

CHAPTER NINE

The Rochester House calendar had a number of fixed annual functions. There were the Christmas Carol Service, ably performed by the school choir, the Halloween Dance, Open Day, Sports Day, Speech and Prize Giving Day, and two blocks of Parents' Evenings which each occupied successive nights. One was held in the early Autumn, after the Summer holidays' digestion of the previous academic year's examination results and was used to plot a course through the Winter. The other was staged in the early Spring and was a follow-up, intended to finally set the preparation for that year's examinations.

It was school tradition and practise that the Parents' Evenings were prefaced by teachers' review meetings, held after school, presided over by the Headmaster, in order to discuss and review each pupil, in turn, to confer and agree on individual strengths and weaknesses, and to determine any remedial action. To the casual observer there might appear to be a great deal of merit in this process, but Mr Crompton was openly and vociferously opposed to the meetings, though his criticism rarely extended further than a declaration that they were a waste of time. Those who were not afraid of him, for many were, agreed that his opposition ran much deeper than the surface, right to the heart of the Deputy's academic philosophy, but none was ever able to penetrate the outer shell as Mr Crompton avoided rational debate on the matter. It was whispered that it was this irrationality which prevented and frustrated that which otherwise might have been a straight forward line of succession, and which left the choice of Headmaster, when the day came for Mr Larkins to retire, in doubt. But for all his denouncement, the Deputy Headmaster came to the teachers' meetings when it was necessary for him to attend, and grudgingly took part.

"I know it may be a little premature for you to attend, Brown, only having been with us a short time, but I think you ought to come along to the meetings on the First year Forms and, of course, on the appropriate evening. It will be good experience. None of us have met the parents of the first year since the year began, so we are all on an equal footing. It would be advantageous for you to have a preliminary discussion with Mr Pennington, of course. I've mentioned the matter to him. It would save him the bother of covering both the first two years as well as the Sixth. Of course, the whole thing is a total waste of time, but we have to go through the charade as if we mean it." Thus spake the Deputy Headmaster.

"It seems an awful lot to get through," said Richard as they sat in the corner of the common room. "The parents of some two hundred boys in one night?"

"Ah! That's how it looks on paper, but it never works out quite that way. For a start, not all the parents come, perhaps less than sixty percent will actually be there. And, secondly, not all of those who do come will wish to see every individual master. If sixty percent of those who do come wish to see you, you are faced with only thirty-six from the hundred first year parents." Richard acknowledged Mr Pennington's assessment of his task. "That's one of the reasons for having our preliminary meetings. They may seem laborious, but they enable every teacher to have a broad basic knowledge of each boy he teaches in addition to the specific subject. He can then discuss the boy's progress in an informal manner with the parents and guide them towards the right teacher in respect of specific problems. Of course the whole thing falls down because the parents you most want to see do not come."

"I see - I think," said Richard, "but - ."

"I think I know what you are going to say; what about the situation with the upper years when a more selective approach is called for? Then we have to be more positive and seek specific meetings with parents outside of the general evenings if we feel that we cannot achieve progress by any other means. However, in respect of this coming evening, look upon it as a means of breaking the ice, to meet the parents, to give them a brief general appraisal of their child's efforts, and little more. Mainly a sort of get-to-know-you evening." Richard nodded again, but without enthusiasm. It did all sound like rather a lot of hard work. "Now, here's the timetable for the teachers' meetings, and here's the sets of progress records which we use as the central documentation. They will form the basis of the end of term and year reports. If we go through them together, you'll be as wise as I."

Richard eyed the documents with apprehension and could not avoid wondering how late these meetings ran, and whether they would interfere with his meeting with Stephanie. He was sorely tempted to declare for the opposition and join Mr Crompton. But duty had to come before pleasure!

Each of the evening meals with Stephanie, for they were becoming established as regular events, was, for Richard, the climax of his day, but he had to confess to himself that his planned relationship with the young lady had developed no further than the unforgettable introduction and the pleasure of sitting down together to eat. Indeed, he had learnt very little about her, no matter how hard he had tried.

"So, you're a teacher," she said. "How fascinating! What do you teach?" He told her, and added that he taught at Rochester House. "Well, well! I know the Headmaster."

"Know him? Mr Larkins?"

"I've met him, I should say - a business relationship."

"What do you do, then?" For a moment she had looked un-characteristically serious and studied his face intently, as if the question, innocent and harmless on the surface, contained a concealed poisonous barb.

"I?" she said, studying her manicured fingernails. "I suppose one would say that I am in business."

"Business?"

"Business."

"Locally?"

"Yes."

Despite further intense interrogation, Richard had not discovered any more about what she did, where she lived, or where she worked. Elusive, with all the beauty, ease, and grace of an exotic butterfly, she evaded the clumsily lunged net of his questions yet, as she glided, she remained tantalisingly within reach.

"Mrs Hiller plans the timetable and prepares the progress reports," continued Mr Pennington. "She's very efficient, and so talented. Don't you think so?" It seemed appropriate for Richard to agree. Outside the common room he ran into Dennet.

"I think I'm in trouble again," he said breathlessly. "Got the call to old Larkins' office. I'll wear out the carpet before I've finished!"

"What have you done, then?"

"I don't know! But I bet that bastard Crompton's at the back of it! Hey! Something I meant to mention the other night - tennis! You said you played?"

"Yes?"

"Good! I'll put your name down at the local club. Don't worry. It's not very expensive, all very friendly, and you won't have to play in. See you later, I hope!"

"Lilly?" asked Mr Larkins.

"He is still away, sick," said Richard. "In fact, he's been away now for over four weeks. I have yet to lay eyes on him." They were sat around the large table in the common room, working their way through the boys of the first year, one by one, and had started with form 1A.

"Shall I inform the Inspector?" asked Mrs Hiller, twisting her bracelet.

"She's very efficient," Richard seemed to hear Mr Pennington say.

"We'll give him another week," said the headmaster. "Will you make a note of that, Mr Brown? Inform Mrs Hiller if he is not back at school the week after next. Do we know what is wrong with him?"

"He's a malingerer," snapped Mr Crompton.

"Have we received any communication from his parents? Mrs Hiller?"

"None that I am aware of," replied the efficient school Secretary. "His attendance record at his previous school was poor." Richard felt that he had to stop looking at her, especially as doing so seemed to take his mind back to the restaurant. He had no doubt as to

where he would rather be.

“Well, we'll give him this and next week, and when he does come back he'd better be seen by the school doctor.”

“Talking of the school doctor,” said a new voice, “Cross has a very bad cough. He has had it all winter to my recollection.”

“Mr Smithson?” There was some surprise in the headmaster's voice as Latin was not a first year subject. Mr Smithson had come in the remote hope that they might reach the second year that evening.

“He has a bad cough,” the Latin master repeated.

“Another malingerer,” snarled Crompton.

“I think not,” said Mr Smithson coolly.

“What do you think, Brown?”

“Me? Why, I don't think I have noticed it,” said Richard, unable to suppress the fact that he was flustered by the question.

“Ah! You should have. You must not forget that as a Form Master you must attend to your form's welfare as well as their academic progress.” Richard nodded and felt unjustly chastised. “Will you attend to that, too, Brown?”

“Of course, Mr Larkins,” he responded, marking Cross's name with a large asterisk. The discussion moved on slowly, eventually reaching Morris. It was agreed that he had the makings of an exceptional pupil, and that he should be marked down as one who could be considered a candidate for missing a year, possibly the third. His name, too, was endorsed for Richard's special attention.

Parents' Evening was held, as usual, in the Assembly Hall with the teachers sat at small desks arranged in alphabetical order around the perimeter. It started at seven o'clock and ostensibly finished at midnight, although those teachers who found themselves devoid of popularity frequently slipped away at a much earlier hour. Richard had experienced similar functions during his schooldays but then, of course, he was on the other side of the desk. It surprised him more than a little to find himself in great demand and fully occupied for the first hour and a half. To each parent he said his carefully prepared and rehearsed introductory lines, varying them slightly as the evening progressed and growing confidence allowed him to ad-lib. He also found it embarrassing to have to say exactly the same thing every time. The substance of his introduction covered the apologetic fact that he had not been at the school for very long, and had therefore no more than a superficial grasp of each boy's academic progress and potential. His preamble was followed by a short personalised review. He had identified a small number of problem children, but, in view of Mr Pennington's comment, he was not surprised when the particular parents failed to materialise. Of each parent who did present his or herself, he asked if they thought if their son was happy at his new school. He received answers which ranged across a wide spectrum, from “don't know” to “he had better be”!

Then came the Wrens who were so diminutive that they seemed to barely be able to peer over the top of his desk. They spent their five minutes haranguing him about the bullying of their boy, who was nicknamed “Pygmy”, and were so belligerent and pugnacious that he was glad to have the desk separating them. There was a lull and he dived in the direction of the refreshment table to secure a coffee and a couple of biscuits before the paltry supply was consumed. Mrs Hiller pulled a face at him to remind him that they were really for parents, not teachers. But she was not to know that he had not had dinner that evening, was she?

When he returned, a small, dark-haired, woman in a fur-lined coat was sat before his desk, looking abstractly at the small pile of files which lay on one side. As he sat, she looked up and he was struck immediately by the immense sorrow and suffering that seemed to be written in every line and shadow of her features. She could not be old. She appeared to be mature. He found it impossible to guess her age with any certainty of accuracy.

“Mrs - ?” He began, busying himself with the files.

“Cross,” she whispered, nervously tugging at the handle of her handbag and stretching for a dropped glove. “Jonathan Cross, form 1A.” Her large dark eyes seemed dull and expressionless, and she hardly seemed to look at him, or anything else in the room. In her

pale, drawn, features he now saw and recognised the genetic similarities with her son.

"I should have recognised you," he said kindly, departing from the script yet not knowing why. "Jonathan is a very bright little boy." He glanced down the list and spotted his asterisk, but she had already started to speak.

"He has taken to you," she said quietly, dropping her gaze onto the desk, or in that direction. "He never liked Mr Holt at all. Do you have any problems with him? His behaviour?" She bit her lip and took a handkerchief from a pocket to clutch firmly in her hand. "Is it normal?"

"Perfectly normal, Mrs Cross. I know of no problems at all as far as Jonathan is concerned, at least not of that nature. He does appear to have a rather bad cough, though." She nodded and swallowed, her eyes, lifeless, fixed on him; a vast void of darkness.

"It comes and goes," she said. "I'll take him back to the doctor for some expectorant. That usually clears it."

"Has he had it long?"

"He's a chesty child, Mr Brown. He is very vulnerable to chest infections and colds, but the doctor says that he'll grow out of it." A sudden, quite irrelevant, thought struck Richard. He had not registered with a doctor. Perhaps he should, just in case.

"Doctor?" he queried.

"MacPherson," she whispered.

"MacPherson?" She nodded and looked again down at her handbag. "He copes with his homework as far as I am able to judge. Does he need help?"

The glimpse of a smile flickered on her face, then vanished. "I help him sometimes. I'm good with figures," she added proudly, then became worried by what she had said. "Does it matter?" she continued timidly. "I could stop, but - ."

"I don't think it will do any harm," Richard said, trying to sound reassuring. "It is essential for parents to be prepared to assist their children if they are in difficulty, always assuming that they can. Just ensure that he has tried himself before you help him out. Otherwise you might end up doing all his homework and get none of the credit!" He smiled at her, trying to indicate that it was to be taken as a joke, but it produced no visible reaction in Mrs Cross. Should he mention her husband and ask her how she was coping? What had it to do with him? And what assistance or remedy would he suggest if she told him that she required it as she was not coping. He rapidly concluded that he should make no reference to the late Mr Cross. "Everything seems fine, then," he said thoughtlessly. "About Jonathan's schooling, that is," he added clumsily.

She did not seem to want to go. Her eyes rose once again and her vacant, dead, stare was fixed upon him. She opened her mouth as if to say something, a cry for help, perhaps, but she changed her mind and stayed silent. Quite abruptly she stood, as if she had suddenly overcome an invisible force that was holding her down. "Thank you," she said quietly, without inflexion. "Goodnight Mr Brown."

"Goodnight Mrs Cross." He watched her as she walked away. She did not visit any of the other desks but made her way straight to the exit. Either she had seen all whom she wished to see before him, or she had come to see him alone. It was a fascinating thought.

As he walked back to Mrs Morgan's that evening, Richard found himself haunted by the vision of Mrs Cross. He could not avoid drawing a comparison between her and Stephanie, though he could not rationalise why he should do so. And, although the comparison was to the overwhelming disadvantage of the diminutive widow, there was something mysterious there, in her features or demeanour, or in her sad presence; something that undoubtedly attracted him and aroused his emotion. Could it be pity? Surely not? Was it material? Did she remind him of his mother, touching off pangs of nostalgia? No! With a son as young as Jonathan she surely could not be, or even appear, old enough for him to relate to her, even in his subconscious, as to his mother. What was it, then? She could not be described as attractive. She could not be described as smart. Yet here he was thinking about her, to the partial exclusion of Stephanie. And the more he attempted to concentrate his thoughts on Stephanie, the greater the shadow of Mrs Cross grew in the background.

“You said you played tennis!”

“Sorry, Dennet?” said Richard, looking up from behind a mountain of inky and smudged exercise books, the inaccurate contents of which were slowly exasperating him.

“You said you played tennis!” repeated the physical education teacher.

“Did I? I suppose it is a fair statement as long as you keep the word 'played' and do not use 'play'.”

“Not play?” Dennet asked with open disappointment in his voice.

“I played last at University; what was that? Two years ago?”

“Oh, you won't have forgotten the game. Were you any good?”

Richard laughed. “What kind of question is that? I didn't make it to Wimbledon, if that's what you mean. Why do you ask? Why all the excitement, and why don't you let me get on with my marking?” Dennet sat down opposite and pushed the mountain to one side.

“Can I talk to you?” he said eagerly. Richard tugged impatiently at the brown books in an effort to restore the topography but Dennet's elbow was placed in the way, blocking his attempt.

“You are talking to me, though I don't think I should be talking to you. I've all these to do and its blue murder.”

“Yeh, I can see the blood! I'll only be a couple of minutes. What I want to ask you, and I'd like you to think about it before answering, is, do you think that you could coach. Basics, that is?”

“Coach? What on earth are you on about?”

“Just this. I'd like to start a tennis club at the school, but I don't think that old Larkins thinks I am very re-li-able, especially if Crompton has any say in it. But if you helped, he might see things differently.”

“You really think so?” Dennet nodded furiously.

“I've wanted to do it for some time. I tried last Autumn as I know that some of the older boys play, but I was headed off - discouraged.”

Richard sat back in his chair and laid down his pen. “Dennet,” he said staring levelly at his colleague, “there are no tennis courts here.

“We'll use the local tennis club. I'm a member, and I told you that I'll get you in.”

“Would they allow it?”

“I don't know,” he said, shrugging. “We'd have to ask.”

“And, haven't they a club pro'? How's he going to feel about us appearing and coaching a load of youngsters, taking away his bread and butter, and eating it right under his nose?”

“I don't think that they'd see it that way. For a start, the Club wants to expand and, certainly, they are anxious to increase the junior membership. If we generate some interest as well as improving the boys' standards, it can only be beneficial to the Club in the long run. As far as their pro' is concerned, as long as we've got the rudiments right, we're creating potential customers for him. If we present it that way, I don't think any reasonable person would object.”

“You've obviously thought it all through.”

“I have! I've given it a great deal of thought.”

“And are we dealing with reasonable people?”

“You said 'we!' You are in?”

“Did I? Slip of the tongue - a mere figure of speech.”

“Oh!” Dennet looked crestfallen. “In that case, will you think about it?”

“Yes. I'll think about it. May I now continue this thankless task?” Dennet retreated, overflowing with professions of gratitude. Richard finished his marking, then sought Mr Pennington's advice on the subject.

“It sounds a good idea,” said the older man. “I think there are several matters that warrant consideration. First of all, there's your commitment. I don't know if you've been involved in anything of this kind before, but if you take any obligation towards the boys upon yourself which means, indirectly, the school, you must be prepared to carry it through. It isn't

something you can start and discontinue as you wish.”

“I think I understand that. The scheme would have to run for a reasonable period anyway, perhaps a term, to give it a fair trial.”

“Just so. Your second consideration is finance. How much will it cost? Will school funds be required? Will you charge the boys a nominal fee to partly offset the cost, and to also discourage hangers-on?”

“The unknown factor there is the tennis club,” said Richard, frowning. “Dennet doesn't know as yet whether they'll agree in principle, leave alone what their charge will be.”

“Work on provisional costings then, and make your basis clear in your proposal. Prepare a short paper on the scheme, covering funding, number of boys, periods of time, insurance, and matters like that. Talk to Mrs Hiller about the insurance and the mechanism for obtaining school funding. She'll explain the committee processes. She will also type up your proposal, always assuming your writing is remotely legible. Have you seen her typing? Faultless, absolutely faultless! Then, when you have the scheme absolutely clear in your mind, go and talk to the Head, or Crompton, or both. You may meet opposition, but neither will turndown any scheme which is well prepared, substantive, supported, and likely to bring credit to the school. Tennis is, unfortunately, a peripheral sport with all kinds of undertones of professionalism. It may be akin in their minds to you proposing to teach Rugby League or Snooker. I do wish you luck, and I'm always ready with advice and a little moral support, should you feel that you need some. And do talk to Mrs Hiller. You'll find her most helpful. She's a wonderful woman!” Richard needed no encouragement to go and talk to Mrs Hiller. There was a warm, feminine, glow about her, which he greatly enjoyed. She always smelt delicious, too.

“I could never do all of those things,” said Dennet when Richard reported the discussion with Mr Pennington. “But I can coach, certainly the basics. And if you are worried, I'll give you a refresher course. Look - if I am pushing you into something, speak up! I mean, do you like to play? Would you like to join the club, anyway? You wouldn't have to play in, you know.” Richard's response was to nod.

“I'd like to give the scheme more thought,” he said. “Its the commitment, you know, Dennet. The commitment.”

That was substantially true. But he had also been nursing a pet project of his own, an idea which had lain dormant for many weeks, but which had recently germinated. Dennet's scheme would undoubtedly take up time outside of normal school hours, part of Saturday and, may be, some evenings. If it were popular, they might find the demand exceeding their time anyway. He went to see Mr Fox. He found the woodwork teacher emptying the contents of a first aid box onto a workbench. “Look at it! Lint, bandages, no elastoplast! I reckon that someone takes it out, all of it, before they give it to me!”

“Is someone hurt?” asked Richard, glancing anxiously around the empty workshop.

“No, no. Be prepared, as we say.”

“We? Are you in the Scouts, then?” Richard tried to picture Mr Fox in uniform and shorts.

“I'm school Scout-Master!” announced Mr Fox with pride. “Didn't you know?”

“I didn't even know that there was any school scouts,” said Richard wondering if this elusive troop had adopted Masonic principles of secrecy. Perhaps the occasional gesture which he had seen used in the playground by, among others, the undesirables of form 3D, were no more than secret Scout greeting signs.

“Goodness! We meet every Friday. It takes up a lot of my spare time.”

“Oh, that's a shame. You may not be so interested in the project I have in mind.”

“Project?”

“I was going to start a school modelling club.”

“You mean boats, and planes, not - .”

“Yes! And trains.”

The woodwork teacher frowned. “I doubt that you would ever get it off the ground. The administration here is primarily concerned with stuffing as much information as possible

into the boys' heads, not developing the use of their hands. True, they do allow them to do art, but that's because it is seen as comfortably bourgeois. And they also allow Sports. They make the little wretches run around the grounds, but that's only to wear them out physically so that they can try and stuff even more into their heads without there being any fear of them running away. I think the Scouts are tolerated because it is thought that it gives the boys something referred to as moral fibre. I sometimes think I'm here as a sort of sifter. If I find a boy who can cut a piece of wood square without amputating a limb, they mark him down as a dunce and demote him. It doesn't pay to give boys good reports in woodwork, not unless you want to terminate their academic career at a young age. Mr Crompton, I'm sure, believes wholeheartedly that manual aptitude and intellectual prowess are anathema."

"Why that's ridiculous!" exclaimed Richard. "Why, I'm - I - ."

"Yes, Mr Brown?"

"I like to think that I'm reasonably skilled with my hands. My father took up joinery after the war and he taught me anything I didn't inherit."

"I wouldn't advertise the fact too widely, if you take my advice. Us artisans are of a lower Order to the Larkinian and Cromptonian world."

"So you wouldn't be willing to help me?"

Mr Fox smiled in a strange way. "I didn't say that. I think I am helping you now. Think it over carefully before you act."

So Richard, trustful and naive, went back to see Mr Pennington. "Ah!" said the Senior Mathematics Master, "Mr Fox has given you sound advice. Yes, I was like you once, full of enthusiasm, eager to start up all kinds of things. But you must learn to slow down and tackle only one thing at a time. You have a reputation to establish. You have your teaching to master and perfect. Don't fall into the trap of developing too many peripheral activities, or else you are bound to fail. Now, of the two projects, yours and Dennet's, which is the most likely to succeed? Pick the winner and concentrate what effort you can spare on that. Earn your reputation and establish yourself in the eyes of the school, boys and masters, as a sound, mature, person. As for Fox's comment about aptitude, well, it is only skin deep. What he is observing is that there is, inevitably and understandably, a reluctance on the part of the senior masters, to promote any interest or activity which might direct a student from his studies. Look upon it as the parents and the education authorities giving us the children in trust, so that they can win scholarships, go to University, get good school certificates, not merely make model planes. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Richard nodded.

"I think so," he said. "Anyway, I will bear your words in mind." He found Dennet out on the playing fields with Form 1A. The boys were stretched out around the perimeter of the grounds in a long, slowly moving, chain.

"Giving them a cross-country run," yelled Dennet as he approached. "Go on Cooper! Lift your feet Morris! Does them good."

"Does it? How about him?" Dennet spun around and together they watched one boy approach. His arms flopped loosely at his side and, mouth open, his head lolled first one way then the other, as if he had totally lost control over its attitude. Only some internal force of will kept the mechanism of his legs going. It was Jonathan Cross.

"You can sit the rest out," said Dennet, stooping and catching the boy around his frail waist as he came past, and steering him to a seat.

"Is he all right?" asked Richard, alarmed as the child coughed and gasped for air.

"He will be, in a minute. Just let him get his breath back." Dennet's prognosis seemed to be correct. Soon Cross was breathing normally though this was punctuated by convulsive fits of coughing.

"Have you been to see the doctor yet, Cross?" said Richard, kneeling down before him as Dennet extolled the remainder of the Form to greater things.

"No Sir," gasped the boy. "I think that we're going tonight."

"Are you all right?"

"I think so, sir. Shall I continue running?" Richard stared at Dennet whose eyes narrowed as he considered the question and his reply.

"No," said the Physical Education Teacher after a short reflection. "Go and have your

shower and get changed. The period's nearly over, anyway.”

They stood in silence and watched the boy walk slowly towards the school buildings. As Cross disappeared from their sight, Dennet turned to Richard as if to pass a comment, but changed his mind. Form 1A continued to straggle past. “Can we go in yet, Sir?” cried one boy.

“Another lap, Smith,” yelled Dennet to a chorus of groans. “You've plenty of time!”

“I've been thinking about your idea of tennis coaching,” said Richard, “and I think I've come to a decision.”

“You'll do it?”

“I'll help you prepare a proposal. Let me put some figures down on paper, and I'll talk to Mr Larkins about the principle. Then we'll have to go and talk to someone at your tennis club and see what they think about it.”

“Will you join anyway?”

“I am very rusty and I'll be very stiff at first, but I think I'd better get some practice in if I'm to be of any use.”

“Great!” exclaimed Dennet. “You've made my day!”

Richard left him to gather up his flock of boys and walked reflectively back to the school. Had he made the right decision? Only time would tell. He had, at the very least, taken another first step.