

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Richard had proposed the toast on the night of the Dance it was because he could see, stretching away to his horizon in all directions, only a blue sky in which a golden sun was shining brightly. The family business was beginning to prosper and grow due to the continued good performance of the new contracts, including that at Dover. And when, after they had arrived home, Eileen sat before her dressing table and allowed him unzip her dress, letting it tumble to her waist, he discovered a passion in his wife like none he had ever experienced before. They won yet another contract and Mr Brown, concerned that things might be getting out of hand, suggested that this one would stretch their resources to the uttermost limits. Rates had to be put up for all tenders for the foreseeable future, a luxury that Richard had never thought he would see, leave alone enjoy. His father was enthusiastic about the Dover contract and regularly suggested that his son should go down to visit the site. It was a shame that the company was carrying out all this high quality work and he was would miss seeing it. He should go, and he should take Eileen. It would be the new Eileen, if he took anyone. Richard could not understand the change that had come over her. She seemed to hunger for him, simmering when she was in the office, smouldering when they were at home. His life was like one extended honeymoon, a continuous state of anticipation and he made no effort to try and analyse why everything had suddenly altered. All he knew was that she was on his mind, this loving, demanding, sensuous, creature he had married, all the time, eclipsing nearly everything else.

"You really must go," said his father.

"I will, when I have a chance," answered Richard.

Eileen's picture of life was not so rosy. If she had a sky to look out on, most of it was grey and rain appeared to be threatening to fall at any minute. There was the question of the insurance claim which showed no signs of reaching resolution. And there were her visits to the hospital. She had sought in vain to find a suitable opportunity to tell Richard about the operation, to tell him that it was physically painful every time he came to her. Yet she could not bring herself to now risk turning him away, not now she had taken it upon herself to combat any threat there might be from Stephanie. As she closed her legs around him, she wondered if she had done enough to satisfy his appetite and sap his stamina. It was all a gamble, but one that if she did not take, she would be the only loser.

There was another cloud, too; one which threatened to spill over into Richard's sky and spoil that. It blew up out of such a tiny incident, a minor storm which took a new direction after both Richard and Eileen thought it had passed them by. Arthur Brown innocently asked why the date and time for the reporter's return visit was not written in the diary.

"I put it in there myself," protested Miss Logan.

"I cannot find it," he complained. Contemptuously, she took the diary and turned over all the pages for the month.

"I cannot understand it!" she exclaimed. "I am sure I wrote it in for last Thursday. I distinctly remember writing it down. It must be somewhere."

"Well, I cannot find it," he continued, "and what is this about the so-called reporter mentioning Stephanie; you remember - the young lady who came down to stay with us a couple of times last year or the year before?"

"How do you know that?" she asked sharply, reacting to the inference that she had been taken in by someone who was not who they said they were. "How on earth can you know that she was mentioned? It's her, isn't it? She - that woman - in there, she has been eavesdropping on me. I suppose that she listens to everything I say. I suppose she watches everything I do, and tells you? Os is she spying on all of us?"

"Eileen just happened to hear the name mentioned."

"That's it," she screamed. "I see it all now. She is trying to force me out! After all the years I've been here, all the work I've done! She and that son of yours want to be rid of me!"

Well, I'll not stand for it!"

"Emily," began Mr Brown, wearily.

"It's no good trying to pull the wool over my eyes! They've been opened; oh, yes they've been opened! I see it all now. First it was young master Richard, and a fat lot of use he is!"

"Emily!"

"Then it's her, coming down here to do some extra work, wheedling her way in, coming in here saying this isn't right or that isn't right; all this to me who has kept books for you longer than she had been alive!"

"I doubt that," said Mr Brown, trying to remain calm.

"Do you know what her latest bitch is? Do you know? She is complaining about the level of un-receipted cash vouchers! What ever does she think? That I am embezzling the money? Is that what is being suggested?"

"Nothing of the sort, Emily! Just calm down and tell me what has happened."

"Well, Mrs Brown came in and - ."

"I mean with this reporter. Exactly what did he say?"

"Nothing very much," scowled Miss Logan. "He just asked about the girl, quite casually. Did I know her?"

"Did he give a reason for his question?"

"No, not at all. It was so casual, almost like an aside. He just wanted to know if I knew her, and if she had ever been down here."

"How odd! Why on earth would he ask that?"

"Now about Mrs Brown - ."

"Emily, there's not a thing I can do. You know that. We've a good amount of work on, with this new contract starting, and Richard's costing exercise is paying dividends. You know you couldn't possibly do it all on your own."

"But it wouldn't have hurt for you to have got me an assistant, someone in to help me, to work for me, instead of bringing her in over me. And look at the way she carries on and dresses! Flaunting herself around! She doesn't impress me!"

"She is not over you," said Mr Brown, having no objection to the way in that his daughter-in-law had suddenly decided to dress herself.

"She is your son's wife! How else am I to view her? She certainly acts as if she is over me the way she orders me about and tells me the proper way to do things! The proper way, indeed! I'll show her how to act properly!"

"Well," sighed Mr Brown, "she may find her interests diverted elsewhere in time when they start a family. I think she will have to divert all her energies in a different direction then. Perhaps I could suggest that she starts training up someone who can take her work off of her and work under you."

"That would be more acceptable," said Miss Logan, coolly. "You'll talk to her? And ask her to stop spying on me?"

"I suppose so," said Mr Brown.

This little cloud grew, almost imperceptibly, when Mr Brown relayed his account of his discussion with Miss Logan to his son. Richard had been anxious to know what had passed between Miss Logan and the reporter and was upset to learn that his father had omitted to ask what her reply had been. "I will ask her myself," he declared.

"For goodness sakes don't do that," implored his father. "Just let it rest. We may never know what it was all about." Richard reluctantly agreed to let the matter drop and, perceiving he was one point up, his father decided not to raise the matter of Eileen at that time. And then another little cloud appeared and joined the one that was already swelling slowly, as yet unperceived, in Richard's otherwise blue heaven. It came in the form of a letter addressed to him at his parent's house. Not surprisingly they were the first to speculate on its origin.

"It is postmarked Bromley," said Moira.

"You don't think it could be from Stephanie?" said Sandra, in awe at the thought.

"Surely not," said her mother. "Why should she suddenly write?"

"It seems strange," said Sandra slowly, feeling embarrassed at making the suggestion when she recalled that Eileen had told her that she thought Richard might be seeing Stephanie again, "that the reporter should come down here, ask about her, then a week or so later a letter comes from her."

"You don't know that it is from her," said Mr Brown, holding out his hand. It was Mrs Brown who took the letter from her daughter and examined it closely.

"It is from a woman," she declared.

"How on earth can you tell that?" asked her husband, baffled.

"Smell it! No man would write on perfumed paper, leastways I trust not!"

"It is from her!" exclaimed Sandra. "Goodness, what will Eileen say?"

"Eileen?" asked Mrs Brown, looking confused.

"About him receiving a letter from another woman," said Sandra, blushing. "Perhaps we should burn it? It is only going to cause trouble, her writing to him."

"I agree," said her mother, looking at her daughter, strangely.

"You can't do anything like that," said Mr Brown, taking the envelope from his wife. "It's Richard's letter and I will take it in to him at the yard."

"Well, make sure that you find out who it is from and what it is about," instructed his wife.

"I will try," he said as he headed for the door.

"Make sure you succeed!" she called after him. He found that Richard had already gone out when he arrived at the office. Miss Logan was, prim and staid, in her place, bristling. Eileen was sat, looking ravishing, at a table in the inner office, surrounded by piles of cash analysis paper. Mr Brown was faced with an immediate dilemma. If he withheld the letter now, Eileen's suspicions would be aroused as it would appear that either he did not trust her or that he wanted to hide its presence from her. So he took the only course that appeared open, saying as casually as he could that a letter had arrived for Richard and he was leaving it on the desk. Eileen appeared not to be over-interested, but when he had left she went to look at the envelope, regarding it with suspicion. It was hand addressed in a vaguely familiar hand. It looked like a woman's hand and she could, like her mother-in-law, detect the perfume. It had to be from Her, although Eileen could not imagine at first what she could be writing about. Then the thought struck her that they could have been corresponding for some time, writing to one another right under her nose! And the reporter who had come, or what ever he might have been, might have been just another of her frustrated lovers!

She did very little work that morning as her thoughts blackened and collapsed in turmoil. She had seen such a letter once before and it had been the overture to tragedy. Perhaps she had been beaten again, outflanked by that woman. She had not thought of them corresponding, only of them meeting. And Richard, he had lain beside her and taken everything that she had to give in her defence of her position as his wife, all the time he was writing to her. It was all so hopeless! Where would it all end?

"Here," she said, tight-lipped when Richard appeared, mid afternoon. "Here is a letter for you, postmarked Bromley!" She was waiting to see his reaction, his embarrassment. She wondered how he would cover it up and what excuse he would trot out, but she was surprised when he looked puzzled. "Your father brought it in for you as it was conveniently sent to your parents' address. She obviously doesn't know that we have moved. Haven't you told her?" Richard's heart plummeted as he caught the drift and the full thrust of his wife's thoughts. Surely *she* could not have written to him, now, out of the blue, after all this time. What would she have to write about?

"I cannot imagine who it is from," he said weakly.

"Aren't you going to open it? Or would you like me to leave before you do?"

"Eileen," he said as terror filled and weakened his limbs. "I don't know who it is from. I am sure it cannot be from - *her*." He found that he could not bring himself to say her name in front of his wife, not in Eileen's presence, yet he could not understand why he was so inhibited. He had done nothing wrong, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing that his wife could find as grounds for complaint. Except he had dreamed, and such dreams!

"Well?" she said sharply. He closed his eyes, fearful of the consequences once the contents of the envelope were known.

"Here," he said. "You open it." Eileen recoiled as he thrust the letter in her direction. It would have been hard to decide which of them was the most afraid of its contents. "Would you rather that I did not open it at all?"

"No, no. The wretched thing has been here all morning. You had better open it and let us get it over and done with!" Feverishly he tore open the flap and took out the single sheet of blue note paper. At first he could not focus on the handwriting, concentrating only on the signature, but when he did, he let out an exclamation of joy. "Good grief! It is from Mrs Pennington! You remember Mrs Pennington, or Mrs Hiller as she used to be?"

"The school secretary? It is from the school?"

"No. It is from her, herself, personally. Here, you read it!"

The letter was short and Eileen read it aloud:

"Dear Richard

I am deeply sorry to have to write to you and tell you that Mr Pennington is terminally ill. Everything that can be done has been done and he is at home now, rather than being in hospital where he spent the last six uncomfortable weeks. I am afraid that the doctors have expressed his life expectancy in terms of days rather than weeks and I find that I do not know whether he will still be there to greet me each morning when I wake up. However, he is lucid and retains all his faculties and has expressly asked that you may come and see him for one, last, time. Could I, therefore, implore you, if you can spare the time, to come up and visit him. If you are able to do this for him, please do not reply, but just come. I am at home and will remain so through his last days. I shall be eternally grateful, if you can.

Yours,

Joyce Pennington"

"I will have to go," said Richard.

"I suppose you will," replied Eileen. Initially she felt relief to see that the letter had not come from the person she feared. And Richard's reaction to it suggested both that he was not expecting a letter from her, and that he assumed that she was still living in Bromley. All of this suggested that her fears that they were seeing each other were unfounded. But then, as she thought further, she wondered if he could be aware that she was not living in Bromley, and that was why he had handed the letter to her, confident that it was not from Stephanie. That meant that he *could* be meeting her! Then she thought that if this was wrong, and her original view was right, he was now about to visit Bromley, the very place where Stephanie lived, and this after she had just reminded him of the fact. She could not ignore the fact that the letter was from *her* mother, even if there has been little love between them. And now, as for Richard, how easy it would be for him to slightly deviate from his course and call in at the flat. If there was no liaison until now, this had produced the circumstances under which one could develop! The temptation to call in on her might be irresistible, yet she could not stop him going, and she could not suggest that she went without arousing his suspicions that she did not trust him. "When will you go?" she asked.

"I think it is getting late now," he said, looking at his watch. "The fact that Mrs Pennington wrote rather than sent a telegram suggests she does not expect the end to be immediate. I will go up tomorrow morning. If I catch a train around nine I should be at the cottage by eleven thirty."

Eileen nodded. In a way she would have preferred to argue that he should go straight away as that would have given him less spare time in Bromley, but she did not. She could not restrict his movements every hour of the day or every day of the week. She could only hope

that the measures she had taken, and the sacrifices she had made, since the night of the Dinner-Dance were sufficient to bring him straight home to her.

"Do you want to come as well?" he said suddenly. "After all you did meet him and his wife on a number of occasions." Eileen breathed in. She had to believe in the strength of her own measures. If they were going to be put to the test at sometime, it might as well be now, before he knew about the operation and its consequences.

"No," she said, resolutely. "He has asked specifically to see you. I will stay here and catch up on the work. I don't appear to have done very much today."

The contract at Newington was progressing well and very much to the satisfaction of both Mr Brown, who was frustrated by not being able to persuade his son to go over and see all the good work they were doing, and Mr Brodie who was frustrated because what he saw as siege mentality in his client prevented him from showing it off to outsiders. They had passed the stage where all the defective timber in the roof had been replaced and the lead and flashings renewed. Work had now started on selected rooms, on the floors and some areas of plaster work. To Stephanie's dismay, Mr Brodie insisted on every floor being lifted to check the condition of the timbers underneath. She had to graciously concede that it was better to take that precaution than find rot after the decoration was complete and she had replaced the furniture and furnishing. Yet she longed to start clearing the hay lofts because she knew that this would mark a significant step towards the builders leaving, and taking the attendant risk with them. "I did tell you it could take two years, even longer, dependent on what we find," said Mr Brodie, patiently.

"I know you did," said Stephanie, sweetly, "but I am sure that you can understand my impatience?" Although he would nod, he did not understand why she had become so, on her own admission, impatient. He now found that when he referred alternatives to her, she would ask which was likely to be the quickest option, not which would be the cheapest or give the best value for money. One example was when he had insisted on as much of the original material being retained and re-used, but his client had heard that this would entail more work and promptly raised the matter with him.

"I think we should do that to preserve as much originality as possible," he told her.

"Why?" she said sharply. "You told me that the house had little architectural merit. Why would it matter whether the materials are original or not."

Mr Brodie was nonplussed. How was he to answer such a non-believer? "When I said that, I did not mean to suggest that we should use inferior materials," he told her. "I think that you should accept the advice of your architect in matters to do with the quality of materials and work." For a moment he thought he had gone too far, and he had a vision of him arriving home and telling his expectant, loving, wife that he had been dismissed. But Stephanie replaced her scowl with a smile.

"Of course," she said. "I am just being impetuous and straying into areas that should not concern me. The quality of materials and work is yours, Mr Brodie!"

The architect might well be able to prescribe the quality of materials and work, and decide whether it was in accordance with the specification or the drawings. He might be able to amend the few drawings he issued, or issue fresh instructions, or even leave matters to the builder to decide. Inevitably there were matters that had to be referred back to his client, to Stephanie in person. Much could be conducted in the regular weekly meeting she held with him, and him alone, in the relative safety of the kitchen to which he brought his papers and plans from the temporary office he used in the former stables. He could never accuse her of not being knowledgeable about the work that was being carried out at any one time, although she always refused to walk around the house with him when the work was going on. There were times when she did emerge, on those rare occasions when she thought it was safe, and would pass through the house, "like a ghost" said the workmen who saw her.

"I think she goes over the house after everyone has gone home," Jack Barnes told him. "Then she examines everything in the minutest detail." Mr Brodie had goo reason to believe this when she commented about the use, erroneous as it turned out, of steel screws

instead of brass. Still, Mr Brodie found her eccentric way of working very inconvenient. There were times when the Clerk of Works thought he required an immediate decision, and she could not be found.

"I cannot be here at the builder's beck and call," she declared rather imperiously.

"I agree," said Mr Brodie. "But these things could become ever more difficult when we get to the detail of the decoration and the finishing, leave alone replacing the furniture. I feel that your presence will be imperative then, unless you want to cede all that to me."

"I do not wish to do that," she sighed.

"I was certainly under the impression that your father hoped that you would take those kind of decisions yourself, with my assistance, of course."

"Things will work themselves out," she said vaguely, cursing the appointment of this particular builder which appeared to be precluding her from enjoying the involvement in the restoration which she considered was rightly hers.

Her dilemma remained, showing no greater indication that it would resolve itself any more than it did at the outset. She continued to debate whether to come out into the open. It would be so easy to turn up at one of the site meetings, face Mr Brown across the table, and say "I am the person you are working for. I am the mysterious woman who walks only by night!" Then she would feel that to do this would simply be foolish and would be to court disaster. And what reason would she give for her conduct to date? No, the longer it went on, the harder it would be to reveal her presence. She was stuck with the predicament in which she had placed herself. So she found herself following her routine of examining the car park, roaming the Estate and, in particular, walking out to sit amongst the ruins of the Monastery, her sanctuary as she thought of it. One day the builders would pack up and leave. One day it would all end.

Stephanie took the second anonymous letter to land on her stately doormat to Father Thomas. She was not pleased to have to visit him again and felt guilty because she had not looked at the prayer book he had given her, and which he would be bound to ask her about. She was also fearful that he would again ask her to pray with him, and was uncertain how she would deal with such a request. Father Thomas, on the other hand, had been hoping that she would call again, if only to allow him to personally thank her for her benevolence. In addition, it did allow him to gaze upon her beauty, despite having been advised by a colleague hearing his confession that this was not something he should dwell upon. Yet she was one of God's creatures - why should he not look upon her? He was saddened by the reason for her visit, telling her that he had prayed that God would deliver the perpetrator up to him or, failing that, the means to stop the letters. Perhaps the person would present himself at his confessional and allow him to call down the threat of Hell, the Devil, and all the horrors of eternal damnation. No-one had been delivered which did not surprise Stephanie because if the sender lived in Eastgate he was unlikely to present himself in the church at Alkham or the chapel on the Estate.

"I do not think my advice now is any different to that I gave you when you came before," he said, handing the note back to her. Stephanie lowered her head. "I do not think that the person means you any physical harm and now that I have had time to think I am not convinced that they were sent by your former lover." Stephanie flinched at the word "lover", but remained silent. "Anyone who has found out your secret of your birth, or has knowledge of your former life, your life before you came to Newington, and I am not asking you for one moment to tell me anything about it, would have been able to go up to Eastgate and post the letter. The postmark could be designed to mislead you."

"But he knows I am here," she protested, not grasping what the priest was driving at. "I believe I was seen. He must know I am here!"

"Even if that is true, it does not necessarily mean that the letters have come from him."

"Eileen, then?" she gasped. "She might do something like that."

"Eileen?" queried the priest.

"His wife."

"His wife," contemplated Father Thomas. "Why would she do something like that if

she did not have cause? Would she have cause?"

"Yes," said Stephanie, lowly, "she would."

"I am not going to ask you why," he said slowly. "I cannot really believe that you have made sufficient enemies of people to cause them to act vindictively towards you."

"I have, as far as Eileen is concerned. Her former husband left her to live with me."

"I see," said Father Thomas. "And now she has taken the man you loved?"

"Love," she said softly.

"Don't you think she has wreaked her revenge? In any case, this isn't the kind of thing a woman would do. This is a man's work. I wonder if the motive is mischievous, to make you feel uncomfortable, perhaps because the sender is jealous of you."

"Isn't that being vindictive?" she asked, weakly.

"Not in the way I mean. I doubt that this person really knows you, or you know him."

"Could he be dangerous, then? Should I go to the police? You read such awful things in the newspapers nowadays." Father Thomas looked thoughtful. This question placed him in a predicament. Neither of the letters, if they could be called that, contained any threat as far as her person was concerned. Yet, how would he feel if anything were to happen to her person?

"I would not advice you not to go to the police. However, if you think that would make you feel more comfortable, you should go. In the meantime, I would like to start a hare running here. With your consent, I would like also to let it be known that you have received these notes although we will not say what the nature is. If you forgive me, I would like to employ a couple of white lies, and see what that does. It is dreadful to admit, but I have only to mention the matter to Mrs Hastings and it will be all over the Estate within the hour, and coming from her it will be taken as gospel."

"What will that do?" she asked, still feeling concerned at the thought that there might be a madman following her every step as she roamed the grounds.

"We might never know, if it works. If it is someone acting out of mischief here on the Estate, it might bring home the gravity of what they are doing. We must accept that apart from your builder, who I do not think is silly enough to send you anonymous letters from his home town, there are plenty of people on the Estate who know who you are, might have some knowledge of your personal affairs, and who might feel aggrieved at your sudden appearance at the House. May I try my experiment? If it fails and you receive a third letter, we will go to the police."

"So, you are proposing to start a false rumour of some kind about the letters?"

"That is what I have in mind."

"I cannot say I understand, but I have no objection to trying what you propose," she said after a short period of thought, "but you will use your discretion in what you say?"

"I can assure you of that, and I will let it slip in such a way that no-one suspects my motives in making these matters, such as they are, public. Then we will see what, if anything, happens. Now, have you looked at the book I gave you? Have you found it useful? The prayer book?" Stephanie coloured slightly.

"I did look at it," she said, picturing it lying on the table beside her bed where it had been since she briefly flicked through the pages. "I would be dishonest if I said it has been helpful." Father Thomas misunderstood her and looked anxiously at his bookcase. Stephanie read his mind. "I do not think, Father, there is any merit in giving me another," she added. He concurred sadly. Still, if she believed in God, that was a start. If he prayed for her, the remainder would follow, in time.

Father Thomas was true to his word and correct in his prediction. The story of the unsolicited correspondence received by Miss Bernstein spread wildly across the Estate, growing in substance at each telling. Inevitably it dominated the conversation at the Newington Arms that evening. "Come on Jack. Tell us the full story!" said the Welshman. "You must know what has been going on."

"I don't know any more than you," said the manager, concerned that this was true and for once Miss Lightfoot, if she knew, had failed to take him into her confidence. "I only know that she has been receiving threatening letters - and threats have been made against her life, something I find absolutely abhorrent. If I laid hands on the bastard who sent them he would

never threaten anything again!"

"I heard that the police were called in some days ago," said the Welshman. "She is under constant surveillance in case this crank tries something."

"How dreadful," said the landlord. "My Betsy says it's the price you pay for being rich. I say it's the wicked world we live in."

"That's true," said Jack Barnes. "You couldn't want to meet a sweeter or more generous creature than her, yet someone comes along and threatens her. I hope they catch him."

"Shoot him," said the Welshman.

"What d'ye mean, shoot him?" asked Ned.

"Some of the police are armed," said the Welshman.

"Really?" said the landlord. "Have you seen them?"

"I have not, not as yet, but then you are not supposed to see them, are you? They are probably disguised as workmen or delivery men, or you do not see them at all until it is too late and there's a bullet in you."

"I wouldn't go that far," said the manager.

"It is true," protested the Welshman. "Mrs Hastings said that she saw one the other day. She was sure he was a plain-clothes man. She said she thought so at the time."

"If all that's true," snarled Wormley, suddenly, from his dark haven, "why has she been wandering around the Estate, exposing herself to this assassin?"

"That is the only way the police are going to expose him," said the Welshman. "She is watched and protected all the time. They never let her out of their sight!"

"Poor woman," said the landlord.

"I cannot get over how brave she has been," said Jack Barnes. "You would never have known that she has been bearing this burden although she has been strange at times, according to the architect. Perhaps all this is why she has been watching the car park, and why she wanted to know what cars were there. Perhaps this has been going on for months?"

"Goodness," said the landlord, "how on earth does she cope with the strain?"

"Ridiculous!" spat Wormley. However he had listed to the conversation with an element of growing alarm that was threatening to overwhelm his smug satisfaction. There was a great deal of fabrication and speculation in what was being said, but if there was smoke, there was also fire, somewhere, and he was becoming concerned that he might be about to burn more than his fingers. What if she had been receiving threatening letters from someone else? What little he knew of her past indicated that it was possible that she could have been involved in far darker things than he had uncovered. Almost anything was conceivable and, for him, credible. If the police had been called in, they would be making enquiries. What if they found the trail he had left and identified him? Apart from the trips to Bromley and Eastgate, he had frequently followed her across the Estate, darting from bush to bush and tree to tree, as she pursued her daily ramble. He had never seen anyone else watching her, but then he had been watching her, not looking out for others. If they were there, they would have seen him. If they were armed they might have come close to shooting him - it would have required only one false move! At the very least they would have now identified him. There could be someone waiting for him at his house at that very moment!

"I think she is a very brave woman, exposing herself like that," said the Welshman. "You have to admire her for it!"

"So do I," grunted Ned. "And I have heard that everyone on the Estate has been asked to be 'specially vigilant.'

"I suppose that it's blackmail," said the landlord, "what with her being rich and an heiress and all that. It makes you wonder if her father has received any threats."

"Perhaps that's who the threats are against?" asked the Welshman. "Someone has written to him saying pay up or your beautiful daughter gets it."

"That's right," enjoined the landlord. "The police usually advise against paying the ransom and try to set a trap to catch the criminal. Miss Bernstein is obviously acting as the bait."

"I'd like to be in any trap where she was the bait," said Ned.

"Ned!" admonished Jack Barnes. "That is no way to speak of your Mistress!"

Wormley listened to all this. He wanted to tell them what he knew, but how could he now without the risk of self-incrimination? Most of what they said must be nonsense, but there was this worrying element of truth. If only they would restrict themselves to that but, no, still they went on, his companions, expressing their concern, singing her praise, piling coal upon coal until suddenly the heat from the flames was more than he could bear. Suddenly he leapt to his feet and with no more than a grunt stalked out of the saloon leaving a half-empty glass.

"There goes someone who does not like it when he is wrong," said the Welshman.

"Just remembered he's left an open grave, more like it," grumbled Ned.

Wormley walked his dark way home very nervously, constantly checking to ensure that no-one was following him. He also checked to see that the police were not waiting for him at his home, but he relaxed when he decided everything was clear and appeared normal. He was disappointed by the loss of the power he assumed he had, but was not prepared to give up. He asked himself just what he had established. It seemed very little. Miss Bernstein, or Miss Hiller as she appeared formerly to have been known, had a murky, unsavoury, past. She might or might not be the daughter of Mr Bernstein, but perhaps that was no longer relevant. She was clearly concerned by the presence of the builders from Eastgate with whom she, presumably, had some previous connection. Was there something in all this he was missing? As he reached his front door and fumbled in his waistcoat for the key, a completely new picture presented itself to him. He was surprised that he had not thought of it before as the possibility had been under his nose all the time. It would entail another trip to Eastgate, which would put him at risk if the police actually were involved, but the town was only a bus ride away. It might be worth the inconvenience.

Stephanie was able to judge the initial effectiveness of Father Thomas's strategy next morning when Miss Lightfoot brought in her breakfast. "I shouldn't really mention this, Miss Bernstein," she said hesitantly.

"Mention what?" asked Stephanie, thinking that her housekeeper only reverted to being formal when she was concerned about something.

"I think you should know that there is a rumour going around the Estate that your life has been threatened. There's even talk of armed police in the grounds and security guards at the gate-house."

"I wouldn't place too much guidance on rumours," Stephanie said, smiling. Then she recalled some of Father Thomas's words. Although he had said he did not think a woman had sent the letters, he had said he thought it was someone on the Estate who was envious of her. It could be anyone. It might be best to be guarded. "But I have been threatened," she added, looking down at the tray.

"Oh, how dreadful! I had no idea, Stephanie, no idea at all. Who on earth could do such a terrible thing?"

"Someone who resents my being here, I suppose. Do you?"

"Do I? Goodness, no! Why I could never do such a thing to anyone although I have had cause enough in my life. Least of all could I do it to you. If you will pardon me putting it this way, I look upon you as a kind of daughter, or niece."

"I don't mind you putting it that way, except I do have a mother. I now know I even had a real aunt," she said looking at Natacha's portrait. "I could always call you Aunt Deborah."

"I would like that," said the housekeeper, "but I am not sure how Jack Barnes and the workers would look upon it. I might start receiving threats then."

"I doubt it. I could always call Mr Barnes "Uncle", if that helped." Miss Lightfoot laughed.

"I don't think he would be very pleased. But about these threats, and the police - you will have to stop all this walking and wandering around the Estate. You get that from your mother."

"My Mother?" said Stephanie reflectively. "I wouldn't know about that. I have been

told to just carry on normally. I don't think there is anything out there for me to fear." She paused. For some unaccountable reason her mind flashed back to the dark, wet, evening when a man had come to the door of their house and asked to see her mother. She had no idea that he was her real father. She had told him where her mother worked and he had left. Her mother had not come home that evening, nor the next. She had never discovered where she had gone or with whom. It was not with her father because he was still outside, in his car, next morning when she was packed off to school. Her mother had not returned for three dark, black, odious, unforgettable, nights during which she had learnt first about men. Even now the recollection of those particular nights, amongst so many, made her shudder.

"I was told by Mrs Williams and she heard it from Di, her husband."

"Well, as I said, there is really nothing to worry about. I am not in the least concerned."

"And you are sure that you are not in any danger?"

"No more than normal," she said wickedly. "No, ignore that. I am not, as far as I know. At least the police have not told me that I am. Not in that sort of danger. But I would ask you to do one thing for me; that is not to discuss my position or this rumour. Just say that you know nothing if you are asked. Now, I had better eat my breakfast before it all becomes cold."

After Miss Lightfoot had left and Stephanie had reached the toast, she noticed the prayer book at the side of the bed. Almost without thinking she picked it up in her free hand and opened it. She was still reading it, silently to herself, twenty minutes later when the housekeeper returned for the tray.

Wormley did not this time call at the builder's office. He arrived in Eastgate late morning and waited on the pavement opposite the yard, immersed in the never pleasant, and occasionally most unpleasant, vapours that emitted from the gasworks behind him. He had gained the impression that the woman he had seen went out for lunch and decided he would gamble on being able to see her. His luck was in as shortly after noon, Emily Logan appeared, prim and erect, and trotted along the opposite pavement in the direction of the harbour. He let her proceed for a hundred yards, then caught up with her.

"You!" she exclaimed, narrowing her eyes as he confronted her. "You are the man who never turned up for the interview! What are you doing here now?"

"I am sorry about that. It is imperative that I talk to you - I can explain all then. Is there somewhere we can go where we won't be disturbed?" She looked alarmed and turned her head to look back at the yard as if she expected to find someone following her. "It is important," he repeated.

"There's a small teashop near the harbour," she said cautiously. "We could go there."

Wormley ordered scones and tea for two, an unusual experience for him, then turned to face the anxious woman. He had also recalled that she had been somewhat belligerent when he saw her, not against him but against something her employer had done. "Well?" she asked. "What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I should start off by explaining that I am a journalist, but that I do not work for a building magazine. That was just a rouse to get in to see you. I am sorry if it caused you any inconvenience or trouble with your employer. I gather that things were a little strained last time I called."

"You could say that," she said lowly. "Who do you work for, then?"

"I am a self-employed investigatory journalist. I do research for national papers and the BBC, into fraud, embezzlement, confidence men, things like that."

"Why did you want to see me, then? I have not been involved in any of those things. Nothing like it!"

"I am not sure what is going on, but something is. You remember I mentioned the name of a young woman when I last saw you?"

"Of course I do," said Miss Logan bitterly, "and a lot of trouble it caused me."

"Now that is interesting," he said, leaning across the table, "because I have reason to believe that the young lady in question has received threats against her life and that the police

have been called in."

"Goodness me," said Miss Logan, "but how is that connected to me? You are surely not thinking that I could have done such a thing?"

"No," he said mysteriously, "but someone has. Someone has threatened her. And that is someone out there who she is afraid of, someone I guess that she knows something about that they do not want revealed."

"So?" she said. "I still do not see what you are driving at!"

"What I am driving at? I am not certain what the connection is, but I have been watching the young woman for several weeks now and what I do know is that she appears to be petrified that the Browns are going to find out where she lives. I would explain that they are carrying out some work very close to her home."

"I don't know what to say," said Miss Logan. "I cannot think of any reason why she should be afraid of them. I mean I have worked for Mr Brown since just after the War and he is the most pleasant of men. As for Mr Richard, he's not here to day. He's gone to Bromley, and I don't much care for him, but I still can't see either of them threatening anyone."

"You can never tell," he hissed. "That is one thing I have learnt in this job, you can never tell. Perfectly ordinary, respectable, nice people are capable of doing the most awful things if they are forced to do so. Is it possible that she found out something about them, something about the business?"

"I can't think what. There's nothing to find out."

"There's nothing odd going on? They haven't been acting strangely about anything or hiding papers, keeping things secret from you, that sort of thing?"

"No," she said firmly. "Nothing at all."

Wormley returned to Dover disappointed. He had, it seemed, reached a dead end. Perhaps it was time, after all, to let the matter drop although he still had the feeling that this young charlatan up at the House would be getting away with something if he did. What he did not know, nor would ever know, was just as he had raised the spectre of Stephanie in Eileen's susceptible and suspicious mind by dropping her name in the office, he had now sown an entirely new, fertile, seed in the mind of the dissatisfied and aggrieved Miss Logan.

© Paul S A Redmond 2007