

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Your request is quite extraordinary and most irregular,” said the Headmaster from behind the safety of his desk. “Most unusual! I do not think I have ever encountered such a case in all my years. Have you, Mr Crompton?”

“I know of no precedent whatsoever.”

A few days had passed since the receipt of the package and the offer of a teaching post. At his request, Richard was at Rochester House.

“But why are you being so precipitous, Mr Brown?”

“I did explain at my interview,” said Richard, anxiously, “that I am available immediately. I think that a prompt start will only be advantageous, even if it is on a reduced basis at first. Otherwise, I will have nothing to do except sit at home and do nothing. Here I can familiarise myself with the pupils, the staff, the School, and the curriculum.”

“You have not had trouble at home?” asked Mr Crompton sharply, looking through the narrow slits of his all but closed eyes.

“Goodness, no!” Richard exclaimed, trying to appear bright and confident. “My father is as anxious as I that I start work.”

“Well, we do have a difficulty in respect of the Lower School mathematics. Mr Pennington has extended his duties to cover the gap temporarily, but the problem of the extra preparatory work for this year's Advanced Level students is beginning to arise. I cannot pretend that your presence would be anything other than beneficial. It is just this suddenness; it is so hasty, so precipitant, and, of course, it does fall outside the delegated powers I have from the Committee, not that those cannot be extended on this occasion.”

“I am very eager.”

“Clearly,” drawled the Deputy Headmaster. “You will have, too, the problem of finding accommodation.” Richard nodded. “Speak to Mrs Hiller. She maintains a small register of likely short-term accommodation for both single men and married couples.”

“Thank you, I will - but - .”

“As for the date for your appointment, I must consult the other members of the Selection Committee. I can accomplish this during the next twenty-four hours. If they are in agreement, I

think we could add an addendum to the minutes.”

“Thank you,” repeated Richard.

“Rather than have us write to your parents' home again, may I suggest that you call here tomorrow afternoon, say at three o'clock, at which time I will acquaint you with the outcome. I do not believe that there is anything further to discuss at this time. Good afternoon, Mr Brown.”

“It does not appear to be a particularly auspicious start to your teaching career,” added Mr Crompton, almost leering, as they reached the door. “Good afternoon, Mr Brown.” The door closed behind him, leaving the two principals to confer. Outside in the corridor, a fair-haired man was hovering and although his face was familiar, Richard did not recognise him immediately.

“Hello!” he said, cheerfully. “You must be Brown, our new Maths man. Saw you the other week with old Grumpy. I'm Dennet, physical education and games. And I'm in trouble again!”

“Trouble?”

Dennet's voice dropped although he did not lose his cheerful demeanour. “Disciplinary trouble,” he hissed. “Bringing the school into disrepute. Appearing in public with no trousers, or something of the kind.”

A nearby door opened and the shapely figure of the school secretary emerged from her office. She seemed to glare at Dennet, then called Richard's name quite softly, and beckoned. Once inside she spoke in her normal voice. “Mr Larkins has asked me to help you resolve your accommodation problems.”

“I'm booked into a residential hotel at present,” winced Richard. “It is rather

expensive.”

“They can be,” said Mrs Hiller, soothingly, revolving the snake-shaped bracelet on her left arm. “You will find good accommodation rather scarce and hard to find, whether you seek full board or a plain bed-sit. There's such a demand in London, you see, such a demand - students, nurses, immigrants, and the Irish - they are the worst. They seem to come and take over the place. Let me see what we've got.”

She thumbed through the papers of a thick manila folder on her desk, diligently turning the pages with her long, lacquered, fingernails. “No - no,” she said, almost to herself, “that'll never do - we tried that one - now, how about trying Mrs Morgan's? It is bed and breakfast only, but you will find a number of restaurants around the shopping centre and her house is within walking distance of the school. It can't be more than fifteen minutes away. It is in Grove Crescent. You know it? By the North station!” She raised her voice as if she was trying to extract an acknowledgement from Richard to the effect that he knew where it was, which he did not, and that he was being perverse in not offering to walk there with his eyes shut.

“If you will give me directions?”

“Of course,” said Mrs Hiller, sounding a little disappointed and seeming to make it appear that he had failed the first test of his adult masculinity. She first telephoned the establishment in question to ascertain that there was a vacancy for a clean, professional, young man, then drew him a little diagram. “I think this is your lucky day,” she said, despatching him.

The town centre consisted of a wide road, flanked by two, drab, brick arcades, the monotony of which was broken only by the presence of rival departmental stores at either end, and the entrance to a luxury coach operator's premises half way along on one side. Side roads darted away, some to quickly fail as cul-de-sacs created with blocks of offices of flats, but others sneaked past short rows of miserable Victorian terraces before breaking into wider expanses of detached and semi-detached housing. In the summer, the Council brightened the main thoroughfare with flower-strewn baskets suspended from the tall, regular, street lamps which lined the pavements and hinted at a tramway origin with their ornate filigree. They planted, too, with geraniums and petunias, the large earth filled troughs which, to the consternation of many a driver on frosty mornings, formed the central reservation. Now, in mid-winter, it was bleak and looked at its worst with the few shoppers and passers-by wrapped deep in thick layers of cloth and fur, sloshing away, looking only at the pavement as they bent against the fine, driven, rain which had supplanted the snow. Near one end of this shopper's paradise, one side road wriggled its way towards the North station and into Richard's destination, Grove Crescent. He traced its meanderings on Mrs Hiller's sketch. She had been faultless in every detail. At a junction he found himself confronted by the low, grey, concrete building of the station which proudly claimed a fast, frequent service to London and, beyond, to the sunny South Coast. It would be convenient, he thought.

Grove Crescent arced away from the station, running in a generous semi-ellipse until it came back to meet the tracks again, trapping between the dwellings and the railway fence, a segment of land which had long ago been the local market, but which now was host to a plant hirer's yard and a small printing works. A diminutive road, Grove Street, squeezed alongside the fence and ran as a chord to the Crescent, facilitating access to this nucleus of industry. The houses in Grove Crescent were tall, resplendent, built with a deep red brick, and each appeared to be generally smart and well cared for, a mixture of terraced and semi-detached dwellings of Edwardian origin. The Morgan household was one of the latter, situated on the railway side, half way around the arc.

Mrs Morgan was clearly waiting in anticipation as she opened the door indecently quickly when Richard rang the bell. “I do not like to keep no-one waiting on my doorstep,” she said, confused, looking anxiously up and down the road and, in particular, at the houses opposite. “Do come in.” She was a small, mousy-haired, pale-faced woman with large, lifeless, brown eyes. For most of the time her face was expressionless, but she was known to feign anger in a most convincing manner, and it was generally agreed among her gentlemen

that her occasional smile was most unpleasant. She was very particular about her privacy and, to a slightly lesser degree, about her appearance. Her hair was inevitably carefully arranged and tied up in a tight bun, but there was talk of rare glimpses of her, usually on Sunday mornings, being seen somewhat dishabillé. Then it would be whispered at breakfast that Mrs Morgan had been seen with her hair down! Those who had resided there the longest held the view that the incidence of such sightings was on the increase and they conjectured that the poor woman was showing the first signs of senility. Clues were avidly sought, and alternative, even preposterous, suggestions proffered. Then, that very morning, a well worn toothbrush had been found on the hall-stand, the discovery of which had brought the breakfast table to a state of enigmatic ecstasy. So far, no rational, or even credible, explanation had been advanced. Poor Mrs Morgan! She was quite ignorant of all the sizing and summing up that surrounded her, though she was far from being unable to play the game herself. "This is a respectable house, Mr Brown. You have no luggage?"

"I thought I should see the room first," Richard stammered. Mrs Morgan's lips tightened.

"All of my gentlemen find their rooms very much to their taste," she said tersely. "Follow me. It's right at the top." For one who appeared to Richard to be quite an old woman, Mrs Morgan demonstrated remarkable agility in scaling the stairs all the way to the last landing in the house. "Eight is my maximum," she said, not showing the slightest hint of breathlessness. "Of course, the longest staying have the very best rooms. Ah, here we are, Mr Brown!"

The room was large but sparsely furnished, set high in the pitched roof and lit by a single, small, dormer window. It was dark. The bed was neat and appeared soft and receptive to Richard's prod. There was a wardrobe, a pair of easy-chairs, a chest-of-drawers and, in one corner, a small wash basin. "You are a teacher?"

"Yes," said Richard, not without some pride at being able to thus answer. He walked to the window. Not far away, through the damp, misty, atmosphere, he could see the Crystal Palace radio mast springing up from a belt of dark, evergreen, trees.

"Most of my gentlemen are professionals," she said with equal pride. "You would like somewhere to sit and work, I imagine?"

"I suppose so," said Richard vacantly, looking around.

"That's fine. I've a small writing table. I'll get Mr Anderson to bring it up. There will be no extra charge."

"That's most handsome," thought Richard as he nodded his approval.

"There's a gas fire and you have your own meter, there. Normal use of electricity, lighting for instance, is covered in the rate for the room, but electric fires are not permitted. Do you smoke, Mr Brown?"

"No, I don't."

"That's good. I do not like my gentlemen smoking in their rooms - the dreadful smell, apart from the risk of damage or fire." Richard nodded again. "I have simple house rules," she continued. "Of course you'll have your own set of keys, one for the room and one for the front door. There's no callers after nine in the evening, and no ladies are permitted in the rooms at any time. I'm sure you understand, Mr Brown. Breakfast is at seven-thirty sharp. You wouldn't want it earlier?"

"Oh, no."

"Good! Sometimes Mr Hughes has an early start. He's our traveller, Mr Hughes. Been with me fifteen years - one of my first, you know."

"Really?" said Richard, trying to imagine what had led Mrs Morgan to start taking in boarders, and beginning to feel thankful that she had.

"But my City gentlemen find seven-thirty early enough. They just pop along to the station and - hey presto!" Mrs Morgan made a generous sweeping gesture which suggested that British Rail employed a broom to convey their commuters to their London destinations. Then she reiterated that the rate for the room included breakfast only, confirmed the terms, asked for a month's rent in advance, in cash would you believe, overwhelming Richard who found himself only too pleased to accept.

"I'll go and fetch my cases from the hotel," he said in conclusion.

"Good," said Mrs Morgan as she opened the front door. "I'll have the keys ready for you when you get back."

"I have landed on my feet, then," said Richard to himself, as he walked away to collect his belongings. "No-one can fairly describe that as inauspicious." When he returned to Grove Crescent in a taxi, Mrs Morgan was waiting for him, brandishing two keys.

"Just one thing, Mr Brown, "she called as he started up the darkened staircase. "School holidays!"

"Yes?" Richard was puzzled.

"You'll wish to retain the room?"

"Of course," he said, suddenly understanding. "But not breakfast. Not if I'm not here, that is." A reduced rate was agreed to apply to those periods when he was absent, and he made his long, twisting, way up to his new room, to unpack, familiarise himself, and adjust to his new surroundings. Having laid out the clothes so diligently folded and packed by his mother, and the few personal items that he had been able to carry, he sat in one of the chairs and again studied the documentation he had received from the school Secretary. There was the timetable, which looked far from being onerous, though he was expected to set, and therefore mark, a considerable amount of homework. He found the curriculum for the First and Second years, algebra, arithmetic, and geometry, all at such elementary levels that the subject matter presented him with no fears whatsoever. Then he examined, form by form, the names of the boys, over two hundred of them, which he would have to memorise and match with their faces. He scanned the pages looking for Browns. On the first sheet, near the top, one name caught his attention and struck a vibrant chord: Cross J.O. Why was that name familiar?

It grew darker outside. Richard stuffed the gas meter with shillings, drew the curtains, and turned on the light. It was dull, but it would suffice for that evening. At the realisation that he had barely eaten since breakfast, he felt hungry. On impulse, he put on his coat and passed down, through the silent house and on, out into the street. He mingled with the trickle of passengers flowing from the station. They represented the prelude to a daily torrent. He slowly retraced his steps and made his way towards the town centre, exploring the side streets, identifying and noting the number of restaurants and the extent of each menu, when displayed.

His choice fell on the Yellow Dragon, a tired-looking, dusty, Chinese restaurant tucked away down one of the side roads, but he soon began to doubt his wisdom. The tablecloth was dirty and stained. The decor looked old and uninspired, while the service was slow, inattentive and near to being incomprehensible. Nevertheless he enjoyed the meal, turning a blind eye to an alien hair in the chop suey.

On reflection, as he sat and waited for his bill, he decided that he should follow a definite plan of campaign as far as the assessment of eating-houses was concerned. A logical approach to eating out was required. He would visit each of the local establishments which offered meals the prices of which fell within the inelastic limits of his pocket, evaluate their service, decor, food, and value for money, and award marks for each item. He awarded the Yellow Dragon high marks on the last two counts, but scored it low on the first. He noted that throughout his meal he appeared to be the only customer. Other people must eat, he thought. But where, and when?

"It is velly early, still, sir," said the inscrutable waiter, pointing to a watch which indicated the time to be nearly seven o'clock. "Velly busy later. You see!"

Here was an aspect of his new life which really needed organising. No doubt he would eat at the school during the day, and he had still to sample the nutritional benefits of Mrs Morgan's breakfast, but he had promised his mother that he would have a proper evening meal and that was one of the first questions she would ask. He resolved to establish a routine and regular time for his evening meal. Self discipline in this respect was vital. He started back, walking through to the main street and along the shopping centre which was practically deserted. He stopped outside another restaurant, small, narrow, displaying a far from appetising menu, but with remarkably low prices. He would go there next.

Several lights were on at the house when Richard returned and let himself in. Although he had the uncomfortable feeling of being watched as he made his way from landing to landing, and past the end of the stair carpet, none of his fellow boarders appeared. All stayed behind closed doors, feeding their gas meters, or burning illicit electricity, no doubt. He had reached his door when the word “laundry” descended seemingly from the ceiling upon him. Mrs Morgan had made no mention of that!

From his window he could see the glow from the roof lights of the printing works and, beyond, a near-empty suburban train was leaving the station. Not much farther away he detected a new feature: several enormous floodlights which appeared to mark the site of a railway marshalling yard. Suddenly weary, he flopped into a chair. He was more than tired. He felt cold, depressed and, quite unexpectedly, lonely. But this was it, was it not? This was what he had quarrelled with his father over, and had chosen. It would have made no difference whether or not they had quarrelled. He would still have ended up, perhaps not at Mrs Morgan's, but somewhere, on his own, alone. Except, had he not quarrelled he would not, maybe, have felt now so lonely, isolated and unattached. It was inevitable, quite unavoidable. An irresistible force and the immovable object, so he reminded himself, but even though he did, he felt no better, and nothing he told himself appeared to lighten the crushing burden he felt in his heart.

Dutifully he took out some writing paper and wrote a short, business-like, informative letter to his mother. It was clumsy and a flurry of errors forced him to copy it. Time dragged on. At nine-thirty he addressed the envelope and sealed the letter inside, but he had no inclination to go out then and post it. He was contemplating the temptation of an early night when there was a sharp rap on the door followed by Mrs Morgan's voice, shrill and raised. “Mr Brown, Mr Brown! Are you there?”

“Goodness,” Richard, “what on earth could have happened?” He opened the door full of apprehension.

“Oh, Mr Brown. I am sorry if I disturbed you but I forgot one thing. I usually do a warm bedtime drink for my gentlemen in the winter, They normally have it in the breakfast room but, as it is your first evening with us, would you like me to bring it up to your room?”

“That's very kind of you, Mrs Morgan,” he replied, relieved, “but would you mind terribly if I forewent the pleasure this evening? I have a bit of a headache and I was just about to go to bed. Would you mind?”

“It is a bedtime drink,” she said a little sharply.

“I do feel just a little queasy,” he added. In the poor light of the landing, Mrs Morgan's nightmarish smile almost scared the life out of him.

“Oh, I am sorry, Mr Brown. And you haven't had breakfast here, so it can't be that. Are you sure I can't get you something else, then? Liver salts? No? Well, don't you worry about it. Just have a good night's rest and we'll see you at breakfast. Seven-thirty, don't forget! Oh, yes,” she added from the top of the stairs, “if you feel cold in the night, there should be a couple of extra blankets on top of the wardrobe. Good night, Mr Brown!” Richard looked. There was none.

Later, he lay in bed in the semi-darkness, listening. From below, doors opened and closed one by one until all signs of there being other life in the house petered out and it fell silent. From outside his window came the dull, endless, mechanical throb and rattle of the presses hard at work, while, farther away, a steam locomotive hissed and hooted its swan-song as it fly-shunted wagons. This was it, then. He had taken that first step; climbed upwards, taking with him an indefinable weight. Perhaps it would turn out to be a millstone? Tired, he might be. It was a long time before he fell asleep.