

CHAPTER TEN

Richard's first step with Stephanie had still led him nowhere. She had demonstrated remarkable acumen in avoiding all suggestions that they might spend an evening together, somewhere other than at the restaurant. In addition, he had met with no success in learning anything about her personal life. "There's really nothing to know," she said sweetly.

"I don't even know your surname."

"It's not important."

"Or where you work?"

"Why should you?"

"Or where you live?"

"Not far away. Don't tell me that you are going to follow me home?" She said it jokingly as she tossed aside his questions.

"I might be forced to it." Her look became serious.

"No, don't do that," she said earnestly. "Promise me that you won't do that."

"But why? Why would it matter?" Richard asked, half laughing.

"I am serious. Please promise me that you won't follow me home."

"Only if - ."

"Only if, nothing! Promise me!"

"But why? Give me a reason."

"Because I ask. I have a dozen quite fundamental reasons, not one of which I am prepared to discuss now. Maybe they'll emerge in time, and maybe you'll have gone away by then."

"You are so mysterious - and tantalising!"

"That may be so. But you originally asked to keep me company, here, if you recall. Let it be and remain that way. We might both regret that outcome if matters went further."

The intense nature of this conversation, and others similar, gave Richard considerable vexation. Once or twice he had been driven to the point of a declaration of love, but fear of ridicule and the risk of a sudden cessation of their limited relationship held him back. And, despite the lingering images of Eileen Cross and Mrs Hiller, Stephanie remained the object of all his desires, sensual, temporal and spiritual. If this was love; if he was in love; then it was with Stephanie. There was no doubt of that.

The Easter holiday loomed. He had put Dennet off by stating that he would have to go home to get his tennis racket, and that he still wanted to get his thinking absolutely clear. He explained his intention to go home to Mrs Morgan and received, as a demonstration of the good woman's approval, a smile that withered all the unfortunate houseplants in the hall. He wrote to his mother, asking if he might come home for the holiday, using the term "home" in the full knowledge that his father would object if he saw the letter, and inserting a paragraph which indicated that he would like to bring a guest with him for all, or part of, the holiday. It was no more than a kind of insurance. He was dreaming still. He had not even dared to broach the question with her.

"Would you like to come to my home for the holiday?" he said. Although he had rehearsed the asking of this question many times, to ask it required courage, and as he uttered the words he realised it sounded obvious and a trifle foolish.

"Your home?"

"Eastgate - my parents' house. To the seaside. I don't know what the weather will be like."

"I'll have to look in my diary to see what engagements I have." It was not the answer he had expected.

"You could come for the Bank Holiday weekend, surely? You can't be working over that!"

"On the contrary. It could be a very busy time." She frowned as her green eyes fixed on and studied his face. "I don't know," she added. "I will have to think very carefully about it. I am not sure that it would be wise." It was his turn to frown.

"Honestly, Stephanie, you're not very approachable." He regretted saying this as he

expected her to be angry, but she looked down and seemed moved and disturbed.

“On the contrary,” she said, again in a low voice, “I am far too approachable.” Richard's heart fell. He had perceived that she wore no ring. He would have to ask the question, just to be sure.

“Tell me truthfully, Stephanie, is there someone else?” Her sharp laugh reverberated throughout the restaurant.

“Hundreds of them,” she exclaimed with forced gaiety. Then her voice dropped once more. “But there is no-one who need concern you, not in the sense that you meant when you asked the question. You are different. I told you that at the beginning. And our relationship, although it has been short, has come when, maybe, I have need of some companionship. It means a great deal to me.”

“Then you will come down at Easter?”

“Oh dear,” she said, almost to herself. “I knew this would happen. I need more time.”

“Stephanie?”

“Will you bear with me, Richard? Just be patient? I have a number of things I must consider. I must check my commitments, and I must think the whole thing through. And I may assume that your parents will be there?”

“Of course. And my sister.”

“And that this is a genuine invitation? No nonsense?” His face fell, but before he could speak she continued. “Oh, I'm sorry, Richard,” she cried, grasping his hand. “How could I doubt you?”

He squeezed her outstretched hand. “Stephanie, I - I would like you to come and spend a few days at the seaside, all fair, square and above board. Please?”

“I can make no promise. Would you write down your address and telephone number for me? Then, if I can come, I'll telephone you a few days before to give you warning. Will that do?”

“You'll come if you can? Promise?”

“If I can. I promise.”

Richard went home to Eastgate in a trance-like seventh heaven of expectancy. He was not totally aware of the fact, but this elation was noted and seized upon both by his mother and his sister. “Do you think that he is in love?” said Sandra, having read about these things and having discovered that she was not devoid of emotion herself.

“I'm not sure,” said her mother. “It's very sudden if he is, but there is this strange reference to a visitor in his last letter. It could be this Mr Dennet who he has mentioned from time to time.”

“Perhaps he's in love with him,” said Sandra, innocently.

“Sandra!” reprimanded her mother. Her daughter took little notice.

“I wonder what she's like,” mused Sandra, assuming that Dennet was not the mysterious potential visitor. “What kind of person would Richard fall in love with? Shall I do the tea?”

“Yes please, dear. I once thought I knew, but I don't think I'd as much as hazard a guess now.”

“Oh, I can. I think that she's small, dark, plain and a little dowdy, wearing flat shoes and a tweed skirt.”

“Oh, Sandra!”

“We can ask him at dinner.”

“Oh, you mustn't!”

“I shall! You'll see.”

Richard relaxed above in his room, at once comforted by the familiarity of the surroundings, engulfed in a wave of nostalgia, quite unaware of, not even suspecting, the very personal nature of the conversation below. He studied the piece of paper he had removed from his desk on which he had written three things he wished to remember:

tennis kit and racquets;

cigarette cards;
model railway;

and carefully laid it on the dressing table in a prominent position. He had brought home some work which he planned to complete early in the holiday, certainly before the period during which Stephanie might be there. This he placed beside the note. Then he went down to the lounge to busy himself in the evening paper until dinner time.

"Would you sit here, Darling?" said Mrs Brown.

"You've changed the seating arrangement!" he protested.

"We thought this more appropriate," said his father, coldly. "Now that you live in London." Dinner commenced. Richard was aware that Sandra was watching him closely across the table, but he assumed this was due to his coming back after absence and not the result of spots, boils, or some other physical blemish or deformity. Her question came as a complete shock.

"What's she like?" He recoiled visibly. Both of his parents stopped eating and stared at him. "She?" he said heavily.

"Your girl friend," continued Sandra. "This mysterious guest who you have invited. It was in your letter."

"Oh, that," said Richard nonchalantly. "I don't know if they'll come."

"They? Is there more than one?" asked his mother sharply.

"No, no. Only one, and its very doubtful," said Richard, anxious to conceal the sex of the person under discussion. "Its very doubtful indeed."

"So, its not worth me getting the guest room ready?"

"I think it would be better if you did," said Richard. "They are going to 'phone to confirm, so there may not be much notice."

A smile crept across Sandra's face. "It is a woman," she thought. "Had it been this Mr Dennet, Richard would have said so. There would have been no mystery or cover up. I suppose we must wait and see." This was a sentiment with which her mother was in total accord. So the subject was dropped for the remainder of the evening while Richard was present, but was thoroughly aired in the kitchen while Richard sat with his father, dull, in the lounge.

And the telephone call, when it did come, gave Sandra quite a shock. "Its a man!" she hissed to her mother as she capped her hands over the mouthpiece. Mrs Brown did not comment, but raised her eyebrows and went to fetch Richard.

"Dennet!" exclaimed Richard, looking at the faces of feminine curiosity which appeared to surround him. "Good of you to call!" His colleague was rather perplexed by both this response and Richard's tone which clearly indicated that he was expecting the call, but Richard had read his mother's and sister's minds and now knew what they were thinking. And, although it bothered Dennet for a short while, like so many other minor irritants and enigmas in his life, he soon forgot it.

"I've been picked for the team coming to Eastgate next Thursday for the H.C. tournament. Would you like to come and watch me play?"

"Tournament? Play?"

"Tennis, of course," exclaimed Dennet. Richard had to admit, to himself at least, that he was unaware that there was a local tennis tournament about to take place. Dennet had not thought to mention it, nor had he even connected it with Richard. And the truth of the matter, as Dennet had later to confess, was that he had been included only as a reserve and at the last moment when a member of the team had succumbed to appendicitis. It was more than likely that he would not be called upon to play. However, as he was actually coming to Eastgate, it would be a pity not to see Richard, a proposition to which Richard was pleased and eager to agree as it acted as a perfect foil to all of Sandra's prying. That was until his mother asked him if his friend would be staying the night.

"No," he said innocently. "There was never any chance of that."

"So!" cried his mother, triumphantly. "He is not the visitor we have been awaiting!"

With which she swept out of the room in search of her daughter, leaving Richard to slump back in his chair, tricked again.

As far as the Browns were concerned, the arrangements for Dennet's visit to Eastgate were vague. It was uncertain as to how he was travelling, or at what time he would arrive, though it was conjectured that it was unlikely he would have time to go up to the house, even after the Tournament, as the evening would be devoted to the Tennis Club Dance which was considered by many to be one of the top social events of the Eastgate year. Such ill-defined arrangements always caused Mrs Brown a degree of anxiety that was out of all proportion to the event. "Couldn't you phone him and ask?" she said for the umpteenth time. "You should have asked him when he phoned you. You know how I like to have things cut and dried!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think of it," repeated Richard. He could not admit that Dennet's call had been as much a surprise to him as it had been to Sandra. Some semblance of suspense had to be maintained. "Anyway," he added, "he isn't on the phone."

"He must have phoned from somewhere."

"I still don't know how to get in touch with him!"

As often happens, the events resolved themselves in an orderly fashion, and not without advantage to Mrs Brown. Dennet telephoned again, to say that the Club had hired a coach for the players and supporters, and that he would be travelling down on that. No, it was doubtful that he would be able to get up to the house. Perhaps Richard would meet him at the Club at, say, one o'clock? Should Sandra come? That would be superb! Perhaps she could even go to the Dance? This last prospect aroused great excitement and Richard's sister ensured that they left the house in good time. She would not be the cause of any delay. They had been gone but a short while when the telephone rang. Mrs Brown answered to find herself greeted by a crystal clear, woman's voice.

"I am sorry," said Mrs Brown, containing her mounting curiosity, "but Richard has just gone out and I do not expect him back until late this evening. Can I help?"

"Oh!" said the woman, clearly taken aback. "I wonder if I should leave it altogether."

"I'm his mother," answered Mrs Brown. "Please tell me."

"Well, I hope it is all right - I mean, I trust Richard has told you, but he did ask me if I would like to come down and stay with you over the Bank Holiday weekend. Oh, it sounds dreadful, having to say this and not knowing whether you know."

"Richard certainly did mention it!" Mrs Brown said firmly, feeling that in some way her son had been slighted.

"Would it be all right if I came tomorrow? Until Tuesday?" Moira Brown softened. The voice at the other end sounded attractive, cultured, and prompted her to try and picture the woman who, as she suddenly realised, might be her future daughter-in-law.

"It is a shame that you didn't phone earlier. You have only just missed him. He's gone to meet a colleague of his, a Mr Dennet. Do you know him?" There was a pause, then a reply delivered with such hesitancy that Mrs Brown could not fail not to notice it.

"No - no - I don't. Will he be there tomorrow?"

"Mr Dennet? I don't think so. If I understand it correctly, he's due to go back later tonight. Are you coming down by train? Can I ask Richard to meet you?" It was arranged that she would travel down by train and would be met at the station. Mr Brown grunted his consent for Richard to use the car and Mrs Brown was left to get through the remainder of the day while she burned, pondered, and concerned herself about the frustration of having such news and no-one at hand to whom it could be imparted.

The Eastgate Tennis Club nestled in the gradually falling floor of one of the few sharply sided valleys that were still wooded. It boasted eight red-topped hard courts and ten lush green grass courts, three of which were reserved purely for competitive use. There was a spacious wood framed, tiled, club-house, although the Dance was held at the Winter Gardens on the sea front. Even tucked away, in the shelter of the trees and the surrounding hillocks, it was not immune from the caprices of the chilling north winds which, on an otherwise fine day, could play havoc with a player's service and return. Although it enjoyed strong local

support, the nucleus of active players was small and stable. By far the largest proportion of the membership joined for the social benefits, rather to play regularly or squeeze onto the limited and rather uncomfortable facilities for spectators. These facts were constantly cited to explain the Club's inability to produce even one player of County standard, and the limited level of competition it was able to stage. Yet the non-playing membership contributed more than their fair share of funds, and the truth regarding development of players probably lay in the educational and social process, coupled with a lack of local opportunity, which had the effect of driving all the promising youth away. The holding of the Hard Court Tournament had established itself low in the national tennis calendar, but it was the most important event of the year at Eastgate, and it did provide an early, competitive, workout for many young players, a small few of which aspired to greater things. There were those in Eastgate who nurtured the idea of the Tournament rising to rival Eastbourne or Bournemouth, but these formed a tiny minority compared with the majority who merely saw it as an excellent excuse for having and attending a grand Annual Dinner-Dance.

They met Dennet in the Clubhouse at the bar. Richard had conceded to himself that Sandra looked pretty, even though meeting Stephanie had forced him to re-evaluate his views on beauty and feminine attractions. It was a mild day and his sister wore a blue-trimmed white dress with a matching blue bow which gathered her fair hair together behind her head. Dennet was clearly impressed.

"My goodness, me," he said, beaming and making room for the blooming, youthful, girl. "You never told me you had such a sister! If I'd known, I'd have got myself invited down before!"

"Are you playing?" Richard asked, watching Dennet swallow a third brandy.

"As a matter of fact, no. I am the first reserve, though, here really in the event that someone swallows a tennis ball or breaks a leg. Would you believe the other fellow went down with appendicitis? Do you play?" he added, turning to Sandra.

"Play what?" she asked wickedly.

Later they sat together, with Sandra sandwiched between them, high on a make-shift scaffold which had been thrown up to provide some additional seating for spectators. The afternoon was grey and overcast, but it remained mild and windless, and the matches were played under what were termed by those who knew as being ideal conditions. Richard's concentration waned. He lost track of the progress of, then the interest in, the tennis, and started to think about Stephanie. He tried to picture her. He wondered what she would be doing, or what she was thinking. And, most of all, he wondered whether she would telephone.

"I suppose it will be all right for me to go to the Dance?" said Sandra excitedly in his ear, gripping his arm tightly. Beyond her he could see Dennet nodding furiously.

"The Dance?" queried Richard, not having paid the slightest attention to the conversation being held beside him.

"I'll get some more drinks," said Dennet, leaping to his feet. "Orange? Or would you like to try something more r-i-sk-y?"

"Oh, orange would be perfect," said Sandra, looking up, then turning back to her brother. "The Tennis Club Dance!" Richard had been a member of the tennis club for a number of years, but he had never attended one of the Annual Dances despite their social importance. He was aware of their position on the social scale and that they attracted only the elite and he had no doubt that he qualified. As he watched Dennet negotiate his way from the scaffold and head off in the direction of the bar with a suggestion of unsteadiness, he found himself harbouring doubts about his colleague's ability to conduct himself correctly that evening.

"I am not my sister's keeper," he said lowly. "You can have my ticket."

"But you must come as well!"

"What? To act as some kind of gooseberry?"

"Richard! Nothing of the kind! Your friend will soon get tired of me and want someone else to talk to. He is rather sweet, though." And her eyes traced his progress into the clubhouse and remained fixed on the entrance until his figure appeared again.

"What about your ticket, then?" asked Richard after some thought, torn between his

duty as a brother and his unreasoned wish to decline, not necessarily the whole idea, but certainly his involvement.

“Dennet's got a handful of tickets,” said a voice as his colleague arrived with his hands full of glasses. “Are you warm enough?”

So it was arranged that Richard would take Sandra home to change and that they would then all meet up again at the Dance. Dennet emphasised that had he not gone to the Dance he would have had an evening to kill as the coach was not scheduled to leave until one o'clock the next morning. Richard, for once sensitive to his sister's wishes, carefully omitted to suggest that the evening could have been spent at his house, or in a wine bar, the Castle, or anywhere other than the Tennis Club Dance at the Winter Gardens. Yes, he agreed, that was the best way to spend the evening.

Mrs Brown found that she could not avoid being affected by her daughter's excitement when they arrived home, or Richard's uncontrollable elation when she reported the substance of the telephone call amplified this feeling, though she did suffer a mother's apprehension both about this unknown man who was taking her daughter to the dance, and the unknown woman who had been invited by her son for a long weekend. She was comforted by the knowledge that Richard would be there, that evening, to act as a brotherly chaperon in that respect, and, as far as the young woman was concerned, they would all be able to examine her more closely during her stay. If her husband shared any part of her views and fears, he did not show it and disappeared soon after dinner to play with his trains. At least, that was how Mrs Brown saw it and how she would describe his activity to her daughter as soon as the opportunity arose.

Sandra's excitement was as nothing compared to the effect that the news of Stephanie's impending arrival had on Richard. It caused a total transformation of his attitude from mild introversion in the afternoon to aggressive extroversion in the evening. Dennet would enjoy himself because it was in his nature to do so, and he had traits in his character which made many of the people around him find him good company, sociable and amusing. Some, however, hated him altogether. Richard, however, had learned that he would often have to work hard to be bright on social occasions and, if he or others permitted it, he could, happily and easily, fall into a withdrawn, retrospective, brooding silence while all about him were clearly and audibly enjoying themselves. He recognised the problem and knew that when the bullet-proof glass shutter came down and the steel doors crashed shut in his mind, it required an immense effort to break free and escape into the real world again.

This particular evening he faced no such problem. He danced with Sandra, then Dennet danced with Sandra, then they both went onto the dance floor and danced the modern section with Sandra, happily twisting and clapping. He did not stop to consider what Richard's parents would have thought, but between them they kept the poor girl on her feet until she was happily exhausted, pleading to sit at least one dance out, but finding it wonderful just the same. This one evening expunged all the bitter memories of previous disappointments and became one which, for many years after; she found both sadness and pleasure in recollecting and reliving all of its most cherished moments. The appointed end came. As the Town Hall clock struck one, this Cinderella gathered up her handbag and gloves, wistfully said goodbye to her newly-discovered Prince Charming with no more than a kiss on the cheek, and was gone.

Breakfast was late next day. Richard was down early and was clearly impatient for breakfast, the paper, the passing of the morning, lunch, everything and anything which preceded and which therefore obstructed, in a temporal sense, the appointed arrival of the train. There was no question of him being late. He parked the car in the station forecourt a full twenty minutes before the train was due in and found himself frustrated even further when it was announced that it was running, true to form, eight minutes late. Then it slid into the station, like a long green snake, with a ripple of doors opening and closing along its windowed flank. Luggage tumbled onto the platform and the passengers moved in a dense, platform-wide, phalanx towards the restriction of the barrier and the point at which he stood. Where, oh where, was she? But she was there, towards the rear of the tugging children and

screaming toddlers, strutting on high heels, carrying a small grey case, and looking as marvellous as ever as she caught the approving sideways glances from the men, and the hostile disapproval of their better halves. Richard's heart all but burst with joy. There was the longing to hug her, kiss her, raise her up and spin her around, right there and then in the station foyer. Instead he took her case and said, "Hello, Stephanie."

"Hello, Richard."

"How long are you able to stay?" he asked fearfully, once they were in the car.

"I must go back on Tuesday. That's if your family will suffer me for that long. Tell me about them again. I do feel a little nervous at the prospect of meeting them." Stephanie did not find it too much of an ordeal even though the entire family was assembled in the hall to greet her on her arrival. Even Richard's father had been dragged from the railway, grudgingly consenting to say "hello" to this woman whom Richard was bringing home.

"Richard," said his mother reproachfully when Stephanie had been shown upstairs to the guest room and left to unpack and freshen herself up after her trip, "you should have warned us. She is beautiful, absolutely beautiful. What do you think, Arthur?"

Her husband, who had stood speechless and open-mouthed since Stephanie's entrance, nodded his agreement. Sandra planted a kiss on Richard's cheek for a change, and told him how pleased she was for him. Richard enjoyed every minute of it.

A little later, above, Stephanie sat at the small veneered dressing table, carefully brushing her hair, and let out a long sigh. "Have I done the right thing?" she asked her reflection. "Have I?"

It was inevitable that Stephanie would be the subject of conversation between Arthur and Moira at bedtime that night. "Isn't she lovely, Arthur?" she asked in subdued tones.

"Richard's young lady? Extremely so."

"And she so reminds me of someone! Who does she remind you of?"

"Some film star? The one who was in that film with Gregory Peck?"

"What film? Don't be silly," said Moira brusquely. "She reminds me of Felicity."

"Felicity?"

"Yes, Felicity. You surely remember Felicity?"

"Of course I remember Felicity," hissed Mr Brown. "But I can't remember clearly what she looked like."

"Oh, you must be able to! She was very good-looking, some would say exceptional. It was all such a waste."

"It is something I would prefer not to be reminded of," grumbled Mr Brown. "I would have thought you would not exactly want to dwell on it."

"I know," said Mrs Brown, "but I can't help being reminded of her. I wonder where she is now."

"Has her sister never said? She still sends us Christmas cards, doesn't she?"

"No," said Moira scornfully. "They stopped coming quite a number of years ago. Don't you remember? I continued to send one to her for a further couple of years and then stopped. Perhaps she moved. I wonder what has become of Debbie, too."

"Well I can remember her and I wouldn't say that Richard's girl is like her."

"I'm not so sure," said Mrs Brown.

"Well, if there is a resemblance, it is pure coincidence," said Mr Brown, wearily.

"There is, but I expect that you are right," said his wife, kissing him lightly and turning out the light.

Richard felt pride; pride when his parents and sister looked and reacted this way; pride when, the next day, he took Stephanie down to Eastgate and walked around the town and shops with her. It was marvellous. She did turn heads. Men did look twice. He had the desperate hope that he would see some of his old school friends and that they would be filled with awe and envy. He never for one moment considered that an asset like Stephanie, even if he was ever right in thinking of her as his own, was something which would be coveted by all other men and was something that could so easily become a liability.

Stephanie was under no illusion. She knew that he was basking in her glory; that she was being shown to Eastgate, not Eastgate being shown to her. She had experienced it many times before and did not readily forgive the men who had exploited her thus, but on this occasion she forgave Richard without him even so much as suspecting that it was so. Eastgate was no tourist trap, but as Richard pointed out the plain, ordinary, unimpressive landmarks and features that failed to add grace to an ungraceful town, she felt at ease and happy, caught in a childlike innocence, released from the pressures, demands and restrictions of her life in London. And there was something in Richard's boyish enthusiasm and naiveté that she found engaging and attractive.

Richard wanted desperately to take her to the Dance at the Castle that evening, but Stephanie decided that she had been paraded and exhibited enough for that day, feigned exhaustion and a headache, and claimed an early bed. It was only when she had settled between the sheets that she realised that she had left the bedroom door unlocked. But she was tired, too tired to get out, and she closed her eyes on an undisturbed night.

Easter Sunday dawned bright and clear. It was going to be a beautiful day. At breakfast it was agreed that they would prepare a small picnic and, after church, take Stephanie along the cliffs. Even Arthur Brown, contrary to all expectation and previous form, elected to go which transformed the outing into an event of considerable note.

Stretching to the East and South, round the great white headland, sprawled several miles of unspoiled, undulating, downland, arrested at its edge by tumbled chalk cliffs through which many attractive paths had been well trodden. Here, this remnant of the Downs lacked the magnificence of the spectacular hills guarding the Channel farther south, but with this stretch sufficiently far from the town centre to discourage the attention of most pedestrian holidaymakers, it remained wild and beautiful.

The expedition set out with Richard and Stephanie in the lead, Mr Brown and the two other women bringing up the rear, the transportation of the picnic being shared between father and son. After nearly half an hour's walk the halted in a dry, grassy, dip which sloped gently away from the shrub-lined path towards the cliff edge. Here they laid out the picnic. After the meal Mr Brown lay back and fell asleep while Sandra sat silently, full of thought.

"We'll explore," said Richard, catching hold of Stephanie's hand. "Come on!"

"I'll stay with your father, of course," whispered Mrs Brown, feeling instinctively that it would be improper and unfeeling to accompany the two young people and informing Sandra thus with a stifling glance.

After a short way they came upon a spot where a stretch of the cliff had slipped and dropped bodily some twenty feet to form a flat, grassy ledge, hidden from the view of passers by on the footpath. In fact, its presence would never be suspected but for the evidence of the lightly marked path which branched off and led to the false cliff face. Richard had known of its existence from childhood; it being one of his "discoveries" as he liked to term them. "Follow me down," he said. "Its not hard. Give me your hands." There they sat, on the grass, under the mild and gentle Easter sun, quite absorbed in the scene and each other. Stephanie kicked off her shoes and turned up her toes. Across the imperceptibly curved horizon two tankers crept, like giant snails, nearing the end of their voyage to the lower reaches of the Thames. Nearer, the sea, its blue broken by the occasional white triangle of a sail, broke into small white wavelets before dashing itself against the chalk rocks below them. "My parents took me to the seaside once, but it was not like this. It is lovely here," she said, laying back and closing her eyes.

"It is," Richard said casually, then changed his tone. "Can I talk to you seriously, about - ." Her eyes opened and she sat up, looking at him curiously.

"You are not going to say anything to spoil the afternoon? I wouldn't want to regret coming here." Her voice was stern and compelled him to turn away, screwing up his eyes as if they had suffered harm from the glare of the sea.

"I think - I was going to say that I think I'm in love with you," he said slowly without turning to look at her.

"Oh, Richard!"

"Are you cross?"

"I? Cross? Oh look at me!" A disturbing, dark and menacing image flashed through his mind, and was gone. He turned and saw that she was smiling, but that there was sympathy in her eyes.

"Are you?" he repeated.

"I'm not sure. How can you be in love with me?" she asked, almost playfully. "What do your parents think of me?"

"They think that you are very beautiful."

"Ah! Thank you. But I asked what they thought of me, not what they think I look like. Neither they, nor you, know me."

"No, that is true. You are a little difficult to get to know." Her expression became serious and she looked away, out to sea.

"Perhaps it is because I prefer to keep it that way. Perhaps you wouldn't like me at all if you really knew me, leave alone think that you love me."

"I cannot believe that is the case, Stephanie, or ever could be."

"Really?"

"Really! I don't think that anything could stop me loving you." She turned back and fixed him with that same awful stare that had so unnerved him in the restaurant.

"One day," she said levelly, "that may be put to the test." Richard did not know what to say. Further protestations of love and fidelity appeared to be inappropriate and would at the very least make him look foolish. They sat in silence for a short while.

"And you?" he asked at length.

"I? What about me?"

"Do you, could you, love me?" Stephanie laughed and looked down at her toes as she wiggled them.

"I do love you, Richard, but as a sister loves a brother. Her younger brother."

"Now you are laughing at me," he said glumly, "and I've already got a sister."

"No, I'm not! You said that you wanted to talk seriously, so I will for a moment. I like you Richard. I enjoy your company. Yes, I think that I even love you, as I said, just as a sister would her brother, something I wanted as a lonely child and never had."

"But love in the other way?" Her eyes narrowed as she caught the words and worried anew about his intentions.

"What other way?" she said tersely.

"Now I see that I've made you angry. I'd better stop."

"No! We had best continue. Let us reach an understanding even if we find we cannot agree. What do you mean by love?" Richard swallowed.

"Well, I didn't mean as a sister," he stammered. "I meant more like a wife."

"Is that a proposal of marriage?" He watched a large gull swoop and soar across the face of the cliff and then plummet down, out of sight, towards the wave strewn rocks. His heart pounded with each breaker. He had gone further than he planned. He had stepped clean off of the edge of the cliff into thin air. He was falling, falling - .

"I suppose it is," he said quietly. "Will you?"

"I must take you what you are saying seriously. And you must believe me when I say that I'm the wrong sort of woman for you. I couldn't make you a good wife, even if I did love you in that kind of way, which I don't. I'm sorry if this hurts, but it is better to hurt you a little now rather than cause you untold agony, or even worse, in the future by leading you on. Believe me, I have good reasons for saying this."

"Are you rejecting me?"

"Yes, Richard. I am saying "no". Apart from any other consideration, I don't love you in that way."

"Is there no hope for me?"

"Hope? With me? Not in that way." Again, they sat in reflective silence. A light breeze ruffled the grass around them, disturbing Stephanie's hair and fanning their faces. "I'm sorry, Richard," she said. "I knew it would turn out this way. Its the burden I carry. All men fall in love with me, or think that they do."

"I don't think, I know!" he said, stubbornly, twisting pieces of grass together. "And

what about you? Don't you fall in love? Have you never loved?"

She seemed to wince at the contemplation of the question. "Yes," she said sorrowfully. "Since you ask me, I'll tell you one little secret. I did love a man, once. I loved him passionately, with every atom in my body, with every ounce of my strength. I would have done anything for him, even laid down my life for him. But he was married, with a son. And I decided his place was with his wife, not with me. It seems so long ago, now, and he's gone, dead - buried."

Silence swept in, a mist borne on the breeze, and engulfed them again. Richard could think of nothing to say, while Stephanie was lost deep in a distant galaxy of bitter-sweet memories.

"We ought to be getting back," he said suddenly, casting off the shrivelled remains of his hopes. Stephanie caught hold of his arm and restrained him.

"Before we do," she said, "may I talk to you in a sisterly fashion?"

"I suppose so."

"There's some sort of trouble between you and your father, isn't there?"

Richard nodded.

"Will you tell me about it?"

"In a nutshell, he didn't want me to leave home and take up teaching. He thought I should do my duty by going to work for him in his business. It produced an impasse. I want to become a teacher. At least, I want to have the opportunity. I think he is most unreasonable, and so do my mother and Sandra."

"I see. Well, I cannot suggest how it could be resolved, but I do appeal to you to make it up with him, even if the two of you do, like us, beg to differ. You will find that life is too short for enmity between parents and children, and would-be lovers. I again speak with the voice of bitter experience. Promise me you'll try?" How could he refuse? How could he have refused her anything? As they walked back, deep in thought, he tried to reassess his position. True he had been refused, but not with hostility or ridicule. There was a sort of tenderness there. He had been too hasty, premature. It needed patience and perseverance.

"I shall try again," he said, just before they came into sight of the rest of the family. Stephanie stopped and turned to face him.

"I know," she said slowly. "I know as much as anyone else that one cannot choose the person one falls in love with. Equally, I hope you will understand that one cannot choose to fall in love. Yes, you will ask again, and my answer will be unchanged. So, please, Richard, do not harbour any hope on my behalf. If you do, you will be disappointed, and our brief friendship will be dashed. I think I would be sorry to see that happen even though I suspect that it may be inevitable."

"Nothing will make me stop loving you," said Richard firmly.

"We shall see," she responded sweetly. "We shall see."

Moira Brown had been watching anxiously for the figures to appear. "Wake up, Arthur! They're coming," she said shaking the recumbent figure of her husband.

"Do you think he's asked her?" said Sandra.

"Oh, don't be silly! He can only have known her for a couple of weeks. She seems very nice, but - we would need to know her better."

"He can be very headstrong."

"Who can be very headstrong?" asked Mr Brown, raising himself.

"You can! And stubborn!" hissed his wife. "Now, sssshhhh!" She studied the faces of the returning couple. Did Richard look slightly crestfallen and disappointed? Was Stephanie preoccupied, thoughtful and, perhaps, a little flushed? What ever was said there, on the cliff edge, none of the substance was ever relayed to any other member of the Brown family by either of the participants.

Nor did Richard raise the topic of marriage again that weekend. That evening Mr Brown was prevailed upon to admit Stephanie into the inner sanctuary of the railway room to see the fabled layout. Such was her influence over, and her effect on, him that she was even permitted to take control. Never had such a privilege been extended to Sandra, as that young lady was quick to observe. They all laughed, and when Stephanie saw father and son joking together, united in merriment, she thought that, perhaps, some good would emanate from her

visit. Was it possible that it would not turn out to be an error after all?

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