bernstein! Or should I refer to you as Mr Bernstein Junior? You have received my note? So gracious of you to come and honour my humble office – do, do come in.” Mr Fishwick bowed, exposing a slightly balding head, and beckoned him into the office.

“Actually, I am afraid that I did not receive your note. Or, to be more accurate, if I did receive it, I haven't read it. It must be amongst the papers at home that I have yet to go through. I came home pretty late last night, I can tell you!”

“Ah! Young spirits having their fling! So how are you here, if I may be as bold as to ask?”

“I went to the office - in Westminster - and Mr Baillie said that I should come here and see you.”

“To the office, indeed!” Mr Fishwick beamed. “Your father would be proud of you. And what did Mr Baillie tell you?”

“Not very much really. There was something about the practice winding up and being merged with two other firms to form something that would be bigger and stronger. And there are some offices up North. It all sounded a bit complicated to me, the sort of thing that makes a chap's head ache.”

“Yes, indeed. That is the basic plan of things - not to make things sound complicated, you understand, but to have a merger of the three firms. And did Mr Baillie tell you the proposed name for the new practice?”

“No, he didn't,” said Michael, puzzled and wondering where all this was leading.

“Ah! Well, then, if I may presume to crave your indulgence for a moment - there! Here is the new letterhead for the practice.”

Michael took the sheet of paper from Mr Fishwick's outstretched hand and received a shock when he studied it. “It is headed Bernstein, Parsons, Morris and Partners!” he exclaimed. “My father is becoming a partner?”

“No, Mr Bernstein Junior, he is not. Your father is not becoming a partner. Nor is he one already. You are the Bernstein of Bernstein, Parsons and Morris!”

Michael did not know what to say, and said so. Despite the immediate wave of jubilation which engulfed him, there was still a small rebellious part in him that rose up and cried out for him to be delivered from the scheming and influence of his father. It called upon him to reject the proposal and declare for personal freedom and self-determination. A year earlier this faction might have had some support and held sway, but now it was swept aside, defeated, routed, as Michael translated pride into achievement and pleasure into success. So this was the result of Christina's discourse with his father during the trip to Newington at Christmas, of her complaints and representations about his lack of progress in his chosen career. She had tightened another knot. If he did not say “no” he would be sacrificing the last impediment to their union. This was his last and only chance to exert some influence over the direction in which his life was heading. “And some have greatness thrust upon them,” he said quietly.

“It is part of your father's grand plan,” continued Mr Fishwick, beaming and preening himself as if he had bestowed the favour rather than being the bearer of the news. “Ah, I know that he hasn't taken you into his confidence, just as he hasn't taken me fully into his confidence. None of us lower beings is allowed to see the whole of the complex tapestry he weaves! But he has decided that you should represent his interests in this field, and that I should be your most humble and compliant tutor and counsel in business matters, sitting alongside you, as it were, guiding your hand.”

“And reporting back?”

“Reporting back? Ha! You jest with me,” exclaimed Mr Fishwick with a less than convincing display of horror. “I shall merely be your guide, your mentor, in these matters. A kind of faithful servant, if you like. And I must say, if you will permit the presumption, that it will be an honour of the highest order to serve you!”

Michael still did not know what to think. The thought of being a Partner was appealing and he wondered what they were called upon to do and how they spent their days. Would it be easier than surveying and drawing sections? No doubt he would soon find out. Yes, he was beginning to feel a warm sense of pleasure, of relief, even. The distant voice still called out to him, claiming betrayal, but he ignored it. He would pick up the golden crumbs that had been purposely dropped from his father's table.

He spent the rest of the morning putting his name to what seemed to be an almost endless succession of forms, brought by Mr Fishwick's aged clerk, usually in the wrong order, for which error he was soundly scolded. Michael did not begin to try to understand them, but he did notice that one appeared to be the termination of his indentures. Nor did he begin to take stock of his position until, clutching two books given to him by Mr Fishwick accompanied by an exhortation to him to "dip" into them, he stood in St Paul's Churchyard. The truth of it was that he was confused and no amount of thought appeared to make matters any clearer. Thought after thought, idea after idea, question after question, all rampaged through his head, tumbling, stumbling and tangling in the general confusion. Perhaps once he started being a Partner it would all fall into place.

He wished above all else that he could go and tell Felicity. He tried to imagine what he would say, then what she would say. She would be pleased for him, there was no doubt of that. She would commiserate with his disappointment that he was not permitted to achieve this position himself, as a result of his own endeavours. He would tell her that, in all probability, it would have taken him several years to rise to being a partner and he now knew plenty who would not achieve it in a lifetime of work. And, on the letterhead, his name was first. That surely was indicative of some kind of achievement and some sort of status. Yes, Felicity would be pleased. Should he write to her? Perhaps not. She had asked for, and they had agreed, a clean break. She was bound to hear it through the connection with Arthur Brown and Moira Muir. Wouldn't they be surprised! Arthur would tell everyone that he had once worked directly under the man who was now one of the Senior Partners, perhaps the most senior of the Senior Partners! What a feather in his cap!

And Christina? She would be pleased, but not for him. Pleased for herself, pleased that the course was now clear. He began to wonder if she knew, if she had known for some time, perhaps since Christmas? What ever, he would have to act as if she did not. He would go straight from the office to the house in Bloomsbury to break the news.

Mr Nathan was waiting for him when he arrived back in the Westminster office. "Ah, Mr Bernstein, I am glad you are back. We have a great deal to discuss, not the least being the provision of an office and furniture for you as I understand you will be based here. And there is the question of a secretary. I must say that this merger represents a great business opportunity for us, all of us. Great indeed! I should also add that the addition of an office at Maidstone must call into question the maintenance of an office at Canterbury. It is something we should consider on a fairly urgent basis."

"What? Close it, the Canterbury office?" asked Michael, thinking of the Halloween Party.

"That could be an option. It would be easy to carry out the work from Maidstone."

"But, Morris and Spencer - we had better not refer to them as M&S - are specialists in the provision of potable water, I understand, so the work would not be necessarily compatible. It is true we would save on overheads, but I understand also that the Canterbury premises are quite inexpensive. My father doesn't own them, does he?"

"I do not think so," said Mr Nathan with a smile.

"Good! That's something. Well, I do not think we should rush into anything. I would like to also consider the possibility of moving work to Canterbury if the costs are low. What is their fee earning potential?"

"Their - ?" Mr Nathan looked puzzled.

"Their capacity? What is the maximum amount of fee annually they could be expected to earn providing the work was there? Do we know the potential value of the work they have in hand? Have we any forecasts for the next three to five years? Have we considered what work may be coming forward locally that we could obtain?"

Mr Nathan was astonished and pleased by this outburst and was unable to answer for a short while. "There are problems in marketing and obtaining work. We are not permitted to advertise. We must obtain work by recommendation, by word of mouth."

"I do not see that as a problem," said Michael, every bit as surprised by his words as was Mr Nathan. "My father has all manner of contacts. If you can find out the names and timing of the schemes and the authorities they are with, I will see what influence can be brought to bear. I do not think we should arrive at any conclusion about the future of the Canterbury office until we have done our research and our sums. Then we can make decisions based upon the facts and sensible, well thought out, projections."

Later Mr Nathan went to see Mr Baillie who had secreted himself in his office, trying to avoid meeting the new Senior Partner. "What can he think of me?" he asked. "I just could not bring myself to tell him!"

"I doubt that he even was aware of your difficulties. He has other things to occupy his mind and I have just had a long and illuminating discussion with him. I was impressed. The transformation is amazing!"

"A case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde?"

"You could say that."

"And which face are we likely to see in future?"

"That remains to be seen."

"I have had quite a day," Michael announced when he reverted to his habit of calling upon Lady Newington and her daughters before going home. He looked to see if Christina showed any kind of reaction before he made his announcement. She did not. If she did know something she was good at hiding the fact. "I have been made a Partner!"

"It is about time," she said.

"That is very good news, Michael," said Helen. "I am sure that you thoroughly deserved it."

"I think it was largely due to my father," he confessed.

"Well, that is what fathers are for."

"And now we can get married," said Christina, going to her mother and not Michael. "Can it be at the start of May?"

"That is really not very far away, darling," said Helen, taking hold of her daughter's hands. "There are many things to be arranged, people to be informed and invited, and the banns to be read."

"You did promise me a quiet wedding, Mama. In the chapel at Newington."

Michael felt uneasy at the mention of the chapel. It was not all that long since he had exhorted Felicity to go to Midnight Mass there.

"Nonetheless there are still going to be many things to arrange. I will think about it and talk to Michael's father. And what does Michael think about it? After all, he should express his view. Michael?"

"I think it should be the bride's prerogative," interrupted Christina.

"I would be quite happy with May," he said quietly. He might as well get it over and done with.

"Before I go there is something I must speak to you about," he said quietly to Christina. "We need to be alone. It will not take long."

When Michael had wondered how Felicity would react to his good news, he had assumed that she would hear because Arthur Brown would tell his fiancée, she would tell her father, who would tell Felicity's sister. There was a clear line of communication and one which would carry the news of his marriage just as efficiently. That was fine, but sooner or later someone would say "surely that's the young man who used to go out with that girl from Dover" or something of the sort. It might come from Moira. It might just develop as gossip on the Estate. Sooner or later that information would find its way back to Christina. It was all history now, but as he made his way back to the office from Mr Fishwick's he had resolved that he would have to tell Christina about Felicity. That would release him from the hold that

the small red notebook in Mr Fishwick's safe had over him. He had no doubt that no matter how painful it might be, it was the best course of action in the long run. It would be better, now that the affair was over, now that he had, in the form of the appointment, a little bargaining power, to also get it over and done with.

"Yes," she said impatiently, as soon as they were alone.

"I want you to understand from the start that what I am going to tell you is over - finished!"

"I do not understand!"

"When I was down at Newington, working, something - you know - I met a girl, a girl from Dover. I liked her very much."

"And?"

"Well, we used to see each other - go for walks together, even bus rides."

"Bus rides?"

"It is all over now."

"You went for bus rides with some girl from Dover?"

"Yes. I felt I had to tell you. I do not want you to hear from someone else."

"I do not understand you, Michael. I really do not. First its that Jenny Forbes, now it is some girl from Dover who has a penchant for bus rides. I am not at all sure that you are to be trusted."

"It just happened. These things do. You ought to know. You write romantic fiction."

"I might write about it. I do not expect any of that twaddle in real life - especially in my life!"

"I am sorry. I just thought I should tell you - that you should know from me."

"Thank you! Well, I do not wish to hear any more of it ever again! I do not want to hear of dalliances, flirtations, romances, affairs, correspondence, not even that you have as much as looked at another woman. I am beginning to think you are weak. I cannot watch you every hour of the day. I will expect absolute fidelity to me once we are married, in both thought and deed. And if so much as hear that you have been romancing I will make your life, and that of your lover, absolute hell! Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Michael softly, thinking how much he loved and missed Felicity and wondering if he could ever bring himself to love the harpy who was devouring his flesh.

"I am not saying any more. I might say something I would regret," she snapped. "You had better go now."

Michael had recovered some of his composure by the time he reached the house in Belgravia. "I hear that congratulations are in order!" cried Natacha, kissing him on the cheek. "Promotion and marriage! Is that in the right order? And I have great news, too. My entry for the Nice piano competition has been confirmed. Miss Crotchet has suggested that we take a holiday after the competition and visit the countryside around there. Apparently she has relatives there."

"It think that sounds like a good idea. When will you be away?"

"End of May, beginning of June, I think."

"You will have to be careful not to miss the wedding. I am to be married in May!"

"Oh, we cannot do that! You must arrange the wedding date so that it does not coincide with the competition. I will speak to Father. He will organise it! But, just think of it. You are getting married, I am in the Nice competition, and Miss Crotchet thinks I will have a good chance there of winning. May and June could be exceptional months for us!"

If Michael had imitated the activities of his fiancée and written a book, he would have entitled it "May Comes Too Soon" as the days that formed the protective buffer between him and the execution of the sentence peeled away with alarming rapidity. He was kept busy meeting his new fellow partners who, he was relieved to find, treated him with due deference, discussing business strategy, even visiting the Canterbury office where he managed to joke with Arthur and Mr Hiller. He found the proximity to Felicity painful. She had been there, with him in Canterbury, the night of the party, the night that Arthur and Moira had announced

their engagement, the night that Mr Hiller had told fortunes. But he said nothing on this occasion. Michael wondered how much more painful it would be to go to Newington to be married.

His feelings were excited and aggravated when Arthur asked him if he would come to his wedding with his Moira, although he did not know when it might be. The suggestion scared Michael. Had there not been talk of a double wedding and, in any event, even if there was not, Felicity would be bound to be invited! Yet he felt he could not say “no” outright. “I suppose it will depend on whether you remember to ask me,” he said. “Have you and Miss Muir fixed a date, yet?”

“No, but when we do, I may send you an invitation?” said Arthur.

“Of course,” said Michael, still trying to treat the subject lightly although he wished he could change it. “And if you do, I will have to send you an invitation to mine!” He knew it was a mistake the moment he said it and the question that followed was inevitable.

“Are you getting married, then?” said Arthur eagerly. Michael had to admit that he was. “To Miss Lightfoot?” The question cut into to him, into the bone, as he had to say “no”. It was only a couple of weeks since they had parted and the memory was still fresh. He should go and see her, if only to say all the things he had intended to say to her on their last day, all the words that had been left prepared, but unsaid in the gardens. He knew he could not because if he went now, he would never stop going. At least Arthur did not ask to whom he was being married as that might have made his relationship with Felicity look fickle and shabby. And it was not! It was deep and pure. They loved one another as much as any two could ever love each other. But no-one would believe that for one minute. It was all a question of the mouse being let out on his own for once. How apposite that seemed! He the mouse, Christina the cat. And Felicity? Just another little mouse, a sweet, soft, kind, loving and loveable mouse, and one which the big, black, wicked, cat would devour if ever she found out the truth about this little mouse.

It was not Arthur's questions that really shocked Michael. It was the thought of coming face to face with Felicity again and in public and all the memories that would resurrect. Quite suddenly, the realisation of the loss of her love hit him. He had tried to banish her from his thoughts, but every time he thought he had succeeded at the very least in banishing her to the deepest recesses of his mind, something, as now, would crop up and it would all flood back, each time worse than the time before. For as time passed by and their last meeting grew day by day ever more distant, the hopeless finality of it bore down upon him. Telling Christina had not laid this ghost. Going down to Newington would only raise it once again. Perhaps he would never be free of her? “Come to think of it,” he added. “Mine will be a very small, private and discreet, occasion. I will send you some wedding cake.”

Would the news of the proposed service at Newington reach Felicity's ears? Would she appear to oppose the banns, or appear to give just cause on the great day? How would he feel if she did? The truth was that he still missed her. He missed their walks, their conversations, their meetings at the cottage or the gardens, even their bus outings taken together. He missed seeing her, being with her, touching her. Now that he had been forced to remember all this, all that he could do was think of her.

He returned to the unhappy, unpleasant, way in which they had parted. He desperately wished to be able to make amends and clear up any misunderstanding, but he had agreed with Felicity that the severance was to be final and complete. Once again, he had given Christina his word, his promise, that he would not see or communicate with her. He had an idea, perhaps unfounded but compelling, nevertheless, of what Christina might do were she to discover he had contacted Felicity. Felicity probably thought very badly of him. Although she was aware of its inevitability, she would probably think even worse of him in times to come, when the news of his marriage did reach her. And he simply could not take the risk of trying to contact her to make amends. It was all very untidy, very bad, and something which would emerge from the dark corners of his bedroom to keep him awake and tormented through the small hours of his night.

Michael, unexpectedly, had several meetings with his father. He would have

described them as meetings, had anyone called upon him to give an account of their nature, because only business was ever discussed. Never once did his father mention Christina, or the forthcoming marriage, but once he started talking about the business he began to appear, Michael thought, almost human, though not humane.

“I am not at all happy with the Canterbury business. The report does not show it in a very good light.”

“I know,” said Michael confidently, surprised at his audacity. “I am disappointed with that. I had hoped that the picture would be better. There are indications of a reasonably strong market with good opportunities for us, but I cannot see how we can improve the premises in order to make the office viable. Despite the low rent, given the poor layout of the building, the cost of productive space is simply too high!”

“Have you considered acquiring the freehold? Land and property are always worth acquiring at the right price.”

Michael looked at his father and wondered whether he was the price for the acquisition of half the Newington Estate. No, that could not be as it had been Mark's decision that had allowed the entire estate to be included in the marriage settlement. Michael wondered what might have been in the agreement before. He should have read it when it was placed in front of him to sign. One day, when he found he had the courage, he would ask Mr Fishwick or even his father. “I must admit I haven't considered whether we should seek to purchase the freehold. It seems to me that unless we re-developed the site we would be stuck with the inefficiency of the layout. No, we have to make a choice between staying in Canterbury by moving to an entirely new location, or pulling out altogether. And given the rather isolated geographical location, I have to admit I favour the latter.”

“You would close the office in Canterbury?”

“At the appropriate time, yes.”

“And do you think that you can persuade your fellow partners?”

“I would have thought so. The figures rather speak for themselves. I might get opposition from a small minority, if that.”

“So be it,” said his father.

Michael often looked back on this episode and wondered if he had allowed personal matters to affect his judgement. The figures were plain and easy to hide behind. But he also knew that if the Canterbury office closed some of the connections between him and Felicity would be severed. Arthur was young. He would either move to Maidstone or leave and get another job. Either way, it could be of assistance to his career in the long run. Mr Hiller, as a junior partner, might present a slightly more difficult problem, but he might be persuaded to move to a new location and establish a new team, if the terms were right. The fact that he thought of them and considered their futures salved Michael's conscience, but he did feel a sense of relief when a full partners' meeting took the decision, in principle and without any prompting or lobbying from him, that the Canterbury office should be closed.

“And tell me,” said his father on another occasion. “Where do you see any future expansion in industry or the economy? In which market sector? If you had to invest your money, where would you put it?”

“I am not sure,” said Michael. “I wouldn't put it in service industries or utilities. The returns from gas, water and sewage is rather modest.”

“How about armaments?”

“Armaments?” said Michael, thoughtfully.

“This Country is on the brink of a massive re-armament programme. I calculate that it will be far bigger than our industrial capacity can produce. If you look around the World you will see that other industrialised nations are re-arming. Look at Japan, Germany, and Italy, for examples. Sooner or later we will have to follow, and where demand exceeds supply An ideal market to be in.”

“Well, if we are going to re-arm,” said Michael, thinking of Herr von Cerny, “I trust it will be sooner rather than later.”

"I started investing in the armaments industry immediately after the Great War as soon as it was returned to private ownership. It was clear that the war to end all wars had actually achieved nothing other than to destabilise Europe even further. The protagonists simply fought to a standstill and then went away to recover, regroup, and re-arm. All the underlying problems, tensions, and territorial ambitions, remain."

"You think so?"

"I know so! Now, you know what Caspar, Parsons and Caspar do?"

"Mostly main drainage schemes, like NBH did, surely?"

"Ah, that's what most people think. When you are next in Birmingham, ask to visit their Special Projects section. That is where they earn *all* their profitable income. You will be surprised."

"Why! Fraulein Christina! What an unexpected pleasure to find you here! And sat alone, eh? May I join you, ja?"

Christina paused in her writing and stared at the man who had removed his hat and was now in the process of sitting opposite her. If she could have she would have stopped him, but she had failed abjectly in the past and it was likely that he would have his way now.

"Actually, it is Frau, now," she said coldly and picked up her pen once more.

"You are married? Ah, then, it is some time since I was being in England. I am out of touch with these things."

"Yes I am," she said.

"And who was the fortunate gentleman? Do not tell me you married that oaf of an engineer?"

"Michael? Well, as a matter of fact I did and you knew full well that was always the intention. And he is hardly to be described as an oaf for marrying me."

"He must be some kind of a fool if he leaves unattended such a beautiful woman alone here in Rome."

"I am sure that even I am safe from you here, Herr Cerny," she said acidly.

"Ah, that is so. Now that you are married I will have to cast my line elsewhere."

"I didn't realise you were an angler as well."

"Well, you could say that. I am on the look out for a fine catch, you might say. And I am prepared to spread my net wide."

"There is some poor, unsuspecting, Italian woman, then?"

"Not poor. And titled. But whereas I may bait my hook and she may bite, I am not sure that I will necessarily want to land her. No, I still think I might throw my line onto a different pond. An English pond, maybe."

"I can assure you that I will not bite."

"No? I think you have nothing to fear from me. It is these Italians that you had better watch out for. I understand Count Rossi is in Rome. He is absolutely notorious where beautiful women are concerned. Be warned!" Christina snorted and watched a low, short, tram slide past. "I am a Count now," he announced. "My brother has died - in an accident."

"I am sorry," she said flatly. "Was he married?"

"No. By the very best of fortunes, he was not."

"And you, Count? Were you never married?"

"What a strange question under the circumstances! Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "Perhaps because I am a romantic novelist. Perhaps because you are old enough to be my father and you are the kind of man I would have expected to have married young, and impetuously."

"What a vivid imagination you have! I was once married but it was an affair of the heart, not the head. And as for romance, what better place to come than Rome and amongst the Italians. Look at them. Look at their eyes as they pass you. Everyone is assessing you, wondering -"

"I am now completely immune to that kind of thing. You should be aware of that," she said firmly. "Advances, flattery, spooning, flirtation, what ever you like to call it, none of it cuts any ice with me."

“And you a romantic novelist? Such repression! Freud would have a field day with you, Christina. I obviously failed to teach you anything!” She snorted again. “So,” he continued, “if it is not love and romance that has brought you to Rome, what is it?”

“We are here on honeymoon.”

“Capital!” exclaimed the Austrian. “On honeymoon, indeed! And that is not love and romance. How *wunderbar*! You will be my guests and dine with me on Thursday, yes? And where is he, this careless, errant, husband of yours who would leave his newly wed, beautiful, wife unattended in Rome? Tell me and I will go and seek him out!”

“He has gone off to visit Santa Maria Maggiore. He has developed an interest in church architecture, although I cannot understand why.”

“Ah, an excellent example. You should see the mosaics! He must come to Austria and Germany and see our churches! But you did not go with him?” The Austrian leaned back in his chair and beckoned to the waiter. “You will join me in a glass of wine, I trust?” he said before he ordered.

Christina nodded slightly. “I wanted to do some work on my latest book,” she said pointedly.

“Ah, yes, your latest book,” said the Austrian, appearing to settle himself and not showing the slighted indication that he had taken the hint. “I have read your first one - in English I might add. I thought it was very good.”

“No it is not,” Christina said forcibly. “That is why it sold so well.”

He laughed politely. “And your family? They are well?”

“Yes. Mama is down at Newington and probably planning to spend a King's ransom on some wall paper. Angela has stayed up in London and Mark is supposed to be daubing away in his studio. Michael's sister, Natacha, whom you met at Newington, should be in Nice and taking part in the piano competition there. And Michael and I are looking for a flat as we are still having to live in the same house as my beastly sister.”

“Ah, Lady Angela. She is a spirited young girl. Quite an angel!”

“An angel? I rather think that Mama and Papa had a distorted sense of humour when they named the two of us. She is no more an Angel than I am a true Christian. But I would not expect you to know about such things or place any value on them.”

“No? I place great value on your sister. Her presence and poise. She knows just how to carry and conduct herself. I am thinking she would make a good ambassador's wife. And as for religion, you do me a great disservice. I am a Christian and a practising Roman Catholic. I have some close friends in the Church and some influence there.”

“And you do not find your political beliefs and activities conflict with your faith?”

“No. Why should I?”

“Not concerning the Jews?”

“Least of all, the Jews. I am surprised to hear a Christian defending the Jews. After all they were responsible for the Crucifixion.”

Christina snorted again. “Some might say that they are just the scapegoats, the victims of God's will. Christ had to be crucified so that he could rise again and show that he was the true Messiah. Someone had to do it - it fell to the Jews. God told the Jews to do it.”

“So you are setting out to make a defence for them. There are some who might indeed say what you say, but not in Germany, not where we have so many profiteers and communists. Of course, some might also say that they had freedom of choice in the matter, as have we. Or that what they did was the work of the Devil and that they should be persecuted for all time because of it. Or that the World would be a better place without them.”

“Oh dear! Next you will be telling me that I should be changing my name.”

“Bernstein? It is rather an unfortunate choice.”

“Michael is not a Jew, you know,” she said vehemently. “Neither is his father. I could not have married him had he been a Jew!”

“Nevertheless - . “

“It seems to me that I am threatened on both sides. If the communists succeed I will perish because I am a member of the bourgeoisie. If your people come out on top, I will go because I have the wrong surname. Neither prospect exactly suits Michael or me.”

The Austrian smiled. "I do not believe for one moment that you are serious, Frau Bernstein. What you say about the communists may indeed be the case, but with us it will not come to that. We will win, I can assure you, here, in Spain, in Germany, in the rest of Europe, maybe all over the World. But you need not be concerned. I will ensure that."

"In Spain?" she laughed. "Surely that is lost already?"

"We shall win in Spain," he said, smiling again. "Just wait and see. And where we do win we will bring order, prosperity, a sense of belonging, a sense of property and possession, work for those who are prepared to work and nothing for those who are not. We will rid the people of communists and profiteers. Look around you, here! What do you see?"

"I see soldiers, uniforms, military bands, Fascist symbols, a feeble cosmetic attempt to revive the glories of the Rome of the past whilst defecating this beautiful city's heritage. I see a people fooled into following a mad piper, knowing not whence he will lead them. That is what I see, Herr Cerny. Perhaps if I looked closer, between the cracks in the new pavement along which the populace are being led, I would see far more unpleasant things? What would I find if I started to turn stones, Herr Cerny?"

"More stones, Frau Bernstein. Nothing but more stones. I fear that you have been listening too much to that brother of yours."

"I do have a mind of my own," said Christina quite firmly.

"Well then, I appeal to you to use it to open your eyes to the world in which we live. Take Germany. Not a generation ago the money was worthless. You would take a wheelbarrow full of money to the post office to purchase a single postage stamp, and probably find by the time you took to get there that the stamp had double in price and you now needed two barrow loads. Millions were put out of work and reduced to poverty, begging in the streets for crusts of bread from the rich Jewish tables. And look at it now. Whilst the rest of the world struggles, our factories are busy, bellies are full, and the people happy. Open your eyes, Frau Christina, that is what we do for people." He paused as one of the military bands, brilliantly coloured and decorated, marched by filling the air with Verdi. "Just see how we have given these people their pride back. See how smart and proud they are!"

"They do not appear to be able to fight any better for it," said Christina.

"Oh, Frau Bernstein! You are more than a little like your admirable sister. You are sharp and see through superficial issues to the heart of problems. I like that. If only you would let me open your eyes to see our world as it really is!"

"I think it is I who see your world as it really is, Herr Cerny," she said sharply. "At least, I think I see through you and your kind."

"Ah! That remains to be seen. And even if you consider me to be transparent, you will still join me as my guests for dinner? I shall not expect a refusal and will arrange for a detachment of the military to come to escort you should you show the slightest reluctance."

"We will come," she said lowly.

"And your absent husband? Do you see through him?"

"Much more than he thinks," said Christina.

"Our friend, Herr von Cerny, is in Rome."

"He is not my friend," said Michael sitting opposite his wife and beckoning to the waiter. "Nor, I thought, is he yours anymore!"

"He has not long left me. You only just missed him."

"Good! You really should have come with me. It really is most awesome. You would have found it most inspiring."

"I doubt that. I am not writing a baroque novel."

"You could write a baroque horror novel, baroque instead of gothic. I wonder if anyone has ever done that?"

"I am not writing a horror novel," she said coldly.

"I think it is the essence of the place, the ambience, the way it lifts one's soul. Now you should be saying this, not me. These are the things that would influence you, not the style. Do come and see it, and then there is a Basilica I would like to show you."

"He has invited us to dinner with him on Thursday. I have accepted."

“Oh, have you? Must we?”

“It seemed the polite and politic thing to do. He is a powerful and influential man. I find him quite scaring and I do have reason to fear him.”

“Surely that's a reason to stay away from him?”

“He has links to a powerful and influential organisation. I did not think that it would be wise to refuse him. We may have need of his influence and connections one day.”

“God forbid that we do. The World will have come to a pretty poor state if that happens. Now, will you come with me and see Bernini's tomb at Maria Maggiore?”

“Is it far?”

“No!” he said scornfully.

“Well, just let me finish this in which I was so rudely interrupted by our Austrian. Then I will come and see your church.”

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