

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

For all intents and purposes, Richard now felt that he had good reason to feel content with the World and assume that he had, at last, turned a corner and everything was going, and would continue to go, his way. By the time they were several weeks into the two flat conversion contracts, the analysis produced by Eileen indicated that both were comfortably profitable, a fact that he was never reticent about parading in front of his father and Miss Logan. They had been bid at his rates, at rates that everyone, all the experts, said were suicidal, yet here they were, making money. Not only that, but the jobs were on programme and all the applications had been paid in full and on time. There was little more that he could ask for and, to crown his triumph, they had been asked to negotiate a third conversion contract which was also to be taken on by Gwilym. The man from Wales had turned out to be a real asset. Richard often asked himself how any of them could ever have doubted him when he suggested that they should invite Gwilym to come down and work for them. And when his father had commented on how well it was now working out, and how beneficial Gwilym's presence was, Richard had preened himself and felt quite smug. Clearly he, Richard, had the touch. He had a natural ability for deciding and doing the right things in the building industry. He wondered why it was he had ever thought he might become a teacher. No wonder he had made such a mess of it! He was not cut out for it! His father had been right all along, although Richard was not going to credit him with this.

Another potential problem was also clearing itself. Gwilym had declared that he was happy there and had started looking for a larger flat, or even a small house, so that he could bring Megan and the children down to join him, although Richard did wonder sometimes if Gwilym pursued the matter with all due expedition. It seemed to Richard that if Megan came to live there, the potential of a problem developing with Sandra receded. All manner of things appeared to be falling into place. There were improvements closer to home. Although she found working in the vicinity of Miss Logan fraught, Eileen clearly was enjoying the work she did and the fact that she was not left at home and, as she would sometimes describe it, unproductive. She did not go to the office everyday. Even with three contracts there was not enough to keep her occupied and every offer of assistance made to Miss Logan, whose workload had increased significantly, was curtly rebuffed. But Eileen, like Richard and his father, ignored the prejudices and eccentricities of this old spinster who, they agreed, was set in her ways and who would never change.

The award of the third contract produced an unexpected consequence. Richard received a mysterious telephone call from one of the directors of Marley & Ellis suggesting that it would be to their mutual advantage if they were to meet on neutral ground. Richard had some initial hesitancy about agreeing to such a meeting, but agreed to meet in Canterbury. They met close to the Cathedral, in an ancient, ramshackle, inn, which had miraculously escaped the bombing. The director had a proposal; they should agree rates and share out the next few conversion contracts. "There is no point us fighting each other," the man said as he downed his second gin and tonic. "We should work together for our mutual benefit. We can save time and effort in tendering and obtain the work at reasonable rates."

"What about the opposition?" Richard asked, feeling uncomfortable, although the idea had its attractions.

"I think they are falling by the wayside, and I don't think that they will risk coming down to our price level."

"I did it," said Richard. "If I can do it, so could they."

"Yes," said the director, staring at him, "I have wondered how you did do it."

"The same way as anyone else. I just kept cutting rates until we hit rock bottom and were in. And that is what I would expect all our opposition to do, sooner or later."

"We had better get in now and make our money, before everyone else catches up with us!"

Richard had reported the meeting to his father. "I have the feeling that it wouldn't be legal," he said. "My inclination is that we should remain independent and work legally."

“Even if everyone else is in collusion?” asked Mr Brown. “How could we compete then?”

“You are not surely suggesting that we should agree and do something that may be illegal?” His father shook his head.

“I was not suggesting that. I would never suggest that we should do anything that would be outside the law. I was just posing the question.”

Apart from the flat conversion contracts, the restoration contract at Newington started to gain momentum and progressed well. Mr Brown found Mr Brodie pedantic and extraordinarily thorough over the paperwork, insisting on seeing the wage sheets and all invoices for materials charged. This resulted in a further increase in the administrative work that fell to Miss Logan to perform, and only increased the friction between her and Eileen. Because it was a contract that Mr Brown, Senior, looked after, she gave that work priority over the work in connection with the conversion contracts, an action which irritated both Eileen and Richard. More than once Richard complained to his father, suggesting that Eileen should take on some of this additional work, but his father, as best he could, papered over the cracks that were emerging, especially those between the two women.

If Richard could find any place where there had not been an improvement, it was here, in the office and right under his nose, and it was with Sandra and her job. There seemed to be some kind of problem there, but what ever it was affecting his sister was intangible and not talked about. She had become very reluctant to mention anything about what she did or what happened at the police station. Mrs Brown ascribed it to the confidential nature of the work she was asked to do. “Apparently some of it is quite unsavoury,” she told Richard.

“I suppose it might also be sub-judice,” he commented. “And she does appear to have regularised her relationship with Gwilym.” His mother agreed. Sandra kept everything to herself. She might have mentioned things to Gwilym as her platonic friendship was maintained, but after the episode on the sands, she felt that she could not take him into her confidence. Whilst Sandra remained silent, Richard thought that everything was all right. She was contributing to her keep and that had been the objective in her going out to work. Yes, everything was all right!

The vision of the spectre that had once haunted him on the landing of his parents' house had not visited him in the new house. Perhaps she was still there, in the dark still of the night, sad and forlorn, calling to her lost lover, but he barely heard her. On occasions a chance remark or an insignificant object, would summon up her memory and Richard would feel uncomfortable for a while. When this happened he did his best not to dwell on it, not to feed the image, but it could be and was difficult.

The latest test came with the impending holding of the Tennis Club Dinner-Dance, one of the major events on the Eastgate social calendar. Richard had missed the one the year before, but he had taken Her to the previous one and even now he felt ecstatic when he recalled the evening. She had been stunning and had, for him and probably for a vast majority of the other males, eclipsed all other women present. It would not be the same this year, taking Eileen. There was pain now, when he thought of the sensation she had caused that night and the fact he had traded all that for the person he would take.

He caught his breath. From behind a number of ledgers and lever arch files, Eileen was staring at him. “A penny for your thoughts,” she said quietly, then looked down at her work again.

“Oh, I was miles away, I'm afraid,” he said clumsily. “I'm not sure what I was thinking about. Nothing important.”

“Richard,” she began.

“Ye-s?” he said hesitantly.

“Oh, nothing.” Perhaps it was his tone that discouraged her, but Eileen abandoned whatever it was she was going to say, and Richard did not pursue it. He wanted to return, not to his arousing recollections of a previous dinner-dance, but to those nice, comfortable, self-congratulatory thoughts he had been wallowing in before he drifted off course. Everything, or nearly everything, was running smoothly and heading in the right direction. That took care of Phase One. There had now to be a Phase Two. Where should they go from there? Even as he

sat there, feeling good, half watching his wife as she transferred figures and added up columns, softly humming some piece of music he did not recognise, a nasty, spiteful, thought wormed its way back into his mind. It owed its genesis to him thinking about that dinner-dance and the comparisons he had been drawing. Was he, it demanded, really happy with his lot? Was he really content to go on like this, a jobbing builder, tied to this morose, dull, unexciting, woman, he with a university education and a good degree? Was this what he wanted to do for the rest of his working life? Was this the kind of life he would want for his son? That is if ever they had a son. That was yet another thought to prise open and let loose his discontent if he allowed it to.

Richard might have been sat there, congratulating himself on his successes, tactics and decisions, and concluding that everything was ameliorating although perhaps not heading in his right personal direction. Not twenty miles away the story was anything but similar. Stephanie sat in her sitting room staring out at the garden, conscious of the distant hammering of the workmen elsewhere in the house. She was close to tears. What had started out with such great promise was threatening to turn into a living nightmare as each day that dawned appeared to bring with it a new threat. Her hands were shaking as she studied the list passed to her by Mr Brodie. She ran down the names, looking for his. It was as well to be forewarned, she assured herself. If he was going to come there, she had to know. She could not bear the thought that she could be unaware of his presence and they might suddenly come face to face. Except she did think that if he was there, she would sense his presence. No, she could not rely on instinct; she had to be forewarned. She could not face meeting him even if she did know he was there. She had to be forewarned so that she could avoid meeting him, or his father. Even now she could not come to terms with the thought that he could come and actually visit her house, be there, close to her, close yet apart, and she could not stop him.

For the first few weeks she adopted the practice of waiting until she thought all the builders had arrived and then sneaking, because that is what it felt like, out of her own home around the back of the stable block so that she could check the cars in the car park. She was, of course, seen and her activity continued to be the main subject discussed in the Newington Arms.

“She goes out daily with the list,” said one of the gardeners. “I know! Happen I've seen her! And she checks every car to make sure there's no un-permitted ones there. Regular as clockwork she is.”

“What happens if she finds one as is not on her list?” asked Ned.

“Blowed if I know,” said the gardener. “Happens she hasn't done as much as yet, at least not while I have been watching her.”

“You shouldn't be watching the Mistress,” said Jack Barnes. “It isn't proper.”

“Of course, you'd be the first to leap to her defence,” snarled Wormley, who was lapping all this up with great relish, content to oil the wheels of speculation when lubrication appeared to be required. “She's got you wrapped around her little finger. Has done since she first came.”

“Rubbish!” cried the Manager. “And you'd better be watching what you are saying, Wormley.” A grunt came from the corner and the conversation drifted in a different direction. Wormley was not concerned. He knew that they would soon be back to it. A couple of words from him was all it would take as virtually all of his ammunition was intact. He would, however, not waste it on insignificant targets. He still had a much more important one in his sights.

Stephanie soon discovered that her strategy was flawed and far from foolproof. In fact the very act of going around to the car park rendered her vulnerable. One sunny morning she had been alarmed in the drive by a car arriving, in her book, late. She had heard it approaching and darted back amongst the laurels just in time. It was clear that the driver had seen her as he turned to look in her direction as he passed although she was sure that he could have caught no more than a glimpse. However she had no doubt as to the driver's identity. It was Mr Brown.

“I nearly ran down a young woman in the drive on my way in,” he grossly

exaggerated when he met Mr Brodie.

“Oh, you shouldn't do that!” exclaimed the Architect. “That was probably Miss Bernstein, our client.” So that was the elusive mistress of the House. Arthur regretted that he had, in truth, caught only the briefest, tantalising, glimpse of her as she darted back into the shrubbery, but he reported the sighting as if she had been a rare piece of game. The incident re-aroused suspicions in Mr Brodie's mind that there had been some fundamental reason why she had suddenly changed her mind about attending the inaugural meeting and shortly after he asked her if she would like to meet Mr Brown when he next called at the House.

“You really ought to, if I may say so,” he said. “After all you are employing him.”

“I would rather not,” she said coldly. It was not his place to enquire further, but he clung to the view that her refusal was personal rather than a matter of prejudice. For Stephanie the whole incident edified her. She had not catered for the possibility that Mr Brown might arrive at almost any hour of the working day and she now realised that there was no guarantee that he would necessarily come in his own car. He could, either he or his son could, come in a car driven by someone else. One day she could check the car park and think that everything was clear and they could be there, walking around her house, innocent, just a disastrous encounter waiting to happen. “This Mr Brown,” she asked, “which is he? Is he the Mr Brown or the son?”

Mr Brodie looked up from his plans. “As far as I know he is the Mr Brown, the father.”

“And the son,” she asked trying to appear calm although her heart was anything but, “does he visit the work?”

“Not as far as I know. I believe that they have some other large contracts and he is looking after them.”

This news was some comfort to Stephanie. Although it appeared to confirm that he was still involved with his father's business, it sounded as if he would not be coming to Newington. Yet she was no better off, she realised when she considered her position. She still had to avoid meeting Mr Brown at all costs as if he knew she was there he would be bound to tell his family. It was ridiculous, she told herself, that she should be laid siege to in her own house! That she should be forced into becoming a voluntary prisoner or place herself under house-arrest. Perhaps she should go out and face him and be prepared to face and deal with the consequences, what ever they might be? No, she was not ready, not yet. She rehearsed the scene, anticipating his reaction. How surprised he would be, that was assuming that he remembered her! Of course he would remember her! How could he have forgotten her? Yet facing his father was one thing. Facing the consequences were another.

Yet he had not returned for her. After the parting she had hoped and hoped that he might change his mind and come back. She had waited for a letter or a telephone call, or the door bell, any form of contact, but none came. If only she had acted differently that evening when she might have had him in the palm of her hand. If he had not arrived late, had he come on time, she would have captivated and captured him, and she would never have let him go. For someone so strong as she, how could she have been so weak and indulgent? No, he had not come hammering on the door of the flat or accosting her in the street. He had not written reproachful but loving letters. He had gone in search of that woman and for certain they were now married. There was a slender hope, the slenderest of hopes, that he might not be. If she thought that there was cause enough to risk meeting Mr Brown, but if he was not married, why had he not returned? No, she had to assume the worst. No news was bad news. He was married and now beyond her reach.

But what of the pain, the dull, sore, hopeless, emptiness, that rotted inside her? Would that ever subside? And what would the effect be on it should they meet? “Oh, it can hardly be worse!” she told herself. This was all because the Browns had been awarded the contract. Had that not happened she would still have thought of him, but not like this, and not be so close to temptation and damnation. Perhaps it was fate. Perhaps it was written in the stars that they should meet again?

So, that was it. She would have to confront his father and, subsequently and consequently, him. She would not throw her arms around him. She would be calm, dignified,

perhaps a little distant and aloof. She would address him as “Mr Brown” and make him understand from the outset that their relationship was to be conducted strictly on a business footing whilst all the time she would be dying inside. Oh no! That was not the way it should be! That was not at all what she wanted! She wanted him back, no doubt of it; with every ounce of passion in her body she wanted him back in her life, in her arms. She wanted to hold his hand and look up into his youthful, innocent, eyes, and captivate him. She wanted him there, at her side, to share her future because what was it without him? They would rebuild Newington, and their lives, together, the two of them.

If that really was so, if that was what she really desired, why should she not meet and face him, and tell him? The awful truth of it seeped back as she relived the last few weeks of their dying relationship. She had to accept that his visits had been growing less and less frequent and that when he did see her he was increasingly less attentive. She had to face the fact that he only came to see her because his other plans were not progressing as well as he hoped and he had suffered a setback. She had lost him long before that dreadful night. The truth was he did not want her. It was over.

What, then, would be the harm in meeting him? That was plain; she did not want to go through all the suffering again. If he was out of sight he was also, to a degree, out of mind. That was how it was, she told herself. If only it were so. Could she then compromise and meet only his father? She could explain her position and ask for him to be the only one of his family to visit Newington. He might agree to that. He might even agree to withhold her identity from his family, but it would never be satisfactory. She had to make a clear cut choice, one way or the other. To meet or not to meet? She decided she would meet and was ready to tell Mr Brodie that she would attend the next progress meeting with the builder.

Then an envelope arrived for her. It looked like a letter. It was a plain envelope, clearly postmarked “Eastgate”, bearing her name and address typed in upper case letters. There was no indication on the outside of who had sent, but Stephanie's immediate assumption was that it came from Brown & Son and was an invoice or something of the kind. When she opened it and read the contents, she froze with horror. It was also typed and unsigned, and said:

“Dear Miss Bernstein

Do not assume for one minute that there is no-one who knows who you really are and what you have been.”

There was no doubt in her mind. He must have sent it. His father had seen her that day when she was careless, and recognised her. He had then told his family when he arrived home. She could almost hear his voice as he informed his wife; “You will never guess who I saw today. You remember that dreadful Stephanie who Richard brought here a couple of times? You remember, the one you have never really forgiven for being her? Well I saw her at Newington! She is the new owner, would you believe! I wonder how she managed that? I can only think of one way!” He had heard from his father and this was his retribution, his vengeance for what she did to him that last night. He had been sweetness and light when he had come to see her afterwards, to say “goodbye” he said. Clearly things had since gone sour!

She curled up on her bed and lay there, moaning. Why, oh why had this all happened? Perhaps there was a God and this was his way of punishing her for all the wicked things he thought she had done. But, if there was a God, where was his compassion and forgiveness? After a while she sat up and perched on the edge of the mattress. There was no question of them meeting now. Nor did she want to meet his father, either. For a brief moment she considered abandoning the whole project, of leaving Newington and its restoration, and going away somewhere, anywhere, simply to escape. Let her father find someone else to take it on; after all this was all of his making. Had he not appointed the Browns as contractors, none of this would have happened. There had to be somewhere she would be safe. Or would it follow her forever, her nemesis?

No, she would brazen it out there, but she would avoid the Browns. She would not

give either of them the satisfaction of seeing her, not after this! There was no necessity for him to do what he had done. He could just have stayed silent. She would not seek any retribution, but she would remain aloof, dignified and detached. Unless they spread what they knew, no-one on the Estate would know and as the restoration contract would not go on for ever, they would eventually stop coming there and their secret would go with them. Then she would be left in peace. And even if she was not, what did she care?

Yet, how could he? How could he bring himself to do this to her? After all the soft and honeyed words he had poured upon her and the proposal of marriage that she, in her vain foolishness, had declined? When she closed her eyes she could see the very spot, the grassy under-cliff, the deep blue of the sky and the green of the sea. Could she really believe that it was all over? His message made it plain that it was!

As the days passed she changed her life style. Increasingly she took to walking alone when the weather permitted, and even sometimes when it did not, over to the Monastery and spending a large part of the day there, sitting, looking or reading. On some fine days she took a light packed lunch and sat in cool comfort amongst the ruins, trying to be at peace with herself. It was on one such day that she detoured to the fairy tale cottage she often glimpsed through the trees and to which Mr Barnes had taken her when she had first arrived there. It looked so picturesque and inviting, its front fence and facade being both covered in yellow climbing roses. Around the back she came upon a small, close cut, lawn and an even smaller patio. The doors were locked, as she had expected, and it crossed her mind to ask Mr Barnes for the keys so that she could look inside.

On this occasion she had to be content with looking through the window. It appeared to be fully equipped and furnished and an idea suddenly came to her. Could she not move here whilst the work at the House was being carried out? That would be far safer than staying on at the House and running the risk of bumping into the person she was so trying to avoid. She did not have to give that as a reason. She could just say that she found the noise and dust in the day disturbing and that the cottage would provide a more than suitable alternative. She did not need the services of Miss Lightfoot and both Jack Barnes and Mr Brodie could come and see her just as easily there as they could see her at the House. It seemed perfect.

"I have decided to move into a cottage on the Estate," she could hear herself saying. "It will be quieter there." But had Mr Barnes said something about her father reserving the cottage for his use? As far as she knew he had not been anywhere near it since she had come to live there. She would be upset if she were to learn that he had! "I will talk to Mr Barnes," she told herself.

"I think you had better raise the matter with your father," Mr Barnes said. What had seemed somewhat vague in the Land Rover that afternoon suddenly became very exact and definite. "He does look upon it as his own special cottage and we do keep it in readiness for him in case he should need it. He could arrive at a moment's notice. He has done that before." She had concluded that her father had probably not known of the significance when he appointed the Browns and the suggestion that he might suddenly arrive and that she might meet him cheered Stephanie briefly. If he came he would be someone she could confide in with some confidence. He knew of her past and she would be able to tell him about the letter. He would be sympathetic and know what to do.

After a couple of days' deliberation she wrote to her father's solicitors asking if it was in order for her to move into the cottage. And she waited. A non-committal reply did come from the lawyers. Her father, they said, was unable to decide for the present whether he needed to retain the cottage exclusively for his use, and did not wish to cause her the inconvenience that would occur if she did move in and he suddenly found he required to use it. It was clearly a "no" dressed up in a lawyer's language. And although the response came as a disappointment to Stephanie as it denied her what could have been a more practical sanctuary than using the Monastery, there was a hint in the reply that her father might be considering a visit to the Estate in the near future. He was one person she certainly would not avoid.

All of Stephanie's actions were noted and discussed ad nauseam in the Newington Arms. Even Jack Barnes, who was ever ready to censor others for their indiscretion or lack of

loyalty, found himself reporting or confirming odd items. He tried very hard to remain faithful to his mistress and defended her actions at every turn, but he felt that he was fighting a losing battle, and his companions were beginning to question his motivation. None was prepared to tell him what they all were prepared to say behind his back; that she, as Wormley had so perceptively noted, wound him around her little finger. And who would not be treated thus by her and be eternally thankful for it? The talk went further, however, when he was absent. It started with her spell cast over the Estate Manager; then he was declared to be "sweet" on her; then they thought that matters were taking a more serious turn and suggested that Jack Barnes might be considering discarding his mantle of bachelor-hood. "Rubbish," hissed Wormley. "Utter stuff and nonsense. He's no match for her and she's no prize for him."

"What about the Estate and the House?" the Welshman asked. "That surely is prize enough?"

"Only if you could be sure that in marrying the woman you could gain the so-called inheritance," wheezed Wormley from his corner by the fire, "but if she is who I think she might be, she is not Bernstein's daughter and there may be nothing to inherit."

"What d'you mean?" asked Ned, one ear cocked for the sound of the Manager coming through the outer door, as he was likely to any minute.

"Only that there may well be legal strings attached to the Estate. She may forfeit it if she marries."

"In which case, I can see her remaining single," said the Welshman.

"That could be the intention," hissed Wormley. They heard the outer door open and slam shut, and the landlord as he greeted the Estate Manager, commenting that he was later than normal. They did not hear the response.

During the evening, Stephanie's perambulations of the House and the car park were chronicled as well as her habit of disappearing for entire days. She had been seen heading off down the valley, packed lunch under one arm and a book under the other. "She just sits in the ruins," said the Welshman. "I have seen her up there a number of times, all alone, sometimes reading, other times she just seems to be thinking. Always she is on her own."

"She is not meeting anyone?" asked Wormley from the shadows.

"Not a soul as far as I can see. I've never seen another person up there when she had been there, except for Jack here." There was a chorus of "oh ho" at which he coloured slightly, and he had to agree that her behaviour was not the kind that they would have ever expected or seen from Lady Newington or her daughters.

"You wouldn't expect a sane person to do what she is doing, certainly not one who did not have the stain of guilt on her," said Wormley.

"Guilt?" cried Jack Barnes, confirming by his reaction all that had been speculated about him. "What has she to be guilty about?"

"That would be telling," chuckled Wormley, darkly.

"I think she is just eccentric," said the Welshman.

"Ah, that's it," agreed Ned. "She's eccentric."

"She's nothing of the kind," said Jack Barnes. "I reckon that all she is trying to do is get away from the noise and disturbance caused by the building works. Why, she is thinking of moving into Rose Cottage temporarily whilst the work is carried out."

"Is it really that noisy there?" asked the Welshman.

"It has been when the carpenters have been working on the roof. I believe that is why she has spent so much time out of the House."

"Including sneaking around the car park checking on the numbers?" sneered Wormley.

"She doesn't do that any more," retorted Jack Barnes, defensively.

"So what does she do instead?" continued the voice from the shadows. "She vacates the house and gets just about as far away as she can from it. And now she wants to move out all together. It is pure guilt, I tell you; nothing but guilt. You'll see!" No matter what they said to him, Wormley not say any more. He sat back, warm and smug, pleased with his recently acquired knowledge and his subsequent actions. He was bloated with the power he could now wield whilst remaining unseen. He pulled a string and she moved. It was not a sudden jerk or

flinch. It was something in her more akin to sheer panic.

For the next few days no-one in the private, select, bar of the Newington Arms gave any credence to Wormley's utterances, until, that is, Stephanie confounded them all and gave him fresh ammunition. "She has been to see the priest," he announced. "There! What did I tell you?"

"Dozens of people go to see priests for thousands of reasons," said Jack Barnes, not knowing why Miss Bernstein would have done this. "I don't think she is at all religious."

"Precisely!" said Wormley, feeling he had called "check", if not "mate".

The assumptions made by Jack Barnes were broadly true. Stephanie's visit to the priest was prompted not by a desire to seek his views or counsel on religious matters, but was in response to a request from him to see her. He had stopped Miss Lightfoot the previous Sunday and asked her if he could visit Miss Bernstein on what he described as an important matter. The housekeeper was doubtful, recalling her mistress's outright refusal to see him earlier, but she promised the priest that she would speak to Miss Bernstein. "Surely she would not refuse to see me at all?" he asked. "It is not a religious matter. Do tell her that."

"She can be a little odd," said Miss Lightfoot, thinking of the large number of lunches she had packed. "But I promise that I will explain that to her."

Stephanie was more receptive than Miss Lightfoot had expected. "I don't think this is a suitable place to receive him," she told the housekeeper. "Perhaps it would be better if I visited him? Could you arrange it?" The answer perplexed Miss Lightfoot every bit as much as it did the occupants of the private bar, but to Stephanie it presented an alternative opportunity to get out of the House. There was more, as well; something that extended towards curiosity and a fundamental shift in her outlook and philosophy. The days spent in her retreat had allowed her to read, and to think of matters in a new way. She had no intention of following a prescribed religion or going to church to sing the dreadful, boring, hymns she had been forced to mouth at school, but she had gradually changed, almost imperceptibly and without realising it herself, from being an atheist to an agnostic. Then, there was another idea at the back of her mind. If the circumstances were right, this local priest, who had heard and kept confidential, the confessions of Lady Newington might be someone in whom she could confide.

Father Thomas was totally unprepared for the young woman who presented herself on his doorstep. He had offered up a prayer in thanks-giving when Miss Lightfoot had told him of Stephanie's decision, written the appointment in his diary, then given it very little further thought. He had been told that Miss Bernstein was handsome, but her beauty almost overwhelmed him. He found that he could barely take his eyes from her. He explored every feature, then gave himself the sternest of reprimands. At his age and in his position he should not be having thoughts like that, but he could see something familiar in the expression, something about the eyes, something he had almost forgotten. He ushered this precious gem of a woman into the room he called his study, where he received parishioners, wrote his sermons, and conducted small, poorly attended, weekly prayer groups. Stephanie noticed the same clinging smell of damp and decay she had encountered at Newington and how old and decrepit was the furniture. The once proud green leather inlay of his desk was faded and scratched, and the seats of the two chairs sagged under the weight of the years' supplicants. The books in the glass-less bookcases were dusty, grubby, some with torn or missing backs.

"No, don't sit there," he said hastily as Stephanie moved to take one of the wooden chairs that stood by the window. "That one's not safe. Would you like to sit here?" She sat where he indicated and wondered why he had asked to see her. Surely he was not about try and convert her? Miss Lightfoot had probably told him she had been baptised a Catholic. "I would have approached you earlier, but your housekeeper, Miss Lightfoot, who is a long-standing member of my congregation, thought you might not be all that pleased to see me and advised against me calling again. Please, I am not offended. Priests soon get used to not being welcomed in some quarters. If only I had a hot meal for all the times I have called and been told that the person I wanted to see was out! However, I do have to talk to you on a matter of some delicacy." Stephanie started to feel a little uncomfortable, wondering if she was

the delicate subject.

"I am sorry," she said. "I did not mean to give the impression that I was not prepared to see you. If I recall rightly, I said that I would not be going to Church on Sundays and a little more that I do not now recall clearly. I think that this has been innocently misinterpreted."

"Lady Newington used to come to Mass every day when she was able to, but I am not expecting that of you, Miss Bernstein."

"I would hope not," said Stephanie sharply. "What are you expecting of me?"

"To begin with I have to go back to the days of my predecessor, Father William, if you will bear with me. The parish he covered was originally fairly large but because she wanted to have a priest more or less on call, Lady Newington arranged for him to concentrate on the services on the Estate and Alkham whilst I dealt with other parish matters. At her suggestion the Bishop split the parish into the rural area based mainly upon the Chapel of Our Lady at Newington, and he remained there, whilst I took on the more populated areas in Dover. When he passed on, I took on his duties and another priest took on mine. It must have been just before the War, if my recollection is correct. Because the rural practice was small, Lady Newington agreed to pay a stipend to Father William to compensate him for the loss of income when the area was split. The arrangement remained in force when I moved here, right up until a couple of months after Lady Newington's death. Then it ceased and I was informed by the solicitors that the agreement to pay expired when she died. I am afraid that although I do live very modestly, I am not able to maintain even subsistence levels on the income from the collection. I have to therefore ask you, and I cannot be other than embarrassed to have to do so, whether you would be prepared to continue the stipend and enter into a new agreement."

Stephanie had listened very carefully. "You are saying that Lady Newington maintained you and her chapel?"

"She was, of course, a devout church-goer," he said.

"And I am not. What will happen if I do not reinstate this agreement?"

"I will be impoverished and, in time, I will have to seek the Bishop's advice and assistance. There are charities to help poor parish priests, but they are not over endowed with wealth. It was never considered nor intended that the rural half of the parish would be self-supporting. I suppose it should have been seen at the time when Father William agreed to the separation. But thank you for coming to see me, all the same." Stephanie remained seated. It sounded like a dismissal, but she felt it was for her to decide when to leave and not him. In addition, apart from the fact that she had not made up her mind about his request there was another matter on her mind that she thought she would raise with him now she had the opportunity. The trouble was she was unsure how to begin.

"There is another matter that I would like your advice upon," she said slowly.

"Indeed?" he said, his spirits rising. Perhaps if they were going to talk generally he could steer the subject back to his pecuniary circumstances. "Could I offer you tea? I think my resources could run to that. I will ask Mrs Hastings to make us some. She comes in to look after me, on a purely voluntary basis, you understand." Stephanie nodded and wondered whether to start. The trouble was she was unsure of herself and what she wanted to say. Yet she felt she needed to talk to someone, someone in confidence. She wished that he would say something, anything that would allow her to steer the conversation around to her problem.

"I haven't been to see the chapel as yet," she confessed.

"Have you not?" he said from the door. "Would you allow me to ask if you follow any particular religious persuasion?"

"No," she said, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "My mother had me baptised a Catholic but I have no leaning towards any of them. Indeed, I have no inclination towards religion at all."

"That's unfortunate," he said softly. "Your mother was a Catholic." Stephanie could not make out whether it was a question or a statement, but she nodded her assent. "Yes," he continued, "I knew your father. I instructed him in the Faith before his marriage to Lady

Christina. You are aware of his background, aren't you?" It was clearly a guarded, tentative, question.

"I am afraid that my ancestry is shrouded in some mystery," she said, unable to hide the tone of bitterness that crept into her voice. "I do know, and have known for several years, that the man who I was brought up to believe was my father was not my real father at all. My mother would never tell me who my real father was. I am afraid that became a source of friction between us. It wasn't until quite recently, until all this happened, that I knew anything of him and even now I know very little."

"That is unfortunate," he said again. "I believe everyone should know where they have originated from, but I can tell you very little. Mr Bernstein came here as a young man and lived on the Estate whilst he undertook some work associated with a drainage scheme. As far as I understand he was betrothed to Lady Christina before ever he came down and, as she was a Catholic and he was not, he underwent instruction. Instruction is a course that non-Catholics must follow before the Church will give her consent to a mixed marriage. Father William should have seen him, but he was not well at the time, so I took him. That was, goodness, some twenty five years ago. I am not sure that I have seen him since."

"Did he become a Catholic?"

"Not as far as I know. Both he and his wife tended to not come down to Newington very often. He had his work and she was a novelist and it was said that she liked to work in London."

"Were there any children?" she asked daringly.

"Sadly, no. It is tragic to see a Catholic marriage, even a mixed marriage, that is childless, but they never had children."

"And my mother? Did you know her? I believe she used to go to Church regularly at one time." His heart which, full of love for God and his fellow beings, had lain dormant, never strained or taxed through all those years, gave a sudden uncomfortable jolt.

"She was a local girl," he said, looking away. When he looked back she was there, looking at him so intently, but so much at peace, with trust and anticipation. He now remembered it, the look, the eyes, the girl. There was no doubt that she was the daughter. It was all there, in the eyes, and it seemed as if it was only yesterday and the guilt and anguish had never left him. "I think I might have known her," he said weakly. "It was a long time ago."

"Known her?" said Stephanie anxiously. "When?" He turned away and studied the top of his small desk. There was an urge to confess that he had known her as a lovely, pure, young woman for whom he would have willingly renounced the priesthood and sacrificed all. He could have sat there and rhapsodised over her beauty, gaiety, charm, posture, as the memories that he had long suppressed, and dared not look at, flooded back threatening to swamp his self control.

"I cannot be absolutely certain but I think she used to come to my congregation at St Anne's. That would have been over twenty five years ago and that's a long time for anyone to remember. She was a mere girl then, probably younger than you are, if I may presume to say such a thing."

Stephanie was confused. She had not come to see Father Thomas prepared to hear anything about her mother and father. In addition she was aware that the conversation was drifting even further from the subject she wanted to raise with him but, before she could ask anything further, a bent, grey-haired, woman came in with a stained and battered wooden tray bearing a china teapot, two cups and half a bottle of milk. "You will have to excuse the saucer crisis," said Father Thomas, pouring. "It is what comes of putting milk out for the hedgehogs. Now, I hear that the work on the House has started." The change was so abrupt that she was startled for a moment.

"Yes," she said, wondering whether to try and take him back to discussing her parents, "we have a builder from Eastgate who is working on the roof. That has to be made absolutely watertight before any of the work in the rooms can commence, but it is so noisy and dusty! I am trying to find somewhere else to live whilst it is going on." Father Thomas, who had barely two pennies to rub together, concluded that he could not ask how much it

might all cost.

“How long will it take?” he did ask.

“Oh, possible as long as two years,” she sighed. “It is partly about the builder that I came to see you.”

“I am afraid that I know nothing about builders, Miss Bernstein,” he said, apologetically. Stephanie shook her head and replaced her cup on the tray.

“No, no, it is not a building problem. It is a personal problem. I need someone to talk to, someone I can confide in. The truth of it is that I am being harassed. I think I could be being blackmailed although no demands have been made as yet.” Father Thomas sat forward in his chair. He had not expected anything like this and it crossed his mind to wonder what this beautiful creature could have done to provoke blackmail.

“If it is blackmail, that is a matter for the police, not me, Miss Bernstein.”

“No,” she said, breathing in, “it hasn't got that far yet, and I wouldn't want to involve the police except as a very last resort. May I tell you about it?”

“You may tell me as much or as little as you wish. I will simply listen and I am bound by my vows of confidence.” He could safely say that; it was one vow he had never broken.

“Even though I am not a Catholic?”

“Even though you are not a practising Catholic. It makes no difference. You may speak freely and in confidence.”

“There isn't very much to tell,” she said slowly. “Before I came to live here I lived a very different kind of life. Some would undoubtedly call it sinful, or immoral, even wicked. I am not going to attempt to defend what I did. It was the way things were.”

“I understand,” he said gently. “Go on.”

“When I came here I hoped to leave it all behind and make a fresh start. It gave me the opportunity to break out, to get clear of the demands that were made upon me.”

“You planned to start afresh?”

“Yes; start afresh, anew. I was very careful to end all my previous contacts and I told hardly anyone where I was moving to. But also before I came here I fell in love with a young man.”

“He was your lover?”

“No - not in the accepted sense of the word. He was different and I loved him for it. I think he loved me. It is so difficult to know with men. He went so far as proposing marriage to me, but I turned him down. Then things happened and we broke up. Now I think that he has found me and is sending me anonymous notes.”

“Notes?”

“Well, only one so far,” she confessed.

“What did it say, may I ask?”

“I have it here,” she said opening her handbag. Father Thomas read the few words, trying to divine some hidden meaning from them. He knew how love could be stood on its head and become vice and sinful. That was the Devil's work.

“This young man? He works for the builder.”

“Yes,” she said softly. To say more might mean confiding more in this priest than she was prepared to.

“And he has come here and seen you?”

“I assume so.”

“And have you spoken to him?”

“No. I haven't seen him since the day we finally parted. I do not want to see him. It would be too painful, far too painful.”

“Sometimes life requires us to do things which are painful at the time in order to avoid even more pain in the future. We each may have a cross to bear. Are you absolutely certain this has been sent by him?”

“As far as I know he is the only one here who is aware of the relationship, and it came in an envelope postmarked Eastgate which is where he lives.” Father Thomas looked thoughtful and placed the letter on the desk.

“I am not sure how to advise you,” he said slowly. “Would you like me to see this

young man? Do you think that might help?"

"Oh, no!" said Stephanie, firmly. The priest paused, feeling that he had exhausted all the other profane options. She would not meet the man herself, nor allow him to meet him. She would not involve the police. What was left, other than prayer?

"You are sure that this young man has seen you here?" he asked. Stephanie blushed, thinking of the morning on which she had been surprised by Mr Brown's car. "If he hasn't, someone else has."

"So, more than just he may know? There is another person? How do you know that it wasn't sent by this other person?"

"I don't," she said, beginning to feel foolish, "but I doubt that he would do something like this. He is not that sort of person and he would have no motive."

"But your young man is that sort of person?"

"No," she said lowly.

"Yet you think he would have a motive, but people do not always need a motive to do things," he said sadly. "I am afraid that is the way of the World. Now, as for the present I do not think there is much you can do. If it is this young man he will probably lose interest if you ignore him and let it blow over. If it someone else - well, I think I would wait and see what happens next, if anything happens at all. Try not to worry about it. I will pray for you." Stephanie smiled weakly. She had not really expected any more from him though the concept of someone offering to pray for her was novel. She could also see that he had not yet finished with her; that there was something more in his mind.

"I must ask," he said solemnly, "do you believe in God?" It was a question she should have anticipated, being one that flowed naturally from a priest's lips. It was also one that some months earlier she would have answered without hesitation and with some emphasis. But now that, during her retreats at the ruins, she had stumbled upon, reached out, and groped in the vast void that lay beyond her mind, she was more circumspect.

"I think that I might do," she said hesitantly. "When I look around me, at the trees and plants, and think of the marvel of life itself, I think that there must be a God."

"And do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, who was crucified and who rose again from the dead on the Third Day and who now sits at God's right hand?"

She felt a tinge of hostility course through her veins. This was too much for her, but Father Thomas had no way of gauging the effort and degree of inertia that had to be surmounted in order for her to admit belief in God. Stephanie's conversion, if ever it was to be achieved, would take longer than travelling just the road to Damascus. "I am sorry," she said. "I believe he was a historic figure. I mean, I believe that he actually lived, but - ."

"That is all right," said the priest, soothingly. "That is fine. You are poised on the threshold of a potentially long journey but I like to think that those who find the faith the hardest to accept end up the strongest. Do you pray?" Stephanie shook her head. She had stood there at school, repeating words that were devoid of meaning. It was a daily ritual that had to be performed. Neither she nor any of her school friends had gained any benefit from it.

"We did at school," she said, "and I hated it. It seemed to be a total waste of time."

"Ah, yes, at school! Schools do have a great deal to answer for as far as the finer things in life are concerned, such as art, music, literature, and religion. They can totally ruin children's appreciation and leave them absolutely prejudiced with conceptions that many young people are never able to cast off. You should forget all you were told at school and start to think anew. You may find prayer of benefit simply in order to put your mind at rest, about these and any other problems. May I give you this? It is a simple prayer book with contributions taken from many of the great religion thinkers. Would you read them, one at a time, before going to bed, slowly digesting the meaning? Go on! It won't burn you, no matter how wicked you think you may have been. You may find a form of words that you particular like. Most Christians have favourite prayers. Mine was written centuries ago by a man now referred to as the Venerable Bede and I find that it is just as applicable today as it was the day he wrote it."

Stephanie obediently took the small booklet and placed it in her handbag. "Thank you," she murmured.

“Would you join me in a short prayer now?”

“Would I have to kneel?”

“Goodness, no. Just sit there and rest your hands together in your lap - there!” And before she could do or say anything, he started, in a low voice, supplicating her by name. She felt embarrassed and awkward and there was something almost comical as she seemed to be able to leave the restriction of her body and see the two of them there, in the small, untidy, damp, room, saucer-less cups on tray, with a near-to-empty bottle of milk, an elderly priest praying for a young, confused, and sinful woman.

“You have been to see Father Thomas?” asked Miss Lightfoot as soon as she returned to the House. There was a note of surprise, possibly even disapproval, in her voice. “Did he raise the matter of money?”

“He did,” she replied, determined not to tell her housekeeper more, least of all how the visit had ended up, although Miss Lightfoot would later see the prayer book and nod her understanding, “but we did not resolve the matter.”

“Oh dear,” said the housekeeper. “That is unfortunate. Lady Newington virtually supported him because there is so little in the way of income from the parishioners. He has received nothing since her death. Some even thought there might be some provision for him in her will, but apparently there was nothing. I think the concern on the Estate and in the village is that the Bishop may simply move him and leave the chapel without a priest.”

“I had not realised just how grave things really are!” exclaimed Stephanie. “Perhaps I was not listening to him carefully enough. I will send him a cheque right away then talk to Mr Robart to make some permanent arrangement.”

Thus it was that some of Father Thomas's prayer was answered, almost by return.