

CHAPTER SEVEN

It may have been as well that Richard had things on his mind other than his first day at school. Had he concentrated on it, thought about and prepared for it, even looked forward to it, he might have experienced an anticlimax. Mondays at Rochester House were acknowledged by both staff and pupils to be dull, drab, affairs, as they relinquished the freedom of the weekend and donned the shackles of the school routine. Richard's first Monday was every bit as bad as any other. Even the day itself appeared unable or unwilling to struggle into anything more committed than a grim half-light. Electric lights shone bravely in the classrooms, but everything outside seemed wrapped in perpetual night. In the house in Grove Crescent, Monday mornings could not be readily distinguished from any other weekday morning. When Richard came down well before the appointed time, he found that he was not the first at the breakfast table. Mr Anderson stood there, eyeing his chair, his former place, though he was quick to move as Richard entered.

"I saw you come in yesterday," he said in his strange wheezing voice, "with all your luggage. Its a long way up those stairs. You should have got me to help you. Everyone else does."

"I'm sorry," replied Richard, wondering why he was being apologetic. "I didn't see you."

"I saw you," muttered Mr Anderson, not without a note of menace in his voice. The room began to fill and a low, personal, conversation started. From the kitchen came a resounding crash followed by the sound of the kitchen door swinging on its hinges.

"You're a wicked old man!" a female voice cried.

"Crab! Mean old crab!"

"Don't you call me a crab, you spiteful beast!"

"Crab! Crab's pinch, don't they? You pinch! Don't you come near me or I'll bite you!"

Richard looked around the table but no-one showed the slightest reaction. Perhaps Mrs Morgan's kitchen lay in a different dimension on the plain of existence, and the kitchen door was the gateway, the envelope where two co-existing universes met and overlapped. Only he, Richard Anthony Brown, with his unique ultra-sensitivity, could detect all this. But Mrs Morgan entered with a smile that would have instantly driven the occupants of any flying saucer scurrying back to whence they came.

"Its such a miserable day, I've made some porridge," she said brightly. "Would anyone like some?"

No-one had the courage to refuse. They all had porridge and, subsequently, paid Mrs Morgan rather cautious and qualified compliments, careful not to give her the impression that they were sufficiently enthusiastic to encourage her to repeat the process again that week. Richard, spoiled by that expertly prepared by his mother, came to the firm conclusion that Mrs Morgan's porridge certainly belonged to another dimension, even if it had not originated from it. This thought added to his fanciful theory. Just imagine that, he might be standing on the very edge of the Universe! One step and - !

"Would anyone like any more?" threatened Mrs Morgan.

Richard had timed his walk to Rochester House and was able to arrive there punctually at eight-thirty. He was making his way to the common room when he met Mr Pennington coming to meet him. "Ah, good morning, Mr Brown. I'll call you Mr Brown rather than Richard for the while as it is a form of address to which you will have to become accustomed. Now, first of all, let us sign you in. Come along." He led Richard into the common room and to a large table that stood in the bay of a window overlooking the street. "Here are the class registers, and here is an attendance sheet for today. With such a large school we do have to have some means of knowing - confirming that masters are in. You might be unwell one day, for instance, and it would not do for your absence to go unnoticed. So each of us sign the daily sheet in our appropriate place, on arrival. Let's see if your name is here - yes! I didn't think for one moment that Mrs Hiller would have forgotten to include you.

She's most efficient - a most remarkable woman." Richard signed, and visualised the remarkable woman he had seen in the restaurant.

"Now," continued Mr Pennington, "Form Registers. Each master is allocated a form if he is fortunate and is termed the Form Master of that form. Later, in the Upper school, the Form Master plays a crucial role in shaping a boy's career, though this is not so critical in the Lower school. The Form Master has administrative duties which are both tedious and quite inappropriate, though no satisfactory alternative is available to us at present. These duties entail marking the register, noting absentees and, on Monday, collecting dinner money and marking up the dinner book. It really is all very tedious. You will have read that forms assemble in their classrooms at five to nine, and that school assembly is at ten minutes past. Boys who arrive after the register is closed are technically late and have to report to Mrs Hiller. I mentioned the collection of dinner money. We do have boys who go home for lunch, and others who bring a packed meal, though we discourage this. On occasions they ask to stay to school dinner. If they have not paid on the Monday, they must go to see Mrs Hiller and pay the money to her. Under no circumstances do teachers collect dinner money on any day other than Monday. When I came here first, they did, and it was quite chaotic. I soon put a stop to all that!

Now, our particular form registers. My Form is Six Science II. I take them for Pure Mathematics too, but I have been looking after Form 1A since Mr Holt, ahem, departed. As you will be taking over 1A, I'll come with you this morning just to go through the routine, to see you bedded down. You wont find it all that difficult."

"You're very kind," said Richard, submissively.

Mr Pennington smiled. "Oh, I am being entirely selfish," he said. "I believe that you are never too old to learn, and I learnt a lot from Mr Holt's sojourn. I wouldn't take the blame for his sudden demise, but I think I could have launched him better. And should you go the same way, where would I be? There you have it in a nutshell. I am relying on you."

Richard felt as if a great weight had been thrust on his shoulders, but the school bell rung heralding the need for them to go to the Form room. Once there, the weight seemed to become a little lighter or, at least, different. The boys stood as one as they entered and sat again, noisily, on the receipt of a curt dismissal from the senior mathematics master.

"I'd like to introduce Mr Brown," Mr Pennington began, leaving Richard thinking he sounded more as if he was about to introduce some celebrity who had come to open a village fete, or a jumble sale. "He is your new Form Teacher and he will take you for mathematics as well." He turned to Richard, who awoke from his daydream, and addressed him in a lower tone. "I think you should call the names in the register. You will find them perfectly legible. Mrs Hiller writes them all out. They are very neat, don't you think?"

It was thus that Richard spoke his first faltering words in front of a real, live, class, and started in his coveted role as a teacher, head down, nervously marking in pencil, trying to keep his hand steady and his voice even, trying to look up with at least one eye to see who answered. But he could not suppress a sudden tremble when he reached the eighth name, "Cross". Involuntarily, he stopped, looked up to see the speaker and, in doing so, lost his place in the register. There he was, three rows back, pale and fragile, the small boy he had encountered at the railway station, and who had been a victim of his dream. Dinner money was collected and a record entered in the dinner book. It went smoothly, but Mr Pennington kept looking at his watch. "We have about five minutes before the assembly bell. I'd like to go and check that my six-formers are not misbehaving themselves. I'll wait for you outside the Hall. You'll be all right?"

Richard nodded and found himself left alone with the class. He needed a few seconds to compose himself but then, rising to his feet, spoke his first address, firmly. "Pay attention for one moment, please," he started. It sounded good to him, and guaranteed his audience, though there seemed to be an implied admission that at times they would not pay attention. "Before Assembly I would like to say a few words to you as your new master. My name, as you've heard, is Brown, which is ridiculously easy for you to remember, far easier than it will be for me to remember yours. So for the first few weeks, when I call out your name, I want the boy to stand so that I can memorise his face. Equally, if one of you has a question, start

with your name until I am able to address you. Is that clear?"

He was greeted by a muted chorus of "yes Sir", and he gained more confidence. He walked down one of the rows of neatly arranged desks. "The second matter is form discipline. You, as Form 1A, are the cream, the elite, of the First year. As your form master, I will expect you to set the standard in conduct, discipline, and work, for the other forms to follow. And I will add, briefly as we will soon be called to Morning Assembly, that I am always prepared to listen to your questions or problems, whether in class or outside, whether they are about the school work, or not. Never be afraid to ask me. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," came a more positive response.

"Right! As we have a few seconds left, let's start my learning." He ran his finger down the list of names in the register. "Smith A.C.?"

"Yes sir?" came a voice from the back.

"Stand up please, Smith. Let me see you." A fair-haired, tubby, boy with large glasses struggled to his feet. "Fine! Now we have two Smiths, don't we? Where's Smith J.G.?" This time a boy in the second row stood up. His hair was the colour of bright copper, and he had a round freckled face which coloured as Richard went across to him. "What do the angles of a triangle add up to?" The boy answered, incorrectly at first. Richard told the Smiths to sit down, and could not resist the temptation of calling out "Cross J.O.?" He watched the boy rise slowly to his feet. He was noticeably smaller than the Smiths, and thinner. "We have met, I believe, Cross?"

"Yes Sir," said the boy, looking glumly down at the desk.

"Be so kind as to look at me when you are addressing me, or I you, Cross." Richard added sharply, wishing to establish a precedent for the whole class. The boy's blue eyes lifted and, for all his appearance of fragility, fixed on Richard with a steady defiance. Was it insolence or spirit? The sound of the assembly bell curtailed Richard's deliberation. "Class is dismissed," he announced, making his way back to the front. "Will you please go down to Assembly in an orderly fashion, without running, pushing, or undue noise."

As he watched the boys file out, Richard realised that his heart was beating quickly. He felt stimulated, and more than a little pleased, by his first encounter with his Form. Mr Pennington stripped away the gloss when he met him outside the Hall. "They should be like little lambs," he told Richard. "They've had Mr Crompton for English for one and a half terms! You should have no problems whatsoever with them. If you really want a challenge, try taking on 3D. They'll break anyone, and enjoy it. Shall we go in?"

Mr Pennington shadowed Richard for much of the day, but Richard had a free period in the afternoon during which his shadow went to attend to his beloved second-year Six, leaving Richard to explore the comforts of the common room. He was alone and, selecting what looked like the best of the armchairs, settled with the intention of reviewing the outstanding items on the year's syllabus. He had been there for only a short while when a voice whispered in his ear. "You shouldn't be sat here, you know." Richard jumped. It was Dennet, in his plimsolls, who had crept up unheard and who now sported a good-natured grin which seemed to stretch from ear to ear.

"Why not?" asked Richard, clinging to an illusion that the grin could not portend anything serious.

"This is Smithson's chair, that's why not! He will carve you into irregular Latin conjugation if he finds you sat here. And that's if you are lucky and he takes pity on you!"

Richard grinned. "Really?"

Dennet's smile evaporated when he realised that he was not being taken seriously. "Really? Each of the Senior masters has His own dedicated, unalienable, sacred chair which Junior masters, the likes of us, are not fit to dust, leave alone sit in. It's no joke, I assure you. Honestly! Come with me." Abashed, Richard rose and followed him, glancing back to see if the chair looked any different to how it had been before he sat in it. Dennet went to the darkest corner of the room where there was an alcove shielded from the fire, and where one could sit out of sight of the majority in the room. "Come and sit here," he said, "and tell me about yourself."

"Well, I'm Richard Brown, Junior Mathematics, but I expect you know that already."

His companion nodded.

“And I expect you know that I'm Dennet. We have bumped into each other a couple of times.”

“Just, Dennet?”

“Just Dennet. Everyone calls me that but, go on, tell me about yourself, and what has brought you to a dump like this.”

“Dump? Why would you call it that?”

“Well, they took me on for a start!” Dennet was smiling again, but there was a tinge of nervous tension in his voice, “Come on, tell me about yourself, then I'll tell you my life story, such as it is. Us new, young, ones must stick together. We're heavily outnumbered.”

Richard gave him a brief account of his history, academically and, as far as it was relevant, personally. By way of exchange, Dennet advanced a sketchy account of himself, telling Richard more of what he had not done than that which he had. But Richard learned that Dennet, showing an early aptitude for sport, had gone into the army at sixteen, partly with the intention of clearing his national service, but also in order to follow a Physical Instructor's course. He had stayed in for eight years and then, at the end of his contract, applied for the position he now filled at Rochester House. “You don't have to be particularly bright to be a PE teacher,” he said, “but to teach here, among this bunch of stuffy, self-opinionated, hypocrites, it helps to be able to conform. Truth is, I'm not really much good at conforming. That's one of the reasons why I left the Army. How about you, Richard?”

“How do you mean? Conforming?” asked Richard, wondering how Dennet could have survived his period in military service without a certain degree of self control.

“Oh, you know what I mean. Behaviour, standards, fitting into the pattern, keeping up with the Joneses. Not letting the side down. Not behaving in a manner likely to bring the school into disrepute. It would be all right if they observed the rules that they preach and like to impose on others. But they don't! And they expect you to be married, too! Have they got at you yet?”

“As a matter of fact, I think they have,” said Richard, finding himself thinking of the restaurant and Her. He would have to go back. That moment could not come soon enough.

Dennet looked glum. “I knew it! Right on form. They never let up, do they? I'll lay odds that they'll be criticising the company you keep before long.”

“I don't keep any company,” said Richard almost plaintively, visualising her red hair and those unforgettable green eyes.

“Oh! We will certainly have to change that!” said Dennet brightly. “Tell you what - what are you doing tonight?”

A shock flew through Richard's heart, a mixture of fear and guilt. “Oh, I'm tied up - at least until half past eight.” He felt secure in the statement. For a weekday, even in suburbia, it sounded, to Richard at least, indecently late. Surely any self-respecting teacher would be at home by then, marking books? But PE teachers do not have books to mark. Nor did Richard, for that matter.

“Splendid!” exclaimed Dennet, slapping his knee. “I'll, meet you outside the King's Head at eight-forty five. You must know it - by the railway station. You must have passed it on your way to and from the school.”

“But - ?”

“Don't worry! I won't show you the town tonight. Just a few jars, relieve the tension, boredom, and monotony of this morgue.” He shivered suddenly and looked about him. “Even smells like it at times,” he continued. “Do you play any sports?”

“A bit of cricket and tennis.”

“Good! You can help me with the school sports day arrangements next term. I had Fox last year. Have you met his wife? Anyway, it turned out that he's scared to death of starting pistols. In fact, anything that goes bang. I think he goes to bed early on November the Fifth and buries his head under the pillow. Imagine him in the Army! Well, as I was saying, he doesn't seem to mind blood, but sharp noises send him haywire. He stood there and tried to pull the trigger with fingers in both his ears. You should have seen him! Nearly blew his head off!” Dennet bounced to his feet as the period bell rang. “Must go!” he exclaimed. “Don't

forget. See you tonight, quarter to nine, outside the King's Head." And with that he was gone.

Richard, having failed to revise the syllabus, and finding himself trapped into an arrangement which cut sharply across the bows of his aspirations, went, with some misgiving and a heavy heart, to join Mr Pennington in an attempt to impress the rudiments of Algebra on Form 1C. But the problem did not stay very long on his mind and after school, determined to disarrange matters, he went in deliberate search of the Physical Education master. As he did so, he was spotted by the Headmaster and diverted into his study. A large woman was sat by the window, a fact that gave Richard a mild surprise and some anxiety until he discovered that she was Mrs Larkins. She was middle-aged and appeared slightly older than her husband. And, although her features indicated that she had probably been pretty, at the very least, in her youth, there was now something offensively unwomanly about her demeanour. Her grip proved to be unexpectedly strong when she took Richard's hand. "I've just managed to get nine holes in," she said briskly. "Do you play too, Mr Brown?"

"Golf? No, I'm afraid that I don't."

"Oh!" Her voice dropped and she turned from him and sat again.

"How did your first day go?" asked Mr Larkins, un-perturbed by his wife's reaction.

"I think it has gone reasonably well, Sir," said Richard, switching his attention to the headmaster. "Of course, I had Mr Pennington to hold my hand, one might say."

"Yes, good fellow, Mr Pennington."

"If he were married," said his wife not turning her head from the direction of the playing fields.

"Yes, Harriet," continued the headmaster dully. "Well, I would not wish to detain you. If there are no problems?"

"None to date, thank you," said Richard, anxious to leave.

"Oh, just one thing, Brown," Mr Larkins called as Richard reached the door. "I see that you are not wearing a gown. You will find that one gives you a little more authority."

"And keeps the chalk off your suit," said his wife, dryly.

"Please, Harriet! What was I saying? Oh, yes, it distinguishes you as a teacher. Get a gown, Brown!" Mr Larkins paused and, pleased with himself, had a miniature chuckle. "That is all, Brown," he added.

Richard failed in his attempt to find Dennet. He went gloomily to his lodgings, turned on the fire, and went to close the curtains. There, under the farthest flickering gas lamp at the very extremity of the platform, stood the figure of a small boy. A vivid recollection of the nightmare flashed through his mind. Surely it was Cross? He hastily drew the curtains and collapsed into a chair, his heart pounding. What did it mean? In all probability it meant nothing. Perhaps it was not even Cross, the boy he had seen standing there inches away from the running rails. Perhaps it was all in his imagination? He would check. He crossed to the window, cautiously drew open a chink in the curtain and spied through. The platform was empty, and the boy, if there had been one, was now gone.

At the appropriate time he made his expectant way to the restaurant. He gloomily thought of Dennet and that impending, imposed, appointment. He would have to go. It was true that he had ample time for his meal, but nothing further. There could be no developments, even if some remote chance, some blessed trick of fate, promoted the opportunity for such a thing, even supposing that she came, and came alone. He had repeatedly fantasised and rehearsed the scene. She would come alone and, after he had settled at her table, he would go over to her, casually observe that they were both alone and that, perhaps, they could keep each other company. Ethereal violins would begin to play as she would say in a low sexy voice, "Your table or mine?" In one version it would be his. In another he would sit at hers, then one thing would lead to another, and he would say - .

"Yais?" said a discordant voice in his ear.

The menu lay in his hands. It looked unchanged from his previous visit, so he ordered the same meal, laying out the correct money before the waitress could ask for it. "Number forty," she said and slapped the receipt down on the table. Then he sat and waited, growing increasingly nervous as each minute slipped by and the appointment with Dennet loomed nearer. He watched the same emaciated girl and the same old man as they went up and

collected their meals. Then his number came up. Almost simultaneously the street door opened, and She came in. It was just as in his fantasies. Everything was going like clockwork! They met in the aisle, Richard retreating into an alcove in order to give way and allow her to pass. Her lips moved, but there was no sound. And those greenish eyes seemed to stare right through him, just as if he was not there.

“At least she must have noticed me,” he told himself as he finished the jam pudding. But it was too late to attempt an approach and introduction. For all he knew it, Dennet was there, already, growing impatient and thirsty, waiting outside the King's Head, or inside. He walked to the King's Head in a fairly sour frame of mind. He was angry with himself for having been compromised and for having his plans frustrated. He was upset with Dennet for having upset them. And what was it he had said? Called Rochester House a dump? Although Richard's association with the school was far too short for him to develop any deep rooted loyalty or sense of identification, in his particular frame of mind he was fully prepared to go to its defence. He had said more. Dennet had referred to the members of the staff as hypocrites. At least that was to whom Richard assumed Dennet had been referring. Did he have some hidden factual knowledge which enabled him to make such a devastating, almost slanderous, pronouncement? Or was it just a figure of loose speech, a casual piece of careless talk, or spite?

Richard stood outside the King's Head. There was no sign of Dennet, neither outside, not inside. After twenty freezing minutes he gave up and went back, miserably, to Grove Crescent. Mrs Morgan was standing in the hall.

“I think I'd like a warm drink tonight,” he said as she greeted him with a milk-curdling smile.

“About twenty minutes, Mr Brown. In the lounge tonight.” Lounge? He pricked up his ears. That was a term that he had not heard used in Grove Crescent before. The nod of her head had indicated the door to the front ground floor room which Richard had noted and pondered as to its use, concluding hitherto that it must form part of Mrs Morgan's private quarters. Was it, then, a lounge?

Twenty minutes later he descended the stairs. The door to the front room was ajar, and he entered cautiously. The room was large, with a high, elaborate, ceiling, and bathed in a low light from two tall standard lamps. A small number of comfortable, well-worn, armchairs were orientated around a lifeless television that stood in the farthest corner. A little nearer, on the facing, party, wall, a meagre coal fire flickered un-enthusiastically in a small grate. Against the hall wall stood a massive, ancient, piano-player heaped with dozens of rolls and cartons, all gathering dust. Heavy, red, curtains sagged before the windows, their frayed bottoms falling in folds over the threadbare carpet.

“Hello,” said a suave, cultured voice. “I'm Frobisher, and you are Brown? Right? We've seen each other at breakfast. What do you think of our little hideaway?” Richard recognised him as one of the men who sat next to Mr Hughes at the opposite end of the breakfast table.

“To tell the truth,” he said, “I'm somewhat amazed. I didn't know that it was here. Mrs Morgan didn't mention it.”

“Well, no,” said Frobisher, looking about him. “To tell the truth, she wouldn't. We, a small number of us, pay another pound a week to use the room and keep it exclusive. If everyone came in, we'd stop paying, and it's a tidy bit of income for her. We do have guests in, especially on cold and miserable nights. They tell me that you teach at the Grammar school?”

“Yes. I've just started there.”

“I've a few clients there,” said Mr Frobisher, dropping his voice. “Advise them on investments. Bits of inside knowledge; that sort of thing. Have you any spare? Anything you want placed?”

“Not really,” said Richard vaguely, clutching at his pockets and not wishing to admit the perilous nature of his bank balance.

“Squid Incorporated,” hissed the broker. “Squid Inc. That's what to buy into. Take my word. Buy Squid Inc. You won't regret it!”

“Squids aren't insects,” he heard someone say behind him. The door swung open and

Mrs Morgan entered with a tray of steaming mugs. Everyone except Mr Hughes had cocoa. He had Horlicks.

“It must be a very special day,” said a voice at Richard's elbow. “I don't get to see the inside of this room very often.” It was Mr Anderson, looking around, wide eyed.

“Perhaps its Mrs Morgan's birthday?”

“Don't be silly,” croaked the old man. “She doesn't have birthdays.”

Mrs Morgan stood there, beaming, her smile sweeping the room with beams of deadly radiation. She caught Mr Hughes eye which caused him to choke over his Horlicks, turn scarlet, then cough loudly. It caused silence. “I think we should propose a toast to Frobisher,” she said. “I know that not all of us have benefited from his advice, but it would be nice. Will you do the honours, Mr Hughes?”

“Oh! This is too, too, much,” exclaimed Mr Frobisher, lowering his bald head in false modesty as he revelled in every minute of it.

“Lady and gentlemen,” began Mr Hughes in a deep baritone voice.” On behalf of those present who was placed in a position to take advantage of his advice and sell Consolidated Worm, please be upstanding. The toast is - Mr Frobisher!”

Richard found himself saying “Mr Frobisher” with the rest of the company.

“Its too much,” protested Mr Frobisher, wishing that they would do it all again, or sing about the good fellow that he was. With the accompaniment of added, muted, acclaim, the toast was drunk from mugs of cocoa, and one mug of Horlicks, though Richard suspected that a number of the mugs had extra fortification.

“To his next killing!” added Mr Hughes.

“Squid Inc.!” hissed Mr Frobisher. “Don't forget!”