

CHAPTER TEN

It was the custom for some of the workers on the Estate to congregate in the Newington Arms most evenings a week, a practice that had been handed down from father to son for several generations. Those who had wives found it difficult at times to regularly attend the function, but were usually given leave to attend on Fridays. Jack Barnes, being unmarried, was one of the stalwarts who maintained and faithfully kept alive the tradition most evenings.

"She seems to me to be a very pleasant young lady," Mr Barnes informed the small company that was gathered there that evening. The public house was not busy - it rarely was - but they clung to their tradition of occupying the private bar, sat around a couple of tables under the low beamed ceiling apart from one who sat alone, in what had been his father's place, close to the fireplace. "Yes, and she's pretty good looking too," he added.

"She arrived today, you say?" said one of the gardeners. "What is her background?"

"Now there is a bit of a mystery," said the Manager, resting his glass on his palms, "a real mystery; the kind of mystery that might come straight out of a Robert Louis Stevenson novel."

"How's that, Jack?" said the landlord, drying a glass.

"Well, we can start with the fact that none of us has ever heard of her before now. I've never heard of her. Nor have I ever heard Lady Helen or Miss Lightfoot mention her. We all know that Lady Christina had no children, so how is it her husband, within a short time of her death, can suddenly conjure up a fully grown up daughter?"

"What d'ye mean Jack? That this girl aint his daughter?"

"I mean the chances are that either he was married before, or she was born out of wedlock."

"You mean she's illegible?" said the Welshman who came from Lower Newington Farm.

"Illegitimate you mean, Di, but there must be more than that. Why have we never heard as much as a whisper as to her existence? You wouldn't think that they would be able to keep her existence a secret all these years." Most of the company shrugged, being unable to come up with any plausible explanation.

"But you think she's all right, then, Jack?"

"Oh, yes! She is fine, quite fine. And very good-looking, as well!"

"I must say," snarled the small weasel of a man who was slumped in the chair in the dark corner by the fireplace, "that you appear to have taken quite a shine to her. Turned your head, has she?"

"She has done no such thing!" protested Mr Barnes. "And I'd ask you not to make insinuations of that kind, Wormley, not about her, not about me." The man shrank back into the shadows so that no-one could see his smile.

"But she is not married, is she?" he hissed.

"No," said Jack Barnes. "At least she does not wear a wedding ring."

"So you noticed that much? And if what you say is true about her being the new owner of the House and the Estate, she is worth quite a tidy sum," Wormley continued. "Quite a catch for someone, eh?"

"Ignore him," said Mr Barnes to the others. "Just pay no attention to him."

"What else can you tell us about the new mistress then?"

"Well, not much else. I don't think she goes to Church regularly and she says she doesn't drive."

"Oh ho!" two of them chorused. "You'll be in there, Jed!"

"And, she has asked for the portrait of Mr Bernstein's sister to be hung in her room."

"Mr Bernstein's sister?" asked the Welshman.

"The one that died before the War," explained Mr Barnes. "The portrait used to hang in the dining room."

"I remember it," said one of them. "Why on earth would she want that? You don't think for one moment that's her mother? I mean, wasn't there some mystery about her going to

France and never coming back?"

Mr Barnes shook his head. "She did die in France, but I never heard anything about her having a daughter. My father never said a thing that suggested that Mr Bernstein's sister had a child."

"But the story was that Lady Christina's brother was taken with Mr Bernstein's sister. There is no saying what might have gone on between them, him being an artist and that sort of thing. That could have been the reason why she went off to France in the first place."

"Go on, Di! You know that sort of thing didn't happen in those days!" laughed the landlord.

"But it is not impossible?" said the Welshman. "What do you know about her, Jack?"

"Not a great deal. She was a concert pianist. I believe that Lady Helen's son, the one who married an American and was lost at sea with her at the start of the War, was sweet on her, but as for a child, I think all the dates would be wrong."

"Then why would she want that portrait, that portrait in particular?" asked the Welshman. "If you ask me, it all fits together."

"If you ask me," said Mr Barnes, patiently, "none of it fits together. But, now I come to think of it, Miss Lightfoot appears to have known about or known of this Miss Bernstein's existence even if we did not."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. Just little things she's said or done."

"How would the housekeeper know of her if we have never heard of her?" asked the Welshman. "I still reckon that she is the sister's girl. What was her name?"

"I don't know. As for Miss Lightfoot knowing something, she did not come to work at the House until after the War. Perhaps Lady Newington said something about her at some time?" A low chuckle came from the corner. "Do you know something about her, Wormley?" asked Jack Barnes.

"No, no," he wheezed from the shadows. "I am just amusing myself listening to the pack of you beating around the bush, but you carry on." They all looked in his direction but could not see the self-satisfied grin on his face.

"So the whole house is to be restored?" said Ned.

"That's what is said. All the rooms and she said they are to be put back the way they were. She asked me if I could remember the House as it once was. And there's been an architect down to measure up and prepare specifications."

"When are they thinking of starting," asked the Welshman.

"No-one has said a date. As soon as they appoint a contractor, I suppose. Miss Bernstein was talking of it taking at least two years."

"It will cost a fortune!" said the Welshman.

"Yes. I suppose all our jobs are safe?" said Ned.

"That's right," wheezed the voice from the corner. "Start asking the important questions, like where all the money is going to come from?"

"That isn't really my place to say," said Mr Barnes calmly.

"And we all know that Mr Bernstein is not short of a penny," contributed the Welshman.

"Yet he let the House go to ruin," said the voice from the corner. "Why should he suddenly decide to restore it now, eh? Ask yourselves that!"

"So, what is your explanation, eh, Wormley?" asked Mr Barnes. "You are sitting there making all these comments and dropping innuendoes. What do you think is the truth of the matter?"

"Yes," said the Welshman. "Innuendoes!" The man slid forward into the light and drained his glass.

I don't have an explanation of these events any more than you do," he said slowly, "but I put it to you - the house is allowed to run down until Lady Christina dies, then within a few months this young, good looking, you say, female turns up, someone who none of us has ever heard of, and she is set up in charge of the House and the Estate. Given it all! I ask you! And now we hear the House is to be completely restored and to her taste, this good-looking

young woman. What is she like, I ask you?" he said craftily.

"Like?" said Mr Barnes, puzzled. "She is quite lady-like. She has a presence about her, something that is hard to define. She is very well dressed and she is very handsome, very handsome indeed. The only thing against her was, I felt, she did not intend to, or was reluctant to, attend the Church."

"Well I don't think she can be his new wife," spat Wormley, "so she's his mistress. No daughter! Oh, she's some poor unfortunate's daughter, but not his. He is installing a mistress in the House, and Lady Newington would turn over in her grave if she knew. Small wonder she does not want to go to Church."

"I cannot say that I agree with that sort of thing," said the Welshman. "The thought of a scarlet woman at the House!"

"Nor I," said Ned.

"Why, it's complete nonsense!" exclaimed Mr Barnes. "Absolute nonsense. Why, you can even see a family likeness!"

"With whom?"

"With Mr Bernstein's sister. I noticed it the moment I saw them side by side, the sister and Miss Bernstein. I even commented upon it."

"You told her that? I bet that made her laugh!" snarled Wormley. "A likeness, indeed. With a painting done years ago and probably from memory by all accounts? No, I tell you she is a mistress and she'll bring no good to any of us or the Estate!"

"That is just foolish speculation, Wormley," protested Jack Barnes.

"Maybe, maybe," snorted the grave digger, shaking his almost bald head. "We'll see."

Mr Barnes did not believe a word of what had been said that evening in the Newington Arms yet, as he walked in the moonlight to his house doubts began to linger and multiply in his mind. Miss Bernstein, or the young woman who called herself that, somehow did not appear to fit his image of a mistress, but then he had never knowingly met one, certainly not at the level of society he assumed her to be. Now he thought about it, Miss Lightfoot had told him that Mr Bernstein had given the House and Estate to his daughter some weeks ago, and before Miss Bernstein had made her first visit to the House. She obviously believed she was his daughter but was it possible that Miss Lightfoot was wrong? Surely she could not be covering up the true nature of things, assuming that Wormley was correct? He had always prided himself on being a good judge of character, something he thought he had inherited from his father. His view of Miss Bernstein had been highly favourable. If she was a mistress she was a very high class and accomplished one, but, then, Mr Bernstein would have chosen with care. No, as far as he was concerned she was what she said she was, not his mistress, nor his niece, but Mr Bernstein's daughter. There were unanswered questions, it was true, but the truth would probably emerge in time. He would put his trust in her and he had no doubt that it would not be misplaced.

That Friday had been, for Eileen, a fraught, fatiguing, day. She had arranged for all their furniture to be taken out of store and for some to be collected from the Brown's residence. One of the vans had broken down. The other was late and failed to collect everything from the depository. As a consequence a second trip had to be made. She had planned to have everything straight and ready for Richard by the time he came home, but had to work like a skivvy to achieve it. Then he, on automatic pilot, had gone straight to his parent's house and wondered why his mother expressed surprise to see him, asking if something was amiss. Sheepishly he had telephoned from their house and explained his mistake. He would be on his way around. Eileen was vexed that he should do such a thing on this night of all nights, but she was also grateful for the small amount of additional time that his meander allowed her to attend to small details as she awaited his arrival. Several times she picked up, then laid down, an envelope that she had brought, unopened, with her from the Browns'. It had arrived first post that and she knew that it was from Mr Brown's solicitors. It might be good news; news that was appropriate for the first night in their home. On the other hand, the news might be bad, and that she was not prepared to not face. On balance, it was more likely to be the latter, so the envelope remained sealed.

She stood in the kitchen and surveyed the glistening cupboards and work surfaces, the shining taps and the stainless steel sink and draining boards. What a contrast with the house in Hayes Close! Through the windows she could see the newly landscaped garden, looking colourful and pristine. This was all part of her adopted and planned self-rehabilitation yet now she had it, she wondered if it was really what she wanted? Her thoughts drifted back to the kitchen at Hayes Close and she pictured Richard sat at the table as she poured out her troubles. Was that such a good memory? Yet before that she had been happy and contented. Why was she not so now? Her eyes fell on a small patch of sawdust tucked under the kicker of one of the floor cabinets, something she had missed! She was still trying to remember where she had decided to keep the dustpan and brush when Richard tapped on the window. "I couldn't find the right key!" he said. "I must have forgotten it."

"If you can forget which house to go home to," she said, forcing a half-smile, "I am not at all surprised you can forget your key." He was admitted and despatched upstairs to see if he could find their bedroom and the bathroom whilst she completed the preparation of the dinner.

"I am sorry that our first meal in our new home is not going to be very exciting," she announced.

"At least we are here," Richard said.

"Have you heard anything about the latest flat conversion tenders?" she asked as she cleared the dishes from the table. The letter from the solicitor still lay there, unopened, and Richard had not commented upon it.

"My father asked the same thing this evening," said Richard, brightly. "Not a thing!"

"You sound very happy about it. Is no news good news?" He joined her in the kitchen and picked up a tea-towel.

"In a way, it could be. Normally we hear virtually by return if there's not a public opening, but we haven't on this occasion. It could mean nothing. They might have been late in opening the tenders, or it could have been delayed going into the post, so I wouldn't make too much of it. Even so, it could, on the other hand, be good news. We could be in the running for both, and then Gwilym would have his work cut out."

"For both? That would mean a lot of extra work."

"It will and if we are successful I want to do a proper costing and measurement analysis so that we know exactly what we are being paid for, how we are being paid and how much it is costing us to do whatever we are being paid for." Eileen smiled inwardly. Here was the mathematician emerging.

"It will mean a lot of extra office work if you are going to carry out that detailed an analysis," she said. "May I help?" Richard did not reply immediately and her heart fell. Was he going to say that he did not believe in his wife going out to work? He had never expressed such views before, nor had he opposed or criticised Sandra going out to work. And it was a family business, one in which Mrs Brown said she had assisted with the office work whilst the children were at school.

Richard had no inhibitions about Eileen working, or helping out, whatever they might call it. His preoccupation was with Miss Logan, the dragon, and how she might react to the suggestion that Eileen should go and work in the office. She would not be reasonable or rational. He knew that from experience, but it was an issue that would have to be faced sooner or later. He would have to talk to his father about her.

"I would have thought so," he said slowly. "Let us see how things work out."

There was a slight glimmer there, a merest suggestion of hope, but Eileen did not seek to follow or bathe in its rays. Instead she assumed that Richard's contemplation and qualified response indicated hostility to the idea. She said nothing further, but sat and brooded, feeling crushed and bitter.

The letter from the solicitors was not taken down until the following morning when she looked out on a cold, wet and windy, day. "The weekend has already been ruined," she said to herself. "I cannot see how this could make things any worse." Even as she thought this, she had a fleeting moment of hope, that the news might be good. It fluttered across the

deep black abyss of her mind as she opened the letter, only to be dashed and plunged out of sight when she read the contents. Hades opened up again, and the black and red tentacles of despair and rage engulfed her. The insurance company had replied, maintaining their position, citing precedent after precedent, and ending by inviting litigation. Mr Brown's solicitor said that this was clearly an option, but he advised against it in view of the costs which could easily outweigh any benefit. The letter closed with them saying that they knew this would be distressing for her. It was such an understatement! Eileen screwed the letter into a tight ball, threw it into a corner, and collapsed across the table in tears. She had barely dried her eyes and composed herself when Richard appeared, unshaven, saying that he was hungry and wondering where breakfast was. The fact that he either did not notice, or chose to ignore, her red eyes and bloated face, only made matters all the worse.

Monday morning brought post of a different kind at the builders' yard. Two letters arrived, almost identically worded, declaring the intention that Brown & Son should be awarded the two flat conversion contracts and inviting the firm's representatives to consecutive meetings on the afternoon of the next day. For a while Richard had the news entirely to himself and it immediately banished any concerns that he might have carried with him from home to work. After reading and re-reading them, his first instinct was to start drafting out the forms and procedures for recording and allocating the costs, though he could hear his father saying "they are only letters of intent! Don't count your chickens." There was also a slight concern over how his father would react, especially when he saw the rates. Richard tried to compose some response that would calm and satisfy him. And if they brought in the system he was designing, they would know exactly where the money was being lost, if indeed they did lose money. What was it Gwilym had said? There was so much money that Marley & Ellis did not know what to do with it? He pressed on, and in under an hour he had completed a rough outline of everything that was necessary. "Now for the difficult bit," he thought, and went to the outer office and into the dragon's lair. She sat impassively, steel eyed, her lips pressed tight together, thin and straight, as he described his plans and the cost scheme.

"What does Mr Brown think?" she asked when he had finished. "Will he proceed with the contracts or withdraw?"

"Withdraw?" cried Richard with dismay.

"He said he thought the rates were very low and that he did not think that we could take such a risk."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Richard, feeling like a schoolboy found in a private orchard with his pockets stuffed with apples. "He hasn't said anything to me! He can't do that!"

"That is for Mr Brown to decide."

"How did he find out?"

"I showed him the tenders. I thought that it was my duty," she said, coldly. The panic that seized Richard as he contemplated the unthinkable almost made him forget his original purpose of asking Miss Logan to take on the cost system. Would his father withdraw? Could his father withdraw? It was true they had never discussed who ran the business; who had the authority to make the final decisions in matters like this. An informal understanding, if it could be called that, had grown up in the months since Richard had returned home and started working there. Miss Logan had thrown down a gauntlet - another's gauntlet - and had forced him to realise that the sole power he had was that which his father allowed him to assume. He started to muster his forces for the inevitable battle, marshalling and parading his arguments for more turnover and a larger gross profit; wishing Gwilym was back from his weekend trip home and there to support him. The chances were he would not, but would declare it to be family business. When his father appeared he would have to fight alone.

"And I am not prepared to do all this extra work!" said Miss Logan, referring to his cost analysis system. "I am sure that Mr Brown will consider it a waste of time!"

Feeling partly defeated before the battle was joined, Richard went back into his father's office. Deep down, as he surveyed the ranks of his forces he knew he was vulnerable. He could not suppress the nagging doubt, the traitor in his midst, on his own admission, that

the rates were lower than he would have tendered had his judgement not been influenced by what Gwilym had said. This was all ridiculous, he told himself. Here he was on the brink of achieving a substantial part, if not all, of what he had set out to do and having misgivings, and having to defend his position. Why should he feel uncomfortable? He heard his father's voice in the outer office. He could also hear Miss Logan's sharp whine as she primed him with spite and venom. It was too late to outflank her and divide his enemies. Mr Brown read the letters in silence and then laid them down on the desk. "Well, well," he said at length. "I suppose you feel pleased about this?"

"It is what we intended," said Richard, forcing a smile and playing with the letter opener.

"Hmmm," said his father, breathing out. "I really wonder if we have the resources to cope with two at the same time, especially given the keenness of our bids."

"You may be right," said Richard, guardedly. "I think we should go to the meetings and hear what they have to say. They may not be prepared to give us two."

"And if they are?"

"I think Gwilym could run both of them. They are not far apart and we would get some economy of scale. We didn't make any allowance for that."

"We didn't allow for very much at all, from what I can see," said Mr Brown softly. "Economy of scale? What's that?"

"Less wastage," said Richard, lamely. His father breathed in again.

"Right!" he said. "Let's see what they say." Richard was left alone to contemplate the situation. It was true that his father had not been entirely negative, but he had hardly been positive or enthusiastic about their impending success. And he had said nothing about Richard's proposals for cost analysis though he knew that Miss Logan had complained to Mr Brown about his plans and his request that she should do the paperwork. For a moment he felt so frustrated he wanted to tear up his morning's work and throw it away, but he laid it aside, cooled down, and tried to think of other things. He was rational, almost resigned, when Gwilym arrived.