

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stephanie had looked forward to Mr Brodies's next visit with anticipation and she greeted him with a broad smile. He was armed, as usual, with rolls of drawing and documents, all thrust under his arm, ever threatening to fly out and deposit themselves on the ground as he made his way from the car. She felt excited at the prospect of at last appointing a contractor and the work commencing, of watching the workmen as they sealed the roof, then repaired the ceilings, re-plastered the walls, replaced the mouldings and, one by one, in accordance with Mr Brodie's programme which he had diligently explained to her in great detail, redecorated the rooms. "Then we can empty Mr Barnes's lofts," she told herself.

He was excited too. "Mr Bernstein has approved the appointment of a contractor, one of his own choice. I have asked a representative to come along this afternoon to the inaugural meeting. I assume that you will wish to be present?"

"If it is all right, I would."

"As the ultimate client you have every right to," he said. "And I am sure that you will find it interesting and rewarding. Do you want to play a pro-active role? Mr Bernstein said he thought you might. I think he hopes you will."

"Proactive? What exactly would that entail? Not sawing wood or hammering nails, I trust?" She saw his face fall, and added, "I am joking, of course!"

"Being directly involved with the building operations. Some clients leave it all entirely to the architect or his clerk of works, but others may become directly involved. Of course, it can lead to immense problems unless the protocol is established right from the outset. That is one of the purposes of the inaugural meeting. There will be a resident clerk of works, of course."

"I think I should think about that," she said cautiously. "Could it not become a case of too many cooks?"

"Not if we can agree all the details before hand, and you are the final arbiter." Stephanie toyed with the idea of being able to have direct contact with the craftsmen. She could see a danger that they might become dependent upon her, but it had the attraction of her being able to step in a correcting anything that she knew to be wrong, or did not like. It could save time and money and, after all, she would be there, twenty-four hours a day, if required.

"Is there somewhere that we can meet this afternoon?" asked Mr Brodie. "Once here the contractor will supply a site hut for future meetings. I don't really want to commandeer the kitchen today."

"I think Mr Barnes has an office in part of what used to be the stables. I am sure that he would not object to us using that. In fact, as Estate Manager, he ought to be at the meeting so that he knows what is going on. I will speak to Miss Lightfoot now so that a message can be sent to him." She left the architect in the sitting room and walked through to the kitchen, pausing for a moment to look out on the inner garden. What would it all look like when it was finished and all the furniture and paintings were re-installed? Would she really feel comfortable living there? Should the House be opened to the public, as many were? It appeared to be in vogue and was popular. Mr Brodie was stooped over the plans when she returned.

"Have you made your decision yet? Whether to come to the meeting this afternoon?" he asked.

"I think I shall," she said. "Who is the contractor, anyway?"

"Oh, a firm that you probably have never heard of, but they have worked for us before and their workmanship was good although they are undoubtedly not the cheapest. You can expect them to do a sound adequate job with a minimum of supervision, although they would not have been my first choice. It was Mr Bernstein who insisted upon them."

"Did he?" said Stephanie, feeling curious that her father should take that close an interest in what was happening. "Who are they?"

"Brown & Son of Eastgate. As you can hear, a father and son company." Stephanie let out a little gasp and flinched. Mr Brodie had remained engrossed in the plans and did not

notice her reaction or the look of consternation that spread across her now pallid features. She was seized by terror and foreboding. What was she to do, and why had her father recommended them? Did he know something? Had her mother, out of jealousy and spite, put him up to it? What ever, it was a cruel trick that he was playing on her! It was a potential disaster, one that could hardly have been worse, and who would be coming that afternoon to the meeting? Possibly both of them! Whoever it was, she could not possibly face them. She could not even run the risk of meeting them, either of them!

“Oh,” she thought, “this is so dreadful. I thought I had left all this behind when I left Bromley and now I find that it has followed me here!” There seemed to be no immediate means of escape. This would not even turn out to be a fresh start. She was doomed to be a person serving out a life long sentence, being punished for her past activities. Something had to be done now, right away. They might even be on the road as she stood there, heading in that direction. They could easily be planning on arriving early in order to look at the House before the meeting. She must do something, say something to Mr Brodie who was still studying the plans, quite unaware of the catastrophe that was threatening to eliminate his client.

“I told you that you wouldn't have heard of them,” he said, but did not look up.

“I have not,” she said weakly, “but on reflection I think it would be unwise for me to come to this afternoon's meeting, or get involved with the work in a proactive way as you described. It could only be divisive. There should be only one person dealing with the contractor, and that's the architect, Mr Brodie.”

Now he did look up, staring at her with puzzlement at what she was saying and the troubled look on her face. Why had she suddenly changed her mind and seemingly lost interest in the running of the project? He had dealt with all manner of clients. There were those who took a positive pleasure in ordering and instructing the workforce, what he would consider as interference, and who had to be restrained. And there were those who considered that any contact with the working class was belittling, below their status, and who acted as if some dreadful disease might be contracted if they as much as saw one, leave alone talked to one. Miss Bernstein, in his view, fell into neither of these categories. “That is a shame,” he said. “I thought that you would have a positive contribution to make. I cannot persuade you to change your mind?” Mr Bernstein had asked him to involve her, but all the same, he had to respect her wishes.

“I think it is better this way,” she said, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice, and desperately searching for plausible reasons. “I can assure you that I do wish to have a positive involvement. I will not be any the less interested for my not attending your meeting. I just think that any more involvement on my behalf might be counter-productive.”

“Won't you at least come to the inaugural meeting so that the builder knows who his client is?” He was not to know that he could barely have suggested anything worse. Stephanie felt uncomfortably close to fainting and slowly, carefully, sat down.

“He will find that out soon enough,” she said grimly. “I do not think he needs to meet me now. And now,” she said, trying to rally her spirits, “I think it must be time for lunch. You will join me, Mr Brodie? Miss Lightfoot has prepared a salad. Will that be all right?”

“But, about the inaugural meeting - .,” he began.

“If you are referring to my attendance, my decision is final. I do not wish to discuss it further!” She stood and swept out of the room leaving Mr Brodie gathering his thoughts and drawings. A little while later he appeared at the kitchen, bashful, cautious, uncertain where he now stood with the Lady of the House who had suddenly become so dismissive.

She had also become very withdrawn. Stephanie said very little over lunch and barely responded to the suggestions he put forward, trying to rekindle what he saw as her enthusiasm. Outwardly she remained cool and indifferent, but inwardly she was furious. She was still dwelling on why that particular firm had been appointed and could only lay the blame at her mother's door. Only she knew of her involvement, of her two visits down to Eastgate, and of her eventual disappointment. It was mean and vindictive and so, so, unjustified. When she thought of it, she could have wept with frustration. She could easily get over that afternoon's problem simply by keeping out of the way, but what would she do once

the work had started? He could turn up at any time, completely without warning; he who was the last person in the World she wanted to see or meet. She could hardly insist on being notified in advance every time Mr Brown was proposing to make a visit. Yet she could not move away from the Estate. The nature of the arrangement, her involvement in the restoration, demanded her presence for much of the time. Oh, how could they have done this to her?

Could she abandon the whole idea; go and tell her mother that she had had enough and that she wanted to rescind the present he had made her? No, she had sold her flat and she had no desire to go back to her former life. There seemed to be no escape. On reflection, perhaps if she was careful and kept out of the way at the times of the day when the risk was greatest, she could avoid meeting him. Perhaps the builder would be decent enough to make his visits at regular hours so that she could predict his coming? But to find yourself a partial exile from your own home!

As soon as Mr Brodie had bundled up his plans, taken up his documents, and set off for Mr Barnes's office to meet the builder, Stephanie went to the west porch and sneaked out of the house. She knew that Mr Brodie would have to conduct them around to see the work and it was essential that she was clear before then. She also wanted to see who it was coming up from Eastgate so that she knew who it was she was dealing with. She told herself that it was just tolerable to see him, so long as she did not meet him and, of course, so long as he did not see her. If he saw and recognised her, all would be lost. He would only come and seek her out. Out in the grounds she circled the house and chose her route with care, ensuring that she could not be seen from either Mr Barnes's office or the drive. For a while she sat in a shady arbour overlooking the valley, studying the mist-impregnated woodland and the hazy outline of the ruins, waiting and listening. When she thought the time was about right she made her way through the shrubbery towards the drive. She could hear men's voices. She recognised Mr Brodie's and had to dart back as she suddenly caught sight of the architect. If he saw her he would only call her over and then there would be no escape. Cautiously she moved so that she could see the group once again. There was Mr Brodie with his back to her, pointing up at the roof and the parapets. There, close to him, was a second man who she did not recognise and who was obscuring a third man. When the second man moved she breathed a sigh of relief. The man standing behind him was Arthur Brown!

For a moment she was on the verge of stepping out of her hiding place and going to greet him. How surprised he would be, to find her there, his client, the owner of the House and the Estate! How pleased he would be to see her again! Then she realised that any such action would be foolish. He would only reveal her presence, the very thing she wanted to keep a secret from the Browns. If she wanted a new life, uncomplicated by the past, no-one who formerly knew her, other than her mother and father, must now know that she was there, least of all any member of the Brown household. Quietly, she tiptoed her way back to the arbour and stayed there until late afternoon. The sun had fallen low in the sky and it was some time after she had heard car doors slamming and someone drive away, before she thought it safe to return to the House. They had all gone, the builder and the architect. She felt guilty and sorry for Mr Brodie. He had left her a simple note saying he would contact her in relation to the start of work. That was all. He had said that it would probably be in two three weeks' time so unless either of the Browns out in a surprise appearance she had a few days' freedom left. She might have later congratulated herself on surviving this particular ordeal, but it was only the first of many.

"How did the meeting go?" asked Richard when he greeted his father at the end of that afternoon. "Have we really got that contract as well?" His father smiled.

"I am pleased to say that we have, all signed although not sealed. Here is the letter of appointment." Richard took it and read it.

"That is rather odd, isn't it?" he said.

"What is?"

"It is written by a firm of solicitors and signed by them for and behalf of a Miss S Bernstein. Why didn't the architect issue it? It is all right, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said his father thumbing through that day's post. "Perhaps he hasn't the powers."

"They don't say that they are executors, so we have to assume that this Miss Bernstein is still alive."

"It would probably say deceased if she were not," said Mr Brown, "and she most certainly is alive."

"You met her?"

"No, but she was there, in residence."

"That makes her sound very grand, almost regal. I suppose she is some ancient spinster?"

"I rather doubt it. I will let you into a little secret. Mr Bernstein, her father, who must be about the same age as me, is very rich. He inherited the house from his wife when she died and has made it over to his daughter."

"So what is secret about that?"

"The thing you don't know, although your mother does, is that I used to work with Mr Bernstein when he was somewhat younger than you are now. That may partly explain why we have been awarded the contract. As for Miss Bernstein, she has caused quite some excitement as no-one at Newington even knew of her existence before she suddenly appeared out of the blue."

"Did you and mother?"

"That is a strange question. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," said Richard. "It was just the way you said it. Perhaps she is not his daughter at all?" Mr Brown shook his head.

"I think it is generally accepted that she is his daughter. He says she is, which is enough for most. And the Estate Manager tells me there is a strong family likeness."

"Perhaps she is illegitimate?" Richard did not understand the strange smile that appeared on his father's face, and did not have time to pursue it as Mr Brown suddenly changed the subject.

"That reminds me," he said. "Sandra and Gwilym."

"Sandra and Gwilym?" said Richard cautiously. "What has happened?"

"Nothing yet, I hope, but he took her out again last night. We will have to head that off before something does happen. We don't want her involved with a married man and I would like to get your mother off my back."

"I don't know quite what we can do," said Richard, lowering his voice. "She is old enough to look after herself and I really do not want to upset Gwilym as things have started so well."

"I agree, up to a point. I do not intend to sound calculating, but that is the point, or one of them. We don't want anything to happen that would force him to go home. No bust up, no quarrel, no scandal. These things can get out of hand and he is a good-looking fellow. It can turn a young girl's head. And I will have to move Peterson down to Dover so we will have to rely on Gwilym all the more." There was a double blow for Richard here. He had been slightly relieved when Sandra had drawn Gwilym away from possibly forming a relationship with Eileen, but if they now split the Welshman and his sister, Gwilym might gravitate back in his wife's direction. In addition, now there was the possibility of losing one of the best foremen.

"I don't want to lose Peterson," he said, thinking he could hardly tell his father what was in his mind concerning Eileen.

"Anderson can take his place. He may not be as good a craftsman as Peterson, but he knows the work and he is good at getting things done."

"I suppose so," said Richard, thinking of his cost allocation and analysis sheets and wondering what the quality of those completed by Anderson would be. "What about Sandra?"

"Well, I thought your mother and I could talk to her, tactfully of course. Try to make her see sense. I mean, for a start she is wasting her time as nothing can come of it."

"I wouldn't say that," said Richard.

"And perhaps you," said his father, ignoring his advice, "could get Eileen to talk to

Gwilym.”

“Oh, I don't think that is all that good an idea.”

“What about you then? Talking to him?”

“It'll be a bit difficult to raise. I mean, he is not going to take lightly to me marching in and telling him to keep his hands off my sister.”

“I did suggest that we should be tactful. Perhaps it would sound better coming from Eileen?” Richard bit his lip. He was now being backed into a corner and there seemed to be no way out of it.

“It might, I suppose,” he said, “but I would prefer to keep Eileen out of it if I can. Why don't you and mother talk to Sandra first? See what her reaction is. I mean, she is the one to tell Gwilym if anyone is. If she doesn't see sense, I'll talk to Eileen then, but only as a last resort.”

“All right,” said his father. “We will try doing it your way.”

The next week did not start at all well for Sandra. In fact she thought that it commenced abominably. She was just getting over the distasteful incident that had occurred with Gwilym on the sands only to find herself the subject of vilification from her parents throughout the weekend. She made desperate efforts to escape their attention during the day by going out. She walked down to the park, then along the tops of the cliffs, but they were there, waiting for her, when she returned. How could she tell them what had happened and what she had said? She felt so ashamed about everything. She felt ashamed to admit that she had seen Gwilym as a knight in shining armour, a potential protector against the advances of others. How could she tell them this and that the armour, if it had ever existed, was now tarnished? If she as much as hinted that they would seize upon it and say that was an example of exactly what they were talking about. Yet she was reluctant to concede. As much as it might hurt, as much as she might have had to relive the experience when she realised, on one of her walks, that she was on the cliff top immediately above the spot where it happened, she was not prepared to forgo the possibility that Gwilym might yet prove to be a protector, or give up what she saw as part of her independence. There was also a doubt forming in her mind when she dwelled upon Gwilym's words. Was she in danger of becoming frigid or old-fashioned? After all, when she looked around her, this thing seemed to be happening with increasing licence. Perhaps that was why Gwilym expected it of her? Perhaps that was what any man would expect of her?

Despite her misgivings or, perhaps, because of them, and close to tears, she maintained her stance against her parents and refused to renounce Gwilym. He might be married. Did that mean that he was not to be trusted? Were they also saying that they had no trust in her?

“You must think of your reputation,” said her mother at dinner on Saturday evening. “Don't you agree, Arthur?”

“It seems to me,” said Sandra, bitterly, and wishing that there had been someone there to take her side in things, “that girls with reputations are more likely to be asked out than girls who have not.”

“I don't believe it is anything of the sort!” said her mother. “Certainly not, if we are talking about men who might be considered as eligible as future husbands. Why, I had an impeccable reputation when I met your father. Isn't that so, Arthur?”

“Indeed,” said Mr Brown.

“Things were different then,” said Sandra.

“Indeed they were not!” said Mrs Brown, stoutly. “These things do not change. Single girls should not go out with married men. There's their wives to think of. What do you think his wife would think of it if she knew? How do you think she would feel if she found out her husband was gallivanting around with another woman?”

“I am not another woman!” Sandra protested. “Nor have we been gallivanting around!” In her heart she knew that she did not want to hurt Gwilym's wife. She did not want to hurt anyone. She felt that she was the innocent party in all of this affair, in the matter with Gwilym and the threat, if it could be seen as that, from Ken and his boss, yet she was getting

all the blame. "But I have no intention of hurting anyone," she added, "least of all myself."

She made an escape to see Richard and Eileen on Sunday. It crossed her mind to mention what had happened. She would have liked to have, but she did not feel that she was intimate enough with Eileen to raise the matter with her, and Richard was likely to react in much the same way as their parents. In addition, if she told Richard he was likely to tell either his father or his mother, and where would she be then?

"What does Gwilym's wife think of him being down here, or foot lose and fancy free?" she asked Eileen, trying to sound as normal as she could.

"Is he foot lose and fancy free?" asked Eileen, studying her closely. "Is that how you see him, or how he describes himself?"

"Perhaps you ought not to be seeing so much of him," said Richard, much to Sandra's annoyance.

"I don't know," said Eileen, "When he is with Sandra she is keeping him out of mischief and he is not getting into trouble with someone else."

"Is he the sort that would get into trouble?" asked Richard, becoming alarmed, though not about his sister, only about the possibility that something would occur that would cause Gwilym to have to go home.

"Most men are capable of getting themselves into trouble given the circumstances and the right partner," said Eileen flatly.

Sandra suffered a further tirade at the breakfast table on Monday. She had weathered it and had been relieved to escape unscathed eventually, although she did miss the bus as a consequence. At least they had not threatened yet to evict her. That was one thing to be grateful for; there seemed to be precious else.

A large, thin, brown envelope was lying on her desk when she arrived late and flustered, in the office. "What's this?" she asked, holding it up. The girls stopped chatting and shook their heads. They had not received one. "I noticed in there when I came in," said Debbie. "It can't be from the messenger because he would have left it in the in-tray."

"And it can't be your cards," said Alice, "as they come on Thursdays."

Her name was typed on the outside, quite simply "Miss Brown". She slit it open and peered inside before attempting to remove the contents. It appeared to contain a number, perhaps about half a dozen, photographs. She dropped them on the desk as if they were burning her fingers through to the bone. "It's horrible!" she exclaimed. "Really horrible!"

"What's that, San?" asked Alice, trying to look across without leaving her desk. "What have you got?"

"Did you know about this?" she demanded.

"No!" they said in unison, so emphatically that she found herself more than prepared to believe them.

"Someone has sent me some horrible photographs. They're filthy! I really cannot bear to look at them."

"Oooooo! Can we?" cried Debbie, getting up. Alice crossed to Sandra's desk and took the photographs back to hers. Debbie joined her, looking over her shoulder. "Oooooo!" she said again.

"That's a bit awkward," said Alice. "I couldn't stay in that position for very long, could you Deb?"

"Not me! I don't think I could get in that position! You're right, San. They are filthy! Goodness, look at her!"

"Don't you find them repulsive?" said Sandra, remaining at her desk. Alice shrugged and looked up at Debbie.

"I suppose they are, but when you have worked here as long as we have and typed up hundreds of sordid reports, you tend not to think too much about these things."

"But aren't they illegal?"

"Absolutely! You've got, let's see, about thirty to fifty pounds worth of illicit material there. Someone had given you quite a present."

Sandra shuddered. "Fifty pounds? For those?"

"There's an awful lot of money in it and to be made out of it if you are willing to take

the risk," said Alice. "With your looks and figure you could probably make a fortune, San. Oh look, Deb! She's blushing! Have you been up to something naughty over the weekend, Sandra? Tell us all!"

"I haven't!" she protested, colouring all the more.

"You have! You have been up to something!" laughed Alice. "There's such a guilty look on your face! Was he good?" They both laughed and Sandra grew even more miserable.

"I don't understand why anyone would send them to me," she said, distraught and close to tears.

"I bet it's that Oxer!" cried Debbie. "That's just the kind of sick thing he would do."

"Where would he get them?" asked Sandra, weakly.

"Where?" cried Alice. "Don't you know? There's a whole room of the stuff that's been confiscated, downstairs - photographs, books, films, even some rather odd implements."

"What? Here?"

"Of course! We reckon, don't we Deb, that some of them sell items from it from time to time, then let their colleagues confiscate it all back. The same material going round and round in a continuous circle."

"Surely that must be dishonest?" said Sandra.

"Oh, Sandra! What ever makes you think the police are any more honest or dishonest than anyone else? They're not recruited for their honesty but for their ability to catch crooks."

"Or stitch them up," giggled Debbie.

"They say it takes a crook to catch one," added Alice.

"Oh, you are being cynical," said Sandra, recovering some of her composure. "But why send it to me?"

"I expect that he fancies you, as well as Ken. You are becoming popular!"

"What on earth am I to do with them?" Sandra asked, thinking that she could now have three problems in her life rather than the one she thought she had over the weekend.

"Can we keep them?" asked Debbie. "One look at these and my Frank'll be good for several nights!"

"Or several times on one night!" exclaimed Alice. They both shrieked with laughter and Sandra forced a smile. At least that solved the problem of what to do with the photographs, but it left her wondering exactly what the implications were. Was it just a joke, simply to embarrass her? Whatever, she spent the whole of the morning in a mixture of anxiety and expectation, waiting for either Ken or Detective Sergeant Oxer to visit her to see the result of their prank. She felt reasonably safe with the two girls there, but neither of the men appeared. At lunchtime, when she decided that she would walk down to the promenade and sit in the sun, Ken did appear and followed her. She allowed him to sit on the same bench but was not prepared to acknowledge his presence. Whereas previously she would have treated him with disdain, she now harboured hostility towards him and the rest of the policemen at the station.

But as always was the case, his proximity turned out to be harmless. He eventually broke the ice by asking her about the previous Thursday and she concluded that he had been, as she thought, on the look out for her. Just think what he had driven her to! It was as well that he did not find her! Now he was asking her out again, behaving, she thought, like a whimpering puppy that was begging to be taken for a walk. She had no hesitation in turning him down. He would be far too weak and submissive to offer her any protection.

Detective Sergeant Oxer did come into their office late in the afternoon but he did not, as Sandra expected, openly ask her how she enjoyed her present which was now thrust deep and out of everyone's sight in Debbie's shopping basket. Nor was she prepared to raise the subject with him, disappointing her colleagues who thought that they might have a steady supply of similar material if Sandra had the courage to hint that she liked it. "I could do nothing of the sort," she protested to them. "What do you think I am?" They had not answered and now watched with more than a passing interest as the policeman asked her how his virtuous little Sandra was, and whether she was happy in her work and the lot she had drawn at the police station. Was there anything she needed? Could she think of any service he could perform? They had it all there! She would be surprised at what they had or could obtain!

Sandra answered him in curt monosyllables. If it had been he who left the envelope, he never mentioned it but she, nevertheless, had the feeling she was being probed to gauge her reaction to it. She thought of any number of things she could have said to precipitate the issue. She could have said, as Alice and Debbie thought she ought to say, "we liked the photographs," or "the girls have the photographs - do you want them back?" She was tempted to say more like "I didn't see you in the photographs," or "I liked the photographs of your sister". But despite the looks and signals of encouragement from the other side of the room, she did not have sufficient courage to risk a direct approach. For all she knew he might not have been the perpetrator, although she was sure that he was. And whatever response it was he was seeking from her, he left with only a vague impression of her reaction and no concrete evidence. She was relieved when the time came to pack up for the day and go home. Debbie was still giggling and Alice was telling her she hoped she got some sleep. Sandra left them to it. Her mother's complaints about Gwilym would seem like peaches and cream compared to that day's ordeal.

Eileen had started her new job that very day. At least it was referred to as a "job" although she spent only one unpaid morning at the office. Richard had taken the trouble to warn her about the attitude that Miss Logan was likely to display so the frigid, unhelpful, greeting was not unexpected. Eileen could not but go to Miss Logan for the books and ledgers from which she would abstract all the financial information required for Richard's analysis. There was a long tradition of allocating the wages and material costs to specific jobs in the cost ledger which made part of her task easier, but no-one had previously attempted to carry out a sub-analysis of the costs and the revenue they earned. "I cannot see for one moment what the use of all this will be!" said Miss Logan as she handed over the books that she had protected and cosseted. "It's a total waste of time if you ask me!"

Eileen spent part of the morning typing the stencils for the various forms that Richard had designed. There was some disagreement over who should then run them off of the duplicator, and who was going to be responsible for issuing those that had to be completed by Gwilym or the foremen, and for collecting them once they were completed. Eileen said that she would do it all, but that did not meet with Miss Logan's approval. Nor did her second suggestion that Miss Logan could run them off in the afternoon and Eileen would issue them next day. When she went home to lunch and the afternoon she left the stencils on the table beside the duplicator. There were some returns from the jobs, but these were incomplete and Gwilym appeared with his apologies concerning this omission. He maintained, however, that he was committed to the project and he would ensure that all the information was collected in due course. "What is all this about you and Sandra?" she asked casually as she examined the returns she had.

"Sandra?" he said. "What business?"

"I don't know. That is why I am asking you," Eileen replied. That was, indeed, the truth. She had no more than sensed that there was a problem of some kind when Sandra called on them at the weekend, and she deduced it could be to do with no-one other than her brother-in-law.

"What shall I do about extra work," he said suddenly. "Or varied work where there's no proper bill items?"

"Do you mean dayworks?" asked Eileen, studying him to see if he was deliberately avoiding the subject she had raised.

"Some of it is on daywork sheets."

"I can pick that up from the daywork sheets themselves."

"And the rest?"

"I think the best thing would be to record it in the comment box at the bottom of Richard's valuation form. I am hoping I can persuade that woman to run them off this afternoon. I honestly am not getting very much help from her, but Richard did warn me, I suppose. Is there much in the way of dayworks?"

"Quite a lot so far. There's additional materials too, some of which we had to get pretty quickly. I think its best to buy them out of the site float and record it as petty cash."

"I can pick those up too from the petty cash books. If there's no receipt will you ensure that you write vouchers and identify what the materials are for and which job it is. I can do the rest."

"Great!" said Gwilym and started to go. Before he opened the door to the outer office he turned and looked at her. "Eileen," he said, "I have a confession to make. I made a complete fool of myself last Thursday. An utter fool! I don't know what came over me." Eileen looked up, surprised; surprised that he had made a fool of himself, surprised he was now telling her.

"Keep your voice down," she said quietly. "What happened?"

"I just went to far and I think I upset her. It wasn't my intention. She is such a nice girl."

"She is," said Eileen, coldly, assuming he was referring to Sandra. "What do you mean by too far?"

"I made a suggestion that I should not have done. I am telling you this in case there are any repercussions. I don't know whether Sandra was said anything."

"Not to us, she hasn't."

"Well, if something is said you can say that it won't happen again. And I have written to Megan to tell her that I took Richard's sister out a couple of times, just in case the story gets back to her. I haven't told her what a fool I made of myself, though." Eileen looked out into the yard and at the two men who had come to retouch the sign.

"You say you didn't do anything that might have more than repercussions in the future?" she said lowly.

"Of course not!" he exclaimed hastily. "Would I do anything like that?" Eileen did not answer. She found that her thoughts had run in an unexpected direction. She was not thinking so much what he might have done or not have done under the circumstances. She was thinking more of how ironic it would be if he had made Sandra pregnant. There would be a baby, an unwanted baby, and here she was being told by the specialist that she probably could have none. She flirted with a fleeting thought that they could adopt it and bring it up as their own and for that moment she almost wished he had answered "yes" as that would give the notion some prospect, but that was not the case, nor was it likely to be. She was due to see the Specialist later that month. She would no doubt say that the latest tests had been inconclusive, give her some more vague, imprecise, views, suggest further examinations and more tests. How ever many did they need before they accepted what she already knew in her heart? Surely a tumour was a tumour, where ever it might reside? Initially she thought it should have been left alone but now she knew more and that it occupied the space reserved in her body for her baby. She knew that this thing was alive and that it was draining her, like a parasite. She almost longed for the Specialist to announce that she would have to have the operation.

Then, her mother had borne only her. They had never told her why she was an only child, why she could not have a brother or a sister like her school friends. It appeared to be a taboo subject whenever she asked. Gradually the intervals between the questions grew longer until she gave up. What ever the true reason was, she never discovered it. She would have to make an excuse at the office for the visit to the Specialist. Miss Logan would have to be told something. Perhaps she could say that she was going to Canterbury to look at dresses for the Tennis Club Dinner Dance which was, after all, only a matter of weeks away. And as soon as she knew something positive she would tell Richard, but not just yet.

"So, the builders have started work on the House, then?" Jack Barnes put down his glass and stretched out his legs.

"Yes," he said, "but not in a big way. A couple of lorry loads of equipment and scaffolding arrived with a handful of men."

"They'll be after starting on the roof, I suppose," said Ned.

"Once the scaffolding is up," said the Manager. "Then they'll start lifting the lead and replacing the rotten timbers."

"It's a crying shame its been allowed to go like that," said the Welshman. "It is hard

to understand why Mr Bernstein let it especially with her Ladyship there.”

“There's some that say it was his missus,” said Ned, emptying his glass and looking around to see what stage his companions had reached in their progress towards the next round.

“Yes,” said the landlord of the Newington Arms from behind the bar. “I've heard that Lady Christina would not allow a single penny to be spent on the place.”

“Odd, that,” said the Welshman, “considering by all accounts they weren't short of a penny.”

“I don't know about any of that,” said Jack Barnes, feeling it fell to him to defend his employers although he realised he was probably responsible for spreading the rumour about Christina's parsimony in the first place. “All I know is that the work has at last started.”

“And what is the verdict?”

“Verdict? On what?” said Mr Barnes.

“On the roof?”

“I have just said that they will be stripping off the lead as their first job. We know it's in a bad way on the South West corner and it has perforated in a number of places on the East side. I've been up there with the architect and through the attics where it's safe to walk. There are areas where it is not! He reckons about a third of the timber will have to be replaced and, of course, all the lead work.”

“And how long do they think it'll take, all this work?”

“On the roof, I don't know. Overall they are talking of up to two years. I think a lot depends on what they find and how far the rot has gone.”

“And how is Miss Bernstein coping with all this?” asked the landlord. “I suppose she is pretty excited?”

“Ha!” exclaimed Wormley from his corner.

“Another round?” asked the Welshman before anyone could pursue the cause of his exclamation. The glasses were hastily produced and pushed across the bar.

“Is something bothering you, Wormley?” asked Jack Barnes.

“No, no, nothing at all,” he whined. “It just seems to me that it's the others who get excited when your Miss Bernstein, or what ever her name is, is around.”

“What exactly do you mean?” demanded the Manager, becoming annoyed.

“Pay no attention to him,” said the Welshman. “Tell us how she is coping with it.”

“Well, it is a little odd. When I talked to her about it, it must have been last week or the week before, she was full of enthusiasm and couldn't wait for the work to start. Now, all of a sudden, she has changed her mind.”

“Changed her mind? In what way?”

“I was talking to the architect after they had held their inaugural meeting with the contractor and he told me that one minute she was going to the meeting and planning to get involved in everything and the next she didn't want to know about it. She just suddenly changed the whole of her attitude, there and then on the spot. There was no reason; at least she didn't give him one, and he couldn't see why she was like it. But since then she's been nowhere near the work.”

“Women are like that,” said the Welshman, distributing the replenished glasses. “One moment they will and the next they won't. They've got a headache or are going to wash their hair. That sort of thing, you know.”

“It hasn't ended there,” said the Manager. “She has now asked for the builder to provide a list of all the cars and vans that he is likely to bring to the Estate and the names of the men and drivers who are likely to come and work or visit the job. Now why would she want something like that?”

“All that are likely to come and work?” cackled Wormley. “Perhaps she wants to know if a particular person is going or not going to be there?”

“What are you on about, Wormley? How could she possibly know anyone who was likely to work for the builder. For a start he comes from Eastgate and, for a second, she is not the kind of woman who would associate with building workers.”

“Ah!” whined Wormley. “That may be what you all think. Things could be different.”

“Take no notice of him,” said the Welshman. “But she is asking for the names of people are coming to work there? Do you think it could be for security reasons?”

“I can only say that she was most insistent. She said it was so that she could check that there were no unauthorised cars in the car park, so perhaps it is security she has in mind. She then talked about a permit system to keep tabs on them, but I don't know whether that's going ahead. I just think she is acting oddly. It's not the way I would have expected her to.”

“And of course, you know her so well!” hissed Wormley.

“She was acting fair odd on day of that meeting,” said Ned, accepting his replenished glass from the Welshman. “I saw her crouching down behind the laurels at the end of the drive, as if she was looking at somat but didn't want anyone to see her!”

“Are you sure that she hadn't just dropped something and was looking for it?”

“Naw. She wasn't looking at the ground but was looking towards the car park, but I couldn't see what at, not where I was stood.”

“I am sure Miss Bernstein would be pleased to know you were spying on her, Ned,” said Jack Barnes.

“I wusn't spying on her, not for one minute! I just happened to see her and wonder what was going on.”

“What makes you think that she didn't want to be seen, eh, Ned?” wheezed Wormley, extending a bony hand to collect his half pint.

“It were just the way she was stooped; as if she wanted to keep put of sight. You know, like when we played hide and seek as nippers. That sort of way.”

“That is most unusual,” said the Welshman, returning to his seat. “When she last spoke to me she seemed perfectly normal and pleasant. What do you think could have come over her?”

“Most unusual?” cackled Wormley. “Nothing of the kind. It is just the way someone who had a guilty secret might act. Perhaps there is someone who knows her secret?”

“Come off of it, Wormley,” said Jack Barnes. “We have been over all this before.”

“May be have, maybe we haven't. Well, I will find out whether our fine young lady is all she makes out to be. Then we'll see, we'll see!”