

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"I think we need to talk about the Newington Contract." Michael stared up at Mr Natham. He was always direct and displayed none of the subservience that Mr Baillie exuded.

"The Newington contract?" queried Michael, thinking that although he preferred Mr Natham's approach, it could come as a shock sometimes and would occasionally remind him of his father. "Let's see, we have awarded that one, have we?" He knew they had some months earlier. He also knew that, following his visit to Mr Fishwick's office, he had surreptitiously arranged for Angus Muir's company to be included on the tender list, never believing for one moment that they would tender anything other than highest. However, when the tenders were opened to his amazement he found that they were lowest by a comfortable margin. He then felt uncomfortable and tried to conjure up reasons why they should not be awarded the contract but the District Council would not hear of it. So, Angus Muir & Co were appointed and had been working on the contract.

"We have problems, have we?"

"We have problems," affirmed Mr Natham. They sat in Michael's office, not at his desk but at a small conference table which he had installed because he found it more comfortable and so did nearly everyone else. Not Mr Natham, however; he probably would have been as comfortable had they met on the ledge outside the window, fifty feet above the ground. "You will recall that Mr Smiley has gone down there as Resident Engineer?" he said.

"In his converted Karrier, I understand. He must have found all the parts that were missing in order to get down there. Mind you I did tell him about a yard near Whitstable. Perhaps he went there."

"Very possibly," said Mr Natham. "And you will recall that the contract was awarded to A G Muir & Co?"

"Yes. Now I come to think of it, didn't we recommend to the District Council that they should be passed over? We were obviously wrong as the reports I have seen indicated that they were doing rather well."

"So they were, until they encountered problems with the levels on the drawings which did not marry up with those in the field. It appears that in a number of locations the sewer will have to be laid deeper than shown in order to make the house connections."

"Well? Is that a problem?"

"It is if you have already laid the sewer. In some cases it will affect the level of the main gravity sewer, which has also been started. What ever is done, there will be a significant amount of work that has to be re-done, with all the attendant extra costs."

"Yes?" said Michael, indicating by his attitude that he still wondered where the problem lay.

"Mr Smiley has been asked to certify this extra work. He has refused."

"Surely that is not right? It cannot be said to be Muir's mistake!"

"The terms of the contract places the obligation to check and verify all dimensions and levels upon the contractor before he starts work. It is on this basis that Mr Smiley has declined to certify any extra payment. I am sure that I do not need to spell out the potential consequences for a firm the size of Muir's which is, incidentally, an unlimited company."

"They will either have to borrow the money or go out of business."

"They would certainly have to borrow enough to tie them over until we do decide how much we should authorise for payment."

"Why cannot we do that now?" asked Michael, beginning to feel a little concerned as to what his father would think of this situation.

"Partly as a matter of policy," said Mr Natham, checking that the office door was closed. "We have to pay everything that is expressly provided for under the terms of the contract. Once that amount is settled, we look at the contractor's claims, the grey areas you might say, and compare these to the amount of the contingency that is left. Usually, where the Resident Engineer has kept variations to a minimum there is sufficient to meet reasonable demands, although we would never pay a claim in full. However, by definition, none of this

can be considered until the final account stage, which could be two years off!"

"And you are saying that you do not think that Muir will be able to hold out until then?"

"I gravely doubt it."

"Oh, dear. There is nothing that we can do?"

"Nothing. I thought that you should be aware of the situation, none the less, given you suggested that the firm should be considered for the tender list in the first place, and the fact that you did the initial survey."

Michael studied the Partner's face as he spoke as his words sounded more like a threat than advice, but there was nothing in his demeanour that suggested that this might be so. It would have been the kind of situation that would have made Mr Fishwick salivate, but Mr Natham, even if it had occurred to him that there was a possibility of making use of the situation to his advantage and Michael's embarrassment, never did. For a while after he was again left alone in his office Michael was disturbed by the thought that Mr Muir's business might be in trouble, and wondered what had happened to Arthur and Moira following the closure of the Canterbury office, but by the time he returned home, late afternoon, he had all but forgotten about it. Outside the flat, on the pavement, he encountered Mr Fishwick's young assistant. "Will? It is Will, isn't it?" he said.

"That's right guv' I was just dropping off some papers for your missus to see."

Michael wondered what the papers might be, but he had another question forming in his mind. "One thing, before you go. Has a Mr Muir, a Scottish gentleman, called to see Mr Fishwick recently?"

"A Scottish gent with a good-looking filly? Yeh, he was there a couple of weeks ago but I don't think he wus that pleased with what the ol' man must have told him."

"He didn't get another loan, you think? You can tell me, in confidence of course."

"It wus either that or the discounts wus too high."

"Discount?"

"Yeh. He wus after factoring a large debt. I expect the ol' man offered him somethink like three shillings in the pound."

"I see," said Michael, finding a pair of half crowns and pressing them into a grubby palm. "Thank you for the information. Not a word to the old man, as you describe him, eh?"

"Mum's the word, eh, guv?"

"Yes, indeed!"

By the time that Michael had reached and stood before the front door to the flat he had reviewed Mr Muir's predicament once again and concluded that there was still no ground on which he could intervene, nor any obligation upon him to do so. He had cause to re-examine this conclusion three days later when a neatly typed letter, devoid of the usual smudged corrections and erasures, arrived for him, signed by Moira Muir and describing her as Company Secretary. His hand trembled as he read her appeal for fair or special treatment, not because of her case, nor because of his earlier involvement, but because suddenly he felt closer to Felicity. Moira's request was quite straight forward; she was asking for payment for the extra work the company was having to undertake. It was therefore simple to answer and repudiate.

It lay on the desk before him. The words, for that was all in consisted off, words in a special order, laid out on a sheet of paper, simply constituted an appeal. There was no sign of a threat, neither explicit nor implied, but why should he worry if there were a threat? He had told Christina long ago, maybe not everything, but enough. Yet it was both stimulating and unsettling, this arm that was reaching out from the past. And still there was some danger within its grasp. It had been an error to accede to his father's request and include the firm on the tender list. He could see that clearly now, and he should have declared, from the very start, a possible conflict of interest.

How should he then reply to it? How should he word his response? Should he be cold and business-like, or more personal? Should he start by saying he was sorry that problems had arisen? That sounded harmless enough, but such words become a hostage to fortune. If he was sorry, why did he not do something about it?

Two days later he passed the letter to Mr Natham. "I have thought about this," he said, laying the letter in front of the Partner, "but I do not think I can answer it - conflict of interest, you know. I knew both Miss Muir and her father. In fact Miss Muir worked for my wife, both before and after we were married. I do not therefore think it would be proper for me to deal with it. Could you reply?"

Mr Natham had looked at him quizzically, especially when he said that he had known Miss Muir, but he said nothing. Once he had handed over the letter, a semblance of peace descended on Michael's mind as if a great burden had been lifted. However, this tranquillity was short lived.

"I have received a disturbing letter from Moira," said Christina, a few days later. "She sent the letter to Bloomsbury as she was not sure of our new address. Mama gave it to me today."

"I do not really understand why she sent it there and not here. We sent her our new address and knowing how efficient and organised she is, I cannot believe that she has mislaid it. So why not send it here?"

"As I have said," said Christina haughtily, "she sent it to Mama's to ensure that I received it and that no-one intercepted it."

"Who would want to do a thing like that?" asked Michael, thinking this was not what his wife had said.

"Who, indeed?" she said and lapsed into thought. Michael knew that she was looking closely at him. He did not return her stare. "Moira says," she said at length, "that you did not return her letters. What letters?"

"There was only one letter as far as I know, and that was a business letter, written on behalf of her father's company. Someone other than I will be replying."

Christina did not comment but lapsed into silence again. "You never told me who *she* was," she said, after a while.

"Who what was?"

"The woman. Your fancy woman. Your lover! Was it Moira?" she asked with venom.

"Moira? Goodness, no!" Michael checked himself. There was a temptation to say more, but if he did there was a danger that he might be indiscreet, say too much, and something he might regret.

"It would be something of an irony, wouldn't it? I can imagine how the two of you must have laughed when I offered her the job. And all the time -."

"It wasn't Moira. She was going out with Arthur Brown at the time. She must have told you that. She even got engaged to him. In fact I doubt that she even liked me."

"Pah!" snorted Christina. "How little you understand women. But I do. As an author, I do. So, you and my secretary! I will have to keep a close watch on you and Miss Saunders. I have seen the way that she sometimes looks at you. Don't think that I haven't. Well, I will not have it! Not here under my roof! Not under any roof! I am watching you, Michael, all the time, everyday. One wrong step, one transgression, and you will regret it, both of you."

"There is nothing between me and Miss Saunders," said Michael, feeling guilty because he had, on occasions, dwelt and feasted his eyes on her figure but, then, what man would not? Miss Saunders was an attractive young woman who, Christina was now telling him, had displayed some indication of feeling towards him. He also felt guilty because he had not noticed it.

"Pah!" snorted Christina, again, pushing her soup bowl away from her and scattering the cutlery.

"And Miss Muir's letter to you? What does she say?"

"Nothing! It is some kind of petition asking me to intercede with you. The thought of it! After what she's done!"

"Will you reply to it?"

"Certainly not!"

Michael saw no point in pursuing the argument on Moira's behalf. It seemed clear that his wife had made up her mind and that nothing short of an affidavit from Felicity, saying it had been she and not her friend, would change that. And then, when he thought about it, there

was perhaps some benefit in her assuming that it was Moira he had been seeing in Dover. The question of who it had been had clearly lain dormant in her mind. Now it was answered. She probably would not raise it again. There was one result. He would not be able to risk taking any steps to help the Muirs over their financial problems in case details found their way back to Christina.

Of course it made him think of Felicity. From time to time he had scoured the ballet reviews in the hope that he might see her name, but in vain. Maybe she was dancing under a stage name. Perhaps it was the same name as her sister had used. Felicity had told him once, but he could not now remember what it was. Perhaps she was, even now, dancing in London, at Covent Garden. He would never know. He could picture her on the stage, as Aurora or Odette. He was there, unseen, in the audience, watching her every move, wondering whether when she performed her arabesques and pas de deux she saw him and not Florestan or Prince Siegfried. His love would reach out to her from the dark, a burning torch that would rekindle the embers, and she would dance as she had never before. Would she know, would she sense, that he was there? Perhaps she looked for him every night in the hope he might be. Sometimes the temptation to go and try and find her was strong and almost overpowering, as it was now, but he resisted it. There would be the difficulty of tracing her and one of his possible avenues, through Moira Muir, or Moira Brown as she might well be by now, had just been lost.

“Are you all right, Darling?” asked Helen as she and Christina sat together in the Bloomsbury garden for the first time that year. “Isn't it pleasant to be able to come out here and sit again?”

“No I am not!” said Christina, stormily.

“Do you remember all the enjoyable times we used to have here, with you, and Angela, and Mark. I wonder where he is - did you see him on the way in? He could join us! What was it you said, Darling?”

“Nothing, Mama.”

“Yes it was. I heard you distinctly. You said - no I am not. Didn't you?”

“Yes I did,” said Christina, sullenly.

“What is the matter? I thought that only I had problems. You shouldn't have any problems. Is it trouble with one of your books? Oh, where is Mark? Would you go and see if you can find him? It is so pleasant here.”

“I would rather that Mark was not here at present, Mama.”

“Why ever not, Darling?”

“I think that Michael is having an affair.”

“Surely not, Christina. You must be mistaken!”

“I am not!” asserted Christina, stamping her foot hard on the ground under the table.

“With whom?”

“With my secretary!”

“With your Miss Saunders?”

“Yes! I am certain of it. He had an affair with the last one - he as good as admitted it!”

“With Miss Muir?”

“Yes! With dear, prim, sweet, efficient, butter wouldn't melt in my mouth, Miss Muir.”

“I would not have thought such a thing of Michael. No, I think you must be mistaken, Christina.”

“He is dreadfully weak, Mama. And you did warn me about Miss Saunders, didn't you?”

“I suppose I did,” said Helen, reflectively, “but I did not think -.”

“She will have to go, of course!”

“What? Miss Saunders? After you said how good she is?”

“It seems that work is not the only thing she is good at. What else can I do? Next time I will pick a married woman.”

“That isn't necessarily any help. Married women can be just as bad as single ones.”

“Maybe. At least it would give him someone to contend with other than me - a husband. If I catch them together, I, I will shoot her! I have told him that I will not have him messing about like this. I won't have it!”

“Men can be like that, especially if there are reasons for their behaviour,” sighed Helen.

“Reasons? What reasons could there possibly be for them not controlling their beastly animal instincts. That is all it is! Simply beastly!”

“You must be absolutely certain before you say anything, Darling. Take my advice. Don't say anything or do anything unless you are absolutely certain. There were occasions when I thought - when I could have said something and, as it later turned out, have been quite wrong. Do take my advice.”

“You mean that I have actually got to catch them at it?”

“Christina! There is no need to be coarse. What I am advising is that if you are wrong you can put ideas into people's heads which were not there to begin with. Promise me you will not do anything foolish.”

“I will promise that. If I am satisfied that I am right, and I am, I will ensure that I act in a way that will not make me appear foolish, nor put ideas of the wrong kind into their heads. I promise you that, Mama!”

“Mark has called to see you,” Christina announced coldly as Michael closed the door to the flat behind him. “He says it is a personal matter. He is in the lounge.”

Michael was puzzled. He found his friend sat, cross-legged, on the settee, reading a woman's magazine. “Does Christina read this stuff?” he said, throwing it to one side. “Or does she write it?”

“I do not know. For all I know she may write most of it. You wanted to see me? Oh, hell! That sounded almost as if you are seeing me on business!”

“I suppose I am.”

Michael waved his hand. “What I should have said is - we haven't seen much of each other since you returned. I don't know what happens to the days, I really don't. Can I get you a drink or something? And what have you been doing with yourself?”

“Oh, I have managed to keep myself busy doing this and that. And, no, I don't think I want a drink. What is wrong with Chrissie? She seemed to be in a quite foul mood when I arrived. There was none of the loving sister act, you know. What have you been doing to her?”

“Nothing,” said Michael, sitting in an easy chair. “Nothing at all. She gets like this from time to time. I think it is when her writing doesn't go exactly as she plans. Best thing is to just ignore her. Your mother tells me you've been all but camped out in Grosvenor Square.”

“That's one of the reasons why I have come to see you. I couldn't ask Mother, nor could I go to either of my sisters, and I certainly did not want to see your father.”

“What about? What have you done?”

“I haven't done anything. It is what I want to do. It is a bit embarrassing, having to ask this.”

“I cannot see what could be embarrassing. After all I am married to your sister.”

“Yes. I keep meaning to ask,” said Mark, lowering his voice. “How are the two of you getting along now that you are married and living here. It is rather nice, isn't it? Do I detect my mother's influence?”

“Yes, you do, and you can ask. Christina and I have a sort of understanding, you could say.”

“Like that eh?” said Mark, assuming a knowing air. “Chrissie can be a little difficult, as we've seen. Not as bad as Angela. I cannot imagine why that fool of an Austrian want to marry her, but he will deserve everything he gets.”

“Going back to the reason for your visit, we have known each other for a very long time. I can't think of anything that we might discuss that should embarrass either of us.”

“I need to borrow some money,” blurted Mark. “Don't you find that embarrassing?”

"I find it surprising, but hardly embarrassing."

"I have virtually no money of my own," said Mark, looking down at the carpet, "and no means of earning any. I do have a small income but I depend upon my mother for almost all my domestic needs. I doubt if I could survive were it not for her. I need to go to America. I'll travel by the cheapest means possible and put up at second or third rate hotels. I am accustomed to that. But I need enough for a return fare, and to tied me over whilst I am out there."

"A return fare? You do intend to come back?"

"Oh, yes. I suppose I might also need enough to cover a single fare back as well."

"You have found her then?"

"Yes! Well, I think I have! Isn't it fantastic?"

"And she is not married?"

"Widowed."

"Or attached?"

"Not as far as I can discover. If I can get out there -"

"How much do you need?"

"A thousand pounds?" said Mark tentatively.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oh! Eight hundred pounds, then?"

Michael sighed. "I will write you a cheque for five thousand pounds. That should be enough to meet most eventualities and if you invest the balance it will provide a small income. If you need more while you are out there, you can always wire me."

"I do not know what to say! At what rate?"

"Rate?"

"Interest rate?"

"Now you are being ridiculous and in danger of being offensive. It is a gift, not a loan. I couldn't lend you money. That *would* be embarrassing. Take it and go and find her, and be happy. You will have precious few opportunities in life to find happiness. You have to grasp them with both hands and not let go. If you do not and you let them slip through your fingers, you will spend the remainder of your life regretting it. I should know."

Mark was barely listening. "A gift?" he repeated. "I don't know what to say. Can you afford it?"

"Afford it? I suspect my father is worth well over a million pounds. I am almost certainly the son of a millionaire. When I think that, five thousand pounds appears almost insignificant. Perhaps I should make it ten thousand?"

"Ten thousand? Goodness, no! Five is more than enough. I am embarrassed by the amount as it is."

Michael smiled. "So we are capable of embarrassing each other? When will you go?"

"Just as soon as I can make all the arrangements. It means another trip or two to the Embassy."

"At least they will know you there."

"So they should. They suggested I should take out a season ticket! On a different matter, Paul Durrant has been asking after you."

"Paul Durrant? That is a name from the past. It's funny, but Christina hasn't mentioned him for ages. He was involved at one time with her publishers and I met him, before that, at one of Alistair's parties, didn't I?"

"Fancy you remembering that!"

"I remember it because he introduced me to a young lady called Jenny Forbes. What became of her after her accident?"

"I think that she went into film making."

"What?" said Michael. "With her features? What were they, horror films? No, I shouldn't say that – it's unkind."

"I think they may have been films of a less wholesome nature. But Paul is working for one of the Ministries. He was going on about there being another war and some special team they are trying to put together. I didn't really understand it, but I gave him your address

and he said he would contact you.”

“Well? What did he want?”

Michael looked at his wife and shrugged his shoulders. “Your brother? He asked for a loan in order to go to America in search of romance and happiness.”

“Did you lend him any money?” she asked sharply.

“No. I did not lend him any money. It is my father who lends money and not me. I made him a gift of five thousand pounds.”

“Gave him five thousand pounds? I trust that it was your money?”

“My money, your money, our money, what does it matter? He is your brother.”

“Mama will not be at all pleased if he suddenly goes off again and leaves her alone.”

“Well, it is done now and I do not propose to attempt to stop the cheque if that is what is in your mind. I hope that he goes off in search of happiness and finds it. It is a rare enough commodity now-a-days.”

“Yes,” said Christina. “That it is.”

“The police have been here today,” announced Christina, coldly but not without a note of triumph, as Michael arrived home some ten days after he had given the cheque to Mark.

“The police?” he said, feeling a pang of guilt. “What did they want?”

A strange, self-satisfied, smile appeared on his wife's face as she turned and casually adjusted a number of roses standing in a vase in the hallway. “I would have thought you might have guessed,” she said mysteriously.

“Me? Guess? Why should I expect a visit from the police? Why did they come? Has something happened to -?” He could think of a thousand and one reasons why the police might call on them and all of them had a common factor - it was bad news, about someone, for someone. “Has someone we know died?” he added.

“Very nearly,” said Christina, “and I hold you responsible.”

“Me?” Michael racked his brains as he followed her into the lounge. Could it possibly be that something had happened to Felicity? Why would the police come here, to see him? “Is it Miss Muir, or her father? But, then, if it is why have the police come here and not gone to see me at the office?”

“Trust you to think first of your former lover!” she snapped. “Well, it wasn't that one!”

“Not - ?” He just checked himself from uttering Felicity's name.

“Yes!” said Christina, sounding almost triumphant. “Your other one. Or should I say, one of your other ones? I dare not ask how many there may be or have been!”

He slumped into a chair. “What has happened to her?” he asked.

“She threw herself under a tube train at Clapham North! It is your fault! You drove her to it, and now I have lost another secretary.”

“Secretary?” he asked vaguely, preoccupied with questions as to what Felicity could have been doing at Clapham North station as he tried to deduce what Christina was driving at. “Secretary?” he repeated.

“Yes! And your Miss Saunders had the gall to tell the police that she thought she was pushed! Well, she won't be typing any more love letters, or did she write them in her own fair hand? That's what she did when I wasn't around, wasn't it? Not content with working for me and typing my books, she is carrying on with my husband in my time!”

“But - .” Michael checked himself again. If he protested his and Miss Saunders's innocence, she would demand to know just who else it was that he had in mind earlier. On balance he might be better off letting her think that they had been lovers, just as she thought that it had been Miss Muir at Dover. It might stop further compromising questions and he was beginning to get this raw feeling that he needed to keep Felicity well out of Christina's sight and reach. “And you think that she threw herself in front of a train,” he said levelly. “On account of me?”

“Yes! Because of the wicked way in which you treated her and me. Leading her on,

sweet-talking her, and all those things. You don't have to tell me the things you do. I write about them often enough, goodness knows."

"And you told the police this?"

"I had to, and they were quite satisfied when I did because it explained her motive. They may want to interview you. They were not certain."

"And her injuries were not fatal?"

Christina shrugged her shoulders and went to the window. "She was very lucky. She fell partly into the train well, the police said, and escaped with minor cuts and bruises. Oh, they did say that she also lost the lower half of her right arm, cut off about here." She pointed to her elbow. "I would say she got off very lightly. And that is two secretaries you have now cost me. I won't forget this."

Michael lay awake in bed late that night, listening to his wife snoring on the other side of the thin dividing wall between their bedrooms. He was awake, yet he seemed to be half dreaming and fantasising. Quite slowly an idea that had been sown some years previously, began to germinate and take shape in his mind. He tried to reject it. It was too grotesque to believe. Yet it persisted and piece by piece he saw the facts assembled into a plausible argument. These things had happened. It might be that they were no more than coincidences, but his mind was not prepared to allow him to assume this was so.

First there had been Jenny Forbes who after a brief but rash moment with him had been disfigured. Now there was the case of the unfortunate Miss Saunders who had supposedly been pushed under an Underground train. It did not appear plausible that she had jumped, and if she had, he was not the reason. No, she had been pushed. And it was certain that Jenny had not inflicted the acid on herself. And in both of these cases, Christina had inferred that he had a relationship with the victim. He still not believe the conclusion that he was inexorably being drawn towards, but it did reinforce his conclusion that he should keep Felicity well out of sight. It was possible that she did need the protection that anonymity would bring.

"It was true!" Christina clutched her handbag firmly as she sat, straight-legged, in the house in Bloomsbury, watching the rain falling in the garden and disturbing the surface of the pond.

"What was true, Darling?" said her mother, not un-wearily. "It seems that you only come to see me now-a-days if there is something you wish to complain about. What is it today? Is it Michael?"

"Of course it is Michael! Who else would it be?"

"I don't know," said Helen, shrugging. "Trouble with your books or with your publishers. Bad reviews - almost anything."

"No, Mama. If you paid attention and looked at the cuttings I send you, you would see that the latest book has been a greater success than any of the previous ones. And they are now talking about making a film of "The Sultan's Slave" with me writing the screen play. I could not ask for more!"

"I am pleased for you, Christina. It is everything that you wanted."

"Well, not quite everything," Christina said reflectively. "I would like to write a serious novel, but first of all I have to meet public demand, and that seems to be insatiable."

Helen rearranged the objects on the tea tray and looked out of the window. One of the gutters was surcharging and mentally she thought of asking Barnes to call Mr Muir. That was foolish, she thought, as they were in London and he was at Newington and undertaking a very big contract. He would not be interested in un-blocking gutters anymore. But the water was cascading down and washing earth out of one of the flower beds. It vexed her. "What is it, with Michael?" she asked.

"It is true - that he had an affair with Miss Saunders. It all came out after - shall I say - the accident. I could tell by his reaction at the news, and when I accused him he did not deny it."

"Oh dear!" sighed Helen. "And you think that the poor woman threw herself under the train on his account?"

"I am sure of it. I cannot begin to imagine what he said to her. Perhaps he thought it had gone too far and tried to break it off. He has not explained his actions."

"What do the police think?"

"They are treating it as an attempted suicide although I do not think they will charge her. Miss Saunders claimed that she was pushed and the policeman who came to see me said that the platform was very crowded at the time."

"It must be very hard to travel on the Underground, all packed together, worming your way under London."

"It is not very pleasant by all accounts. Michael does it regularly. Anyway, the police have appealed for witnesses but so far no-one has come forward."

"How dreadful! You do not think there will be any unfortunate publicity as a result of his name being linked to hers?"

"I don't think so Mama. I think it was in the evening papers and that's all. I expect it will soon be forgotten."

"And Michael - I find it hard to believe. I know he is not a Mark, but I have always had the impression that he was good-natured and the kind who would not willingly hurt anyone."

"He is weak," snapped Christina, "and eaten up with guilt. The first thing that he did after having heard of the incident was to write to his mistress and send her a cheque for a thousand pounds! I know he did it because I saw the letter!"

"He wrote to her and sent her money?"

"Yes! And I confronted him with it, I may tell you, Mama. And do you know what he said? He said that if what I alleged was true and that it was his fault that she had fallen under a train, it was for him to recompense her! A thousand pounds for an arm? She would be lucky to get fifty, if that, in a court!"

"Oh, Christina! Do not say things like that. I find them quite unpleasant."

"It is unpleasant, Mama, unpleasant and unsavoury. I do not know what to do about him!"

"About Michael?" asked Helen, becoming increasingly concerned by the sliver of mud that was spreading across the paved area outside the French doors. "Tell me, Christina - do you sleep with him?"

"Mama!" she exclaimed, and then grimaced and looked sullen. "Not after this I won't. I'll have none of that sort of thing. If I can abstain, so can he."

"Men are different," said Helen, tentatively.

"I could leave him, but if I do it will only increase his opportunities to misbehave and I do not want to run the risk of bad publicity. You can imagine the kind of story the papers would run about a writer of romances who cannot manage her own."

"You could come and live here with me?"

"I thought that you were going to go to live at Newington?"

"I do not know whether I shall," Helen sighed. "I am not entirely happy about the idea. I feel as if I am being put out to graze."

"Oh, that's not the case at all, Mama. If you like I will stay at the flat at least until Michael makes up his mind about buying this house. I will be keeping my eyes on him and I will be more careful in the selection of a new secretary. Someone ugly, married and well over fifty. Perhaps that will curb his passion!"

Helen remained sat in her chair staring out of the window long after Christina had taken up her handbag and left, and long after Matthews had come in and removed the tea tray and its contents. She contemplated what Christina had said and watched with a morbid curiosity the stain on the paving stone as it spread and grew larger. It was still hard to believe that Michael had been unfaithful and even harder to think and decide on the advice she might give her daughter. There had been something in the way that Christina had told her of the affair which suggested that she was not as concerned as she made out. But Michael? Unfaithful? Although she had seen it, and suspected it, sometimes mistakenly it later transpired, in others there had not been the slightest hint of infidelity by her husband, not during his lifetime, not since his untimely death. She could not begin to count the number of

times they had sat there, together, and he had reached out, reassuringly, to take and gently squeeze her hand. Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said. Life was much simpler then. And then, in the prime of his life, he had been taken from her, virtually snatched from her arms. Father William said that only the good die young. What was it that she had done which was so wicked that it kept her alive, separated from him, and facing so much sorrow?

Her thoughts drifted aimlessly until they came back to what Christina had come to see her about and the way in which she had said it. There was some pretence there, Helen was sure of that. And it now seemed unlikely that they would have children but, then, it was not a proper marriage. It was a mixed marriage. Had she been right to go through with the agreement that had been forged between Albert and Horatio? She respected her husband's wisdom and foresight and never once questioned his decision. She would never have thought that the son of so respectable, and respected, a man as Horatio Bernstein could turn out to be a knave. Yet Michael had been unfaithful. There may have been a degree of acting on her daughter's part, a little over-reaction. Her daughter might be less concerned about his infidelity than she portrayed herself. However the smoke was evidence of the fire and Helen accepted and believed that at the core was the truth, Michael had transgressed. And that was simply and solely the result of it being a mixed marriage.