

CHAPTER TWO

Outside, a chilling, nose-reddening, wind was occupying itself with the freshly fallen snow. Across the playground and playing fields it blanched out fresh footprints, whipping the flakes high in the air in shimmering silvery spirals. Throughout the suburb it snatched the snow from branches and roofs, maintaining the semblance of a blizzard long after the fall of snow had ceased. People stayed indoors, or huddled together in shop doorways or what ever shelter might be found. An exception was the small, black-clad, knot of mourners who stood, in sharp relief, around a freshly dug grave in the otherwise virgin-white cemetery, nearby. Here, irreligiously and without any show of sympathy or remorse, the wind pressed home its attack, heaping drifts against the gravestones, eradicating paths, driving snow into the very grave as the group clustered together to keep warm or converse in barely audible and hoarse whispers.

"Its a terrible business, terrible! I mean, I don't think I'd have come all the way from Rhyl for anything else. But its been so sudden, you know; so sudden. Owen was my brother although I had not seen him for many years. We were split up during the War, you see. It makes her a sort of - well, Gwillam and I, we were talking last night about it. Gwillam? He's my husband! Well, now, the point is, she isn't really a blood relative at all, except through the marriage. A sister-in-law, you might say. But I had to come, I told him. I mean, she's got no-one now, no-one except the boy there, and there's not much of him, is there? And who's this then?" The two women turned their gaze from the group around the grave to focus on a newcomer who, almost unnoticed, had quietly and diligently picked her way through the submerged obstacles and now stood alone, a little distance away.

"I think I know her, ducks," answered the other woman who was, by now, becoming peeved at her inability to insert even a few words edgeways, endways, or any other ways, into the conversation. "I am sure that's the woman from the Estate Agent's, only it was a really long time ago when I saw her last. She came to their house."

"She is very handsome."

"Lor, I'd call her a beauty, especially with hair like that! That's why I think I remember her."

"Oh, you want to come to Wales for redheads, you know. We've hundreds of such beauties. Take our Dyllan's girl, Enid. Fair takes your breath away, she does, but - is there anyone from Owen's firm?"

"The man next to Eileen," hissed the English woman, indicating with a slight dip of her head. "That's Owen's boss, or at least that's the man he was working for at the time. He had his own business, you know."

"Ooooooh! Terrible, that! To fall all that way because the scaffolding wasn't fixed properly. She ought to sue them for everything they've got."

"The way I heard it, it wasn't the scaffolding and it was largely his fault, but its not the sort of thing to talk about here, over the coffin. It aint proper."

"Oh no," said Megan with a sudden shake of her head and not without a slight tinge of disappointment, "I couldn't agree with you more. But how will she manage now, you see? Look, he's saying something to her. I wish could hear it. I wonder what he's saying."

The tall, gaunt, thin-faced, grey-haired man, who had remained dutifully silent throughout the ceremony, had now permitted what he considered to be an adequate period for reflection and prayer. He touched Eileen's arm. "Should you not go home now?" he said hoarsely. From beneath the white-speckled black veil two dark eyes stared at him. There was a vague movement of the head, followed by an almost imperceptible nod towards the thickly-clad grave diggers to indicate that they could commence their final task. They stepped forward and, as the first clods of frozen earth struck the coffin lid, the young boy beside her was convulsed by a shiver which seemed to ripple through his thin body. "The boy?" continued the man.

Eileen leaned forward slightly and lifted her veil as she turned her head. "Are you cold, Jonathan?" she said softly. Instinctively the boy gripped his mother's arm.

"No, Mummy. I'll be all right - ." His voice trailed away as his breath was stopped by

the biting wind and he clenched his teeth to suppress a further shiver in the face of this new onslaught by the elements.

“Doesn't he look pale?” said Megan, watching carefully the activity at the grave-side. “Poor little mite. What'll happen to him now?”

“Happen, dear? What do you mean?”

“Well, her - without a man - how's she going to manage? And, you know, although I shouldn't really be saying this, she is a little strange.”

“I do know, and you shouldn't,” replied the other woman, curtly. “I pride myself on knowing her well. You don't live next door to someone for years and not get to know 'em well. Least-ways, I don't. It aint neighbourly. 'Course she'll manage - and I dare say that 'e 'ad 'is insurance.”

“Insurance, eh? How much?”

The question remained unanswered as the neighbour turned aside to look at the grave. The diggers paused in their task and respectfully indicated that the small group of mourners should, at the very least, move back if they were not prepared to disperse altogether.

“I'll see it through to the end,” repeated the widow in a low, determined, voice.

The diggers started again, muttering to each other as they shovelled clods of frozen earth and snow. “We'll have to bloody well dig the whole thing out again,” hissed one. “It'll never compact.” His words were caught on the wind and swept away. They did not reach Eileen and even if they had, she would not have heeded them. She stood as still as she could, bracing herself against the buffeting of the wind, her features masked by the veil which she clutched with one white hand. Her thoughts were uncontrollably confused. All kinds of aspects of her life flooded into her consciousness, unsought, random; a torrent of incidents, of words, little things said, large things left unsaid; of pleasure and pain; of their first, tentative, meeting one day after school; of her failing to say goodbye to him on the last morning of her husband's life, of good times, bad times, partings, meetings, quarrels, joy and misery. Now there was nothing except numbness; the unattainable past and no future. Time ceased now. It had ended. It was being interred there, before her, along with the broken, mortal, creature who had been, for better and worse, her husband. She watched the frozen earth raked into a formless mound. The diggers stood back and stared at her for a moment before turning away. Their task was, for the while, complete. It was over.

“The mason will come as soon as the weather improves,” said the Sexton, kindly. He had stayed at her side while the Vicar had hurried his frail body to the warmth and shelter of one of the cars as soon as his services were complete. “Our deepest sympathies,” the Sexton added, gently taking her arm once again with the intention of guiding her towards the undertakers who stood in the lea of the hearse, having considered it inappropriate to emulate the Vicar and sit inside. She seemed to resist, as if rooted to the spot.

Mr Wick came to her side somewhat purposely. “Its all over now,” he crackled in the softest voice he could manage. “Will you come?”

Eileen's hand dropped and her head slumped forward. For the briefest moment her knees seemed to buckle and fold under her, but partly through her own will and partly through the support of the men at her side, she maintained her balance. “Yes,” she hissed, and turned abruptly away from the mound. She would not look back.

Megan stood between her and the cars. Mrs Howard seemed to be hovering beyond. “It was good of you to come all that distance, especially in this dreadful weather,” Eileen said, drawing on an unsuspected reserve of strength and composure. “Will you come back to the house?”

“Oh, I'd love to but I've got to catch my train to make the connection at Euston, you see. Won't you come and stay with us? I talked it over with Gwillam and he agrees. We could easily put you in the spare room with the boy.”

“Not - no, not yet,” whispered Eileen.

“Perhaps when the weather's better, then? When you've found your feet? We could go to the mountains, up the railway to Snowdon. He'd like that,” she added, indicating with a nod of the head.

“You are kind, so kind,” whispered Eileen, “but - .”

“Just you think about it and remember that we'll always be there!”

“I'll write to you.” promised Eileen. “Thank you again for coming.”

She passed on by with her son behind her, sadly scuffing his wet feet through the snow. A car door opened ready for her to enter, but she stopped, aware, for the first time, of the presence of the red-headed woman who stood near the bonnet. For a moment their eyes met, and the woman moved her lips as if to speak. Eileen turned sharply away, lowering herself onto the rear seat of the car and closing her eyes. When she opened them again the cars were loaded, ready to move off, and the woman had gone.

“Brown?” A sharp voice aroused Richard from the reverie into which he had sunk since left by the Headmaster in the Secretary's office. He would have had to admit that much of the time had been spent contemplating the mature Mrs Hiller who, in her tight sweater and pleated skirt, displayed a striking figure from all angles of view. The newcomer was a tall, well built, blue-eyed man with close-cut grey hair. “I'm Crompton,” he continued. “The Head has asked me to conduct you around the school, that is if you are capable of arousing yourself. He thinks it will be of immeasurable benefit if you were to commence familiarising yourself with Rochester House and our ways, immediately.” As he spoke, Mr Crompton removed his steel rimmed glasses with a flourish, closed his eyes, and turned his head so that he no longer faced Richard.

“I don't know that I have the position yet,” said Richard, sheepishly, suddenly aware that Mrs Hiller had looked up at him sharply, and wondering why.

“I can assure you,” he said with his eyes now fully open, “That I would not be prepared to waste my invaluable time conveying you on a wild school chase, undertaking a special tour of the premises supported by expert commentary, if there were the slightest chance that you might be rejected. Shall we go? You have a coat?”

“A coat?” exclaimed Richard. “The school's not that cold, is it?”

Mr Crompton's eyes opened so wide that Richard flinched. “Cold?” he snorted. “Of course the school isn't that cold. We have four excellent Lancashire boilers down in the boiler-room which is, I might add, out of bounds to the pupils. Three of the boilers are operational at peak demand while the other is undergoing maintenance. They are more than adequate to keep you warm as well as the rest of us and, also, provide all the hot water that our smelly little boys require to maintain some semblance of cleanliness.”

Richard had the suspicion that he was not going to like Mr Crompton and began to assemble his thoughts and shape his attitude with that as a basis. Then it suddenly occurred to him that this idea of looking around the school might be an extension of the interview. Why else send him with the Deputy Headmaster when a prefect would have sufficed? That had to be it! It was a further test! To send him around with someone senior who had not been at the interview, just to see if he slipped up under relaxed conditions. But would anyone be relaxed in the presence of Mr Crompton? He glanced at the Secretary. Her sharp blue eyes were on him and there was the faintest trace of a smile around her lips. But was it sympathy? Or amusement at another example of Cromptonism? “Shall we proceed?”

Clutching his coat in the assumption that it would be required for some purpose yet unrevealed, even if it was to be unceremoniously shown the tradesman's exit, he followed the Deputy out into the corridor. Crompton paused and regarded him from behind dropped eyelids. “As we go around,” he started, “I will give you a general outline of the history of the school, our philosophy, teaching methods, the overall approach to teaching, school activities, and so on. We will undoubtedly meet many members of the teaching staff but I doubt that you will subsequently remember them. It will not matter. I think we should start in the library. Come!”

They climbed several flights of well worn stone steps until they paused on a landing where the staircase divided and halved in width. Before them, at the top of a dozen or more steps, stood a large, arched, wooden door, resplendent with enormous butts, hinges, and furniture, set in an ornate Gothic stone doorway. The second flight of stairs branched back on their left, running away up, out of sight.

“You have probably learned that Rochester House was founded just over one hundred

and thirty years ago as a private boarding school by an ancestor of Mr Larkins. The original Rochester House, named so because it, like the present, stood in Rochester Street, was demolished some twenty years later to allow the erection of a new building which now forms the nucleus of the school. It has, of course, been quite extensively extended. Day boys were introduced first in the nineteen thirties, and boarding was discontinued after the evacuation of the entire school during the second World War. Although it now has the status of a state-assisted Grammar School, many of the old traditions have survived, kept alive by the Headmaster who is, as I have mentioned, a descendant, through the male line, of the original founder. That is one tradition, we fear, that is coming to a conclusion as he has only one child, a daughter.”

Richard's mind seized on this point, recalling the comments about being married to the 'right kind of wife'. What a boost to a young teacher's prospects and career, to marry a Headmaster's daughter! He could not avoid dwelling on the premise that Miss Larkins, assuming that she was a 'Miss', still, and marriageable, must surely qualify. But, then, she might be a six foot six Amazon with a moustache.

“You are smiling, Brown? I have said something that amuses you?”

Richard apologised and said that it was nothing. After a glare from Crompton they mounted the steps to the library door. It swung open to reveal a long, high-ceilinged, room. Several heads turned and hastily looked down again when they realised who had entered. “It's grumpy!” was whispered and passed along until it reached the furthest end of the room where there was a sudden flurry of boys, then all was silent.

“The library!” announced Mr Crompton, taking no notice of the reaction to his presence though it was all perceived through his half-closed eyes. “In the days when Rochester House had boarders, this was the Chapel. You can see the traces of the monastic style in the windows and the roof. It was fitted out as a library after the war, using funds raised by the Parents and Teachers Association. It is now a tradition that each boy donates a book when he leaves. We have an excellent reference section and a flourishing lending-library well stocked with books carefully vetted and selected by Mrs Larkins. Boys are allowed to come here to study and read during breaks and dinner time, and also for up to one hour after school in the afternoon. As you can hear, the silence of a reading room is sought and maintained.”

They strolled between the rows of bookcases and reached the end of the room, stopping before a small antechamber which was separated from the library by a grill of ornate ironwork. “The altar was here, though morning prayers are now held in the Assembly Hall. That we shall see later.” He stopped talking and riveted his attention on a small group of boys sitting around a table in the last of the alcoves formed by the rows of bookcases. “Come and see me at four sharp, Thompson!” he hissed. The boy in question paled and looked up with panic in his eyes. Not one of the other heads was lifted from the work but Richard sensed their fear and trembling. “Is Cross not with you?” continued Mr Crompton.

“He's not at school today, Sir,” stammered Thompson, trying to rise to his feet without allowing the chair to scrape backwards across the polished wood block floor. Mr Crompton dismissed the speaker with a curt nod and a shutting of his eyes.

“That's some of Form 1A,” he said as they walked back down the aisle. “We have a system of numbering the Forms, the numeric part indicating the year, the letter indicating the grade, although you might be excused for wondering if the system is flawed, or the method of selection at fault. Each year up to the Fifth is split into four grades. Initially the boys are allocated on the basis of their eleven-plus results together with the former Headmaster's appraisal. Errors do occur and manifest themselves, but we aim to eliminate these in the first year. Form 1A should, as a consequence, end up with the brightest, most promising, boys from within the catchment area for that particular year. To encounter them makes one wonder.”

They reached the landing again and Richard's guide pointed upwards. “That use to be the dormitories. After the evacuation the area could not be used because it became infested with woodworm. It has taken several years to eradicate the problem and reinstate, but the new classrooms are now used exclusively by the Sixth forms. Come!” Richard followed Mr

Crompton up the stairs and along a gloomy corridor off of which there was a number of classrooms of various sizes. The floor was set high in the pitched roof and the classes were illuminated by small dormer windows and mean artificial lighting. The overall impression was that it was dark and dingy, hardly conducive to serious, applied, concentrated study.

“We will not disturb them. As you will be involved solely with the first year to begin with, there's little point in formally introducing you to the Sixth form on this occasion.” Richard pricked up his ears. “I speak, of course, on the assumption that the position is offered to you and you accept it,” added Mr Crompton.

“Of course,” said Richard, a little disappointed.

They descended a wide wooden staircase which was flanked by ornate carved balustrades and banisters, to reach the lobby that led to the Assembly and Dining Halls. Here they encountered a young, fair-haired man dressed in a dark green tracksuit over which he wore a thick woollen sweater. On his feet was a pair of grubby off-white plimsolls. “Mr Dennet!” exclaimed the Deputy Headmaster with biting derision in his voice. “Your attire is not that which would be considered suitable or appropriate for your present location.”

“Sorry, Mr Crompton,” gasped the young man, appearing breathless. “Staff Meeting! No time to change - must go!” And so saying he jogged away.

“That's Dennet, our Physical Education Instructor, as they like to be called these days. I do not think for one moment that he has entirely adjusted to his employment here. I fear that he never will.” The eyes closed and the guide continued his sightless way with Richard at his heels. “We do believe in giving the young boys a great deal of sport and physical training. It assists their development and helps curb their nasty little excesses.”

“Essential for young lads,” commented Richard, desperate for something to say.

“Exactly! Now this wing houses what we term as the Middle school, that is the Third to Fifth years, up to Ordinary Certificate level. Rochester House has an excellent reputation for academic results. After the preparatory work in the first two years, this is where we mould those who have the ability into young academicians; the Civil Servants, Scientists, Engineers and Dons of the future. Streaming is essential, of course; separating the wheat from the chaff. We have none of that Comprehensive rubbish. You wouldn't think of planting lilies with weeds no more than you'd raise mink with swine. Our methods are basic, old-fashioned, and well proven. And discipline!” Mr Crompton's face broadened into a chilling smile as he mentioned the word. “Discipline!” he repeated, opening his eyes very wide.

They passed on, along seemingly endless dull, poorly decorated, corridors, up and down dingy, ill-lit staircases, until they descended a flight of stairs into what appeared to be total darkness. The temperature dropped suddenly and Richard shivered. “Normally these doors would be open,” said Crompton, “but for the present weather.” He groped and rattled a handle. As the door swung open a blast of cold air swept across them and Richard was dazzled by the blinding white light from the carpet of snow in the playground. “This is why you need your coat,” laughed Crompton, grimly.

They crossed the quadrangle, leaving fresh tracks. The temperature there seemed to be exceptionally low as if the surrounding school buildings had some peculiar property of trapping the cold and refrigerating it. “We could reach the laboratories through the school but the passageway and stairs are rotten and the whole area is out-of-bounds until we can raise the funds to have it repaired.”

They passed through the Physics Laboratory, which looked damp and chaotic, followed by the evil-smelling Chemistry Laboratory, and came to the Woodwork shop where little boys were busy taking neat, uniform, pieces of wood and transforming them into indescribable shapelessness. “Oh, Mr Crompton, Mr Crompton, if you please,” wailed an almost falsetto voice. “Could you pursue this matter of first aid equipment? I'm out of plasters and I'm down to the last two bandages. I've spoken to Mrs Hiller and she said that she's waiting for the requisition to come back from you. Could it be expedited just a teeny-weeny bit?”

“It shall be done,” said the Deputy Headmaster majestically. “It is incredible to think, Mr Brown, that for centuries up to not one hundred years ago, the letting of blood was considered beneficial. People, by and large, must have been accustomed and totally adjusted

to the sight of bleeding and blood. But not Mr Fox! He defies Darwin and clearly originates from some other stock. The merest thought of being without a packet of elastoplast sends him into paroxysms. At the sight of blood he is liable to faint but, fortunately, our little craftsmen are made of sterner stuff and have learned to not only attend to themselves, but to revive him, also. Mr Fox is responsible for handicrafts, but not Art. That is our Mr Sorretti's department. Our Italian Master. Come!"

He started for the door but Richard hung back. He had felt degrees of discomfort throughout the stages of his visit, yet here in the workshop, with the sweet smell, the attendant noises, the shavings, he felt reassured and totally at ease. He remembered an occasion from his childhood when he was taken by his father to the sawmills. The noise of the giant revolving saws as they ripped through the hearts of stout trees; the pulleys and their long snaking leather belts; the hum of machinery; the heaps of sawdust which he wanted to place in a bag and take home - to no particular purpose - just for the sheer joy of having some! There had been the tales of limbs severed; blood, gore, and sawdust. He had asked, innocently, if all the dismembered items were taken to the conveniently placed adjacent abattoir. Yes, that memory of blood and sawdust.

"Please Sir! Smith's cut himself. It's ever so deep and there's lots of blood. I think we can see the bone! Will we have to amputate?"

"Come, Mr Brown. Rest assured that Mr Fox will, or will not, cope, as the case may be. We have not lost any of the little brats yet."

They walked through Dennet's domain, the vast, empty, gymnasium, and then returned to the gloomy conglomerate of the main school. Richard tried to picture it in the light and warmth of a summer day. It was difficult. Then they were back, virtually at the spot from whence they had started.

"This floor is given over to the school administration, with the Headmaster's study, mine, the Secretary's office, and the interview room which you have already seen. Further along the corridor we have the Staff room and opposite that, the Prefect's room." The door of the last was thrown open to reveal a long, shabby, low-ceilinged interior which was sparsely furnished. A good-looking, fair-haired youth detached himself from a group sat near the window on uncomfortable-looking chairs, and approached them.

"This is Martin, our Head Boy this year," said Mr Crompton, fulfilling at last his promise to introduce someone to Richard. "Mr Brown, who has been interviewed for the position of preparatory Maths Teacher to replace Holt."

"Colin Martin, Sir," said the youth, extending his hand which Richard clasped as he nodded his greeting. The other prefects had now stood and stared at Richard with well-meaning, yet unreassuring, smiles. Richard felt uncomfortably that they were ready and eager to thrash anyone who came into their lair. He smiled back, inclining his head again.

"Our prefect system follows its traditional role, serving a dual purpose. Firstly it gives the boy the right kind of light responsibility and allows the natural leaders to develop. Secondly, it eases the disciplinary and organisational demands on the teaching staff. It works very well."

"Prefects do have privileges, Sir," said Martin, but he did not elaborate farther.

"We will conclude our examination in the Staff Room," said Mr Crompton, heading off once more, towards a door on the opposite side of the corridor. Richard followed and found himself in a large, bright, room, well-decorated and comfortably furnished, which contrasted sharply with the grim, spartan, appearance of the Prefect's room. It seemed more in keeping with the plush reading rooms of a high quality hotel, or a London club. At one end stood a large polished conference table. Elsewhere plain, but inviting, armchairs were scattered in groups throughout the room, the walls of which were lined with a range of packed bookcases, broken only by the odd writing table and the windows. The sole occupant, who grunted as they entered, approached to meet them. He, like Mr Crompton, towered above Richard with a weather-beaten, gothic, face set below thick grey hair. He had a remarkably firm grip.

"You must be Brown," he said flatly. "I'm Smithson, Latin." He spoke to Richard in a monotonous voice for a full fifteen minutes, covering the subjects of school discipline,

curricula, politics, Suez, and the World at large, maintaining a fixed, almost sullen, expression. Richard said nothing. He did not have an opportunity to do so because Mr Smithson appeared prepared to talk, ad nauseam, and probably would have done had not the door opened and Mr Larkins entered. "Well, well," he said, "staff meeting over?"

"It was brief," droned Smithson. "Veni, vidi, vici! Denet agreed to the proposed revision of the Friday afternoon timetable or, to be more exact and quoting Mr Hargreave's words, he arrived late and was presented with a *fait accompli*, one might say in *veritum*."

"Hargreaves is our senior French teacher," hissed the Deputy Headmaster.

"No early Friday afternoons for him next term. Mrs Hiller has recorded the matter in the normal way."

Mr Larkins nodded his approval and turned to Richard. "You've finished your inspection?" he asked, glancing at Mr Crompton and receiving a pair of dropped eyelids by way of affirmation. "Come along to my Study, then, and we'll tie up any small details there may be still outstanding."

The lofty, superbly decorated, Study was vast. A huge leather topped, inlaid, pedestal desk crouched in the centre of the deep carpet while a matching table was set against a wall. Beyond stood a large, intricate, Victorian fireplace over which was hung the dark portrait of a fierce-looking man who Richard assumed to be the School's founder. Two walls were flanked by high bookcases, crammed with dusty red and brown leather-bound volumes while opposite a pair of French windows, set in a framework of apple-green curtains, revealed a snow covered balcony, and the white playing fields beyond.

Mr Larkins navigated the desk and settled in his swivel chair. Mr Crompton, who had followed Richard into the study, clicked shut the heavy door behind him and effectively blocked Richard's line of retreat. Again, a glance from the Headmaster in his Deputy's direction received a silent, concealed, signal in reply.

"You will appreciate that we have not made our final decision. We have other candidates to interview, and we will require a couple of days to consider the matter most carefully. No doubt you will wish to do the same. In any event, what ever the outcome, we will be writing to you before the weekend. Thank you for coming - Mr Crompton?"

The dismissal struck Richard as being abrupt, without true formality, lacking the usual pleasantries. Perhaps he had failed to make a good impression on his tour? It was too late to attempt to start now, as Mr Crompton ushered him into the hallway which lay at the threshold of the main entrance. A bell rang and, like thunder, from above came the sound of hundreds of feet thumping across the floorboards, as if a stampede were under way. The building seemed to reverberate and shake.

"Dinner time," sighed Crompton, bracing himself. As Richard closed the outer door, he looked back and enjoyed a brief glimpse of the Deputy Headmaster standing, angrily waving his arms, in a sea of upturned, awe-struck, faces. The vision accompanied him all the way to the railway station.