

scandal?”

“I’m in trouble, Agnes. Something terrible has happened. I tell you, it is impossible. You can’t marry me.”

“Oh, I see! Now it’s supposed to be *me* marrying *you*, is it? And why not? Why? Tell me that.”

“Agnes! You’re not going to like this at all. You see, there’s been trouble over Millie Thompson. She’s having a baby.”

“Oh, Gabriel, we know that. The whole of Rothersey knows it. I fail to see what Millie Thompson’s baby has to do with you, I do, really.”

Councillor Purvis screwed up his nose into his eyes and wiped a crumpled handkerchief over his forehead.

“Look, Agnes!” he said quietly. “I don’t have to go into details, do I? The police insist — ”

“The police!” she gasped.

“Agnes! Don’t keep repeating what I say. It’s difficult enough to tell you as it is. Now, as I was telling you before you interrupted me, the police have insisted on my giving evidence in the Polenti case. I shall have to tell them everything.”

“Everything?” she said, with an admixture of horror and curiosity. “But the case has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me. I was blackmailed, Agnes. Blackmailed, don’t you see? You remember Donoghue, don’t you? Well, he tried to get money out of me over Millie Thompson. The police planted a trap but he got away. Now, they’re bringing the case against Polenti. Of course, he will be sentenced and the case will be closed in the hope that Donoghue will make an appearance, break cover again, if you like, when he thinks it’s safe enough. Anyway, what I’ve been trying to say is — it’ll all be in the papers.”

Miss Baldock blanched and sat up, rigid in her chair with a constipated intensity, like a tortured figure in marble. All the air she had expired only a moment ago she now breathed back in a long swishing sound that told the Councillor that the lady was not pleased. Indeed, it was very likely that an explosion would shatter his world in a matter of seconds.

“In the papers?” she muttered with a remarkably restrained whisper. “You, Gabriel, in the papers!? You and that — that — harlot? That common little painted prostitute? And all this under my very nose. And you dare to ask me to marry you when you have got that nasty little whore with child? Why, you — you — you pig!”