

CHAPTER THREE

To a stranger the town of Eastgate was visibly past its prime. For centuries it had survived as a rural seaside community, clutching to the remotest tip of Kent, an unimposing group of dwellings high, if not always dry, on the narrow strand which stretched between two chalk headlands. Its first settlement was, indeed, ancient. The local archaeological society had excitably found traces of stone and iron age man, and had deposited relics in the local library where few knew of their existence, and even fewer came to examine them. But the facts of the discoveries were passed, in triumph, to the London Museums, filed and cross-referenced, while all the time the sea remorselessly consumed the evidence. By the time of Richard's visit to Greater London, most of the remnants were below the high water mark, and disappearing rapidly.

The Romans had come, seeing the white cliffs as their first glimpse of Albion, but they had pressed on into the hinterland. The first Christians had followed several centuries later, blazing a trail which was pursued by European and Scandinavian hoards, Saxons, Normans, French, Dutch, Spanish; each in turn had made, attempted, or contemplated the trip across the Channel at this point. Beacons had been stacked high on the forelands, tinder-dry, and lit at the approach of the Armada. They were there during the Napoleonic Wars when a vast treasure fleet had foundered in a terrible storm off the Eastgate Deep, and had given rise to the local folklore of gold and precious stones to be found in the yellow sands. The size of the population was limited by its subsistence on fishing and farming of the poor, shallow, inland soil, and it remained more or less static for centuries.

Static, that is, until the South Eastern Railway, eager to impress brokers and prospective shareholders with the laying of a track mileage in excess of its competitors, had promoted an Act of Parliament, driven its rails right onto the treasure-laden sands and built a small terminus station just above high water. Their nearest competitor had responded by finding an alternative main route down from London, linking the towns that the South Eastern, in its haste, had bypassed, and approached Eastgate in a wide arc, passing over the SER tracks to build their station, with its magnificent facade, not a quarter of a mile away. Thus, in less than a decade, the bewildered inhabitants found themselves endowed with two railway stations and a frequent, but usually slow, and for many, unwanted, service to the principal towns in Kent and direct into the heart of the Metropolis; a journey which had hitherto been considered as appropriate for none to make, other than fools and novelists who would insist on attempting to connect, in their perversity, with the Dover Mail at Canterbury.

The converse, the journey in reverse, was as practical and produced a more dramatic and lasting effect on Eastgate and its unsuspecting inhabitants. Victorians eagerly flocked to the seaside. For a brief period the town remained unspoiled, a place of great charm, with gracious, leafy, flower strewn walks beneath avenues of trees, along the cliffs and undercliff, in small havens from the stark, bare, chalk headlands. And there was always the sea, accompanied by its predominately northerly wind which swept unhindered from the Arctic. It was indecently healthy. The arrival of the railways was too late for Eastgate to acquire the fashionable elegance of other South-Coast resorts, nor did its natural beauty possess the grandeur and scale of the Atlantic coast. Indeed, so small and fragile was its beauty that it was encroached upon and buried by tenements and hotels before anyone became aware of the fact. It was left to the activities of a small band of talented Victorian water colourists to record its passing and their efforts now cluttered the shelves of the library along with the artefacts of the earlier ages.

And, as had been the pattern through those ages, the invading hoards changed with the times. The fashionable Edwardians yielded to influxes of Midlanders and stranger, word-clipping, folk from the North, who sought alternatives to Blackpool and Scarborough. In a slow crescendo, interrupted only by the War, came the London day tripper, cheeky-hat aloft, beer-drinking, sunbathing, and more if somewhere with a little privacy could be found. They arrived late morning in great caravans of ancient coaches which had scraped and squeezed their way through the Medway Towns, raced one another along the inadequate roads, bolting

between the sprawling hop fields, to disgorge the human cargo so that they could savour a few hours of indifferent weather while the driver tried to remain sober as he attempted to reassemble the mechanical parts in time to attempt the return journey. Long, snaking, hissing, trains, which wheezed as they struggled up the demanding gradients dictated by the Downs, brought thousands at a time. And they spent; spent money; money in the cafes, in the public houses, the amusement park, and in the stealthily spreading amusement arcades.

Hostilities brought yet another alien folk to the area. Attracted by its strategic position and the wave-levelled topography of the hinterland, thousands of American airmen descended upon the local airfield, which became enlarged beyond all imagination. They spent their money, too, and, unlike the holiday makers, they spent the whole year round. But they demanded more sophisticated forms of amusement and recreation, forms which the indigenous population could not provide in their entirety, and had, as a consequence, a lasting, corrupting, influence on the outnumbered natives.

This was the town to which, on being demobbed, Arthur Brown brought his young Scottish wife and their two bairns. It was a ghost of a town, with houses damaged or disappeared altogether, others standing empty, deserted, windows broken and cob-webbed, fittings removed, the families and their possessions long since evacuated and now showing no inclination or intention of returning. The Brown's choice had been dictated in part by Moira's desire to move from the clinging and penetrating damp of their small flat in Canterbury and her wish to live, once again, near the sea. Eastgate was selected because it had a glut of inexpensive rented accommodation, albeit of a quality not greatly superior to that they vacated. Being experienced in the building industry, Arthur found work easily. After a short while he persuaded two of his colleagues to join him and achieved his ambition when they set up a small jobbing-builders. As the town began to recover from the ravages of war, the demand was great. First there was the reparation of war damage then, as the holiday trade picked up, the fitting work in the arcades and hotels grew. The best work was seasonal, but the small enterprise subsisted on general building work in the lean winter months and, aided by the financial and administrative skills of his wife, Arthur watched the business grow and when the opportunity presented itself, bought out the interests of his partners. And with the growth of the company their quality of life changed and improved. They moved house several times, always to somewhere larger and more imposing, until they settled in a road of large detached houses near the cliff top, in what was referred to locally as the 'better part' of Eastgate.

Now, a decade and a half or more after the War, the town's prosperity had swung into a decline. Possessing cars, able to travel and explore the length and breadth of the country while the more adventurous penetrated Europe and beyond in a perverse reversal of the trend of centuries, seduced by cheap, packaged holidays of sun, the population sought to spend their vacations elsewhere, and the industry of Eastgate collapsed. One by one the large hotels succumbed and were demolished or converted into flats. The terraced boarding houses were decimated as their gorgonic landladies retired and sold up. Many were purchased and converted by distant authorities for use exclusively by elderly people. And there had been one mortal blow. The Americans had gone, retreating behind rows of so-called defensive missiles elsewhere.

Arthur Brown was fortunate. The demise came too late to materially affect his progress in the local life. The company was established, stable, with a steady workload and workforce, surviving off of the indigenous annual expenditure. If he could not trace its formation back to the previous century, as two of his competitors could so boast, he could relax in the knowledge that his company was among the largest and most respected in the area. As long as the competition remained static; as long as no-one became greedy and attempted to gain more than his fair share; profitable work was assured and the future livelihood of the company and that of its employees was secure.

But he had not established a bed of roses. The business was not without its problems, the principal one of which being the need for it to be managed on a day to day basis. It was one of Arthur Brown's failures in life that he had taken but few steps to relieve himself of that burden. Success had not gone to his head, though. His feet were kept firmly on the chalky

ground and when his two children, born within a year of each other, shortly before the declaration of war, came to go to school, there was no question of private education. Both attended State primary schools from which Richard, by virtue of his own talent, intellect, and application, had passed through Grammar School, graduated to University and on, then, to pursue his chosen profession. Sandra was less fortunate. She did not couple her inherited good features with an outstanding brain and no exciting career was mapped out for her. She was highly musical, but not to the extent that her parents considered it a career she could pursue. So, now in her early twenties, she found herself at home with her mother, helping with little aspects of the business, and living in the vague hope and expectation that some day a husband would appear, very much in the manner of a letter through the letterbox.

On the day of Richard's interview, Sandra had little to do and sat in idleness on the window seat of the front bay, watching the snow carpeted drive for some indication of her brother's return. She knew well enough the time of the train that he planned to catch. She could calculate with reasonable accuracy when he would arrive at the house, whether he took a taxi or walked. Yet, even when the train had barely left the London terminus and was still threading its way past the cold white roofs of the suburbs, she was sat there, in readiness. Richard would have taken a taxi had there been one on the stand. The journey had provided him with ample time for reflection and preparation; a rehearsal of what he would say to his mother and sister, and that which he would not say to his father. Rather than wait, he walked down the station approach and along the otherwise deserted sea front, smarting under the aerial bombardment of snow and sand. Inevitably the route to the house took him past his father's office and yard, laying as it did next to the Fire Station and opposite the recently closed gasworks. He was not sufficiently a coward to make a detour in the first place and, having elected to take the direct route, was incapable of passing the builder's yard without calling in, no matter how painful might be the result.

It transpired that the grasping of the nettle was effective. Miss Logan, grey haired and seemingly incapable of ageing further, who had typed the company's free estimates, purchase orders, and invoices for well over ten years, looked up from behind her vintage typewriter, expressed her surprise at his presence, and informed him that his father had gone out. In a friendless fashion she asked if she could make him some tea. Richard was the boss's son. In Miss Logan's mind it would be sycophantic to treat him with anything other than mild hostility. Arthur Brown had noted her attitude but had let it go unchecked, declaring to himself that the lad had to fight his own battles. He had to. Why should not his son? Richard might have felt a degree of injustice in this, but he did not object to the philosophy, though he often wished that his father applied it on a broader and more consistent basis and not just this narrow application. And, anyway, knights who tackled dragons were supposed to end up with fair maidens, and Miss Logan clearly guarded no such prize. So even when, as now, she refrained from breathing fire, he gave her a wide berth, politely declining her offer, and went home.

"He must be walking," exclaimed Sandra, somewhat agitated by the thought of Richard perishing in the snow. Her mother was more sceptical.

"I don't know. Perhaps he caught a later train, or the service has been delayed by the weather. Oh, do sit down, dear. You make me feel nervous."

Sandra waved her hand impatiently and returned to her window-side vigil.

"You won't bring him home any quicker," Mrs Brown continued. "He'll come when he comes, and no sooner."

"Oh, Mother! Why must you attempt to be so calm and rational about everything?"

Mrs Brown did not reply, but stole quietly out of the room and into the sitting room where her husband huddled himself before an open fire, sipping hot lemon, and irritably nursing a head cold. "Richard should be here soon," she said for the third time since he had come in. "Now, you do promise that you'll not quarrel with him?" Arthur emitted a small sigh and stared deep into the fire. Could he promise such a thing, he wondered as he contemplated her question? Could he, while there were such deep, unbridgeable, rifts of contention between them, and one in particular? "Promise?" repeated his wife, close at his side. He nodded, just a little feebly and with no indication of the positive spirit that she so desired to

see.

"I will attempt not to quarrel with him, providing I am not provoked."

"Oh Arthur!"

"Oh, Moira!" he grunted, trying to capture her tone and expression. "Damn it all. This is my house and he is my son. Shouldn't I have some say in it all?"

But he's a fledgling, poised at the brink of the family nest, wondering whether to fly. A wrong move now and he could discover that he can fly away altogether, for ever, or fall to the ground and perish."

"Rubbish!"

"Arthur!"

"Fledgling! As far as I am concerned he's some puffed up prize cockerel who struts about as if the world owes him a living, doing nothing, doing - all!"

His wife's lips straightened as her features became taught. "Will it help if you quarrel with me?" she cried, clenching her fists and giving a slight temperamental stamp with her foot.

A weary smile spread across her husband's face, but before he could answer Sandra's voice was raised excitedly from the lounge. "He's here, Mother!" she cried. "He's here!" A crash followed as at least one potted plant was swept aside in her eagerness to reach the front door before Richard did.

"The girl is plain clumsy," Mr Brown sighed.

"I'll clean it up, whatever it is," retorted his wife. "But be quick now, before he comes in - do you promise? Just for this afternoon at least?"

"Oh, all right. I promise, if it will make you happy. But he must not be provocative! You can tell him that. He must not provoke me!"

Mrs Brown stopped her son in the hallway and blocked his access to the sitting room where he knew there would be a fire. "But I'm cold, Mum," he said, rubbing his hands together. "It's been snowing outside."

"It's your father," she hissed. "He's in there, all grumpy and prickly. Come in here first and we can talk." Sandwiched between mother and sister, Richard was hustled into the lounge. Sandra demanded the fullest account of the day's happenings, but her mother waved her to be quiet and addressed herself to her son, speaking in earnest. "Your father is at home!"

"I know," he hissed. "You've just told me."

"He's got a nasty head cold and isn't in a very good frame of mind. Please say nothing to upset him."

"Me? Upset him?"

"Don't be contrary, Richard. You know exactly what I mean." Richard drew himself and nodded soberly. Unbeknown to his mother, he was prepared for the situation, and the likely confrontation. He knew how the stage would be set.

"In that case," he said deliberately, "it would be better if I were to go and talk to him first. You can have all the details later, Sandra. If I survive." Richard took the armchair on the opposite side of the fire to his father. Mr Brown neither moved nor switched his gaze from the flames. "Mother tells me you are going down with a bad cold. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," grumbled his father, blurring the words in an effort to make it sound worse. There was a long silence during which Richard found himself able to study his father, but Mr Brown felt unable to look at his son. Eventually the older man summoned his courage. "How did it go?" he asked weakly.

"Not very well, I think," said Richard, a little woefully. Their eyes met as Mr Brown scrutinised his son's face to see if he could ascertain the truth of the matter.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said brokenly.

"One of these things," shrugged Richard, full of the uncomfortable sensation that he was colouring. "Anyway, I'm not so sure that I really liked the place. They showed me around. It looked like some kind of rundown institution. We'd do well there if they had some money - ."

"Schools are very competitive."

"But I won't know definitely until next week. They're going to write."

“That's a shame. What will you do now?” Richard smiled briefly.

“I'll wait for their rejection slip, first.” His father stared at him intensely and raised an eyebrow, but he did not comment further.

Dinner passed quietly, peacefully, and harmoniously and that evening, after his father had thoroughly dosed himself and retired to an early bed, Richard found himself alone with his mother. Before them the fire was dying, the failing light of the last flames flickering around the lowly lit room. Sandra brought in two steaming mugs of cocoa and then, as if by pre-arrangement, took herself to her room, to disassemble her toilet or whatever she did as a routine to occupy the forty-five minutes it took for her to get ready for bed.

“You managed your father very well. I think he believed you and you deserve congratulations for that. But what is the truth of the matter? Richard?” He had been almost half asleep, fantasising. He felt a mental numbness as if the day's events had sapped all of his intellectual energy. Right then, he did not want to think about the problem, yet he found himself forced to carefully consider his reply to his mother's question.

“It is as I said,” he said at length, nursing the mug and sipping between every other word. In the half light he saw his mother smile; a familiar smile; the one which had always appeared when she had said 'what are you doing?' and he had answered 'nothing'.

“You think you have the position?”

Richard shrugged. “It really is as I have said,” he replied, laying great stress on his words. “They told me that they haven't arrived at a decision and that they will write in due course. What I think isn't that important.”

“But you must have created a good impression,” said Mrs Brown, unaccustomed to the concept that her son could create any other, “or else they would have rejected you on the spot.”

“I suppose that could be the case. But they will have other candidates to interview and probably wish to see all of them before making their final adjudication. I would have had to have been very bad to have been rejected there and then.”

“Of that I'm sure,” mused Mrs Brown. “But what was your impression?”

Richard shrugged again. The truth of the matter was that he did not know the answer. At first he was highly optimistic, buoyed up by the chance remark made by the Deputy Headmaster. On the train he thought more about what he would say when he arrived home than about the interview and the impression he had made. And now that the images of the visit were beginning to slip out of focus, to blur. “I don't know,” he said lamely. “I don't think I'm capable of objective thought about it.”

“If you are rejected, if you fail, what then?”

“I expect I'll try again, elsewhere.”

“And if the position is offered to you, you will accept?” The heart of the fire collapsed inwards, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney born by the draught which coaxed the dying embers back into one last show of life.

“I think we should go to bed,” he said firmly.

The next two days passed without incident. It was true that the arrival of the post brought the entire household to a brief, tremendous climax each day, but no further direct reference was made to the question of Richard's prospects. On the first day his father, still under the weather as he described himself, had paid a brief visit to his office, then returned and spent the remainder of the day immersed in his favourite pastime, the construction of an extensive model railway. It filled an upstairs room that ran above the garage from the front to the back of the house, an extension by the builder himself for that specific purpose. It represented Eastgate at its zenith, with the two stations at one end of the room and the London termini at the other, as accurate in its detail as the space, scale, and records would permit. Resplendent varnished, delicately lined, engines and rolling stock conveyed imaginary miniature passengers between the two. What was conceived as a lifetime's work was gradually approaching completion.

Richard had spent countless happy, full, hours there, or in his father's small workshop. His introduction to the Aladdin's cave had been gradual, but once in and initiated

in the mysteries, and taught the skills of model engineering, painting, lettering and lining, it had been discovered that he was every bit as adept as his father. Mrs Brown passed through the periods of temporary widowship, with her daughter as companion, employing her customary shrewd pragmatism. At least she knew exactly where they both were, and vaguely what they were doing. And, minor cuts, grazes, burns and electric shocks aside, neither could come to much harm. On this occasion, when Richard joined his father, he found no magic in it, and obtained sparse satisfaction. His father, too, seemed to work aimlessly. No reference was made to *the problem* and Richard persisted in resisting all consideration of the matter.

But on Sunday morning he found himself in the house alone. The rest of the family had gone to the Presbyterian Church where his father, once a month, was accustomed to preach against the evils of the World; avarice, greed, sex, and the worst evil of all, the hegemony of union with Rome, while maintaining the virtues of love, chastity, compassion, and the unity of the Family. This day Richard had a headache, or thought that he ought to have a headache, and remained at home. His mother's question of a couple of days earlier fell across his mental path, blocking all advancement of thought. It was a hurdle over which he could not vault, but perhaps he could clamber. If the post was offered, had he the courage to accept it? Never for one moment had he considered the possibility that he might reject an offer. Yet now that door was opened, misgivings tumbled out and piled before him. That sea of young faces, for instance. Could he keep discipline? Could he keep to the curriculum? Would he have to join a union? And, if he did, what would his father say? In all probability he would be disowned altogether. Then there would be lodgings to find which would have to be within easy reach of the school as he had no independent means of transport and, certainly, no intention of reverting to cycling. Then, he would be paid monthly. Could he subsist for a month in London without borrowing from his family? Could he afford to live in London on his salary? Could he live - alone?

That small band of friends whom he had known throughout most of his academic life, lived with, enjoyed the company of, was now disbanded and scattered to the four points of the compass. In London he would have to start anew without reference, without counsel. He would have to make new friends, or have none at all. There was danger, and in the danger, excitement. But having enjoyed a secure and protected life, he was not sure that he relished the idea of living dangerously. He had chosen to climb. He could climb sideways, but if he did it had to be with the sole purpose of finding an easier route up. To descend would mean disgrace, even if such a descent now might appear to be the safest and easiest option. Above him the cliff was sheer with an overhang which blotted out all vision he might once have enjoyed at the summit. And if he was to advance, hand and footholds would have to be hacked out of the virgin rock, just to reach the first ledge. And after that? Another precipice, crevice, or overhang. Yet he was resolute. There would be no ignominy. There could be no turning back.

In the middle of the following week the vulnerable equilibrium of the Brown household was shattered. The first post brought not a letter, as Richard had anticipated, but a large, brown, envelope which some might have described as a parcel. It lay there, at the breakfast table, beside his porridge dish, begging to be opened, but with as much explosive potential as a pin-less grenade. He was greeted by quizzical looks from the remainder of the family who all doubted that the packet could constitute the dreaded missive. "Shall I open it?" he said, trying to conceal his nervousness.

"You had better," growled his father. "I don't want to go off to the office and have the matter decided in my absence, not knowing what I'm coming home to."

Almost trembling, Richard slit open the envelope and diligently removed the contents. Had he thought the matter through, he would have realised that one answer would arrive in a small envelope while the alternative was likely to be accompanied by a fair amount of documentation. There it was, in the form of two sinister brown files, a wad of papers, a handbook for the guidance of the parents of prospective children and, among it all, a lengthy letter on the School's crested notepaper. Mrs Hiller had done her job well.

"What is it?" exclaimed Sandra, but her mother waved her to be silent. His father's face darkened as his thoughts raced in advance of those of his son. Richard saw this and held

the letter out across the table.

“Do you wish to read it?” he asked.

“No!” snapped Mr Brown. “I do not even want to touch it!”

“Shall I read it out?” asked Richard, full of elation and ignoring, if not forgetting, for that moment at least, the contrasting emotions of those around him.

“No,” snapped his father. “Don't read it aloud. Not in my presence. They have accepted you, haven't they?”

“Oh, Richard!” exclaimed his sister, clapping her hands and being fully prepared to throw her arms around her brother's neck, but being discouraged by a black look from her mother.

“And you are going to accept their offer?” Richard tried to suppress his triumph and the grin as he nodded towards his father, but he failed. “So you are going to leave home, then?” continued Mr Brown, wiping his mouth on the napkin and leaping to his feet in a rapid movement which sent his chair tumbling backwards.

“I will have to,” replied Richard, almost apologetically.

“Fine!” snapped his father, reddening. “Fine! As long as we all know exactly where we stand!” He looked down at his wife who seemed to be struggling for words. “This is what you get for twenty years love and labour! All that struggle and hardship! And then he leaves home!”

“Oh, Arthur!” wailed Mrs Brown.

“If that is the way you feel,” continued his father, reaching the door, “I suggest you leave now!”

A surge of anger swelled inside Richard. Before he knew what was happening he, too, was on his feet, shuffling the papers before him. “Very well,” he said curtly. “I'll go today. I wouldn't wish to stay anywhere if I'm not wanted!”

“Richard!” exclaimed his mother.

“Good!” snapped his father. “Be gone when I come home.”

“You mean that?”

“I mean it!” The door slammed leaving the words echoing in Richard's ears as his face grew hot and tears welled up in his eyes. From the table, in what appeared to be growing darkness, two white-faced women stared at him, horror-struck.

“Oh, Richard,” sighed his mother. Slowly he sat, burying his face in his hands. Below him, everything, every support, each little rock, nook, and cranny, every foothold and ledge, all had been swept away by the avalanche. There was now no question of going back, down. He could climb nowhere, no way, but upwards, into the unknown.