

CHAPTER THIRTY

Richard had driven straight to the house at Newington and left the car before he remembered that he had been told that Miss Bernstein had moved to a cottage on the Estate. He went in, telling the workmen the good news and then finding a Welsh gardener who gave him directions to the cottage. He stopped the car at the end of the track and sat looking at the cottage. He had diligently prepared what he would say to this eccentric woman who had, as far as he knew, remained in her recluse-like state throughout the committal proceedings. He would apologise for coming to see her, for breaking into her private world. She would reprimand him but let it pass given the occasion. She had to have some interest in the outcome of the trial. She would have to admit that much. Then he would tell her that they had won; that they had left the courtroom without a stain on their characters, and that none of this might have been possible but for her intercession. He would add that Mr Arrowsmythe was confident that they would be awarded their costs and that therefore she would get some, if not all, of her money back. No, he would not tell her that because if he did she would reprimand him again, telling him that money was only of secondary interest and that she had been anxious to see that justice was done. There would be some small talk. He might be offered tea. Then he would go home to face Eileen and to console himself by thinking of Stephanie.

As he walked up to the porch it was a picture of Stephanie sat in the court that stayed foremost in his mind. How had she known about the hearing? Probably from her mother. And where was she now? What was she doing, and was she thinking of him as he was thinking of her? It had been good of her to go, even if it had upset Eileen. She would read of the outcome in the papers. He could even try writing to her care of Mrs Pennington, providing he did not let Eileen know. She would know where her daughter was now living and would forward the letter.

An old woman opened the door and stared for a moment at Richard in puzzlement. "Why!" she said. "It is the younger Mr Brown. I did not recognise you for a moment, seeing you here and away from the House and the work. And I did not expect a caller at the cottage at this time of day, indeed, not at any time of day."

"I am sorry," said Richard, sheepishly. "I came to see Miss Bernstein. Is she here?"

There was absolutely no doubt that Richard's visit would be reported in the Newington Arms that evening. The Welshman would tell the assembly that he had directed the young man to the cottage and that he had no idea who he was. Wormley would listen and make the connection, conclude that Miss Bernstein had reverted, but he would resist the temptation to say anything. He would let it come out, as it would, as time passed. The others would simply conclude that it was a mystery, or invent a scenario. Miss Lightfoot would be vowed to secrecy about the visit and none would guess his true identity or even make a hint as to the truth of the matter. But all of this lay in the future.

"I am afraid that she is not here at the moment. She has gone out for a walk. I think she may have gone up to the Monastery."

"The Monastery?" said Richard, not knowing that there was a monastery nearby and wondering why Miss Bernstein would be visiting it. "Is it far? It is important that I see her!"

"Are you in a hurry?" asked the housekeeper. "It is probably a half an hour's walk, perhaps slightly more."

"I cannot drive?"

"No," said Miss Lightfoot firmly. "You can only get there on foot."

"Half an hour?" Richard thought of Eileen. No doubt she was at his parents celebrating, living it up and having some fun for a change. "I am a little pressed for time."

"If you walk up the path, there, is always a chance you might meet her coming back. Otherwise you will find her amongst the ruins. She often goes and sits there."

Richard hesitated. It was beginning to get late though he was less than an hour's drive from home. In a way he wanted to be there, joining in the party, planning a new future. Yet he had come this far. It would seem almost cowardly and ungracious to leave the news with the housekeeper and not thank Miss Bernstein herself, face to face. He could imagine Eileen saying "Did you see her?" and him answering that he did not because she was out for walk and had not waited. She would then remind him of his undertaking and that this unseen Miss Bernstein had risked a small fortune on their defence. They owed their freedom to her and there he was, not prepare to spend maybe half an hour in seeking her out and thanking her. Eileen could be very scathing at times. This was likely to be one of them.

He followed Miss Lightfoot's instructions and gradually made the ascent, hoping that any minute now he would see a woman's form appearing in the other direction and he could say his piece as he accompanied her back to the cottage. The sun was dropping, now clipping the tops of the trees yet the air was pleasantly warm, balmy, and sweetly scented. Above him a large flock of starlings took off in a crescendo of wing beats, chased by a number of stragglers. One or two crows ambled lazily homewards across the sky. He watched a grey squirrel hop away in front of him before scampering up a tree trunk to watch his passing from an overhanging bow. It seemed idyllic and he thought how fortunate this Miss Bernstein was to have all this to herself. Suddenly he was out of the woodland, climbing a short steep bank and finding himself confronted by the gaunt shapes of the monastery walls, standing stark against the sky. If these were the ruins, and the housekeeper was correct, the elusive Miss Bernstein should be secreted within them. Then, for no apparent reason, he started to feel nervous and almost turned around and left. That would have been even more difficult to explain to Eileen, yet he felt here he was, trespassing on this woman's privacy. She would excuse it, given the occasion, he assured himself.

Passing through an archway he stopped. He could hear a woman's voice, reading something out loud. Then, as he stepped forward there was a woman's figure. He could not see her clearly or make out whether she was young or old, but she was sat, reading apparently from a small red booklet in the fading light. "Miss Bernstein?" he called out from his position in the archway.

Neither of them was prepared for what followed. They stood and saw one another as invisible bolts of ecstatic lightning cut the plasma between them and they were fixed in time, motionless, silent, each in contemplation of, and yearning for, the other. "Richard!" she said softly. "I prayed that you might come." He was overjoyed, but confused.

"It is marvellous, but you are the last person I expected to find here. I came to see Miss Bernstein, to thank her for all that she has done for us. Is she here?"

"Oh, Richard!" with laughter in her eyes, "How can I tell you this? You are looking at her! I am Miss Bernstein! And I have longed and longed for this moment to come. Don't say anything, not yet. Let it last. Oh, I could die now; the World could end now; my father could come and take back everything that he has given me, yet I would not care. It would all have been worth it!"

"I don't understand, Stephanie," he said lamely.

"No - and how could you? How could you possibly when I am not sure if I understand it all myself! But, don't say anything just yet. Come and sit by me. Let me feel your hand and I will tell you everything. Oh, this is too wonderful for words! You cannot imagine how I have longed and yearned for this; how I have prayed for you and for this - me, pray? And I have made offerings to God and offered him bargains. Isn't that wicked? But, nevertheless, you have come to me and my prayers have been answered. He has directed you and it is some kind of miracle, happening here, right on this spot. I know. You have come to tell me that the judge has dismissed the case against all of you, but, my Darling, that is only the mechanism. Father Thomas tells me that God works in mysterious ways. This is one of them! Now, let me look at you. How is she treating you, that Eileen? I suppose that she is being steadfast and faithfully, stolid and homely.

That was always Eileen's way, but she does not, cannot, love you in the way I do, with passion, with love, totally, absolutely. I have given up my old ways. I have changed, Richard, but my love for you, the love that you generated and released inside me, has not changed. It as strong as ever. You are the only man in my life and I shall know no other. Am I embarrassing you, Darling? Let me kiss you. Let me submerge you in kisses! Are you not pleased to see and be with me? Truthfully?"

Richard sighed. "The honest truth is that barely a day has passed, certainly in the last year, when I have not thought of you and felt wretched because I let you slip through my fingers."

"Oh, it was my fingers, my Dearest," she murmured. "I was confused. I didn't know, or would not believe, my own heart. I did not want to fall in love with you - at first I saw you as fun to be with and unusual, different to the other men I had been used to in my life. And gradually, without realising it, I fell. Oh, how I fell! Do you love me?" Richard did not answer. "Tell me," she continued. "Tell me truthfully. You did once propose to me, you remember, didn't you?"

"I am married now," he said awkwardly.

"What difference does that make? Just for this moment, whilst you are in this magical spot, my serene haven, witnessed by no-one other than myself, a woman who would go to the end of Eternity for you, forget Eileen and tell me the truth."

"It is so difficult. How can I be faithful to Eileen and true to myself?"

"Then you do love me?" she exclaimed. Richard nodded. "How much do you love me?"

"How much? I suppose I adore you. I sometimes feel that I cannot live without you. When I saw you in the courtroom I wanted to rush over and embrace you. But, if I am truthful, I suppose that I also love Eileen too, in a different kind of way, in a way that I cannot readily describe. Oh, this is so embarrassing. I feel like a schoolboy experiencing his first crush. No, it is not like that. I love you just as passionately as you love me, but I am married, and I could not leave her. We have had our difficulties, but I couldn't harm her or knowingly cause her anxiety. She has suffered too much already. It is hopeless, you and I."

"I know. I would not have expected you to say otherwise. I don't think I would love you as much if you were prepared to leave your wife, but are you happy living with her?"

"After a fashion, I suppose," said Richard after a moment's thought. "I don't know what Eileen would say if she heard me say that, but with all the troubles I haven't had too much time to think about whether we are happy together. And you?"

"Am I happy? I am now, right at this moment, deliriously so! Let me tell you all that had happened."

"Shouldn't we be starting back?"

"Not unless you are anxious to leave me now that you have found me. This spot is very special to me; like the spot where you proposed to me. I would rather stay here." Richard thought of Eileen. She was likely to stay at his parents' house until fairly late. They would all be there, Megan, Gwilym, the children. It would be like Christmas afternoon, except he was not there. Still they would get along without him for a while and whereas on some ways he would have liked to be there to join in the celebrations, in other ways, and on balance, he preferred to be with Stephanie.

As the darkness finally took hold on the lounge, creeping under the door and through the windows, advancing from the shadows in the corners until it appeared to envelop her, Eileen gradually released the last vestiges of hope. She had lost track of time, aware only of its passing when the street light suddenly went out, leaving only a sliver of moonlight penetrating the French doors. She had lost. She had lost everything and everyone. Owen and Jonathan were gone. Richard had been taken. Even the remote possibility that Sandra might become her friend and companion was now dashed. She was now alone in the World, sat there in an empty house,

husband-less, child-less, hopeless and nearly lifeless.

What was there that was left? She tried to picture the coming months. Perhaps he would return to collect his possessions. Perhaps he would send someone to collect them for him. She would be left to face his parents, Sandra, Gwilym and Megan, and to try and explain that she had been unable to hold on to her husband. No-one would believe that it was not her fault. No-one would believe that he had been simply ensnared by that other woman. How was it that now she appeared to be so rich and powerful? No doubt she had entranced some wretched, stupid, millionaire who had made all his wealth over to her before being driven by her perversity and fecundity to suicide.

There were ways to die. How had he done it? Had he cut his wrists, or inhaled the choking exhaust from one of his fleet of cars? Perhaps a gas oven? No, nothing that common. More likely a revolver to the side of the temple. Maybe he had just slipped over the side of his yacht one moonlit night, into the dark, receptive waters of the sea, one night like this night. For a moment she felt grief and sorrow for this unknown martyr, but he had been stupid. Richard had been stupid. And what had she been? She was not to know that he had met Stephanie before she became close to him. She could not see the invisible mark of the sting. The poison was already at work and her antidote had not been powerful enough. "No!" she screamed out loud, the sound reverberating around the room and echoing from the landing and hallway. But it was true, it was real. No dream, no fantasy, no wild stretch of the imagination. He had gone and he had not returned.

He might have had an accident in the car. It would have been comforting to believe that, that he was lying in some hospital bed, seriously wounded but cared for by sterile nurses, looked over by sanitised doctors. Even now the police were on their way to tell her that he had been driving too fast in his attempt to get home to her. But no-one came. No-one would come; only the darkness, creeping further until it filled her mind.

When she opened the front door Eileen was surprised by the shaft of warm air that greeted her. She was bathed in the moonlight as she stepped, phantom-like onto the path. No note? Should she leave a note? What for - who for? Richard was no longer interested in her fate and the rest of them could go where she was going, to Hell! What was it that coroners said? Something about the mind being unbalanced. Well, her mind was not unbalanced. She felt unexpectedly calm and thought that she could, for the first time in months, see everything exceptionally clearly as she made her way through the streets. House lights were going off, one by one. Soon the few remaining street lights would follow and she would have only the faithful moon there to illuminate her ghostly, silent, passage.

At length she sat at the edge of the cliff top on the under-ledge where months before she had encountered Detective Sergeant Oxer. When she looked out to sea she could see nothing but the inky blackness through which came the black ship borne on with black sails. This was it, then? How far was it to the rocks below? It would be far enough, far enough to be certain. She wondered what would happen to her. The sea would reach out and take her body. She might never be found. What would they say then? She had just disappeared one night, off the face of the Earth. No more, nothing. No-one would never know how she had suffered in this wretched, rotten, life. She would leave nothing behind her. After a short while it would be as if she had never lived. Perhaps it had all been a waste of time, anyway?

The edge was only feet away. She could make out its indistinct edge in the moonlight. A few small steps, and then one big one. That was all it needed. That was how close it could be. That was how close it was. It seemed odd that death was that close; that death was a single terminal act when life was made up of hundreds of thousands of individual acts, all of which would, eventually, culminate in this final act. The last thing you have to do in this life is die, she told herself. That was the very last thing. Yet Richard would be free! The witch would have won. Her spell would have captured her victim and eliminated her only possible rival. So be it. She

would not live solely to attempt to frustrate their lives. Her life was worth more than that. Let her have him, and he her, if that was how it was to be. She rose to her feet. It was just a few steps!

Goodness! She did want to punish him, for his weakness, his duplicity, his treachery. For a moment the anger swelled and she would have done anything if it would have paid back her husband for the way she thought he had ill-treated her. If Detective Sergeant Oxer had passed by she would have willingly thrown herself upon him simply to be able to parade the fact before her absent husband. She was prepared to do anything, but not this. This was not an answer. This was the negation of everything; the destruction of the whole World as manifested through her eyes. That could not be. They all had to go on living. They could not perish at her hands. Weary, sad and wiser, she slowly retraced her steps. She would go home and wait; wait to see what sorrow the new day would bring.

“So, you are now rich and you own all of this?” Richard asked when Stephanie had finished her story.

“I own all the Estate and the House unless my father decides to take it back, and I have no-one to share it with. That is an invitation.”

“And it is one you know that I cannot take up.”

“I do know. Oh, Richard! If only it could be like this all the time. If only we could dispense with the necessities of life; of having to eat, sleep, cloth ourselves, have possessions, and work. If only we, you and I, could just stay here, in each other's arms, forever, feeling the warmth and movement of each other's body, immortal. We were not meant for this World, lovers of our kind. And I am afraid that we will not be recorded in the annals of History. No-one will write of our star-crossed love! But for the moment, for the present, we have each other.”

“Is it safe to stay here? This late?”

“Safe? Of course it is. We are miles from the nearest public road or houses. It is probably safer to stay here than it might be if we tried to walk back. Oh Richard, you can be so unromantic, yet I love you for it!”

“And I love you,” he said slowly, “although I suppose it is hopeless.”

“Suppose?” she echoed, lightly. “Hopeless? What ever do you mean?”

“Well, with me being married for a start.”

“And even being here with me, in my arms, makes you feel guilty? Forget Eileen - I would like to say forever, but I know that it is too much to ask of you. Forget her for tonight, just one night, and make love to me.”

“Stephanie,” he said reproachfully.

“What is it, Richard? That I am asking you to be unfaithful?”

“In a way, it is, to both you and Eileen. You once told me that you would never sleep with the man you were to marry.”

“That is true. I did say that. So you think that there may be hope for us?”

“And you do not?”

“I don't know,” she said wistfully. “I know that I will never marry anyone other than you. I shall wait for you in this World and if you do not come to me, I shall wait for you in the next. And you?”

“I will wait for you,” Richard said softly. “I do not know how Eileen will react when I tell her.”

“Tell her? Tell her what?”

“Tell her about this. About us. I think she knows how I feel, anyway.”

“Will you ask her for a divorce?”

“No,” he said firmly.

“Nor a separation?”

“No. I will leave the decision up to her. She is blameless.”

“So, if she decided to seek a divorce, you would not oppose her?”

“No.”

“And your work? Now that the trial is at an end, what will you do? Will you go back to your father's business?”

“I have given that some thought as well. I have had enough of building work. I will attempt to get out and back into teaching as soon as I can. I think Gwilym, Eileen's former brother-in-law, will be able to virtually step into my shoes. I am not sure that I even want to retain a share in it.”

“Your father will be disappointed,” she said, running her hand through his hair.

“He may be, but he will understand.”

“And Eileen? What will she think?”

“She will be pleased, and I think I would like to do something that would please her.”

“I see,” said Stephanie. “You are doing it for her?”

“Not really. I gave an undertaking to Mr Pennington that I would go back if the opportunity arose, and I think I will be more comfortable teaching. It has become my aim.”

“And one I would expect you to follow.” A long errant cloud slid across the moon, plunging them into darkness. “Hold me, Richard,” she said softly. “I suddenly feel cold. And you will not consummate our love?”

“No,” he said, drawing her closer. “Not now. I really could not.”

“Then just hold me,” she breathed, “and I suggest that we have a compact; an agreement. We should meet here once a year until you have your freedom. Once a year, on this anniversary, to celebrate our finding each other again and your victory in court. Once a year, here or at the cottage. What ever happens I am sure that my father will let me keep the cottage. No more or less frequently. I am sure that Eileen can spare you for one day in the year. Do you agree?”

“That we meet here once a year come Heaven and high water, no matter what happens or where we are?”

“Until you are free and we can be together.”

“And we do not meet at any other time of the year?”

“Certainly not, not unless you have your freedom. Then you may come to me at any time. Absence maketh the heart grow stronger.”

“It is a novel arrangement,” he said. “I doubt if anyone has ever done such a thing before. I agree. Once a year, on this day, it shall be.”

“Oh Richard!” she purred and nestled deeper in his arms. Far above her she could see the stars stretched across the night sky. “Oh Father Thomas is right,” she whispered. “There has to be more than just this.”

“Sorry? What?” said Richard, drowsily.

“Nothing,” she said softly, and closed her eyes. In time the darkness yielded possession of the sky and was expelled by the crimson beams of the Sun as it rose slowly beyond the ruins and the woods. It was another day and a new light fell upon the Earth.

THE END

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