

CHAPTER SIX

The solitary letter that Richard did write reached the Brown household at breakfast time. Although it reposed at the side of Arthur Brown's plate, and he recognised his son's handwriting, it was addressed to his wife and he automatically passed it to her. She was watched closely as she opened the envelope and scanned the all too brief lines. "You realise from whom it has come?" she asked her husband.

"I recognise the handwriting. What has he to say?" Moira glanced at her daughter who lowered her head.

"He appears optimistic," she announced.

"Optimistic? What does that mean?" Mrs Brown inhaled deeply and explained that the optimism related to a further interview which would be the subject of a second letter. That they had not received, yet. "You mean they're allowing him to start? Fools!" Thus saying he stomped away. Mrs Brown pulled a face at her daughter and the two women completed their breakfast in peace and at leisure.

"You do seem troubled today, Arthur," cooed Miss Logan. "It's not the business, is it?"

"No, Emily," he sighed, "it's not the business. That's never done better. It's all domestic." Miss Logan thought that was odd. Divisions of the normally harmonious Brown household were rare, almost unheard of. "Richard," he added in a dejected tone.

"An ungrateful boy," she spat. She saw her employer's eyebrow rise slightly, but she went on. "You know me, Arthur. I speak my mind! I am afraid of no man!"

"But there's a few around here who are afraid of you," he thought.

"He's an ungrateful boy! After all that you've done for him!"

"I've told him that."

"And?"

"And nothing. Moira and Sandra take his side. I'm outnumbered and isolated, outflanked. Rejected, in my own home!"

"Its disgraceful. There ought to be a law against it!"

"Trouble is," he continued, "its a kind of catch twenty-two problem. Have you read Catch 22?"

Miss Logan frowned. "Is it about cricket?" she asked hopefully.

"No!"

"Its not one of those sex novels, is it?"

"I don't think it could really be described in quite that way."

"Oh!" she said, clearly disappointed.

"The point is," he continued, regretting the introduction of the literary reference, "its a situation that I cannot win. If I let him go his own way and he comes to grief, as I'm sure that he will, then its my fault for not giving him proper advice. If I give him what I deem to be proper advice, I'm accused of bias, acting out of self-interest, trying to stop him making his way in the World. And the plain, unvarnished, truth of the matter is that he is not cut out to be a teacher. I can see that! Why cannot the others?"

"What makes you think that he's not cut out for teaching," asked Miss Logan, unwittingly placing herself among the category of "the others". He stared at his secretary and book-keeper, and frowned. At first sight it seemed an impertinent question to ask of him, but it was fair. He shrugged.

"Perhaps that's why others can't see it?"

He screwed up his face and pushed the morning's post towards her. "You're not much help, Emily. I think you've been talking to Moira. You're in league with them. Yes, its one vast conspiracy against me."

"Oh! You know that's not true," she winced. "Nothing could be further from the truth! Would it make you happy if I said that I agree with you? Except, my loyalty is to you

and not your son, and that if he did abandon his teaching career and come here, I might find it difficult, no, impossible, to work for him?"

"No!" he said, bluntly. Miss Logan snatched up the post and stalked to the door. "Did you mean that?" he called after her. She stopped and turned to briefly face him, a shrewd smile passing across her face as she replied.

"Let us wait and see what happens," she said.

"Old bitch!" he hissed in her direction as the door shut.

Richard arrived in Eastgate shortly after lunchtime that Saturday. For half of the journey the train was plagued by swarms of red-scarfed, drinking, shouting, swearing, singing, and sweating, football supporters, for half of the journey. He had retreated to a first class compartment, prepared to pay the excess. This tactical move was flawed, though at least he was not called upon to pay the extra fare, the guard staying firmly shut in his part of the brake. On the whole, the fans appeared to be good humoured although it might well be a different story on the return trip should their team lose. They had invaded his first class sanctuary before the train reached Bromley, dumping themselves opposite. "Pretty posh, here, aint it, eh? Do oll right for 'emselves, don't 'ey?"

The second one giggled.

"You OK, mate?" said the first, looking at Richard.

"Are you addressing me?" he said stiffly. More giggling.

"Well, yerse," said the first, looking around the compartment. "Unless it wos that light up there. Waddyou think, Flidge?" His companion giggled.

"Are you still at school?" asked Richard, trying to keep a level head.

"Yerse. Triniticomp."

"Pardon?"

"Triniticomp," the lad repeated. It did sound like one word, but the boy could see the pained look of puzzlement on Richard's face. "Holy Trinity Comprehensive School," he said slowly, precisely, and with obvious distaste. "Aint you heard of it?"

"What subjects do you do? Are you taking School Certificate?" It was the boys' turn to look puzzled. The second one stopped giggling and tugged aimlessly at his brightly coloured scarf. Both eyed Richard with apprehension.

"You a teacher or something?" said the first.

"Yes. I am a teacher."

"Gauld!" cried the first boy. "Trust us to get in with a toff teacher!" He leapt to his feet. "Come on Flidge!"

"Wait," said Richard sternly. "Sit down. I'm not going to do anything to you." They sat, hanging their heads. Slowly, piece by piece, Richard extracted information from them.

"Schoolwork? Get-off. No'un works at school. Any'un what does is a swot an' gets it. The other lads don't allow it."

"But wouldn't you like to become a doctor, or a dentist, or even a teacher?"

"What me, mate? Wi' me drunken father and me sister on the game? You got to be joking."

"Well, what will you do when you leave school?"

"Dunno. I aint thought 'bout it. Get a job down the council yard or somethink. Go on the dole. Look after me ol' mum?"

It sounded dreadful to Richard, but he was unable to find anything to say. The picture they conjured up was in direct contrast to his own education and to his projection of his teaching career. But when he reported the conversation to Mr Pennington some weeks later, the astute man suggested that the two might have been "trying it on a bit". Anyway, they were a product of the Comprehensive education system that was politically motivated, cared little for a child's education, and which would fail due to its own lack of momentum. So believed Mr Pennington, but Richard found it difficult to dismiss the matter so lightly.

His mother greeted him with apprehension in her voice. "Your father is in the railway

room. I think you ought to go up and talk to him.”

“Will it serve any purpose?”

“I think he has something he wants to say. I think that he wants to talk to you.”

His father was bending over Eastgate Marine station when Richard entered. He looked across the platforms. “I have read your letter to your mother,” he began, “and I want to make my position paramountly clear. I have no wish to argue. I don't want to quarrel. I do not intend to lose my temper, so please do not attempt to provoke me.”

“I never attempt to provoke you, as you say. I just wish you would see my point of view.”

“Your point of view? Well, perhaps I do. But why should that prevail? What about my point of view?”

“I am over twenty-one,” cried Richard.

His father started to colour. “And that gives you licence?” he said, raising his voice slightly.

“It gives me liberty!” It was a poor choice of word, but Richard could not un-utter it, drag it back once it had slipped from his lips.

“Liberty?” shouted his father. “What are you suggesting? That we keep you in some kind of prison? Or that I want to bind you into some sort of slavery?”

“It makes me responsible for my actions and, as a corollary, means that I must be free to determine those actions.”

“It means you should act in a responsible fashion!”

“And so I am doing.”

His father stepped back from the edge of the model as if he was untrusting of his actions and fearful that some sudden violence might damage or destroy it. By now he was quite red in the face and breathing heavily. “No!” he gasped. “There's little purpose in attempting to discuss this. Your mind is made up.”

“They have offered the position to me, and I have accepted,” said Richard coolly. “I start on Monday.” Arthur Brown seemed to deflate. He turned away and mopped his brow vigorously. But Richard had not finished. “You asked me to leave your house a couple of days ago. Whether I wished to or not, whether you still wish that to be so, circumstances now dictate it.”

“That's right,” cried his father, swinging back to face him. “Remove even my privilege of throwing my son out of my house! Take that away as well!” There was a pause. Richard had more to say, that which he could say, that which he would have said had it not been clear to him that his father was vanquished. As for his father, what ever it was that he had originally planned to say, it had now gone unsaid, and would remain so. “So shall it be,” Arthur Brown said slowly and sorrowfully, as if he were burying for ever that cherished relationship they had enjoyed, father and son, man and boy. “But you had better be right.”

“Will you wish me luck?”

“Oh, no! You have made your choice. You must make your own luck.”

“As you wish,” said Richard coldly, and turned to go.

“One thing more. One thing about which I insist that we come to an understanding. I have already expressed my wishes to your mother - .”

“Yes?”

“ - on the subject of where you live.”

“Yes?”

“What ever happens, this will not be your home for at least the next two years. You may come to visit us, as a guest, during the school holidays, but at all other times I expect you to live somewhere else. Anywhere else. Enjoy your freedom. Exercise your responsibility. Once the two years are up, we'll see what prevails.”

“As you wish,” said Richard, thinking that it sounded a little like a Victorian melodrama. “I cannot imagine the necessity for your condition being altered or even challenged.”

“Except in the instance of sickness or injury.”

“My goodness!” exclaimed Richard. “You have thought this out.”

"I have," said his father, now calm. "I have given it a good deal of thought. Perhaps more than it justifies."

The interview was over. Richard left his father, a broken and visibly older man, in the room in which the two of them had spent countless happy, possibly their happiest, hours of mutual enjoyment and companionship. Now it was all at an end.

Eastgate boasted a number of regular Saturday evening dances, but only one of them, held at the Foreland Castle, a large hotel, ran right throughout the Winter. By this virtue it had gained a relatively widespread reputation and had become a regular venue for the youth from up to a forty mile radius. There were no prearranged formalities, though a kind of convention for dress was applied by the management at the door. Drunks, yobs, hobbledehoyes, anyone who was, in their view, undesirable, or was likely to become so, was turned away, though it was sometimes noted that the rule seemed to be applicable to males only. One result was that the dance tended to be patronised by the sons of middle and upper class families and heavily made-up girls who would arrive on the six-thirty train from London, prepared to return sometime on Sunday, or even Monday morning. The ritual of the Castle dance was observed on most Saturday evenings by both the six-formers from the local Grammar school and the old boys, they finding it a better way to keep in touch than any other form of reunion.

It was described as, and termed, a dance, but in reality the dance floors would become so crowded that any step, other than a limp, vertical hop, was impossible. To reach the main bar, one's expedition had to traverse the seething dance floor, an exercise which could take fifteen minutes in which time the expectant drinkers would come close to dehydration before the explorer returned, if he did, at all. Sometimes, one did not. The secret was to be there early and to take up a position at, or close to, the bar before it came crowded.

Richard had encountered one of his former school friends at the station on his way home. Ken had naturally asked if he was planning to go to the Castle, to which Richard had advanced a half hearted affirmative. They had then arranged for Ken to call at the house in his car on the way there. The argument with his father had dispelled any doubts which might have lingered in Richard's mind about the prudence of going.

"I think you'd better keep out of your father's way this evening," said his mother just before tea.

"That's all right," he answered brightly. "I'm going out with Ken Steven's tonight. I met him on the way home, and he's going to pick me up about seven."

"Where are you going?"

"To the Castle."

"Why don't you take Sandra?"

"Oh, I don't know that I could, seeing that Ken is collecting me. I mean - ."

"I thought he was a bit sweet on her at one time."

"Ken? Perhaps."

"Could you ask him when he comes?"

"For you, Mother, anything."

Richard gave the conversation no more thought, nor was it discussed in front of Sandra. Yet when Ken arrived half an hour late, and Richard went to open the door to him, Sandra appeared, as if out of nowhere, at his side, utterly transformed. She was heavily made-up, with darkened, shaded, eyes and deep red lips, and was wearing a black velvet dress with a carmine sash. In her high heeled shoes she seemed to have suddenly grown several inches. Ken's mouth fell open at the sight.

"Oh, yes," stammered Richard, "sorry, Ken. Can we take Sandra with us?"

Ken seemed to choke and had great difficulty in speaking. "Gosh, oh Hell!" he managed. He tried to pull Richard through the door and whisper, but all to no avail. "I've got a couple of birds in the back that I picked up," he croaked. "I can't drop them here!"

"Couldn't I sit on Richard's lap, going?" pleaded Sandra.

"Well, I sort of promised them."

The corners of Sandra's mouth fell. "All right!" she said firmly. "I won't go!"

"We could come back for you," volunteered Richard.

“No!” she said, stamping her foot and turning away. “I wouldn't go with you if you got down on your knees and begged me!”

“Unless you are prepared to attempt it,” said Richard looking at Ken, “we'd better go.”

“It's the new regulations,” groaned Ken as they walked down the drive. “Girls cannot get in unless they are accompanied by a bloke.”

“Forget it,” muttered Richard.

The two girls in the back of Ken's car turned out to be revolting and, to Richard's relief, disappeared as soon as they had gained admission to the dance. In comparison, he could not help but think of the red-haired woman in the restaurant. Ken could not help thinking of Sandra.

“What on earth made you think of bringing those two in?” Richard asked, wiping the back of his mouth now that the first pint was down.

“I told you, and I thought it might be a good idea - a bit of fun. I didn't think about Sandra. What should I do? Shall I go back and fetch her?” Richard shook his head.

“The floor's crowded now, so you'd have to fight your way through that lot for a start. Then you'd lose your parking place while you're away. Sandra would have to change again. Think of all the beer you'd miss out on. Then, she'd never come anyway. She's like that - awkward.”

“Oh Hell!” said Ken into his glass and remained seated. Various cronies and old school friends appeared and formed a small, convivial, party. In the jollity, the earlier incidents of the evening faded into the background, but neither Richard, nor Ken, completely forgot their respective ladies. It was inevitable that they would drink too much. The Clock Tower had struck one some time before the arrived outside Richard's parents' house. Ken staggered from the car out into the centre of the road and looked up at each of the houses in turn until his gaze came to settle on Richard. “What about Sandra?” he said, rather slurred. “I really think I ought to say that I'm sorry.”

“She'll be in bed now,” protested Richard.

“I must tell her I'm sorry. Sandra! Sandra!” he called, waving his arms about like the sails on a windmill.

“Sssssshhhh,” hissed Richard. “You'll wake up everyone in the road!”

“What?” cried Ken, stumbling towards him. “Are they all called Sandra? All of them? Are there more than one called Sandra? Sandra! Sannnddrrrraaaa!”

“Is that you, Richard?” called a woman's voice, softly, from the direction of his front door.

“Sandra?” croaked Ken, falling over the kerb. “My love?”

“Its my mother,” muttered Richard, pushing his resistant friend back inside the car. “Now please go home.”

Ken slid into the driving seat and fumbled around for the ignition key. “Sandra?” he whispered. “Can I call tomorrow?”

“Are you all right?” asked Mrs Brown as Richard went in.

“I suppose so,” Richard murmured. “You shouldn't have stayed up.”

“We all watched the late film. Your father has only just gone up himself. Do you want a warm drink?”

Richard declined the offer and went straight to bed. He fell asleep almost at once, and dreamed vividly. At first the dreams were simple and pleasant, but gradually the character changed and they became confused and sinister. He found himself overlooking a railway station. At the far end he could see a group of people, a couple of women and a child; yes, a young boy. He recognised the boy. It was the one whose cap he had recovered outside the station the evening before. The scene changed with a jolt, like a new slide inserted in a projector. Now the boy was on the railway track and Richard found himself shouting, but unable to move. A train was approaching in the distance, but still he was held back. Suddenly a man detached himself from the group of people, jumped down onto the track, and started to run towards the boy. Richard recognised him, too. It was the fair-haired P.E. teacher from Rochester House. He wanted to scream, to call out as the train came rumbling on, sweeping

over them, dashing them to pieces as they disappeared from his view. Now one of the girls was running wildly along the platform towards him, screaming. It was Sandra, in the black velvet dress, but her face and hands, and the sash, were all now covered with blood. She was still shouting and waving her arms. What was it she was calling? He caught the words, "Go to the school! Fetch Mr Larkins! Hurry! He turned and ran through the crowded streets, dodging between cars and buses, jostling with the shoppers, barging people aside, knocking them to the ground in his frantic effort to reach his goal. Then, suddenly, he was there, at the school, in the corridor, forcing Mr Crompton out of his way as he tried to prevent him from entering the Headmaster's study. Beyond the door he found two women at the desk, locked in an embrace. They separated at his entrance and he immediately recognised one as the redheaded beauty from the restaurant. To his horror, the other gradually metamorphosed into a man - Mr Larkins!

He awoke with a start, cold, shivering, yet bathed in sweat. The blankets lay scattered on the floor. As he groped and recovered them he noticed that it was ten minutes past three according to his bedside clock. Still trembling, he wrapped himself securely in the bedclothes, but found he had no desire to go back to sleep. He was still awake at dawn.

Richard returned to London early in the afternoon. His mother pleaded with him to stay longer but Richard was obsessed with the desire to visit the restaurant and see if She was there. The recollection, the dregs, of the night's dream weighed heavily on his mind, especially the final scene that was presenting and representing itself to him over and over again. Basic, minimal, courtesies were observed and exchanged with his father, but each kept his distance. Neither was happy, but an understanding of sorts had been achieved, even if it were unsatisfactory to one and painful to the other. Sandra, in an ill-temper, came down late and pointedly missed Church. Fortunately Ken did not carry out his threat to call around.

"If this is the effect of his visiting us," moaned his father, "it is best that he should stay away." It was not a sentiment shared by his wife, but on this occasion she remained silent.

Sat in the train, eyeing the two large suitcases and the holdall that contained his personal possessions and bearing only his mother's good wishes, Richard tried to focus his mind on the expectation of the coming day, his first day at school as a teacher. He tried to write some notes, but words seemed to be in short supply, and the carriage heaved and bounced so much that those few that found their way onto paper were virtually illegible.

The house at Grove Crescent was still and quiet when Richard, fatigued, arrived. It was strange that in none of his afternoon visits had he either seen or heard any of his fellow gentlemen. Yet, as he wearily climbed the stairs, he once again experienced the unpleasant feeling of being watched. His room appeared exactly as he remembered leaving it, and he spent some time unpacking and methodically placing things away. It was after five o'clock when he finished. Outside it was nearly dark. As he looked out he received a sharp shock. He realised for the first time, consciously at least, that the station platforms extended into his line of vision. It conjured up the scene from his nightmare and a ghastly shiver struck him with a sensation of *deja vu*. He almost jumped out of his skin at the light tap on the door.

"Mr Brown?" a woman's voice called. It was Mrs Morgan. He could not recall her presence in the nightmare though she did appear to possess admirable qualifications. He opened the door and was greeted with the kind of smile that, in Greek Mythology, turned lesser men to stone. "I thought it was you," she said. "I like to know when my gentlemen are in or out. Is everything all right?"

"I was just unpacking. Yes, thank you, everything's fine." Her eyes seemed to dart beyond him, scanning the room to ensure that it was still there.

"Will you be coming down for a warm drink this evening?" she added. Richard thought of his almost sleepless night and of the trial and tribulations of the coming day.

"No," he said. "I think I must aim for an early night. I had a rather heavy weekend, you know how it is?"

"I know how it can be," she replied with great stress. "We will see you at breakfast, then."

He closed the door and sat in the more comfortable of the armchairs in front of the

gas fire. Its hiss was somehow soothing, pleasant, and it was inevitable that he should feel snug, drowsy, so comfortable, and - .

He awoke with a start. The room was cold, the gas fire having long since gone out, but the electric light was still on, just as he had left it. As he gathered his thoughts he remembered his mission to go to the restaurant. As he searched for his coat he noticed the bedroom clock and his heart fell. It was eleven fifteen! It was too late, too late for the chance of seeing Her, too late, even, for a hot drink. The opportunity, if there would have been one, was past, slept through. For a moment, in his frustration, he was tempted to run out, wildly through the streets, just to look for Her, to call Her name, had he known it. All he did know, or thought he knew, was that she went there regularly and lived, therefore, in that locality. He knew, too, that his recollection of the sight of her in the study at Rochester House from his dream now haunted him and had possessed him. Sadly, he pursued the sole sane course of action left open to him on that late February evening. He went to bed.

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