

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Richard did not sleep well that night. Again, he had vivid, disturbing, dreams with tangled, convoluted, plots, none of which made any real sense, all of which evaporated at his waking leaving a nagging residue at the bottom of his conscious self. Breakfast was normal. Richard found that when the kitchen door opened and the sound of raised, abusive voices emanated from the other world, echoing along the hallway and reverberating throughout the house, he was nearly able to ignore the phenomenon. His heart did not quicken as it had the first time. Nor did he anxiously survey the table to see how the others reacted.

He did have his mind on other things. He ought to write home and resolved to try and fit a letter in during the day. Then there was the previous evening's fiasco. He worked out what he would say to Dennet when he met him at school. He would leave his colleague in no doubt as to his opinion. And he did allow his mind to run forward to anticipate the pleasure of the coming evening, to the restaurant, and the fascination of the new scene there. The school day started with its rituals. Mr Pennington had come upon him in the common room examining and admiring the collection of house plants which occupied strategic positions.

"Mrs Hiller looks after them," Mr Pennington said. "She's very good with plants, you know."

It sounded as if she had succoured and raised them with her own fair hands, but if the truth were known, they probably came from the florists in the High Street and her care extended no further than an occasional dowsing with the contents of a small watering can. Richard looked for Dennet, but he was not to be found in the common room, nor was he to be seen at Assembly. Their confrontation, for confrontation there must be, would have to wait.

The morning passed without incident. The boys were quiet, as attentive as boys ever are, and as Richard had no homework to collect and mark he had the last period of the morning completely free and at his disposal. Outside, a weak sun had appeared in the pale blue sky. It was bright and crisp. He decided to walk around the school grounds, a pleasure that he had not yet enjoyed. The grounds were extensive. Beyond the lower quadrangle, which was paved over for use as a playground, lay the playing fields, huge plateaux carved out of the gradually rising ground. Richard counted three football and four rugby pitches, and identified a number of protected cricket squares. Around the boundaries of the playing fields complex was dense shrubbery, which appeared to be deep in places. He found two pavilions, a substantial one close to the school buildings, and a smaller, neglected, decaying wooden one some distance away. If misdemeanour were to occur behind one of the pavilions, the choice would clearly fall on the smaller. Scattered around the grounds he also encountered several outbuildings and huts, though their exteriors gave away no indication of the true use to which they were put.

His promenade did not pass unnoticed. Mr Larkins saw him pass by the study and threw open the French window. "Good morning, Brown," he said haughtily. "A good day."

"Yes," said Richard almost sheepishly, feeling that if he had been wearing a cap, he would have had to touch it. "I thought I'd familiarise myself with the grounds as it is such a nice day."

"Excellent idea! Carry on." With which the window was closed.

He was seen, too, from high aloft, from the Prefect's room. "That's Brown, isn't it? Look!"

"Think it is. Wonder where the devil he's off to?"

"Having a sniff around, I suppose."

"What do you make of him so far?"

"I don't know. A bit wet, I suppose. Hard to get to know."

"Quiet sort of a chap."

"Will he last longer than Holt, we ask ourselves."

"If he stands up to Grumpy, he might!"

"Or do the opposite for Joyce!" They all laughed, crudely, and left the window.

Some distance away, on the farthest pitch, Richard could see the white and green shapes of boys playing football, and as he grew closer he could hear their almost involuntary, but obligatory, shouting at each other. And as he grew nearer still, he distinguished a taller figure which was almost static among them. It was Dennet, was it not? He quickened his pace, almost as if he feared that Dennet was going to run away at his approach. But Dennet was not running anywhere. Such mobility as he possessed was reduced to a mere stroll around the field, and that looked pedestrian, leaden, and painful. "Oh, hello," he called flatly as soon as Richard came within easy hailing distance. "Hang about. We've another five minutes."

Dennet's five minutes elapsed far quicker than the authorities at Greenwich would have approved. His whistle sent the boys scurrying towards the school and to the showers, while he hugged the ball and came across to Richard. As he approached, Richard became aware of his pallid complexion and blood-shot eyes. There was something about the way he walked, too - as if he had several alien, unwanted, objects in his boots.

"Where did you get to last night?" asked Richard, trying to sound excited.

"Me?" said Dennet, somewhat blandly. "I forget. It's a long time ago."

"We were supposed to meet! You must remember! You arranged it!" A tinge of colour crept across Dennet's face as he winced, as if in pain.

"Well, I was there!" he said suddenly and aggressively. "I was outside the Turk's Head at a quarter past nine, and I stood out there in the bitter cold for all of ten minutes! Where were you, then?"

"At nine-fifteen? On my way to my lodgings."

"There!"

"But the arrangement was that we would meet outside the King's Head at eight forty-five!"

"Oh?" Dennet's face coloured even more. "Oh!"

"Where were you, then? What happened?"

Dennet looked at the ground and bit his lip. "I suppose I forgot, or got it muddled up. It happens to all of us sometimes you must know. Don't take it personally!" Richard wanted to make a fuss about it, about how he had abandoned his own, vital, plans to conform to his colleague's wishes, all for nothing. But Dennet's tone sounded so wretched, and he looked so fragile and contrite, that he found that he had not the heart to pursue and press home his attack. So he stayed, broody and silent as they walked back to the school. "I don't know how it happened," said Dennet after a short distance. "Really, I don't." They walked on. "I was celebrating," said Dennet as they passed the larger pavilion. "I had some luck, a windfall. A tip a bloke gave me."

"Consolidated Worm," said Richard, almost under his breath.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

Dennet stopped. "I will have to make it up to you, somehow, I suppose. How could I get it wrong?" Suddenly he turned on his heels and walked slowly back to the pavilion, repeating mild self-recriminations aloud to himself, and leaving Richard to complete the walk back to the school alone.

The afternoon slipped away without further incident. Under the watchful eye and guidance of Mr Pennington, Richard set his first homework, careful to give neither too much nor too little. Three subjects were set each evening, designed initially to occupy an average boy for a total of one hour. It was then the practise to gradually increase the amount in the second and third years in an attempt to extend the pupil or, at least, the brighter ones. Richard found that the substance of the homework set for Form 1A already differed from that set to Form 1D. As he walked back to Grove Crescent on that fine, crisp, evening, he felt pleased with himself. The academic day had passed well, cancelling out the disappointment of the previous evening. He seemed to have made a secure start in his chosen profession. And he felt a tinge of excitement every time he thought of the prospect of the forthcoming meal. This swelled in a crescendo as the time came to set out to the restaurant, so much so that his appetite for food was eclipsed.

Almost trembling, he sat at the table, tendered his order, and waited. The first part of

his quest was rewarded. There, on cue, appeared his Aphrodite, radiant, moving to her customary altar in all her voluptuous glory. This was it, but could he carry it through? As he rose his knees seemed to lose their strength. His hands became hot and trembled. Should he, could he, go on? "Excuse me," he said nervously.

"Yes?" Her voice was sharp, aggressive, and he felt as if her eyes were cutting him into slivers.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't help noticing that you are alone. I am alone, too, and I wondered if you would like to join me or, alternatively, allow me to join you - just for the company?" It had come out well, exactly as he had planned it. But there were no soft lights, sunsets, or throbbing violins, only the seedy restaurant and the smell of yesterday's greens. How his heart was pounding!

"Thank you, no," she said in a low, emphatic, voice. "When I wish to have company, I'll ask for it. Perhaps you would kindly return to your table and cease to bother me. Go away!"

He wanted to flee, to run out of the restaurant, into the country, to find some remote hole into which he could creep and live out the remainder of his wretched days as a hermit, in empty, absolute, solitude. In reality, he crept back to his table and awaited the announcement of his meal, resolving that when he collected it he would move to the farthest end of the room so that he could be out of her sight. But there was a saying. Was his heart that faint? So he edged along the bench so that he could see her obliquely across the restaurant and, of course, she could see him. When he did summon up the courage to look, she appeared to be studying something in her handbag and she paid him not the slightest attention. He lingered over his meal. It was the same as before, but it had been stripped of its limited appeal, and he had no appetite. When he next summoned up his courage and looked in her direction, he found that she was looking direct at him. He blushed, and when their eyes met, he had to look away.

If Richard thought that he had reached his nadir, he was wrong. Worse was to follow. Having passed the next day in a foreboding trance, a mixture of frustration, dread, and nursing a resolution to make amends when the opportunity presented itself, he sat patiently in the restaurant only to find that his beauty was not there. Her table was vacant, despite his lingering until nine-thirty in the vain hope that she might have been delayed. He was distraught and spent the remainder of that evening, half of the night, and much of the following day desperately inventing reasons for her absence and fitting them into his scenario. Surely it could not have been as a result of his approach? How could he have done it better? Been smooth, suave, or more patient, gradually insinuating himself? Or should it have been a tour de force, dropping his dinner in her lap? There had to be a way, and it had to be found. His very sanity and survival seemed to depend on finding and following it. The goods were on the shelf and, even if he could not buy because they might not be for sale, or he might not be able to afford the price, he desperately wanted to have a closer inspection. But if he was not to see her again, what then? "Please, sir, what's the purpose of Algebra?"

Richard gazed at the speaker as he regained his senses. It was a fair-haired boy in form 1A, named Jenkins, who was earning himself a reputation for asking particularly awkward questions. Looking at him, Richard was glad that he taught Mathematics and not Biology, as did Mr Stark. He could imagine the kind of questions Jenkins had in store for him. "The purpose of Algebra? Let me see if I can give you an example. Are there any of you who are interested in railway engines?"

Several hands shot up, among them the long, thin, hand of Jonathan Cross. "I see," said Richard, surveying the class and trying to make it look as if his selection was made at random. "You are, are you, Cross?"

The boy rose nervously. "Yes, Sir. I collect numbers." It provoked a titter which ran around the classroom.

"One minute," said Richard sternly, scanning the smiling faces. "Has Cross said something funny? Perhaps I should inform you that there is nothing funny or peculiar in being interested in railways. It is a subject for serious study. Apart from their social importance, the railways were built by some of the greatest of our Civil Engineers, men like Brunel, Telford, Stephenson. I'm sure you will have heard of them. They helped this country become what it is

today, however.” He paused, then turned back to address Cross. “Tell me, do you know what a piston is?”

The boy looked a little worried. “Does it go inside the cylinder, sir?” he said hesitantly. Someone laughed, but was hushed by others in the form.

“Here is a cylinder,” said Richard drawing an elevation of the blackboard, “and here is the piston seen sideways-on. Supposing we need to know what force is exerted. We know how to calculate the surface area of the surface of the piston, don't we? Cross?” The boy answered correctly and with more confidence. Richard then developed the formulae for the force acting on the piston as an equation, demonstrating how it could then be calculated by the insertion of notional figures. The class watched attentively and in silence.

“You may now sit down, Cross. There we have a simple application of Algebra in an equation for the design engineer. Far more complex formulae have to be developed to design the bridges over which the rails run as well as thousands of other applications. Does this answer your question, Jenkins?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” No one had any further questions, so Richard set the homework for that night. When the period bell rang he called Cross over. The boy struggled to fight his way against the tide of his class-mates.

“So, you are interested in railways, are you?”

“Yes Sir.”

“That would explain why I have seen you hanging around the station some evenings, I suppose?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You do realise that a railway station can be a dangerous place?”

“Yes, Sir. My mother allows me to go there for half an hour after school.”

“And what does your father say?”

The boy's mouth quivered. “My father's gone, Sir.”

“Oh! I see. I'm sorry.” Richard was almost at a loss to find suitable words. “Right! You'd better run along now.”

“Thank you, Sir,” the boy exclaimed, and dashed away, leaving Richard with an unexpected feeling of ill ease.

“You look a bit down in the dumps,” said Dennet as Richard entered the common room. Mr Crompton heard and turned his head, scrutinising Richard closely. “Is anything wrong, Brown?” he said, turning away again.

“Oh, no,” said Richard and, with Dennet following, he made his way to the corner of the room that they had claimed for their own.

“He's just waiting for something to go wrong,” hissed Dennet. “He loves it. He'd gleefully jump all over you in cricket boots, he would.”

“I've just heard something about Cross's father,” Richard said softly. Yet as he spoke he wondered why he was concerned and why he was telling Dennet. Was he making a fool of himself? He could have died years ago, yet there had been something in the way the boy reacted that made Richard assume this was not so.

“Cross?” said Dennet. “Funny little chap. Doesn't like games and doesn't do PT, you know, due to some obscure medical reason. Can't say the I agree with it. He'll never grow strong and healthy without exercise.”

“His father?” persisted Richard.

“Yes, a sad case, that. He was a builder, or something, and he had an accident at work. Left a widow and the one boy. You'll meet her in a couple of weeks at Open Evening; if she comes. They live over beyond the station; must be somewhat in your sort of direction.”

“You know her?”

“No, but I know a bit of the history - someone I knew, once - you know. Least said, soonest mended.”

“But this accident? It happened, when? Recently?”

“Why, yes. It must have been in the last couple of months, perhaps three or four weeks ago? But come on! All of this is morbid and too depressing. You seemed gloomy

enough when you came in, leave alone adding to it. Brownd off already, are we?" Richard did not reply. He realised that for a moment he had forgotten the reason for his depression and had begun to feel depressed about feeling depressed. "Why don't we go out tonight?" continued Dennet. "Oh, I know what you're thinking, but I mean it. Have a meal together? A couple of jars? Cheer you up? Come on, how about it?"

The tantalising vision of the restaurant and his Aphrodite loomed before him. He was certain that when Dennet talked of a meal out, he did not have that restaurant in mind. And, if he did, he would have to be headed off! Furthermore, it did seem that the idea of going to eat elsewhere, with someone else, had an unpleasant flavour of infidelity. He wanted to say "no" to Dennet; to tell him to forget it. But, then, had she eaten somewhere else on the previous night? If she could be unfaithful in this manner, so could he! "All right," he said with next to no enthusiasm. "But there is to be no messing about." Dennet looked puzzled if not worried. "I mean about us meeting," added Richard. "Like the other evening."

"Of course not! Look, why don't you come around to my flat and meet me there? I'll write the address down for you. It's not at all that far. And to make up for the mess I made of things, I'll stand you the meal. How about that?"

Richard forced a smile. "Oh, that won't be necessary. What time?"

"I insist! It's the least I can do. Seven-thirty?"

"Done!"

Richard hurried back to his lodgings that evening. He had homework to mark and he could not risk leaving it as he had no idea how late his outing with Dennet would run. Like a magnet, temptation drew him to the window, just to see if Cross was visible, on the platform. He was not, but Richard lingered, in an indefinable daydream, gazing vacantly out into the darkness. A clock chiming the half-hour brought him precipitately back to his senses.

Dennet lived at roughly the same distance from the school as was Grove Crescent, but in the opposite direction. This presented Richard with the excuse to make a small detour along the High Street and pass the restaurant. He peered in, but he could not see Her. Sadly, he walked on. The quality of the housing deteriorated as Richard approached the address that Dennet had given him. The houses were older, smaller, and far less pretentious than those in Grove Crescent. He found the road, and the right number, passing through a hole in the privet hedge into a front garden which seemed to have little growing in it other than a number of rusting cars. He could not find a bell so he knocked hard on the door.

A small, chubby, girl opened the door and looked up as she licked and sucked a fluff-covered lollipop. Beyond stretched a brown walled hall, dimly illuminated by a solitary electric light bulb of mean wattage. At the bottom of the staircase which rose on the right hand side, three further children seemed to be fighting and sprawled across the floor. An untidy, dark haired, woman, wearing an ill-fitting, grubby, chequered, dress and carrying a small, miserable, baby, appeared from a concealed doorway somewhere on the left hand side of the distant reaches of the hall. "What is it, Kathleen?" she called. Then she saw Richard in the doorway and eyed him suspiciously. "If it's the rent you are wanting, my man's not home. He'll be yet a while."

Richard's mouth fell open. Could she be referring to his colleague? Was he now looking and a clutch of little Dennets? "He's out?" he said hoarsely. The woman stepped over the children and came closer, scrutinising him. The baby tugged at her unkempt hair and started to dribble. "Have I come to the right place?" asked Richard.

"Is it me you're asking?" she said sharply.

"I was looking for a Mr Dennet." A smile broadened across the woman's face and her appearance and character changed immediately. She was really quite attractive, he thought.

"So it's the teacher you'd be wanting. An' there's me t'inking you'd come for the rent. You'll find him at the top of the stairs. Go right up. Don't mind the children."

"You've met our Mary, have you?" said Dennet as he greeted him. "Wonderful woman. Good husband, too. I rent this little lot from them for quite a nominal rent. And here you see it, all my worldly possessions. The harvest of years of labour, hard labour at that."

Dennet's flat, for this was how he wished it to be described, was as un-presentable as

the remainder of the house as far as Richard had seen. In fact, the sole feature which allowed it to be termed a flat with a tiny modicum of justification, was a small kitchen which appeared to have been quite inexpertly formed from a cupboard using stud-work, plywood, and an ample quantity of six inch nails. Richard took it to be the work of Mary's good husband. He thought that a more accurate and conventional description of the all together untidy and chaotic room would have been "bed-sitter", and to apply that required a stretch of the imagination and the fullest benefit of doubt. It was furnished, with a table, and a variety of chairs, no two of which were either alike or of the same height, a battered writing bureau, a lop-sided bookcase which was almost bereft of books, and two well used arm-chairs, which sagged, exhausted, before a two-bar electric fire. A section of the room was segregated by a curtain which, on closer examination, turned out to be two army blankets hung over a piece of rope stretched between two nails hammered in to the cracked and flaking plaster. "My sleeping area," explained Dennet.

The kitchenette was cramped and the cabinet drawers on either side met and touched each other if opened at the same time. It housed a small cooker, a refrigerator, and a sink with a single draining board. It had everything that Dennet might want. "What do you think? All right for a gay, foot-free, bachelor?" said Dennet with a sweep of his arm which encompassed all the territory as far as the eye could see. Richard could not help making a comparison with his room, and thought how meagre both seemed when compared with his parents' home at Eastgate.

"It's fine, Dennet," he said weakly.

"Of course, I don't eat much here. It's not really suitable for that. But just to put one's feet up, to crawl into bed, its perfection. Now come and see this, my absolute pride and joy." He unlocked the bureau and took out a number of brown, leather-bound, albums. "These are my most precious possessions! Go on, have a look!" The outside of the first album was decorated in as art nouveau style and bore the title "Forty Edwardian Beauties" embossed in an elaborate script. It was obviously vintage Erotica. With a tremble of apprehension, Richard opened it.

"Why, they're cigarette cards!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Dennet with glee. "Just look at these. First trains, Wills' cars, cricketers, footballers, regiments, and so on."

"Do you collect them, then?" said Richard, wondering if any had survived at home from the days of his childhood.

"Well, they're hard to come by now. They do come up at auctions from time to time, but the early ones fetch a high price, out of my modest reach. Its the Americans, you know. These are a sort of family heirloom. My grandfather started collecting, then my father, who passed them on to me. About all he did pass on, now I come to think of it."

"Amazing," said Richard, wishing he could think of something more sensible to say. "My father would be interested in the railway ones."

"Does he collect them?" asked Dennet, full of interest.

"Not exactly. He builds model railways."

"Oh! Model railways? I looked at one once at an exhibition somewhere. All those tiny little details on the locomotives; handrails on the carriages; lamps, numbers. It gave me a feeling of vertigo and made my head ache. You know?" The albums were lovingly replaced and the bureau closed.

"Are they safe here?" asked Richard in a low voice. "Assuming they are valuable?"

Dennet looked at him quizzically. "You're thinking of the O'Hallerons? Oh, yes, I'd trust them. I'll lock it up to stop the children from prying, but the O'Hallerons are as honest as the day is long. I expect my collection is safer here than it would be in Grove Crescent."

"I don't know."

"I do! Don't worry about them! Now, come on. I've some reparation to perform. Let us go out and eat."

Meal times were no longer the happy event in the Brown household that they once had been. While breakfast and lunches were often informal and improvised, it was a long

standing family tradition that everyone sat down to dinner, and the table was invariably laid accordingly. Even on the uncommon occasions when one of the family was absent, and certainly throughout the whole period when Richard was at university, four places were set. It was natural, then, for Richard's place at the opposite end of the table to his father to be set for each of the nights following his departure. It was not an oversight by Mrs Brown, for she did not, for one moment, consider that it might be done otherwise. But the conversation at the table lagged and was stilted. The company was in imbalance. And when any theme or subject was taken up and developed, inevitably it was concerning Richard, and the conversation became the exclusive prerogative of mother and daughter. "He hasn't written," said Sandra curtly.

"He will. I expect that he's busy at his work, marking books, setting exams, and all of that sort of thing."

As the two of them sat close and opposite one another, conversation was easy. Arthur, isolated at one end of the rectangular table, faced by a blank place, was either unable or unwilling to join in the small talk and discussion about his son, and he found it impossible to introduce any alternative topic that was readily adopted by the ladies. After a few evenings he developed a feeling of exclusion and of being ignored, and began to harbour suspicions that there was some kind of plot against him; that they were trying to teach him some kind of lesson in response to his attitude towards his son's career. He bore the situation bravely and patiently for nearly a week, then he decided that the time for action had come. Something had to be done. "Something's got to be done!" he said. They turned their heads and stared at him with amazement. He felt they could not have registered greater surprise had he been speaking for the first time in twenty years.

"Done? About what, dear?" asked his wife, sweetly.

"Its this table," he said, gripping the edge. "It will have to go."

"Go? Why? What's wrong with it?"

"We'll have to get a round one. Then we can sit at one hundred and twenty degrees to each other."

"Ninety!" corrected Sandra, trying to show how clever she was.

"Great Scott!" her father exclaimed, leaping to his feet and making her turn pale. "There is only three of us!"

"But what about Richard?"

"He doesn't live here any more!" Moira's lips stretched tight across her otherwise placid face, and she pushed her plate away from her.

"I see," she said deliberately. "That's what this is about, is it?" Her husband's face coloured. "Well, he doesn't," he submitted.

"Sit down, Arthur, please," she said coldly. "No, Sandra. Please stay here and hear what has to be said. This is a family matter."

"There's nothing to be said."

"But you were making a point about the table and Richard."

"Oh what's the use?" he said in apparent disgust, and turned away.

"Oh, no, Arthur! You can't escape like that! Go on!"

"Well, well, there's that place set there, for instance," he said, pointing. "And I dare say that upstairs his bed is made and aired, and his clothes laid out, his shoes polished, and so on. He just doesn't live here any more! He's left home! He's gone!"

Moira studied her husband's reddened face for a short while, then smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Arthur," she said softly. "I hadn't realised. I didn't give it a moment's thought. Yes, he's gone, and I supported him in that design. But even though, I have not really adjusted to the fact. It's hard, isn't it? After all these years. I mean, even when he was away at University, we acted as if he were here, as if he might appear at any time. We all did. And now, what shall we do? I like this table. We bought it when we were first married. As for round tables, I don't want to be made to feel like one of your knights, even if I am your lady. Can we alter the placings? Try this, for instance."

Self assured, she stood and walked to the end of the table and sat in Richard's former place. "Will I do?" she asked.

A smile crept across her husband's face, "You are priceless, Moira," he said slowly. "You really are, you know."

"And we'll set for three in the future, except when Richard visits us as a guest, such as at Easter. I'm sure he'll come. Then he can have my old place, opposite Sandra. How will that do?"

"Lose a son and gain a wife, eh? It is a start!"

But whereas the question of dining had been resolved, and a degree of harmony was re-established in the Brown household, Richard was approaching his evening meal on the horns of a dilemma. Where should he eat? Should he return to the restaurant in the High Street? Dare he? He could eat earlier. He could eat elsewhere. He could go back to his original mini-Egon Ronay plan, or trek to the Indian establishment favoured by Denet. Or he could just go and brazen it out, face her and act as if nothing had happened. There was this nagging thought that she might not be there, and he had to admit to himself that she was the sole reason for his continued patronage. Otherwise he might find somewhere much better in which to dine. He considered deciding the matter on the toss of a coin, but he could not decide whether or not this would be a satisfactory method of resolving the issue. He was wrapped in this internal debate when he came upon two boys from his form pressed against the railway fence near the corner of Grove Crescent. One, Colin Morris, had already impressed Richard as being very bright. The other, not surprisingly, was Jonathan Cross. "Collecting numbers, are we?" he said, catching them unawares and scaring them half to death. Cross nearly choked and started coughing. "Is either of you interested in model railways?" he added casually.

"Oh yes, sir," said Morris. "Both of us. Jonathan's got a Hornby Dublo!"

"Is that so?" Still spluttering, Cross nodded his reply. "We must have a chat about it sometime. Now, make sure that you are not home too late. And don't forget your homework!"

He left them and walked on to Mrs Morgan's. To his surprise he realised that his dilemma had quietly resolved itself when he was not thinking about it. He would go to the restaurant to eat. He would act just as if nothing had happened.

He arrived outside at what he thought was his normal time and made his way to the table at which he had previously sat. A glance into the corner gave him a nerve shattering, numbing, shock. She was there, looking ravishing. She watched him as he sat and the intensity of her gaze compelled him to slide along the bench until he was out of her sight behind the protective cover of the screen. He felt dizzy and it was painful. He began to doubt the wisdom in coming. He ordered his meal and went to collect his tray on cue. All the time she seemed to be watching him with those penetrating, fascinating, petrifying, green eyes. What was she thinking? Suddenly he was aware of a sensuous rustle and she was there, to his terror, sitting before him. She rested her elbows on the table, cupped her hands under her chin, and smiled gorgeously. He felt desperately uncomfortable.

"I hope you don't mind," she said in a velvet voice.

"Me? No, no," Richard stammered, finding that his command of English vocabulary seemed to be draining away.

"I'm sorry, but I have very little time this evening. The other evening I thought you were - well, never mind what I thought. I can see that you are different. I would have told you last night that I was sorry, but you passed straight by and you didn't come in."

"You saw me?"

"Oh, yes. I saw you. I've seen you a couple of times in the morning, too, going to - your work?"

"Goodness, I didn't realise that I'd made such an impression."

She laughed. "You didn't as such. I was watching for someone else, and you came along. But shall we start again? From the beginning? I'm Stephanie."

"And I'm Richard; Richard Brown."

"Oh! Hello, Richard! Just call me Stephanie. Now, I really must go. Will you be here tomorrow?"

“Oh, yes,” he said, mentally challenging anyone to try and keep him away. There was no trace of doubt in his voice.

“Then we'll eat together. Until tomorrow!”

And she was gone, leaving Richard in a state of ecstatic bliss. Again he found that his appetite had vanished, and he left the remainder of his meal uneaten. He seemed to glide back to Grove Crescent on a magic carpet of euphoria. And, as he lay back on his bed and counted his blessings, thinking how wonderful life was, he thought suddenly of Denet's meagre room, and felt guilty. Yes, perhaps he still had some cigarette cards. He would look when he went home next. And those boys, could he do something for them? Perhaps he could start a model railway club at the school. Yes, life was wonderful! Here in the space of little over a week, he had got the job he sought, placed his feet on the first rung of the ladder, found good lodgings, and now he had met the most wonderful and beautiful woman he had ever seen! Oh, this was marvellous! Why ever had he harboured doubts about leaving home?

Still in his ecstatic trance, he fell into a deep, relaxing and contented, sleep. Outside the printers printed, locomotives shunted, wagons clattered, papers were produced, roads were cleaned, life went on, but Richard was lost and did not hear or heed them. This was, indeed, bliss.