

## CHAPTER FIVE

Richard awoke in a totally confused state next morning. It was still dark and he realised that he had no idea, at first, where he was. The room was totally unfamiliar; he could not recall where to find the light switch and, worst of all, he had no clue as to what the time was. In a panic he fumbled around in the area where he thought his watch should be and was thankful to discover that it was not yet seven o'clock.

At twenty minutes after seven he made his way, tentatively, downstairs. The breakfast room, pointed out to him by Mrs Morgan on the day before, was empty, but the table was set. A row of cereal packets stood on the sideboard along with a bowl of sugar, a jug of greyish orange juice, and a large basket of bread rolls. He walked the length of the room, picking his way around the high-backed, ponderous, chairs and peered through the window. In an unreal half-light he could make out a short, damp, garden which appeared to terminate in a cracked, rendered, brick wall. Then, on one side, projecting out as if it had been added as an afterthought, lay what he assumed must be the kitchen. He could see the door and a window, and through the window, the kitchen.

"Good morning!" barked a voice from behind him. "I'm Hughes. You must be our newcomer." The speaker was a tall, balding, man with a large moustache. He wore a brown chequered suit and a drab green tie. He was clearly counting the number of places set.

"Yes. I'm Richard Brown."

"It's a good job your parents didn't call you William!" enjoined Mr Hughes, blandly. A sharp cackle startled Richard. It was Mrs Morgan having entered behind Mr Hughes.

"Oh, Mr Hughes," she cried. "You are so funny! You'll be the death of us all before you're finished! You will! Such wit, Mr Brown. So quick, and such repartee! You have to hear him to believe him!"

"It is all part of the basic requirements of my profession. - stock in trade, you might say. How to jolly folk along - Put them at their ease." Richard felt anything but at ease.

"Mr Hughes is our travelling salesman, Mr Brown."

"Technical Sales representative, please, Mrs Morgan." She turned to Richard, beaming ghoulishly. "I leave my gentlemen to sort out the seating arrangements themselves. Mr Hughes always sits at the head of the table because he has been here the longest."

"Yes," said Mr Hughes, once more surveying the table. "We'll move Anderson down one place and put you - here!" Richard moved to the chair and, as he did, the door opened and Mrs Morgan's gentlemen filed in. Mr Hughes introduced a confused Richard. Greetings were exchanged, and the company settled to the more serious matter of eating breakfast. "Oh, Anderson," Hughes called above their heads, "we've moved you down a place." The old man shook his silvery-grey head sadly, but submissively, as he passed behind Richard to the next seat. Breakfast continued. Generalities were exchanged and Richard caught snippets of the conversation from the far end of the table.

"Consolidated Worm is down again."

"Yes. Another week or two and it will be time to buy."

"What about reinforced Girdles?"

"I'd get out quick as possible. They'll never hold up. If you want something steady, safe, which will keep growing, get into insects."

"Worms aren't insects," someone said. Quite suddenly the tranquillity of the breakfast room appeared to be shattered. A door, which Richard assumed to be that of the kitchen, crashed open and raised, angry, voices emerged.

"You drink it! I've been to the trouble to get it for you. Drink it!"

"I shan't! I don't want it. You've put something in it! It tasted different." There was a further crash like breaking crockery.

"Oh you wicked, wicked, old man! Just look at what you've done! As if I didn't have enough to do without having to clear up after you!"

“Didn't do it on purpose.”

“On purpose? Glasses of milk don't just jump about the kitchen, do they?”

“I want to go.”

“You'll have to wait. I can't stop now.”

“Harpie!” Astonished, Richard watched as the breakfast room door swung on its hinges as Mrs Morgan entered, beaming, bearing a tray covered with plates of bacon, eggs and sausages. She appeared quite normal, unruffled, and no-one at the table reacted in any way other than that which was appropriate for the occasion. But when Mrs Morgan left, he heard the kitchen door swing on its butts, and the same masculine, rasping, voice. “You're back, are you? Where have you been, you old bag of putrefaction!”

Around the table Mrs Morgan's gentlemen were tucking in, passing the condiments, and acting as if nothing unusual had happened. Richard looked down at his plate, half in anticipation of finding something odd there, but the food looked quite ordinary. He glanced out of the window. He could see the kitchen window and, as he studied it, Mrs Morgan appeared in the garden with a saucepan, emptied the contents into one of the dustbins, and retreated into the kitchen. It looked so normal. He cut open the egg and watched the yoke flow across the plate. What was it in the kitchen? A parrot? Or could it be the radio? Not one of his fellow breakfasters had reacted it in the least. Puzzled, he ate on.

“Must go,” announced the smartly-dressed, plump, man who sat almost opposite Richard. “Are you on the road today, Hughes?”

“Could be the big one today,” replied the technical sales representative, winking and tugging at his moustache. “Could be the big one!”

From Richard's side came a sound like a bath emptying. It was Mr Anderson drinking his tea, and it appeared to be the signal for the rest of the gentlemen to rise, en bloc, and leave the room without observing any order to their going. Slowly, Richard wiped his mouth and followed. At the door he paused and turned. There was Mr Anderson, his cup cradled at his mouth, with his beady eyes fixed on Richard from above the rim, brimming with hostility as if to say, “Move me down a place, would you?” From the hallway Richard could see the door that led to the kitchen. It had a small, glazed, observation panel, but this was steamed over.

He had a whole morning to fill. Not far from the station he found the library which was modern in appearance, spacious, and well equipped. But when he asked if he could join, the smart young lady at the counter told him that as he was not a ratepayer, he would need a sponsor. He was handed a form to complete. She even put pencilled crosses against the relevant entries, an idiot's guide to library enlistment. His first choice as potential sponsor fell on Mrs Morgan, and he later raised the subject with her. But the good lady threw up her hands in horror and declined, saying, “Oh, Mr Brown! I could never enter into such a commitment!” So, even later, Richard took the form to Rochester House where Mrs Hiller gave him a warming smile, rotated her bracelet, and, with heavily scented equanimity, endorsed the application in the correct place.

Mr Pennington was in the Headmaster's study when Richard was admitted. The senior mathematics teacher was a Scot, born and educated in Edinburgh, but one result of his self-imposed exile was that little of his accent remained. A kind, friendly, man, he greeted Richard warmly. “I thought it appropriate that Mr Pennington was here, Mr Brown,” Mr Larkins said stiffly. “We have carefully considered your request and we have agreed that you can start immediately, that is on Monday next?”

“That's excellent!” exclaimed Richard.

“I trust that we will all think so. I have asked Mr Pennington to devote as much of the remainder of the afternoon as he can spare to you. As Junior Mathematics Master, you will be responsible to Mr Pennington for all matters to do with the curriculum and your subject. Before you go, would you see Mrs Hiller and sign all the necessary forms of which, I fancy, there is a number.”

“As simple as that!” thought Richard. “I'm in!”

“So, we look forward to seeing you on Monday morning?”

“Of course.” Outside, in the corridor, Mr Pennington took his arm.

“Come into the common room. We can hide in one of the corners and get a little privacy there.” Like magic, Mrs Hiller appeared at the door to her office.

“Tea or coffee?” Mr Pennington looked quizzically at Richard.

“Oh - what ever you have. Tea would be fine.” She retreated and Richard followed the mathematics teacher into an otherwise empty room.

“We have it to ourselves!” announced Mr Pennington. Then he began to speak in earnest, but always in a kind, almost fatherly, voice. “I think we ought to talk about the problems. These next twelve to fifteen months will be critical for your career. You've come straight from training college?”

“I did a six month course after University.”

“Ah, ha! But no actual teaching experience?”

“No. This is the first position that I have applied for.”

“Mmmmm. I think, then, that the first thing you must realise and accept is that there is no substitute for teaching experience. And, secondly, we must see that you take things cautiously at first. There is a learning curve to teaching, like everything else, and it is no exact science. Never confuse teaching with the content of your subject matter, which you should know better than the back of your hand. As a new teacher, your biggest problem may be establishing the respect of your pupils, discipline, in one word. Regardless of the way some around here carry on, it isn't simply a matter of shout and clout. If you resort to that in any except the most extreme cases, you've failed. Not that I am necessarily opposed to corporal punishment, you know. However, starting now you may be fortunate as even the First year boys have been here long enough to know what is expected and required of them by way of conduct. It might be a different story if this was the start of a new year, and both you and the new boys had to go through learning curves.”

In the warmth of the room, on that late afternoon, Richard began to feel drowsy. Mr Pennington's voice was soft, soothing, and gradually Richard's thoughts slipped away from what the senior maths teacher was saying into an indefinable semi-daydream. Mr Pennington perceived what was happening, and chuckled inwardly. “Come on!” he said, lightly tapping Richard's knee. “Finish your tea and we'll pay a quick visit to the little rascals. I could talk all the way to infinity and back if you allowed me to. Except, by definition, I'd never reach there.”

The maze formed by the school buildings worried Richard. “Is there a school plan?” he asked.

“Plan?” queried Mr Pennington, fearing that a school plan was a new-fangled device dreamed up at a training college.

“A general layout plan. Of the classrooms?”

“I don't know. If there is, Mrs Hiller will have it. Wonderful woman, Mrs Hiller! But I wouldn't worry. You'll soon learn the geometry of the essential locations; the Lower School classrooms, the assembly hall, the dining room, the library, the way out! And we're trying a new system this term. Previously the boys have stayed in their classrooms for all normal lessons and the teachers have gone to them. This term we are varying the classrooms, which means that the teachers remain static while the pupils move. I don't think it will be a success. Never did. Too much movement.”

They made their way into the section which housed the Lower School finding, in one classroom, Form 1A involved in a History lesson. The History teacher, Mr Johnston, was a dull, little, man in a tweed suit, with steel rimmed spectacles, who whined at the classes in a falsetto voice, caring little whether or not the pupils were interested in the subject, only that they learned and could, like parrots, recite the dates of battles and English Monarchs. At their entry the class stood with enthusiasm, more, perhaps, to relieve the boredom than to greet their new Mathematics teacher. As Richard's arrival was announced to the class, he scanned the rows of desks. He now knew some of the names and wondered which one was Cross. It had been a long time since he had stood before a real, live, class of boys, and never before had he felt in such a position of power and influence.

They followed a similar procedure in each of the other three classes which made up the first year, but there was insufficient time to start on the second year. “School uniform is

compulsory,” said Mr Pennington as they watched the boys tumble out into the street. “Caps must be worn with uniform for the first three years, but the fourth year upwards have dispensation from wearing them. You should have received and read, I trust, the school disciplinary code and procedure. Disorder marks are given for minor offences and recorded in the disciplinary book. Three such marks in any one term automatically results in a detention, which can also be given in the instance of worse offences. Serious bad behaviour, or three detentions in a term, means a visit to the Headmaster's study. Strictly speaking, he is the sole person who can inflict corporal punishment, but a blind eye is turned at times. But I repeat my advice. If you can, do not indulge. Once you have, I think that you are well on the way to losing the real battle - that of educating your little charges. The Prefects use a slipper - power without responsibility - you've met Martin, have you not? Fine boy.”

Most of the school's masters were in the Common Room when they returned and Richard was taken around to complete any outstanding introductions before passing along the corridor to complete the formalities and documentation for Mrs Hiller. “The stage is set, then, Brown?” said Mr Larkins who appeared suddenly, as if he sensed Richard's presence in the Secretary's office. “Be here between eight-thirty and eight-forty five, and Mr Pennington will show you the ropes, as they say. I am sure that you will have nothing to worry about and will cope admirably.”

Richard walked back to his lodgings. Near the station he came upon several boys messing about and throwing the cap of one of them, a small, desperate, pale-faced lad, from one to another. They were oblivious of Richard's approach and ignorant of his presence until he addressed them loudly wearing his most censorious expression. The cap fell into the gutter, and the offending children fled. He let them go and watched the victim recover his property. “Are you all right?” he said sternly. “What started it, anyway?” The boy hung his head and mumbled a reply which Richard found totally unintelligible. “Do you live near here?” he added, looking around. The head shook, and the cap was thrust back on top of the untidy hair. “Then, why are you here? Why are you not at home?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“Well,” said Richard, stretching his back, “I think you'd better get home just as fast as you can. And mind the roads! Do you understand?” The boy nodded and scurried away into the darkness of the winter's afternoon, leaving Richard wondering what induced parents to allow their children to wander the dark, poorly lit, streets instead of impressing on them to go straight home.

The evening began to slip by. There was an almost overwhelming temptation to stay snug in his room, reading, but he had made his resolution and promised his mother. He would have to go out. He would try that small restaurant that he had noticed in the main street the day before. As he descended the stairs of the almost silent house, he wondered where Mrs Morgan's gentlemen ate. Perhaps he could ask?

The interior of the restaurant was larger than the restricted frontage suggested. The room was deep and opened up, transversely, like the top of a tee, at the furthest end from the road. The tables, each capable of sitting up to six people, were separated from one another by wooden partitions which extended upwards to about head height. The result was that a customer's visibility was limited to the tables directly across the gangway and the ends of those situated in a diagonal position. Conversations, however, could be overheard without one being aware of the listener's presence. It paid to be prudent in what one said there, indeed one should take care in choosing where one sat. It came as no surprise to Richard to find that there were few other diners in the restaurant, a fact that afforded him the widest choice of tables. He settled himself at the junction of the tee which gave him a good view of the comings and goings, such as they were. After a short while a short, thin, dark-haired girl bustled up, stared at him almost as in disbelief, as if he had no right to be there, and went away without uttering a word. She returned and slapped a badly typed and misspelt menu on the table before him. Then she disappeared again.

He decided on the steak and kidney pudding, with boiled potatoes and peas. The act

of doing so made him feel hungry and he awaited her return. After a while, she was back and, taking a small pad and pencil from her apron pocket, stood alongside him. "Well?" she said. He ordered.

"What about afters?"

"Afters?" The menu was consulted again. "Jam pudding and custard?" he said and began to feel ravenous.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please."

"Number thirty-four," she muttered, slapping a sheet, torn from the pad, on the table. "Three and four pence, please."

He paid, and settled back to await the meal and any other developments. He began to wish that he had brought a book or newspaper. In this stagnation there was no amusement or distraction. He was not even outnumbered by Chinese. "Number sixteen," called a shrill voice which made him jump. A hunched up man rose from one of the tables nearer the window and shuffled his way towards the rear. It was then that Richard realised that there was a servery at one of the ends of the top of the tee. But why number sixteen? The old man collected a tray and shuffled back to the front, dribbling and breathing heavily. Richard looked at his slip. It was number thirty-four. Where were the other seventeen diners?

"Number twenty-seven," announced the shrill voice. This brought a thin, pale, emaciated girl in a grubby frock rearwards to the servery. He remembered having noticed her as he went in and being struck by her large, dark, and sad eyes. He tried to guess her age, but he could not decide on a figure. Perhaps they were table numbers, then? As he was trying to count the number of tables to see if this could be the explanation, his number was called and he was on his feet. The tray held a large plate and a small bowl, each covered by a dull aluminium lid. Beside the cutlery there was a steaming cup of something which lay between coffee and tea in appearance, and smelt like neither. At the table Richard removed the cover from the plate. There was no doubt about it. The meal looked rather distressed and as if it had known better times. The potatoes were small and perfectly spherical, giving every indication of having overstayed their time in an automatic peeler. The steak and kidney pudding was neat and symmetrical and had, no doubt, been recently prised out of a rather small tin. The peas were very green and hard. Low marks for food!

He had just cut through the pudding and was beginning to savour the smell when the door opened and a clatter of heels heralded the arrival of a newcomer. Richard looked up and caught his breath. There, coming down the aisle towards him was the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen, on or off the cinema screen. He was transfixed as she passed him and disappeared behind a screen near to the servery. He found that he could hardly continue to eat as he waited for her to order and go to collect her meal, but he was denied that treat. Instead, the dark-haired waitress took a ready-prepared tray straight to her and then an older woman appeared from the servery and spent some time at the table-side in conversation, completely blocking the limited view that he enjoyed when she returned to the kitchen. Oh, had that he had sat elsewhere! Could he move, or would that appear too obvious?

He pondered over his pudding. It had turned cold by the time that he finished. His drink, on the evidence of its surface, was undergoing some fundamental chemical change before he reached it and placed the cup to his trembling lips. Yet he could see so little of her! An arm, her leg, and an occasional glimpse of her delectable profile as she leant forward. Then the realisation that she must be a regular customer burst upon him, brightening him considerably. Yes, that was a fair supposition. She had been waited upon, whereas everyone else, all three of them, had collected their meal. And there had been the conversation. There could be no doubt of it. Whoever or what ever she was, wife, lover, mistress, she was a regular and privileged customer. He waited and watched her leave, feasting his eyes on her face and every movement of her shapely, sensuous body. Oh, there was now no doubt about it! No doubt at all! That was the place to eat!

He lay long in bed that night, awake, picturing her exquisite features, the green eyes, the long, silken, auburn hair. He conjured up the picture and feel of her small mouth with its red, moist, lips. He fantasised about her luscious body, inventing ecstatic images in his

imagination. He was with her, here, there, everywhere. It was pure, and impure. It was every thing he wanted. She was with him, part of him. They were as one, joined - in bliss. Too late he realised that he had not fulfilled his promise to his mother to write again and inform her of the day's outcome. And now it was too late. With this sobering thought, the fantasies evaporated, though something of the essence lingered. Richard sighed and turned over. He would go down to Eastgate, anyway, that weekend - that coming Saturday - tomorrow - no, no, now today.

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