

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"I think that this must be the place," said Miss Crotchet, anxiously trying to direct the car's headlights towards the property to see if any name was distinguishable.

"I trust that it is," said Natacha, trying to hold a torch between her teeth and direct its feeble, failing, light onto her lap. "This map they gave us isn't up to much. I don't believe half of the roads are on it, and half of those that are don't exist. My skills at map reading leave a lot to be desired, as I am sure you have noted."

"You 'ave done as well as I would 'ave done under the circumstances, ma chere."

"Well, I think we are about there," Natacha said, pointing to a dim spot on the map. "And according to our earlier reckoning, there is about where we want to be!"

"Did you ever see so much rain?" exclaimed Miss Crotchet, leaning back and stretching. "It is veritable dogs and cats. We picked a fine day to come up 'ere!"

"I was wondering what it is like in Rome. I hope it is not like this!"

"Ah, the honeymooners! They are not all that concerned with what the weather is like. Now, for once we could do with a man 'ere with us now."

"Perhaps I should have been more persuasive with Mark?" said Natacha, trying to wipe condensation from the windscreen. "Perhaps he would have come."

"And if he 'ad, he could have got out in this weather and found out where we are and whether we are there!" They looked at each other.

"One of us is going to have to get out," said Natacha with an impish grin on her face. "I don't really mind doing it just so long as there is no-one else about."

"I do not think there is anyone about apart from the people in the village at the bottom of the hill," said Miss Crotchet, "but it 'ad better be me. We do not want you to catch your cold or anything like that. I just need something to place over my 'ead."

Natacha watched her dart around the bonnet and then sliver along the beam of the headlights, trying to avoid the puddles but only stepping in them all the more because of her efforts. Then, quite suddenly, the woman was gone, out of sight, in the darkness that lay beyond the sweep of the lights. She settled back in the seat and stretched her legs forward. Reason told her that she should not be disappointed with her second place. That was a reasonable achievement for anyone, but to be a runner up was no substitute for winning. And she had worked hard, so very hard. Perhaps it was the slight hesitation in the Bartok. She knew it had occurred. Miss Crotchet heard it, but the judges? The piece was not to their liking, and they said so. Or perhaps it was because she was a young woman and the winner was an older male. The judges had stressed that there was little to choose between the two of them. She had heard it said that at least one of the judges subscribed to the view that women lacked the strength and stamina required for all the travelling and practice necessary to keep up the schedules associated with a concert career. Yet, if the audience's reaction and the flowers she received afterwards, both backstage and at the hotel, were anything to go by, she more than had the edge over the winner. Of course, it could have been that the audience were sympathetic towards a young girl making her first appearance outside her native country. Perhaps it was simply her gender.

It seemed all right for Christina. No-one suggested, any more, that she could not write because she was a woman. No-one had put forward such an argument without inviting derision since the last century. No-one suggested that Chrissie's books were second-rate on account of her sex. If this was the reason for the judges' decision, it seemed unfair, but second place was second place in a large competition where many, mostly males, had fallen by the way side.

"I 'ave heard you play better," Miss Crotchet had said, "but only slightly so."

"Enough to make the difference?"

"Possibly so, ma chere. Possibly," was the response. Yet Natacha thought that her tutor's initial reaction was one of disbelief when the decision was announced, although this soon gave way to disappointment and words of consolation. That she should have been consoled for finishing second at Nice! That she should have finished second at Nice!

It seemed strange, after the awards and the press conference, to return to the hotel, pack everything, and then leave. The car, which Miss Crotchet had picked up in Nice, was arranged through Thomas Cook, but the chalet where they intended to spend their holiday, if ever they found it, had been organised by one of Miss Crotchet's relatives. From the very outset there had been some confusion as to exactly where it was and the best route to take to get to it. After several hours driving they had sought directions only to be told that they had missed the required turning and would have to retrace a considerable part of the journey. And having done so, and sought fresh directions, they were sent back in the direction from which they had lately come. Natacha started to form a very poor opinion of French folk.

A late lunch was taken at a small hostelry near St Martin-Tende-Vesubie where the sight of two women, one French, the other English, and *plus belle*, aroused curiosity and a good deal of comment amongst the locals.

Then, in the afternoon, as the weather closed in and the rain started, they encountered a dense mist and completely lost their way, unwittingly passing turning after turning, arriving more than once at the same border crossing without being aware that they were again on the same road and heading in the same direction as before. Miss Crotchet, who was sat in the driver's seat and who mostly pointed the car in what she instinctively felt was the right direction, became increasingly frantic, but Natacha remained calm and, after the second unplanned attempt to cross over into Switzerland, found a dog-eared Route Map covering the Nice District in a pocket in the car door. It had been her painstaking navigation that had brought them to where the car now rested and where she sat, listening to the rain as it beat upon the roof.

Still Miss Crotchet did not return. Natacha thought of, and dwelt on, the applause, received the bouquets over and over again, curtsied low, then looked down at her hands. How they had moved! In the Listz and Bartok even she had been surprised at their speed and accuracy over the whole breadth of the keyboard. It was almost as if she now longer had any control over what these hands did! Not even when, for the tiniest of moments, they hesitated. No, the judges could not have noticed it. Only she alone, apart from her Tutor, knew.

She thought of Mark. He was reliant upon his hands too though she had once read an account of how someone had painted with a brush held between his toes. She dwelt on their parting, with her coming down to Nice and him returning to his studio to paint whatever it was he was painting. If only he had come with them!

"I have this ridiculous feeling that I may never see you again," he said. "I feel I am losing you!"

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "And do not become all serious and mawkish with me. Of course we will see each other again! What do you think is going to happen?"

"I don't know. You will be an instant success with men throwing themselves at your feet!"

"I trust they won't! It makes the place so untidy!"

"And you will then set off on a World Tour, leaving the likes of us poor mortals behind, reduced to worshipping your effigy. You will be enthroned and exulted as the new Goddess of Music and set on high, attended by Miss Crotchet and other handmaidens, unapproachable but revered."

"Don't be silly," she repeated, this time a little more severe.

"I will miss you."

"You should have come with us. You could have. You still could."

"No. We did discuss that ad nauseam. It would not be right. You must go to Nice without any distraction and just play, and win. I will wait here."

She thought that it might have been in his mind to propose marriage to her. She knew that he would not, because that would have most certainly have been a distraction, and she was relieved when he did not as that saved her having the burden of refusing him and carrying the guilt for her decision with her to the competition. So, nothing was said. One day he would ask, she was certain of that. And then, what would she say?

Oh, it was good to have Mark around! He would sit and sketch her, or turn the pages of the music, or simply fill in time with his idle chatter and witticisms; but she had no wish

for a romantic entanglement, not with Mark, not with anyone. She did not want someone who, as a matter of right, had a call on her time and her person. Then, he had never actually said that he liked her as a person, although she had always assumed it to be so. Had she been asked, she would have said, as she did say, that she liked him. Pressed, she might have gone so far to confess that she loved him as a younger sister might love an elder brother. Pressed further she might have conceded that had things been different, and there not been the music, she might have been prepared to marry him had he asked her.

Was it fair, then, not to be provocative and presumptive and have the whole matter out with him? Tell him now that if, as she suspected, marriage was in his mind, it was hopeless and that she would never marry him, nor anyone else. He would at least know where he stood. But, then, if she did that he might no longer come to see her and turn the music, and she did have to admit to herself that she did enjoy his company. And his masculine presence did deter some of the other would-be admirers.

Could she have said all this when they parted? No, not once he had made his silly pronouncement about never seeing her again. She had found that disturbing then and it disturbed her now, then because she thought he was suggesting that she would no wish to see him any longer, and now because it had occurred to her that things might be the other way around. He might have been preparing the way for him to say "goodbye" to her! After all, now that she thought about it, she had no idea what he did or whom he met at his studio. Or at those other times when he was not with her or his mother, and he was not to be found at his studio. He might have it in his mind not to propose marriage to her, or continue seeing her as a friend, but simply to seek to end their long association. The prospect hurt her, hurt her vanity, hurt her more than she would have been willing to admit and far more than being faced with having to decline a proposal of marriage would ever do.

Miss Crotchet was rapping on the window. "It is 'ere, ma petite!" she cried, brushing the water from her eyes and cheeks. Leave the headlamps on so that we can see what we are doing. I will bring the luggage. You make a dash for it!"

The chalet was an isolated, low, stretched, single-storey stone building. It stood at the end of an unpaved track that wound its way as it climbed from the village half way up a mountain, or so it seemed. "It is a bit primitive," Miss Crotchet announced, "but the view from it should be breathtaking if the weather clears. I 'ave lit a lamp so let us get in quickly!" At the time, in the darkness, there was no view to behold. Natacha found it hard enough to make out the chalet and the path leading to the door. She found herself in a large room lit by the solitary lamp. A corridor led away on one side along the rear of the building to the bedrooms. A door in the opposite wall led to the kitchen and a basic bathroom. "It is a long way to walk," she commented to Miss Crotchet.

"At least it is better than 'aving to go outside and down the garden path!" said the music teacher.

The rooms appeared to be clean and well furnished. Miss Crotchet examined the bedrooms and selected one for Natacha, declaring it to be the best and expressing the hope that the mattresses had been thoroughly aired. "It can still be quite chilly and damp up here at this time of year," she declared.

"So I can see," said Natacha, prodding the mattress and finding it quite firm and resistant. Back in the main room she spotted, standing in the shadows at one end, a baby-grand piano.

"It is an old Broadwood," said Miss Crotchet. "I 'ave asked that it might be brought up 'ere but I do not know what the tuning will be like in this weather. Play something for me while I light the stove and the fire and prepare something warm for us. We can leave the main unpacking until the morning."

Natacha looked at the piano and flexed her hands. Then quite suddenly she felt a compulsion not to play. Not tonight - perhaps tomorrow? "Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "That won't do at all. I will help you now. I may play tomorrow. I think I am too tired to play tonight, anyway."

The sound of a man's voice awoke Natacha. For a moment she was not at all sure

where she was or where he was. Then she thought he must be inside the chalet but as she adjusted to the novelty of her surroundings she realised the voice was coming from beyond the shutters through which a narrow shaft of sunlight was trespassing across the bedroom. Easing herself out of the bed she tip-toed across to the window and parted the shutters just a few inches. The speaker was a young, dark-haired man with a rugged complexion and her overwhelming reaction was to think of how handsome he was! He was addressing Miss Crotchet who was standing in a dressing gown with her hair unkempt and loosely tied back. Both appeared greatly animated and were talking so quickly that Natacha could pick up only the odd word here and there. When suddenly he turned and appeared to look straight at her she gave a little start and stepped back, feeling guilty even though she was sure that he could not have seen her, or even been aware that someone was there. Slowly she eased the shutters back into their former closed position.

“Who was that?” she demanded of Miss Crotchet once she was dressed and the Frenchwoman had come back into the chalet and was now preparing breakfast.

“That was Jacques. He 'as to bring up the water as well as the fuel and supplies and 'e is demanding payment for doing so. I was telling 'im that the payment was included in the price of the chalet. It is included in the sum we paid, this fetching and bringing. I told 'im that and that if 'e did not do it as agreed I would go and talk to the Count. We have been asked to go there for dinner, incidentally!”

“How much does he want?” asked Natacha, clearly ignoring the reference to the invitation that Miss Crotchet felt so triumphant about.

“Five francs a day, if you would believe it!”

“I would have paid it,” said Natacha, stepping out into the sunlight and breathing in the fresh air. “I have to see this view.”

The car stood exactly where they had abandoned it, angled across the end of the track, batteries drained. “It is all right,” said Miss Crotchet. “We can start the car by running it down the 'ill in gear. My father showed me 'ow to do it once.”

“I hadn't realised it would be so beautiful,” said Natacha, her eyes running up the line of the valley right to the snow-capped distant peaks.”

“You see the village? Look, down there! That is where Jacques comes from. That is where 'e 'as to bring things and for that 'e asks five francs a day!”

“I would have paid him,” said Natacha demurely.

“And over there, just beyond the church, the line of trees? That is where the Count's chateau is.”

“The one who, you say, has asked us to dinner?”

“Oui, ma chere. He is rich. He could be incredible handsome and most eligible! I expect you will like him.”

“I think that Jacques is handsome.”

“Jacques? Pah, 'e is nothing - a mere mule driver, a village yokel. I would forget 'im.”

“Except we will rely upon him for our water and provisions. That will be hard work, bringing all that up.”

“He will use a mule. That will do all the 'ard work for 'im. The worse 'e will 'ave will be the loading and unloading. That is all. And for that 'e asks five francs a day!”

It was at just after noon that the two women set off for a short walk up the mountain and a picnic. Miss Crotchet carried the provisions in a small hamper she had discovered on a cupboard in the kitchen, whilst Natacha followed carrying a small parasol and looking undeniably pretty. They passed through a flower-strewn meadow disturbing pale yellow butterflies that surrounded them as they did so, and carried on along a grassy slope until they reached a spot at which the hill facing them suddenly became disturbingly steep. Here they settled and spread out a cloth across the short grass, secure in the shelter of a rocky outcrop which provided shade from the rays of the sun.

“Mark should be here. He would have loved this. There is so much to see and take in, so much that he could paint!”

“This young admirer and painter of yours, does 'e paint landscapes?”

"I really do not know," confessed Natacha. "I certainly have never seen one that he did, but then I have seen very little of his finished work. He does go and lock himself away in his studio where few are admitted and, I must say, from which very little emerges. When we get home I will make a specific point of asking him. Better still, I will insist on seeing inside the studio and all the work he has been doing!"

"Will he be prepared to do that?"

"He will do anything for me," asserted Natacha. "I am certain of it."

They sat and ate and wine themselves, admiring the view, watching large birds circle and swoop, alone, with not another human soul in sight. "Is it not peaceful here?" asked Natacha. "I almost think this is more idyllic than the cottage at Newington where Michael stayed. That was beautiful too, though not on this grand scale."

"We must watch the sun," said her companion. "I did not bring my pocket watch and it can become very damp up 'ere very quickly at this time of year. Beside that, we must be back in time to get ready as the car is coming to collect us at eight."

"This Count of yours. I suppose that he is old and ugly?"

"I told you! I do not know," said Miss Crotchet. "The chalet belongs to 'im and if I understand the agent correctly, all of the negotiations were done with 'im. But I do not know what 'e is really like, only that 'e sent word that 'e would be pleased if we would be 'is guests and dine with 'im. I replied that we would be delighted."

Natacha did not comment further but stretched and laid back, closing her eyes. It seemed almost criminal to shut out the beauty and grandeur of the scene before her, but she felt tired, very tired. She could hear Miss Crotchet still talking, but her voice was becoming fainter and fainter.

Then she was dreaming. She did not think she was truly asleep, but she was in Rome, at a large, luxurious, restaurant, with Mark, Christina and Michael. They were laughing and joking, celebrating their weddings. She was married and on her honeymoon! They were both on their honeymoons! And they were celebrating her success in Nice! Yet, was it Mark who was there, or Jacques? It seemed indistinct and confused. She could not be certain who it was who was with her, or who it was she wanted to be with her. Now there was some kind of announcement. She did not catch most of what was said, but people at other tables were turning towards her and applauding. Some of the men, smart and suave in their evening jackets, were standing, and the person at her side was gently helping her up out of her seat and saying "go on, go on" in her ear. She assumed that she had been asked to play and stood, turning to acknowledge the applause. But, where was the piano? Why had she not brought it with her? Why had she gone out without her piano? Suddenly the management acted and there was one, standing some distance away, shrouded in gloom.

"I 'ave asked for it to be tuned," said Miss Crotchet who was suddenly beside her, "but it will not stay so, not in this weather. It matters not because these peasants will not appreciate what you play. It will sound all the same to them, in tune or out of tune!"

Natacha started forward, pushing between the tables, avoiding the groping advances of some of the men and ignoring the sneers of some of the women. Yet she did not appear to be getting any closer to the piano and her legs were beginning to feel tired, weak, like lead. Then she was beyond the tables and on the dance floor, except everything was changed and she found herself in the living room at the chalet with the ancient Broadwood that stood at one end before her. As she came up to it and prepared herself to sit, a sheet of flame exploded in her face and engulfed her. For a moment, as she tried to escape and beat away the flames and screamed for help, all she could sense was pain, from her face, her legs, and her hands which seemed to be melting before her eyes. Then she was aware of someone reaching out, grasping her charred arm, and pulling her out, inch by inch, out of the fire and to safety. The person was speaking. "Natacha, ma chere," said Miss Crotchet, "come along. It is time that we are starting back to the chalet!"

"My house is charmed and enriched by your presence," said the Count as he greeted the two women that evening. He addressed both of them but it was clear to all that the words were directed towards Natacha. Miss Crotchet stepped backwards and smiled gracefully.

“And,” he continued, “before you say anything I should explain that I was educated at Oxford, my father being something of an Anglophile which is rare amongst Frenchmen. I can therefore speak English perfectly, almost as well as I can speak my native tongue. *Je connais que vous etes la francaise, Mademoiselle, mais ce soir, je desire que nous parlons en Anglais.*”

“Oui,” said Miss Crotchet from behind Natacha, “this evening we will all speak in only English.”

He turned to Natacha and took her arm. “May I?” he said. Natacha looked at her companion who nodded slightly her consent. “I was in Nice, you must know, to hear you play,” he continued. “You were magnificent! I am a great lover of music. Have you tried the Broadwood I had placed in your chalet?”

“No,” she said with a slight pang of fear.

“It is quite old and was bought by my grandfather on the understanding that it had once been in the possession of the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy family. How do you relish the prospect of playing a piano that either Felix or Fanny might have played? Perhaps they even sat beside one another and played duets? Do you play duets, Miss Bernstein?”

“Natacha, please.”

“Yes, of course, Natacha. I would put myself forward as a partner but I am afraid that you might find something lacking in my playing.”

“I am sure that cannot be the case!” she said lightly.

“And I have a good number of original manuscripts here, some of which are unpublished. My father, and his father before him, were collectors, you see. There are some charming pieces by Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky who my father met whilst in Russia when he was in the service of the Foreign Office. Your Sir Arthur Sullivan came here, looking for the lost symphonies of Schubert. We had but fragments, I am afraid, but then he found the great Seventh elsewhere.”

“And you, Count?” asked Miss Crotchet, fascinated by the conversation yet not feeling a part of it. “Are you with the Service, too?”

“I? Ah, no Mademoiselle. I simply live here with my aged mother and look after this chateau, the gardens and estate, and the village. That is all I do. I enjoy life. And when you live here, I find that there is little or no inclination to live anywhere else, certainly not amongst the snow and Spring-less days of Moscow, or the rains and sun-less days of Manchester. When you have been here a couple of days you will see what I mean.”

“I am sure that Moscow ‘as a Spring, Count,’” protested Miss Crotchet, “every bit as much as Manchester ‘as sunshine, occasionally.”

“Not since the Bolsheviks seized power has Moscow had a true Spring day,” he growled. “And do not tell me that the sun shines in Manchester. It rains. I know, I have been there.”

“It does not rain all the time,” said Miss Crotchet defensively and feeling alarmed that the poor weather in Manchester might be due to Bolshevik infiltration.

Do you live here alone?” asked Natacha, feeling that there should be more interesting subjects to discuss other than relationships between climatology and politics. “Apart from your mother?”

“Yes. Only my mother lives here with me, but she normally keeps to her room because of her health. I have asked her to join us at dinner this evening but I doubt if she will. It is her infirmity. Shall we go in?”

It was late, and the moon was high in the sky above the glistening mountains, when the Count's car brought them back to the chalet. “What a wonderful evening!” exclaimed Natacha as soon as they were inside and the car had started the descent back to the village. “I really enjoyed myself. He is such a handsome and considerate man. And what a beautiful house! What did you think of the Count?”

“I found 'im a little superior,” grumbled Miss Crotchet, busying herself with the lamps. “Perhaps a little aloof, but then I am no more than a mere piano teacher, a second class person.”

“Oh I am sure that he did not mean that for one moment,” exclaimed Natacha. “And, did you notice the strong resemblance between him and Jacques? They could almost be brothers!”

“They may well be 'alf-brothers,” called Miss Crotchet from the kitchen. That is not uncommon in these parts.”

“Really?”

“If you think about it. He owns the village and all the land for miles around. There was a time when 'is family virtually owned all the people on that land, or acted as if they did.”

“I have read accounts,” said Natacha going out to join her companion, “of how the sons of the Aristocracy would take their pick of the village girls, or would claim a right to be the first to sleep with a villager's bride. You mean that kind of thing? Do you think that it still goes on? He is very attractive, this Count.”

“I would not worry your 'ead about it. I dare say something of the kind persists in some remote regions. I dare say that it is possible that the likes of the Count would still look and seek out those who are weak on the flesh for 'is recreation.”

“Goodness! Do you think that we are at risk, here, alone? Should we barricade the doors and shutters? You should have warned me before I accepted his invitation to luncheon tomorrow!”

“You are teasing me, Natacha, I know. I do not think we are at risk, as you say. I do not think the Count would 'ave any designs on an old leg of mutton like me. And I think 'e will use charm, gallantry and persuasion with the likes of you. No, we are not at risk, not in that sense, not 'ere.”

“But you think we are at risk in some other way?” asked Natacha, suddenly feeling rather chilled.

“I do not know. There is an intoxication about this place, an atmosphere, that could make one loose their sense of proportion. And there is something else as well - .” Miss Crotchet brushed past her and carefully placed the lamps on table in the living room, ready for them to be taken to their bedrooms. Natacha followed her in and instinctively looked at the Broadwood standing in the shadows. “No,” she thought, “it is late and I am tired. I am not going to play it. Not tonight.”

“You will find that every day is sunny here,” said the Count handing Natacha her parasol. “Even when it is misty or wet. You will need to carry this in the garden. It is not like - “

“Manchester?” smiled Natacha. “You know I have not yet been to Manchester. I was due to play there but the engagement was cancelled for some reason. I cannot recall why. Perhaps Miss Crotchet can. But I cannot believe that it is as bad as everyone makes out. I am sure that there are far wetter places in the United Kingdom, but we do not wish to discuss those, do we?”

“I see I will have to be careful what I say, now. What would you like to discuss, Mademoiselle?”

“Natacha, please!” she protested as they started to walk together, with Miss Crotchet following at a discreet distance.

“Mademoiselle Natacha? I could tell you how the gardens were designed, laid out and constructed by my great, great grandfather when he was still a young man, shortly after the restoration of the Monarchy. He would have nothing to do with it then, nor would the local people have anything to do with the Revolution before that. We are very isolated here. I could describe how the terraces which make up the gardens were cut out of the rock of the mountain side, and how the topsoil was brought here by mule from miles around, impoverishing the peasants as a result. Or how the gardens, if they were more widely known, might be regarded as one of the modern wonders of France today, rivalling Versailles or the Eiffel Tower, perhaps. But if I said these things I might just sound to you like a travel guide, someone employed by your Thomas Cook. I wish to be more than a travel guide to you, Mademoiselle Bernstein.”

“You are looking for someone to play all your pianos, Count? How many are there?”

You appear to have hundreds of them.”

“I do have a formidable collection, but not hundreds. Not even one hundred. And, no, I am not looking for someone to play them. I can engage any number of mediocre pianists to fill my house with their music, but it needs something more than that. There are some things that money cannot buy. I imagine that you are one of those things? Do not answer. Come and see the miracles of the Chateau gardens and let their charm and beauty speak for me.”

Passing through an ornate opening in a tall box hedge Natacha found herself in what she could only describe as a complete wonderland. The gardens rose above her, terrace after terrace, stretching up into the sky. Together she and the Count, followed by the faithful, observant, and ever attendant, Miss Crotchet, zig-zagged up the side of the hill, climbing steps, sometimes wide and grand, sometimes narrow and twisting, and passing along successive terraces, past arbours, under pergolas, and through flowering arches. Some were laid out with expansive lawns and shrubs, others were narrow with roses, clematis, and sweet smelling perennials. They followed the undulating shape of the hill side so that on no terrace could one end be seen from the other. This added to the sense of awe and expectation as they rounded a bluff and a new vista would open up before them. At one point they suddenly came upon a wide waterfall, tumbling thirty feet into a frothing white and blue pool. “Oh!” exclaimed Natacha. “I could hear the noise, but it is so unexpected! Where does the water come from?”

“Not only unexpected,” said the Count, “but at times like this, when there has been little rain for a while apart from the other night, I must confess that we do cheat a little. We would not do it normally but the water is being pumped today, just for you.”

“It is quite breathtaking,” she said. “And just for me? I feel so flattered. And puzzled.”

“Puzzled, Natacha? How can that be?”

“By you, all alone apart from your mother, in all this beauty, and no-one to share it with you.”

“I live here in the hope that the right person might come along. Someone with an appreciation of beauty, a love of music and an interest in things ancient and historic.”

“I dare say that you would find someone if you really looked hard,” she said softly.

“Maybe I have already looked, and looked hard,” he said smiling. “Come. Take my hand and I will show you something unusual. You can walk right behind the waterfall.” So saying he led her along the smooth rock edge of the pool and onto a broad ledge carved out below the overhang. Miss Crotchet remained at the pool-side, holding Natacha's parasol, and watched them vanish behind the curtain of water. “I think you belong here,” he said suddenly as they stood in the shimmering, green, light. “Your presence graces the gardens and justifies all the effort that has been, and is, put into them. You are the jewel in the crown.”

“You are saying all this just because we are alone and Miss Crotchet cannot hear you above the noise of the water,” laughed Natacha.

“No,” said the Count, seriously. “Do not laugh at me. I am saying it because I mean it. When I saw you on the stage and heard you play at Nice, the moment that I set my eyes upon you, I knew that you were the one. When I learnt that you were coming to stay here in a chalet I owned, I could not believe this was simply good fortune. It had to be destiny. It was ordained that we were to meet like this. I am asking nothing of you now, not yet, except this - whilst you are here, in the gardens, at my humble Chateau, in the village or on the mountain, look at the blue of the skies and the white of the clouds, look at the meadows and the butterflies, listen to the birds, and ask yourself whether this could be the kind of paradise in which you could happily spend the rest of your life. Do not say anything now, not a word. If you now said “yes”, I would not believe you. If you now said “no”, I would consider that you had not taken me seriously. Just dwell on my words and open those beautiful eyes, and see. I will ask you for your decision when the right moment comes. Will you do just what I ask?”

“Of course,” said Natacha softly, although her heart was loudly racing.

The two women followed the Count up to the highest level of the gardens, Natacha dwelling on the Count's words and Miss Crotchet guessing from her pupil's brooding silence that something had been said behind the waterfall, and wondering what. “From here,” said the

Count, "you have a panoramic view of the valley, the Chateau, the village, the gardens, even your chalet. Look! Do you see it up there?"

"Oh, yes!" said Natacha, suddenly seeming to feel bright again. "I can even see the car. Do you see it, Miss Crotchet?"

"I do and I trust that is Jacques and his mule climbing the track with the water and provisions," she said grumpily.

"Ah, you have Jacques looking after you, have you? He can be idle and insolent, that one. Have you had any trouble with him?"

"No!" said Natacha firmly and before Miss Crotchet could open her mouth, and neutralised the Frenchwoman's annoyed glare with the sweetest of inoffensive smiles.

"You can also see more clearly from here how much work and effort must have gone into hacking out the terraces and levelling them. You can see how they dug out the rock from the mountain side and spread it to increase the width of the ledge on the other. It must have been a Herculean task, building up the levels. Most of it had to be dug out by hand and, as I said, the topsoil had to be brought here and raised right to this level. I believe that the thickness diminishes as the levels increase so that when you reach this level it is suitable for Alpines and plants that grow at this height. Even today the equipment and plants have to be manhandled from level to level. It is quite an undertaking, but I am sure everyone thinks that it is worth it. And now the idea is that although there are steps at each end of the terraces, we descend in the reverse order to the way we ascended. You will see the gardens in a completely new perspective that way."

"Did you know all about this?" demanded Natacha once the two women were alone in the dim light of the chalet.

"Know about what?" asked Miss Crotchet.

"Know what he was going to say to me?"

"What 'e was going to say to you? No, I 'ad no idea. What did the Count say to you under the waterfall?"

"He was very forward. He asked me whether I thought that this was the kind of place in which I would like to spend the rest of my life!"

"What, 'ere in the chalet?"

"No," said Natacha, scornfully. "In the Chateau and the gardens, looking at the mountains and the blue skies."

"He asked you that? How presumptive! The French can sometimes be far too precipitive. It is the Latin blood."

"You are French."

"Ah, well, I 'ave spent a long time with the English and adopted some of your reserve. Clearly the Count 'as not."

"Clearly the Count wishes to. And he has been educated at Oxford! "

"It does not appear to 'ave done 'im all that much good in the ways of manners. Do you not want to go tomorrow? We could 'ave another picnic?"

"Oh, yes, we will accept his invitation and go to see him tomorrow. I am looking forward to seeing the village. I did not find him offensive, just a little forward. Had I found him offensive I would not have contemplated staying as we did. I would have returned here straight away. There is one thing that is strange. Have you noticed we have not see a sign of his mother who he says lives there with him?"

"He did say that she keeps 'erself to 'er room because she is infirmed."

"I know. But here he is as good as proposing marriage to me and not even introducing me to his mother. It does seem very odd."

"I expect 'e has his reasons. 'E may explain it all tomorrow. I am pleased that you have decided to see 'im. And I am going to prepare myself a night-cap. Do you want me to do you one as well?"

"Yes," said Natacha, and looked at the Broadwood, standing at the end of the room, waiting to be played. As yet she had not as much as lifted the lid or laid a finger on the keys. Yet she felt no compulsion to play it. She had played at the Chateau, for the Count, but here -

. “No,” she thought, “not tonight.”

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