

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A full week had passed since Christina had visited her mother and convinced her that her husband had been unfaithful. It was on the afternoon that a new advertisement appeared in the literary press seeking someone mature for the post of secretary to one of the Country's foremost authors that Michael, once again, came upon Mr Fishwick's young assistant jauntily walking along the street, hands in pockets, whistling loudly, and propelling an empty can before him. "Hello gov'nor!" he exclaimed. "I've just dropped off a small package at your pad. Left it with the lady of the house, I did."

"I am glad that I have bumped into you," said Michael, blocking his path and allowing the can to roll into the gutter. "You might be able to give me some information about the services that Mr Fishwick can arrange for people, perhaps only for the most select few."

"Not more information, gov. The ol' man was suspicious last time and gave me a fair wiggin'."

"This is just general information. Just about the services, the way he can help people who need something done."

"What sort of thing?"

"Supposing I wanted to get even with someone, pay them back, so as to speak?"

"What? As I see it, this guy has done you an injury and you are looking for someone to go around to his pad and put the mockers on him, rough him up a bit, rearrange his features?"

"That is the kind of thing."

"No problem, gov. Just tell me who the gent is and its as good as done."

"What if it is a woman? Would that make a difference?"

"A skirt? Naw, there's some blokes who'd be happy to turn over a skirt for free. Lay her out if you want. Just let me know who she is."

"No, not now," said Michael, hesitantly. "I just wanted to confirm that he could get that kind of thing done."

"No problem. Done it can be with no questions asked and no come-backs."

"Thank you, Will," he said, handing the youth a pair of florins. "That is all I need to know."

Michael paused and watched the youth resume his whistling and recover the can from its resting place, before he made his way up to the flat. He let himself in cautiously and silently, still with dark thoughts. Could Christina really have gone as far as arranging Jenny's and Miss Saunders's accidents? Was his wife capable of such deeds? She was sat at the writing desk when he went into the room and did not look up. He stood and stared intently at her, trying to understand what she might be thinking, or might have thought, this person he lived with, was married to, yet did not know at all. "We should go away for a holiday," he said impulsively.

"Holiday?" she said without looking up at him. "I am far too busy. I have a new secretary to find, haven't I?"

Michael crossed the room and sat to the side of the desk prompting her to look up. Their eyes met. Was she really capable of doing such a thing? If she were, where would she draw the line? Was he in any danger of encountering a similar accident? "Would you come on a holiday with me?" he asked.

"We have to go to Vienna," she said flatly. "You could call that a holiday."

"You once talked of travelling. You talked of seeing places and getting local colour for your writing."

Christina shrugged. "I get all the colour I need locally and I am sure that there are plenty of baroque churches in Vienna as well as other buildings that will interest you."

"Interest me? Yes, I suppose so. The trouble is we do not appear to have very much in common, do we?" he said reflectively.

"We are married to each other," she said acidly. "What more do you want, Michael?"

He paused for a minute and looked at her. She put down her pen and looked back, eyebrows raised, the slightest hint of a smile on her features. "I want?" he repeated. "I want to know what you have been up to. That is what I want."

"I've been up to? I? What do you mean?"

"Nothing," he said, retreating.

"No, no, I insist," she said forcibly. "What do you mean?"

"Small services that Mr Fishwick can arrange?"

"Fishwick? That horrid little man. What has he to do with me?"

"I just thought - you remember Jenny Thorbes?"

"Christina scowled. "Of course I remember her. You haven't been seeing her again, have you?"

"No I have not!" he said emphatically.

"What then?"

"She had an accident, just like Miss Saunders, only it wasn't an accident any more than Miss Saunders's was, was it?"

"I do not know what you are driving at," said Christina, turning away. "God punished them because they had been very wicked. Very wicked indeed!"

Michael breathed deeply. "And will God punish me, too?"

"No," she said. "I pray for your forgiveness."

"And, in what way were they wicked, Jenny and Miss Saunders?"

"They consorted with a married man."

"Jenny did not."

"You were as good as married!" said Christina turning to face him, a wild look in her eyes. "We have both been as good as married since we were young!"

"And, Christina, about me. God is not going to punish me?"

"God would have punished you, thrice over, but you are my husband and I have prayed for you and your deliverance. I prayed to Mary, the Blessed Virgin, and she has interceded on your behalf. God will not punish you as he has others who have transgressed." She paused and looked down at the papers before her, then stared him full in the face. "Do you understand, Michael? I have done nothing. But I have prayed to God on your behalf and beseeched his forgiveness for your transgressions. Thus far my prayers have been heard, but take heed. Even God's divine patience has limits." Michael did not know what to say. He was puzzled and disturbed by what she had said yet he found some reassurance in her words which appeared to suggest that what ever part she might have played, if any, in the attacks on Jenny and her former secretary, she presently had no such plans for him. "Now," she said suddenly. "You had better let me get on with my work."

Michael was far from happy at Angela's wedding. It was held in the cathedral with Angela, prim and proud, in a voluminous white dress attended by six bridesmaids, their flaxen hair platted high on their heads. A detachment of blonde headed men from an elite regiment formed the guard of honour, forming a pointed arch with their sabres under which the supposedly happy couple ran hand in hand and embarked upon their new life together. "It is all a little obvious," whispered Christina. "And there is talk that he was married before."

"How can he be getting married in a Catholic church if he was married before?" hissed Michael.

"They say it was a civil wedding and not recognised by the Church because both he and the bride were Catholics."

"It sounds all very odd to me. I think I will be glad when this whole thing is over." Michael passed much of the remainder of the service in silence, last to kneel when everyone else did, studying, when he was not kneeling, the high painted ceiling or the cold, remote, walls that shut out the World. It made a stark comparison with his own wedding in the tiny, intimate, chapel at Newington. He could remember the words of the service which was not on the scale of this wedding mass he was struggling to sit through, the exchange of rings, and how they had squeezed into the tiny vestry to sign the Registrar's book. He could remember his feelings of despair as that really was the day that he finally parted from Felicity. She

would not know that, but instead of standing at the altar with hope for the future, he had only longing for the past.

If he had to choose, he thought, he would chose the Newington service any day. Even had he been marrying Felicity. Marrying Felicity? Why was he sat here, thinking about her? He should not be there, in God's house, next to his wife, thinking about his former lover. No, not his *former* lover! *Still* his lover, in thought, in every thought.

Was God still there? Michael's gaze wandered from the backs of the dresses of the Maids of Honour to the uniforms of the *Waffen* Guard who lined the aisle. Would God really stay to be part of this, Father Thomas's God? Perhaps it did not matter. God was everywhere and even now was stripping him bare and reading his innermost thoughts. Father Thomas had told him that. If he now was thinking of Felicity, God would know, and might tell Christina.

He looked at his wife. Her head was angled slightly to her direction of view. Her face was paler than usual and her eyes full of hatred. For a moment he thought it might be jealousy, but that did not fit in with what she had said earlier. Did she really feel like that about her own sister? Suddenly she caught his gaze and leant towards him. "That man," she whispered, "is evil personified. I should have spoken to God about him years ago except he is above God and out of his reach. That is the man who -" She stopped and looked down at her lap. A tear welled up in her eye and, much to her annoyance, started an uncertain passage down her cheek. Michael felt compelled to put out his arm, around her, to comfort her, and she let her head fall and rest on his shoulders. Around them people nodded and whispered that the sister of the bride, an English novelist of some renown, was clearly overcome by the emotion of the occasion, and that clearly they were a loving couple. Michael knew otherwise. It was probably the only time in the whole of their married life when they approached intimacy, and that in a house of God. Michael knew otherwise because he had caught glimpse of something dark and unfathomable, hidden in the depths of his wife's secrets, something he had never for one moment dreamed was there; something he would never glimpse again.

"Ah, Herr Bernstein," said the triumphant Austrian, bearing down upon him as he left his new bride to display her dress before the admiring looks of the fawning party faithful, "I understand that at is going well in your business?"

"I suppose it is," said Michael, looking to see where Christina was.

"And how do you like Vienna? It is the first time you have been here? Tell me, you are not proposing to wander off to look at the inside of some of our magnificent churches and leave that beautiful wife of yours unguarded, as you did in Rome?"

"I am not, but I would have thought myself entitled to do so here. Are your *Waffen* officers men of honour who would respect a woman, even with a name like Bernstein?"

"Hah!" exclaimed the Austrian, smiling. "I think I did advise her that it might be necessary to change it."

Michael could not decide whether the statement was to be taken seriously. "And me too? It would make little difference. You would know that I had changed my name."

"You take these things too seriously in England, Herr Bernstein. It is a shame that you cannot concentrate on your Colonies, as does Italy now that they have relinquished their claims to my Country, and leave Europe to us. But, for you, you are not a semite for a start. And, for a second, we are only interested in rooting out those Jews and Communists who are parasites, like leeches in our society. With your father and the services he has performed, I do not think that either you or anyone in your family have anything to fear from us."

"I suppose I am relieved to hear that you do differentiate. What do you do? Issue cards? Or is it, as I have read, stars? What happens to these so-called leeches when you get hold of them?"

"I am not involved in that programme," said the Austrian haughtily. "I believe they go to rehabilitation camps where they are taught the incontrovertible virtues of Teutonic life. It is for the good of all in the Fatherland."

"And for those in Austria?"

"Austria will simply cease to exist and will become a part of a greater Germany. We are all citizens of the Third Reich, and by choice, Herr Bernstein, by choice. It is a birth right that cannot be denied to all Germanic-speaking people. It happened in the Ruhr, and now

here. Next it will be parts of Poland and Czechoslovakia. Watch the Sudetenland. It is irresistible.”

Michael did not know where the Sudetenland was. Neither did Christina when he asked her. “Just look at Angela - how she is lapping it all up, and Mama, who is aiding and abetting her. She cannot see a thing wrong in the man.”

“Will it work?”

“What Angela and Herr Cerny? She will suit him down to the ground. She can play the part - being the wife of someone who is a very important person in the Party. It is Angela from head to toe! Going to balls, dinners, fetes, garden parties and official functions, being aloof, acting properly, achieving recognition and deferment; these are things she was made for. As for her husband, I know what Angela is like better than anyone. He will deserve every bit of it!

Contrary to Herr Cerny's expectation, they spent most of their remaining time in Vienna together, sat in the Belvedere Gardens. Christina wrote or made notes. Michael just sat, admired the view, or simply thought. In some ways the scene was familiar and reassuring. Of course, they were larger, grander, more impressive than the gardens at Newington and if he were anywhere, that was where he would prefer to be. Except he could not imagine himself there with Christina. How different things might have turned out had she simply said “yes, I will walk to them with you” that day when they stood together at Newington and he saw the Ruins for the first time. Now that he thought about it, sat here with his wife at his side, now writing, now staring into space, now looking at him and, out of character, smiling, he could not think of Felicity. Nor could he think of going back to the Newington gardens, not the cottage. Perhaps he should never go back to Newington again. It was better that Helen should go and live there.

“At least we have now settle the question of the London house,” said Christina.

“You must have been reading my thoughts,” he confessed.

“Really? I wasn't trying to. I was trying to imagine what a honeymoon at Bayreuth would be like. Even I have difficulty with that concept. Can you imagine it?”

“I cannot, and I am not going to try,” said Michael slowly. He managed to stop himself from saying that whereas he had no interest in Opera, he would go to see ballet. “I didn't know that Angela was an opera lover, leave alone a devotee to Wagner.”

“She is not, but she will sit through each and every indeterminate performance, poised, awake, seemingly attentive, ready to clap discretely in the right places, displaying herself and proud to be on display.”

“Well, you have to admit that she can look impressive and strike a pretty regal pose.”

“I would admit nothing of the sort!” exclaimed Christina. “As far as I am concerned, she just looks pretentious and stuck up, not that Mama can see it. If that is the price you have to pay for public recognition, she is welcome to it. I would rather remain as I am, relatively anonymous.”

“Is your mother happy to go and live at Newington House?”

“I understand so. She has complained about lack of companionship but she has Matthews and I am sure someone else could be found for her.”

“So, when we get back we will have to think about moving to Bloomsbury and selling the flat.”

“I still think that you offered too much for it,” said Christina.

“So does my father. I see it as a long-term investment. You are happy about moving there?”

“I suppose so.” Christina did not sound enthusiastic.

“And about your mother going to live at Newington? She could stay in the house with us, if you like.”

“No,” she said reflectively. “I think she should go to live at Newington. I am sure that she will be happier there, and I will not have her about the house in the day when I am trying to work. We can start making the arrangements as soon as we get back to London.”

“And your new secretary?”

Christina's eyes flashed danger for a moment. "Mrs Maynard? Yes, Michael, she is married and has a little girl. And she is very strict, almost Victorian in her outlook, extremely moralistic. So, be warned! In general, I am not quite sure how it will work out, but she won't live with us. She travels in from somewhere awful in Kent - I think the station is called Shortlands, but I am not sure where it is, but I think it is near Bromley and that will be useful as Mama keeps on at me to get involve in some of her institutional work. I can send Mrs Maynard in my stead."

"The home for Distressed Young Ladies? I always wondered if it was a front for White Slavers and that was where you got some of your background material!"

"Michael! Don't you let Mama hear you say that! Anyway, I do not know what Mama expects me to do there. Just walk around and pat everyone on the head?"

"Perhaps you should be more concerned with the funding and the running costs," said Michael, assuming his father's mantle.

"We do have auditors, appointed by your father, but I suppose there would be no harm in looking more closely to see what is going on. I'll let Mrs Maynard do that. She has some book-keeping experience. Unless you want to become involved?"

It was a mistake, an error of judgement which Michael could see in her eyes as soon as she had said it. "No," he said quickly administering an antidote and she relaxed. The Distressed Young Ladies of Bromley would be safe, but Michael's thoughts were still lingering at Newington. There was an irony here. It was the larger part of the marriage settlement and would have been a prize possession for anyone, yet here he was concluding, on the brink of vowing, that he would never live there, never enjoy its trappings, its gardens, or the cottage. Not without Felicity, and as that was impossible, not at all. It was fortunate that Christina showed no inclination to live there herself and was content to banish her mother there. For once they had found something in their lives on which they mutually agreed.

"We will have to decide just how we are going to manage the Newington Estate, what we do with the net income and how we control the expenditure. Shall we continue leave those decisions to your mother, and my father?"

"Certainly not!" said Christina brusquely. "She has an income from a trust set up by my father which should be adequate for her needs which ought to be modest now. If we let her loose on the house and the Estate there is no telling where it may end. She has already spent a small fortune down there and had to raise a mortgage to do it."

"It is with my father."

"That is as may be, but I would like either to be released from it or, if your father will not agree to that, see us redeem it from the proceeds. No, the income from the Estate should be closely monitored and the expenditure strictly controlled. In fact, I will do it!"

"You?"

"Yes, me! Why not? You can set it all up and I can deal with the day to day matters."

"But neither of us will be there. We will both be seventy miles away!" said Michael becoming slightly alarmed.

"There is no need to be there, is there? If you can manage your business interests remotely so can I. We have Barnes on the spot. I think he is capable of carrying out orders which are clearly drafted and communicated. I would trust him, but not Mama. If it were left to her the House would be taken to perfection, right down to every last tiny brass screw. I do not believe there is not enough income from the Estate to support that degree of extravagance. So I will take on its running from London. After all, Mama spent much of her time in London. I might even write a novel about a penniless young woman who inherits, completely out of the blue, a run-down stately house and estate, and her struggles as she sets out to restore it. I could use Newington as a model."

"And she marries the gamekeeper?"

"No, Michael. That is too predictable. My public will expect something slightly more subtle and unexpected than that. I might let her have a romance with the game keeper and let them think that she might marry him. They will all know, of course, that he is a rogue and a cad, and a bigamist. Yes, I have quite a few ideas. I had better make some notes."

At times in Vienna, they sat in the Gardens in silence, together yet apart. However,

Michael was later to look back on that short spell as the one time when he and his wife came the closest to intimacy in the whole of their married life.

It was several weeks before a letter arrived from Mark. It was short and to the point. He had arrived safely in America and had travelled, not without difficulty, to Wisconsin and to the address given him by Rebecca, only to be told that she had moved on.

The clerk in the dingy boarding house had stared at him intently before responding to Mark's question. "I have come a long way," added Mark. "I understand that she is staying here?"

"What was the name? Rebecca Van Hass? There is no-one here of that name."

"But she wrote to me and gave this address!" insisted Mark. "I wrote to her here and she replied!"

"I am sorry, but we have no-one here of that name," repeated the man, turning away from the small counter and sitting in a chair.

"Could I have a room, then?" It was getting late and he had nowhere arranged to stay. It might as well be here as anywhere. The man stood slowly, as if it was either painful or too much trouble, and handed Mark a key.

"Sign in, please. First floor, second door on the right. You cannot miss it," he said dismissively and returned to his chair and the book he had been reading when Mark arrived.

The stair carpet was a deep red, worn but seemingly spotless. The room was refreshingly clean and well furnished, belying the external appearance of the building. The sheets were white and fresh, and had been turned. Mark found water in the jug that stood in a bowl on the dressing table in one corner. And although the light was poor and he was tired, in his disappointment Mark felt a compelling urge to write a letter home.

"Is there any where I can post this?" he asked the clerk.

"Couple of blocks down that way," was the reply, accompanied by a gesticulation. The man did not even look up from his book but, as soon as Mark had gone out into the street, he laid it down and crossed to a curtain doorway at the foot of the stairs. A woman's face appeared, pale and anxious. "Well?" he asked.

"I am not at all certain," she said frowning. "He fits the description and he is English. It could be him."

"He said that he wrote, but anyone could say that. How can we be certain?"

The woman looked vexed. "We should have prepared for this moment. We knew that he was coming!"

"It is too late to go over that now. Let's leave the recriminations until later. For the present we have to find a way of testing him, of making absolutely sure that he is who he says he is."

She smiled. "There is a way," she said mysteriously. "I cannot think of why I did not think of it before. Just a moment." She disappeared from sight behind the curtain leaving the man anxiously watching the street door. She returned carrying a small object. "Place this in a prominent position. Over there, by the bell. If he is our man, he will recognise it."

Mark called at a diner on the way back. He sat at a small table overlooking the street, watching the occasional lone passer-by in case Rebecca came along, and was made to feel uncomfortable by the prolonged stare of a blonde woman who was perched on a stool at the counter. After a while she came strutting across and sat down opposite him and smiled. "Hi!" she said. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

"I am," said Mark, quietly, placing his hands around his coffee cup as if he thought she was about to snatch it, and wondering how to respond to the unwelcomed attention from this young woman.

"Are you English?" she asked, wide eyed.

"Yes," he said, fearing her reaction.

"Gee!" she shrieked. "This guy's from England, Elma May," she cried.

"No kidding," said the woman behind the counter as she polished another glass.

"What in high heaven brings you to an out of the way place like Arcadia?"

"I am looking for someone."

“Are you a private dick?”

“No. It is someone I met in Europe. She wrote to me from here but I have been to the address she gave me and they tell me they've never heard of her. Perhaps you can help as you may have seen her around?”

The woman nodded and opened her mouth in anticipation. “She has reddish hair,” Mark said, “greenish blue eyes, freckled face with high cheek bones, about - . “

“There was a red haired dame that used to come in here, wasn't there, Elma May? What was her name?”

“Her name is Rebecca van Hass and she is in her late twenties or early thirties.”

“And a bit prissy, too?” said the woman. “You remember her! She stayed in a rooming house a couple of blocks away. Isn't that right, Elma May?”

“Reckon we aint seen her in quite a time,” said the woman from behind the counter.

Mark's hopes were raised. “Have you any idea where she went? They don't seem to remember anything about her at the hotel.”

“As I recall she didn't come in here all that often. Have you tried the police department, just across the road on Main Street?”

“No,” said Mark, recalling that he had seen a police station on the opposite side of the road as he had made his way from the rooming house. “I arrived here only an hour or so ago.”

“Well, if you are looking for company you know where to find me,” said the girl, opposite.

Mark walked back slowly, wondering what to do next and what he should say to the police next day. At least he knew more about Rebecca now than he did when he first went to the American Embassy, and it was clear, to him at least, that she had been there, even if the clerk at the rooming house did not remember her. He would ask to examine the register. She was bound to have signed it and her name would be there, but where was she, now?

He did not ask, but stopped at the counter and turned the register around to face him and flipped over the pages. He could remember the date that she had put on the letter, but when he looked at the entries around this time, her name was not there. Dejected, he almost missed seeing the bowl as he turned to go to the stairs. It was there, prominent, on the counter, right under his nose. How could he have not seen it before? “That bowl!” he exclaimed. “That's Rebecca's work, and it is one I painted! How did it come to be here? How did you get it if she has not been here?”

The clerk looked up from his book, looked at the bowl, then at Mark, then re-immersed him self in the book. “There's hundreds of bowls like that,” he said. “You can buy them for twenty cents down at Frank Neskinsy's store.”

“You cannot!” exclaimed Mark, turning the bowl over. “This is a hand-painted one. I did it myself. Look! Here is my mark.” The book was laid, open and face down, and the clerk stood up, his eyes narrowing as he reached out and took the bowl out of Mark's hands. “Well?” asked Mark.

“I suggest that you come with me into the back room,” said the clerk, pointing towards the curtain. “We can talk there.”

“I will take him,” said a woman's voice. “You keep watch, Joe. You make sure I know if anyone comes in - anyone, y'understand?” The curtain was pulled back and the speaker stood in the opening. Mark immediately recognised Rebecca's colouring and features, but this woman was certainly older, maybe much older. “You must be Mark,” she whispered, indicating towards a chair at a table that was set for two. He sat down and she sat opposite, studying him with piercing blue eyes. “We have been expecting you to come and, before anything else, I have to tell you that Rebecca is our daughter and our only child, someone who is very precious to us and who we love dearly. None of this would have happened if she had listed to her folk instead of getting involved with that Dutchman. Still, I do not think you came here to hear all this.”

“Where is she?” asked Mark softly, leaning forward. “What has happened to her? Why all the subterfuge and mystery?”

“You have a right to ask, of course. I am not sure that I can explain it all. I am sure that I do not understand it all. Let me start about three, maybe four, months ago. Rebecca was

staying at her house up State and came to us and said that she was in trouble. Someone from the FBI had been to see her and as good as told her that she should make herself scarce and hard to find. That was their words. I don't think she believed them at first, but they were persistent. Someone, they thought, from Spain had entered the Country to do with her husbands activities over there."

"He is dead, I am told."

"So we understand. The authorities there, the Nationalists I believe, caught him and shot him as a spy, and a death sentence was passed against Rebecca."

"I am sure that she had nothing to do with whatever it was that he was doing out there."

"That may well be true, Mark, but that is not the way that the authorities saw it, and they must have felt real riled and bad about it because, according to the FBI, this person or persons came over here to carry out the execution."

"You mean Franco's mob has sent someone to kill Rebecca?" said Mark, horrified.

"That is what the FBI said. After a short while Rebecca decided that she should take their advice. She had already come to us and written to you before she went into hiding. Perhaps she should never have written, but she wanted you to know that she was all right and felt that she could not explain her problem, nor risk putting you off coming over. It was all plain risky, but she wrote and gave you our address so that you would have somewhere to come. Then she went off. Of course, you can appreciate why we had to be so cautious when you arrived. You could have been anyone, but when you recognised the bowl I knew you were genuine. Whoever it is that she is in hiding from would not have know about it. That was the clincher."

"She told you about me?"

"In some detail. And she was over the moon when you wrote and she realised that you had survived."

"What did she say about me?" he asked anxiously.

"Lord sakes! You don't expect me to repeat all that sweet talk?"

"Did she say what I should do now?"

"No. I don't think she thought all this would go on this long, but you are welcome to stay here with us as long as you like. Isn't that right, Joe?" she called towards the curtain.

His head appeared. "What was that Martha?"

"Young Mark, here - can stay with us as long as he likes?"

"Sure, sure - you've told him about it all? Now, the best thing you can do, young man - "

"Mark, please."

"Mark, is to write home to your folks and say that you cannot find the person you came out to look for, but that you will be staying out here in Arcadia for a holiday. No more. Nothing about us being her kinsfolk and that sort of thing. They may be opening the post. Funny things have been happening around here and elsewhere. Can't be too careful. Keep it short and snappy. And join us then for supper."

"Yes," said Martha. "You must act just as if you are one of the family. We wouldn't have it any other way. I'll let you into a secret, I always wanted a son. Instead we only got - "

"Martha! Loose talk, you know," said Joe, winking at Mark. "Reckon I can shut up now. It's always quiet at this time of the year. You go on up and write your letter. Then come and join us down here."

Mark did exactly as bid. He had not the heart to explain he had ate in the diner. And that was how Helen came to receive two letters from him in quick succession. The second briefly said that he had come to a dead end in his search for "her" and that he would stay on a short while at that address whilst he worked out what to do next. The countryside was breathtaking, he said. It sounded plausible. Michael was not to worry about the money. He had plenty left.

"I bet he has," said Christina when she read it. "How much did you give him?"

"Enough," said Michael.

"It is very strange," she continued, handing the letter to Michael. "He goes all that

way, half way around the World, to the address she gave him, and when he gets there she is nowhere to be found and no-one has even heard of her.”

“The United States is a large place. Perhaps he has got the wrong location.”

“I am sure that there is likely to be only one Arcadia in Wisconsin although I did not think that the scenery there could be described as breathtaking. I am sure that is where the address was.”

“So there's a mystery? Just the thing for a novelist. A young man goes off in search of a woman who has written to him and when he arrives she is not there and everyone denies her ever having been there. How would you script that?”

“I don't write mysteries,” said Christina crossly, “but if I did I would say that she had been abducted or murdered and that everyone was trying to cover up the facts. That sort of thing might be all right in a book or a film. People either want to read about the things that they would most like to happen to them or to read of things happening someone else that they certainly would not like to happen to them. In reality these things just do not happen, or happen so rarely that you can discount them. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that she said “yes” in a moment of rashness and now she does not want to see Mark. Or he has simply got it wrong.”

“So the most rational explanation is a simple mistake, by Mark or his American woman? I would not have thought that she would have been so heartless as to let him travel how ever far it is and then walk out on him before he so much as arrives.”

“An error would explain why no-one knows of her. I doubt that he has been ditched. I think that is the modern way of describing it. I cannot see any motive for it.”

“Some women do the oddest things,” said Michael, “sometimes quite unpleasant things.”

“So do some men!” she spat.

“I still cannot believe that Mark went to the wrong address unless she deliberately mislead him. He will have checked that he was in the right place out there.”

“Then we simply have a mystery,” she said coldly, “for which there is no rational explanation that we can think of, short of the melodramatic.”

“That would appear to be the case,” said Michael standing. “I must go. I am meeting the Receiver today concerning A G Muir.”

“The Receiver? Has the business failed?”

“Last week, I am afraid. There is a strong chance that the probably could lose everything. The winner is my father who called in the Receiver. He will gain a fair amount of property in Dover. That appears to be the way that it goes, I am afraid.” Michael waited for Christina to say that she was sorry, but she did not.

“It is God's punishment,” she said after a moment's thought. “It is over.”

Michael did not respond. Just as it suited him to have Christina believe that he had an affair with Moira, it suited him for her to also believe that any outstanding score she might have against this woman was now settled. It would mean that Moira was safe and that he would not have to face the prospect of having her on his conscience. It did not mean that Felicity was safe, but she would be safer. Very slowly, as the years slipped by, the little markers which might alert his wife to Felicity's existence and identity were dropping away and disappearing, and he now found that he could think of her calmly and without arousing all his passion and a burning desire to see or be with her. “I have, at last, come to terms with it,” he told himself. “Accepted the finality of it all.” He wondered if she had managed to do the same, wherever she was, whoever she was with, what ever she was doing. He consoled himself with the thought that she probably had done so years before him. Indeed, he sometimes wondered if she still loved him as much as he loved her, if at all.

“There is the question of all these claims,” said the Receiver. There was some irony in all this because his father was one, probably the principal one, of the preferential creditors.

“I have no doubt that some moneys will become due to the company,” Michael said, “once they have demonstrated a clear contractual entitlement to them. However, against this we now have the question of the abandonment of the contract and the additional cost that will be incurred in completing it.”

“I think,” said the Receiver, “that the cost of completing the work should be assessed as those of just another ordinary creditor and that any sums that become payable under the contract should be paid in full without impediment or off-setting.”

“I, of course, disagree,” said Michael, thinking it was surprising that Mr Fishwick had not arrived as receiver and faced him. “It may be something that we will have to leave to the lawyers to resolve?”

This suggestion was not taken graciously by the Receiver but Michael stood his ground. One thing he had learnt was that the higher he was in an organisation, the more power he had to say “no”, and the easier it was to say it. No doubt his father would have a different view and was anxious to get his hands on some, if not all, of the money that might be due. “Let him ask for it, then,” thought Michael.

He felt saddened when the Receiver had gone, not because the man had left but because of the almost inevitable consequences of the company's failure. He wondered what would now happen to the Muirs and Arthur, whom he had lost sight of when he left the Practice when the Canterbury office closed. Perhaps they were married, or perhaps it had all fallen through. Perhaps he could have done more to see if sums could have been released under the contract, but it was all too late now and there was nothing to suggest that it would have had any effect. He could imagine Mr Muir congratulating himself when he learnt that he would be on the tender list. How pleased he would have been when he was told he had won the contract! And now, at the end of it, he would be ruined and the only person who might profit was his father.

“What will happen to Mr Muir now?” asked Christina. Michael noted that she did not enquire after Moira.

“I expect he will be declared bankrupt. He could go to prison.”

Christina showed no sympathy for his plight. Clearly God's punishment was visited upon the father as well as the children.