

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Much as she might have liked it to, Stephanie's visit to Father Thomas did not pass unnoticed or un-commented upon by the regular gathering at the Newington Arms. This time Jack Barnes was not informed regarding his Mistress's activities and was unable to leap to her defence. He might have expected to have heard from Miss Lightfoot, but the good lady kept the knowledge of the visit and the reason for it to herself.

"She dunnot go to Church like normal Christian folk," said Ned.

"I am not sure that you are right in describing Catholics as normal Christian folk," complained the Welshman. "There's many who wouldn't want to be in the same room as a papist."

"Now, now," said Jack Barnes. "We don't want any of that sort of talk in here. For a start we don't know that she is a Catholic and maybe she doesn't go to Church, but I am sure that she had a good reason for going to see the priest."

"What reason could anyone have for going to see a priest if she is not a churchgoer?" said the grave digger from his corner. "Other than she has something she is afraid of?"

"I can't see how you can possibly deduce such a thing," said Jack Barnes. "It doesn't follow in the least."

"Ha!" said Wormley. "Why do people go to see Catholic priests? I'll tell you. To arrange baptisms, weddings and funerals, and I think we can all assume that it's none of these. And if it isn't any of these things, it is the only one left - to confess. And you only go to confess if you have got something to confess about! And if you aren't someone who normally goes to Church, which our fine young lady isn't, and you find that you have a need to go and confess, it has to be about something pretty earth shattering!"

"Rubbish!" said Jack Barnes, but the others were not listening.

"Do you know something about her, then, Wormley?" said the Welshman.

"Is there some dark secret?" said Ned, full of anticipation.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" said Wormley. The truth was that he was itching to tell them what he had found out and reveal just how wrong they were about this goddess of theirs. She was no goddess, he would tell them. She was a slut, someone who, in the past, was more likely to have been tied to a stake rather than raised on a pedestal. Yet, there was power in this knowledge, power that could be used to effect, to punish her, to make her respond at his whim. She had already been driven to see the priest. Mrs Hastings had said that she had been able to glimpse a piece of paper in the priest's hands although she could not hear clearly what was said behind the closed door. Wormley had little doubt what that paper was. It was an example of the way in which his power could be wielded, and the knowledge that drove it had to be retained until the appropriate time came for it to be revealed.

Eileen had been sitting at her desk, adding up columns of figures, when she heard the man's voice in the outer office. At first she had no intention of listening, but the door was slightly ajar and she was curious as she did not recognise who it was. The voice was thin and shrill, and set her nerves slightly on edge, though not to the extent that Miss Logan was capable of doing. Eileen had been trying to reconcile the values of work set out in the forms prepared by Gwilym with the amounts in the Architect's Certificates, expecting fully to find some discrepancy that might explain why they were apparently continuing, on Gwilym's figures at least, to make a profit on the flat conversion contracts. Yet with the exception of his latest sheet, which could not yet be reconciled, everything appeared to tally reasonably well. "Richard will be delighted," she thought as she turned her attention back to the allocation of their costs, searching desperately for some error or some flaw in the logic of Richard's methodology. She found nothing amiss, yet she felt slightly concerned. For no reason at all, certainly no reason she could find, she felt uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because things were going well and it was the natural order of things, in her life at least, that they should not.

"Where did you say you were from?" she heard Miss Logan rasp.

"Building Today magazine," the man said. "We are running a series of articles on the

restoration of stately homes and country mansions and we understand that Brown & Son have a substantial contract at Newington, near Dover? We would like to interview Mr Brown in order to obtain the facts and details of the work, as well as going on to seek permission to photograph the house.”

“You are writing an article? And you want to include one of our contracts?” Eileen judged, by the tone of voice, that Miss Logan was unusually animated and attracted by the idea. “I am afraid that neither of the Mr Browns are in at present. Perhaps I could assist you. I am the Company Secretary.”

Wormley was thorough in all things. He had spent an entire afternoon in the Reference Section of Dover Public Library reading building magazines, making notes, and preparing a list of questions. He had rehearsed these as thoroughly as he would have done had he been about to appear on the stage at the theatre in Canterbury before a live, paying, audience. He had rehearsed until he had reached the point where, without notes to refer to, he thought he could just about pass himself off as a journalist. That was all they had to do, after all; ask a few questions. And Miss Logan might not be paying for the performance, but she was alive and was about to benefit from all this minute preparation.

That was what he did. He asked her about the size of the contract, the nature and extent of the work, the number of men they were employing down there, whether they were employing any subcontractors, whether they had done this kind of work before, how they heard of the contract and how they were selected to do the work. Eileen thought that it all sounded very routine and at some point she lost interest and ceased to listen. Wormley was treated to more information than he would have expected: that the Browns had worked on the House before the War, as Miss Logan had heard Mr Brown say something like this. And that Mr Brown was surprised when they were awarded the contract, with more than a hint that he did not expect it and could not understand the basis on which the award was made. Eileen had immersed herself in the myriad sheets of the cost analysis when she heard, or thought she heard, something that made her heart stop. She listened intently but she could not catch Miss Logan's answer which was whispered in hushed, confidential, tones. Then the man was gone, leaving her suspended in an air of alarm and doubt. Had she heard correctly? Had he, a journalist covering a story about the restoration of stately homes and country mansions as he had said, really mentioned that woman's name? What had been the question and what had Miss Logan answered?

She could not go outside and simply ask the woman who erroneously described herself as Company Secretary what had been said. That would have put her at a disadvantage. Heart thumping, she opened the door fully and, as casually and naturally as she could, asked Miss Logan who it had been.

“A journalist!” said Miss Logan with a flourish of smugness and triumph. “They are doing an article on the restoration of stately homes and country mansions and want to cover our contract at Dover. I have made an appointment for him to come back and see Mr Brown, Senior, on Thursday.”

“What did he say? What did he ask?” she said.

“Just routine questions,” Miss Logan said defensively. “I gave him some facts.”

“Did he say whether he had Miss Bernstein's permission?” Miss Logan scowled and her sharp eyes seemed to pierce Eileen, but she did not discharge the venom.

“He didn't say,” she said sharply, “and I did not ask. That is for him to obtain.”

Eileen went back to the work she had been doing before although with her mind now on other matters, she did very little for the remainder of the afternoon. Perhaps she had misheard? After all, why would a journalist go there and suddenly drop that name? What possible connection could there be? As the afternoon wore on her doubts and fears multiplied until she took them home with her and waited for her husband. A remote, almost impossible, certainly unbelievable, picture was beginning to take shape in her mind.

“Have you been down to the job at Dover?” was the first thing she said as he came in the door. Richard immediately recognised the strained tone of censure and hostility in her voice, although he could not understand it. His response was to assume that her motive for

posing the question was more important than his answer.

“Why do you ask?” he said. “Has something happened?” Eileen noted what she took to be evasion. Richard clearly was not prepared to give a straight answer. Perhaps the idea that had grown in her mind was not so preposterous after all. He would soon hear an account of what had happened at the office and if she pressed him now he would only become suspicious and guarded and she might then never learn the truth.

“Oh, no particular reason,” she said, trying to relax but still sounding very strained. “Only a journalist came to the office this afternoon. I didn't talk to him, but Miss Logan did. He was from a building magazine who are doing articles on the restoration of stately homes and country mansions and they want to include our contract at Dover in it. He is coming back to see your father later this week.” She watched Richard closely as she spoke to see if there was any unusual reaction, but she could detect none.

“That's good news,” he said with enthusiasm. “The publicity will be just what we need - spread the name of the company.”

“I suppose so,” Eileen said softly and went back to preparing the dinner. From that day on, although she dismissed the outlandish possibility that Miss Bernstein might be other than she was said to be, she worried and watched her husband's movements and actions with great care, searching for the slightest sign that might lend weight to her growing fear. And although Arthur Brown was at the office on the appointed day and waited all morning, the journalist did not keep the appointment, and the projected article was neither written nor ever published.

After writing out the cheque for Father Thomas and giving it to Miss Lightfoot to arrange its delivery, Stephanie retired to her bedroom and sat on the end of the bed contemplating what had passed between her and the priest. There had been so much more than she had bargained for that she could not decide what to think about first. Here was someone who admitted to knowing both her mother and her father, and twenty-five years ago! That was about the time she was born. And there were these local connections, not only with the priest but with Miss Lightfoot, too. However, the housekeeper's memory had proved to be less reliable than that of Father Thomas. So what did she now know? That her mother had lived in Dover when she was young. That her father had been here and that he had married one of the young ladies in the photograph Mr Brodie had showed her. And that was about it! In some ways it seemed almost like an Agatha Christie novel.

At least she had confided in someone about the document that had been sent from Eastgate although she might be no further forward in solving the problem of what to do about it. Could she now face Mr Brown in the flesh? He had been kind to her when she had visited their house. She was sure that he would be both pleased and surprised to find her there. She pictured the scene when she confronted him, but what would follow? Her vision of the consequences remained the same, full of a large degree of risk and uncertainty. Yet if she was correct about the note, he must have seen her and already knew about her. He must have told his son for him to be in a position to send it to her. What, then, was wrong in bringing it all out in the open? But, if he knew, why had he not made an effort to see her? Surely he could not have concluded that she would not see him? There was always the possibility that she was wrong and that someone else had stumbled across her secret, if she could call it that. If that was so, she would be revealing her presence for nothing. It would serve no purpose at all except to expose her to the risk that he would tell his son.

She flung herself back on the bed in frustration and despair. Very soon her tears formed a growing damp patch on the pillow, something that Miss Lightfoot was bound to discover and wonder about. That was the least of her problems! It did not appear to matter which way she turned, she was bound to lose. If she did nothing the problem remained. If she stood in the drive one morning and confronted Mr Brown, his son might still not come and she would be even more heartbroken that she was now. She could not bear the thought that he might not want to see her anymore than she could the thought that he had sent the note. And even if he did come to Newington, she did not want to see him.

Of course she wanted to see him! More than anything else she wanted to see him!

That was the root of it. She desperately wanted him, but the achievement of the desire was suspended by so slender a thread that the slightest tremor could sever it and dash all her hopes. And to think that she had left her flat and moved here to escape all this!

She sat up and fumbled in her handbag for a handkerchief and her hand mirror. She could have gone to the dressing table. She would do that later. She found the small book of prayers Father Thomas had pressed upon her. How foolish she had been! Sitting there, pretending she had been praying when her mind had been on so many other things, least of all this God of his. Without thinking she flicked through the pages, seeing the print but not the text. There were no pictures, she told herself, and laid it on the bedside table. It could be looked at later.

What if she were to offer up a prayer? What should she pray for? There was no doubt. She would pray that she was wrong and that he was not the one who had sent her the note. She would pray that he was happy and that he still loved her. All her prayers would be for him.

She attended to her face, dabbing her eyes and wiping the mascara where it had run. "Fancy going to see a priest wearing make-up," she said aloud. "What on earth could he have thought of you?" The damp patch on the pillow was beginning to dry, but it would leave a stain, so she turned it over. And as for her problems, she did not have to decide anything. She could leave everything exactly the way it was, and wait.

Sandra had expected that Ken would seek her out and ask her to the Tennis Club Dinner Dance and was fully prepared for him when he did. There had been a brief respite from the unwanted attentions of Detective Sergeant Oxer so she was a little more receptive to his approach than she might otherwise have been. Even so he was to be disappointed. She was going to the Dance with her family and Gwilym would be her escort.

"What? That Welshman? Why do you keep seeing him?" said the luckless Ken.

"Because I like him," she answered pertly. "Anyway, it is all settled."

"You would think that he would have got the message by now," said Alice, after the Detective Constable had left. "Goodness, you have told him often enough."

"They're all a bit thick," said Debbie, laughing. "They wouldn't be policemen if they weren't, eh, Sandra?" Sandra was not listening because what she said was only half true. She knew that if she asked Gwilym he would say that he would come, providing he was not going home that weekend. Then there was the danger that he might move his wife and family down before the dance, so she had better make her request soon. What would her family say of it? What could they say? What harm could there be in him accompanying her to a dinner-dance along with her parents, her brother and his wife? But Gwilym was a little more cautious when she asked him. He sought Eileen's advice and, acting upon it, wrote to his wife, explaining the situation and the nature of the invitation. He did not tell Megan that the invitation had come directly from Richard's sister in the first place, but then he did not have to. She was only too aware of the mischief husbands could get up to when they were at home. How much more might there be whilst they were away?

So she wrote to Eileen, in confidence, woman to woman, friend to friend. Megan said that she did not want Eileen to spy on her husband but she would like to know the facts. In particular she wished to know what Richard's sister was really like. Was she pretty? Was she flighty? What was her husband really up to? Eileen, for her part, did not relish the idea of having to act as an informer on behalf of her sister-in-law and selected her words with great care, agonising over each one when she replied. She could not get away, however, from the thought that many things might have been different had she known more about what Owen was up to. And now she would be the last to object if someone took it into their head to watch her husband and report to her his every move and everyone he met. She told Megan that the relationship was platonic and brotherly, and that Sandra was pretty but was also staid and certainly not flighty. She omitted any reference to Gwilym's faux pas on the sands as she was not sure whether he would have confessed such a thing to his wife and it appeared to be in the past, anyway. How strange it was that men would confide in a woman other than the one they were married to, as Gwilym had in her! Anyway, Megan had, she thought, no cause

to worry as Sandra was unattached, needed an escort, a kind of chevalier, and the whole family would be there. Who was better suited than Gwilym?

Eileen's words were clearly not selected carefully enough as Megan's response was to write to her husband and suggest that she could travel down and stay that weekend. They could go to the Dance together. Gwilym was in a panic when he read the letter, concerned at what Sandra would say, convinced that Megan was coming down only because she did not trust him. When he thought about it calmly he concluded that the Browns probably would not object to there being seven rather than six at the table, and he knew that Eileen and Megan got on reasonably well together. Someone amongst the women would always be in need of a partner, but that was a small price to pay. The Dance was only days away when he wrote back in strong positive terms. He told her he was sure that they would be able to get another ticket and that they could have a great time together. Could her mother, he wondered, look after the children, just for that one weekend?

This letter was sufficient to do the trick, as he termed it when he related his part in the saga to Eileen. It had put Megan's mind at rest and she had written back by return that her mother could not look after the children at such short notice and there would be too many complications were she to bring them down with her, leave alone the cost. Gwilym was given permission to accompany Richard's sister to the function providing he behaved himself. The letter ended with the usual row of kisses which were shown to Eileen as a demonstration of how normal and regular things were. Eileen kept quiet about the correspondence that had passed between her and his wife, and Gwilym went away, happy.

Eileen and Sandra travelled to Canterbury together to purchase new gowns for the Dance. Sandra chose a white dress with a full length skirt, trimmed with pink, as she thought blue would be too cold, a view that Eileen agreed with. Eileen, however, was toying with the idea of buying something desperate in black as that seemed to suit her prevailing mood, but she settled eventually for a low cut crimson dress with a short skirt. "You do have nice legs," commented Sandra. "You might as well show them off. Not like mine which are fit only to be covered!" Eileen half smiled at the comment and praised her sister-in-law's appearance at the fitting. Sandra was full of praise for her, talking enthusiastically about what the reaction of the men would be when they saw them, and planning for them to go together to the hairdresser. It was inevitable that this close companionship which had suddenly developed, out of necessity rather than choice, would result in the subject of Gwilym being discussed. Sandra was cautious, aware that Eileen liked and thought highly of him, but she could not resist the temptation to mention, first, some of the incidents at the office, then allow this to spread to what had happened on the sands.

"I do not think he will try anything like that again," said Eileen, trying to decide whether Sandra was being sincere about her reaction to his pass.

"I dearly hope not," said Sandra. "It does so spoil things when men come on to you like that. It as if they have only one thing on their minds all the time. I don't know what they think we are!"

"Easy game," said Eileen, resentfully, "and fools most of the time."

"And they can be so obnoxious! There's this one at the station."

"Ken?"

"No, not Ken. His boss. He is absolutely dreadful. When ever he is within arm's length he's touching me. It's horrid."

"That is one of the problems of being single," said Eileen, although she did wonder if there were greater dis-benefits in being married. "Not that it seems to make any difference as far as the men are concerned."

"Oh I don't think this one would worry much whether you are married or single. I don't think it would make the slightest difference. I think he sees us as all the same. I reckon," she added, lowering her voice, "that he is a sex maniac." The last two words were uttered, not without difficulty, in an awed whisper.

"There must be something you can do about him?"

"I don't think there is. The girls at the office reckon that he will lose interest in time, and I am safe when they are around, but I wouldn't want to be alone with him. You know, I

am sure that he tried to follow me home one night, the first time that Gwilym took me to the pictures!”

Eileen stared at her. “Followed you home?” she said with horror.”

“Certainly part of the way. I hid in a doorway and I saw him. I was never so scared in the whole of my life!”

“Are you sure that he was not just making sure that you got home safe?” asked Eileen, sceptically.

“No! I saw his face! I do not think for one moment that he was there to protect me.”

Eileen shook her head, not knowing whether to believe Sandra's melodramatic version of events, although she knew that what she had said about Gwilym was true, as he had confessed as much to her. Why should Sandra lie about this, unless she was trying to make the incident with Gwilym seem more than it was? On any case, she did not know what advice to give to Sandra and her sister-in-law appeared to be quite calm when she had given her account. “What about Ken?” she asked.

“Ken? I suppose that I like him in a sort of way, but he is a bit of a buffoon. He's a fetcher and carrier, do you know what I mean? I used to go out with him on occasions before he went off on his course, but I am not keen to do that now. In fact I don't want to give him the slightest crumb of encouragement. He pesters me now and then, but not in that way.”

So Sandra thought she was under attack from both her former boyfriend and his boss? What it was to be single, Eileen thought. It did seem a long way off, and when she thought about it, she recalled that she did not get pestered in the way Sandra appeared to be. Some of the other girls did, but usually it was only a certain kind. Owen and Richard had pursued her, but then they had also pursued the other kind with as much enthusiasm. “Men!” she said venomously. Sandra was looking at her intently.

“You're all right, surely?” she asked. “You and Richard?” Eileen did not answer, but her look blackened, causing Sandra to feel little stabbing pangs of anxiety. “I mean,” she continued, “Richard would never do anything - wrong. Not Richard.” Their eyes met, Sandra's full of shock and surprise, Eileen's full of pain.

“Have you ever heard of a girl called Stephanie?” she said, levelly, after a pause.

“Why, yes,” said Sandra, feeling a surge of jealousy when she thought of the woman, her looks, and that fact that she had appeared to come to their house to take her brother away. “I had no idea that you knew her, or knew of her. What makes you mention her now? Surely Richard hasn't been seeing her again?”

Eileen shrugged. She had asked herself the same question, a countless number of times, since she had heard the name mentioned in Miss Logan's office. Clearly there was something afoot. The reporter had never come back to complete the interview. Eileen had concluded he was bogus and was checking up on Richard. Why else would Miss Logan have whispered her response - and she knew that something was going on. It was always the wife that found out last! As yet she had no evidence, so tangible evidence, to connect Richard with her. She had been watching him closely, and she knew he was aware that he was being closely watched. She could detect that there was nothing different - no change in his attitude or outlook, no lipstick on his collar where her head had rested, no long, auburn hairs on his jacket, no words in his sleep, no spring in his step. If he was not seeing her, why had the man mentioned him? And was it safe to mention her fears and suspicions to Sandra? She might be aware of the liaison or what ever it was, though if that were the case, it was bound to get back to Richard and that might make him think twice. Alternatively it might make him more careful and even more deceitful! Whatever the position, she should be cautious. “I heard her name mentioned quite recently,” she said.

“I had absolutely no idea that you knew her,” Sandra repeated. “Did Richard mention her?”

“Not recently. He did tell me about her before we were married.” That was true. He had been economical with his detail. Perhaps it had been painful for him to say that he wanted to be open with her and tell her. It had been painful for her to listen and she had pretended that she did not know this other woman. That had been untrue. She was still then hurt by her presence at the funeral and it was all past history. Why tell him? Yet if it was history, was it

now repeating itself?

“Oh!” exclaimed Sandra. “That is how you come to know of her!” Eileen smiled weakly. She could hardly now tell Sandra the full story that she had withheld from her husband. And it was hardly relevant, not to the present matter.

“He only told me a little,” she said. She had assumed that at the time he had told her everything in essence, and truthfully, but now she was beginning to have doubts. “Did you meet her?”

“Oh yes! She came down here to stay for the weekend, a couple of times. She was all sweetness and light and she swept all before her!”

“And you hated every minute of it? That's Stephanie,” hissed Eileen.

“I think that Richard proposed to her the first time!” said Sandra, reliving some of her own more pleasant memories. “But, then, he was swept off his feet, infatuated by her.”

“She can do that to men,” said Eileen, bitterly, still wondering exactly how it was done and wishing that sometimes she could do so as much herself. “She seems to take delight in doing it.”

“But I thought it was over with Richard,” said Sandra, puzzled. “Something major happened. I don't know what.” Eileen did not know what had happened. Richard had never confided in her. He had simply told her that it was over, and she had believed him, at the time.

“She came down here,” she said slowly. That was something else he had not told her. It was not that he had not told her, it was that as Stephanie knew where the Browns lived, she could easily have come down again. Perhaps she had come down again. Perhaps she was even living in Eastgate, seeing Richard, meeting with him? She could even appear at the Dance! The thought was alarming.

“She came down a couple of weekends,” said Sandra. “Richard took her to the New Year's Eve Ball and she looked stupendous, even if I have to say it myself. She looked absolutely stupendous, just like a film star. If there was one thing she was good at it was showing herself off to her best avail.”

“Not all women try,” said Eileen, lowly.

“I don't think she had to try. With her figure, colouring and complexion.”

“You liked her?”

“No,” said Sandra, shaking her head and smiling. “I think I grudgingly envied her, but I didn't get to see much of her or really talk to her. Richard monopolised her and some of the time I was occupied elsewhere. My father certainly liked her. She was even permitted to operate his trains! That's not something he would normally allow any woman to do!”

“And you think that it is over, between her and Richard?”

“I have always assumed so,” said Sandra. “I mean, what ever went wrong between them was fundamental. It was a pretty big bust up as bust ups go. He was devastated. He packed in his job and came home because of her and what ever happened. I cannot imagine that he would ever think of going back to her.”

“These things happen,” said Eileen, softly. “Men can be like that. We can stand firm and hold to our principles, but men are weak, and usually prepared to sacrifice anything and everything for a whim, a mere fancy.”

“I still can't believe that Richard would act like that. You said that the vampire mentioned her name. What else did she say?”

“I couldn't hear. It was whispered. The man had been interviewing her about the contract at Dover and I am not even certain how the subject got around to her.”

“Perhaps she is living down there?” Eileen did not readily forgive Sandra for voicing her worst fears. Even now she could not openly admit this as a possibility.

“What? In a stately home?”

“She could have met someone new. The way she looks some men might well give her a stately home in return for her favours. Or perhaps she works for the magazine the reporter came from. She only has to have said that she knew the Browns. It might have been a matter of the reporter just following up a piece of gossip. Come to think of it, I am more inclined to think that it was something like that. I can't believe that Richard would be seeing her behind your back. He isn't like that. He's not the type. He wouldn't do that.”

“I suppose you are right,” murmured Eileen, and the subject was allowed to drop.

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