

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The summer term started on a Tuesday. Richard travelled up to London on the Monday evening, reaching his lodgings too late to pay his customary visit to the restaurant. Although there on the cliff top he had met with a refusal, the conversation had seemingly placed his relationship with Stephanie on a more stable footing. He was impatient to see her, but his earlier nagging anxiety had been replaced by a reassuring understanding that she would be there, both willing and pleased to see him. Yet, in spite of having a complete, long, weekend with her at his mercy, he still knew little about her. He did not know where she lived and she had skilfully avoided revealing her surname to either him or his parents. As he sat in his bedroom he resolved that one priority for this coming term was to find out more and solve this mystery. But how? He had promised not to follow her. There had to be other ways. Sooner or later she would say something indiscreet, something that would give him a clue. If he was patient and observant.

He was down to breakfast later than normal and found the room nearly full. Mr Hughes greeted him cordially, and Mr Anderson moved aside without a murmur to let him reach his place. "I hope you don't mind," said the old man after a few minutes had passed, "but I sat in your place while you were away."

"It's time to get out of Squid Inc." Frobisher was saying. "Buy into American Snail. It might move more slowly, but its as safe as houses."

"It's not an insect," someone protested. "Snails are gastropods."

"Nice to have you back," beamed Mrs Morgan with a look that might have parted the oceans. "Did you have a nice time at the seaside?"

"Very good," answered Richard without thinking. He heard the hinges on the kitchen door creak followed by a resounding crash.

"You've knocked over your milk, you beastly old man! Look at it! All over the floor! I've better things to do other than clear up after you!"

"Taint milk. Its poison."

"Of course its milk!"

"Taint. You're trying to poison me, you old wart covered toad."

"Its ordinary milk!"

"Its got white powder in it."

"Its ordinary milk. All milk's white, you stupid old fool!"

"No its not, you female Gorgon! Not the milk you get from women's - ." The door creaked shut on the alien beings which dwelt in Mrs Morgan's kitchen. And, as was usual, the conversation at the breakfast table had paid no heed.

"A cut-throat razor, did you say?" Frobisher was asking.

"Yes. There in the hall," said Mr Hughes. "Of course I secreted it under some sales literature and carried it off to my room. Serious turn of events, I'd say."

"Indeed," said Frobisher.

"What would she want to use a cut-throat razor for?" asked someone from further down the table. "Or two bottles of castor oil, for that matter?"

Richard paid special attention to the hall-stand as he went out. He was greatly disappointed to see it bare, but assured himself that one day it would be his turn to make a momentous discovery and achieve dominance over the breakfast table conversation. As he hurried to school he started a mental recapitulation. He had remembered to bring back the books that he had taken home for marking, and all the items on his list. Dennet needed no prompting when he saw him at morning break. "What about the tennis?" he asked immediately.

Richard smiled. "What did you think of my sister?" he said, trying to appear nonchalant. He had purpose in asking this as Dennet had clearly made a favourable impression on Sandra, although it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that she was head over heels in love with him. The outcome of their encounter was that he had been commissioned to ask Dennet to stay for a week during the Summer holiday, though his

mother, not having met the gentleman in question, had enjoined her son to use his judgement in the matter.

"She seems to be a very nice girl," said his colleague. "It was a good day out. But what about the tennis?"

"Don't worry. I'm ready to talk to Mr Larkins about the scheme in principle. Then we must go around to this club of yours and see what they think of it."

It did strike Richard in passing that Dennet would have had ample opportunity to raise the subject with the Club's Chairman and Committee on the day of the Tournament. But, as Dennet gave no indication that he had broached the matter, Richard did not pursue it. He arranged, through Mrs Hiller, an appointment to see Mr Larkins and was admitted, in due course, to the Headmaster's Study early that afternoon. "Ah, Brown. I wanted a word with you, anyway. But I'll let you have your say first."

Richard put forward the proposals he had prepared for Dennet's coaching sessions. Mr Larkins listened in silence, but nodded now and then, as if he was finding things with which he was in agreement. This encouraged Richard. "You are prepared to shoulder this responsibility?" he asked when Richard had completed his exposition.

"Yes," said Richard, "along with Mr Dennet."

"Hm. Do you not think that it may be a little early for you? In your career?"

"That may be the case. But Summer is on its way. If we are to make a start, it has to be now. If not, we would have to wait a year in all probability." Again the Headmaster nodded.

"I greatly like and approve your readiness to take on responsibility, providing you can, and do, discharge it in a responsible fashion. I think you would be right to charge a nominal fee to discourage the casual attendees. You will need to adopt some method of grading the boys, too."

"That depends on the level of response we receive."

"Indeed. Of course, nothing you do should detract from the schoolwork, either in respect of yourself, or of the boys."

"Of course not."

"I know the Chairman of the LTC very well. I will convey my approval of the scheme and I'll leave you to follow the matter through in detail. I am sure that you will not let the School down."

"No Sir."

"Have you something else on your mind, Brown?"

"I was wondering if I could start a model engineering club in the Lower School." Mr Larkins frowned and looked down at the top of his desk.

"I do not think that would be appropriate, Mr Brown. No, not at all appropriate. Let us concentrate our efforts on the mathematics and let us see if you can get the tennis off the ground." Richard dropped his head slightly and turned to leave. "Oh, Brown, one other thing."

"Yes, Mr Larkins?"

"I have received slightly disturbing reports that you have been seen associating with the kind of persons who might bring the School into disrepute if, for any reason, such an association became public knowledge. Now, before you say anything, I do not know, of course, nor do I wish to know, whether these allegations are with substance. You have started well here. As a young, promising, teacher, with your career stretching before you, you must take care to associate with the right kind of person. Errors of judgement in this respect could bring yourself and, through you, the School into utter disrepute and could ruin your prospects of a good reference to further your career. Do I make myself plain?"

"I think the allegations are groundless, false, and malicious," said Richard tersely. Mr Larkins smiled coldly.

"That may well be the case. Whether it is or not, please bear my words in mind. That will be all, Brown."

"Well?" asked Dennet when Richard returned to the common room.

"I got told off for mixing in bad company," said Richard, still confused and outraged.

“Oh I get told off every week! That's nothing. You'll soon get use to it. What about the tennis?”

“That's all right. We can go ahead,” said Richard, displaying an indecent lack of enthusiasm for Dennet's pet project. When he had calmed down, and stopped smarting, they agreed to visit the club on the following Saturday afternoon at a time when Dennet was certain that the Committee Chairman would be there. Dennet went away happy. Richard went to meet Stephanie.

“Did you enjoy the weekend?” he asked when they did meet, that evening, in the usual place. She smiled.

“Oh, yes,” she said warmly. “I had my doubts about going at first, but I think that it turned out well and it made a wonderful change from being up here.”

“Have you thought any more about what I said, about you and me?”

“I have,” she replied. “I have not changed my position or my viewpoint. The answer is the same.”

“I shall keep on trying. If you knock on a door long enough, you must wear the door down.”

“Or your knuckles,” she cooed. “Far better to find a door that is already open.” It seemed to Richard that it was not just the task of opening the door that frustrated him. He had yet to find out where the door was in the first instance.

“Do you play tennis?” he said after a short pause.

“I did once. Not any more. Why?”

“I am thinking of joining the local tennis club and looking for a partner. Did I not mention it?”

She smiled. “You did. I don't think the tennis club would be too pleased to see me there.”

“Why ever not?”

“I just don't think they would,” she said lightly, shrugging her pretty shoulders.

“How about going out together, then? The cinema? Dancing? Up to the West End?” Stephanie shook her head.

“I work most evenings, silly.” It seemed hopeless. He was not going to get anywhere, not that evening, perhaps not any evening. Perhaps he should give up and save bruising his knuckles?

The next school day ended with Form 1A and mathematics. At the end of the period he called Cross and Morris over as they were preparing to leave and showed them photographs and plans of his father's railway layout. The two boys greeted the details of the model with awe. “I don't think we could build anything like that, sir,” said Morris. Cross started as if to speak, but suddenly coughed and the strain seemed to convulse his body.

“No, I don't expect you to. That layout has taken my father many years and thousands of hours to complete. But have you started yours?”

“Jonathan's mother says that its all right, but we're not sure how to mount the baseboard.”

“Perhaps I could help?”

“Oh, please Sir!” they exclaimed in unison.

“Would you like to ask your mother, Cross, if she would mind? I could come one evening after school if its convenient.” Jonathan nodded furiously.

“I'll ask her tonight,” he said excitedly. Which he did, coming to school the next day, eager to communicate his mother's approval. Richard was invited, cordially by Jonathan Cross at least, to visit the house on the coming Tuesday, straight after school, a fact that had been further communicated to the majority of first-year boys by lunchtime.

Saturday arrived with remarkable rapidity. When Richard called at Dennet's abode he found the front door open. Mrs O'Halloran bustled into view as soon as she heard his step. “Oh, it's you,” she exclaimed. “I t'ought it twas the milkman. He'll be wanting the money or we'll be getting no milk.”

“Good morning,” said Richard, smiling. “Is Mr Dennet in?”

“He is that,” she cried, viewing his sports bag with more than a little suspicion. “It's up the stairs, in the usual place.” He found Dennet ready, in his tracksuit, full of bounce.

“Ha!” he exclaimed when he saw Richard. “Didn't forget your kit, then? We'll be off.”

“Not so fast,” cried Richard, unzipping the bag. “I've something in here for you. I had them given to me as a child. I don't know if they are of any use to you, but there's no point in my keeping them.” As he spoke he laid on the table several albums and a couple of cardboard boxes. Dennet opened them and looked up with glee.

“My dear chap! Of course they're of use to me! I've - I'm - overwhelmed. I - you shouldn't have - how much do you want for them? I'm a bit short of cash at the moment, but -”

“You can have them,” said Richard, shaking his head.

“And I'll treasure them. This is marvellous! Its quite made my day!” The cigarette cards were locked away in one of the bureau drawers and, in an atmosphere of gratitude, they set off to walk to the tennis club. Indeed, Richard ran the gauntlet of a constant barrage of expressions of “thanks” in one form or another as if Dennet was determined that he should at least be paid in words if he refused all else.

The well established local lawn tennis club occupied half of the area which housed that at Eastgate, with four hard courts and less than a dozen grass courts. It lay in a prime position in the suburb, behind a range of shops at the southern end of the High Street, surrounded on its other three flanks by gardens, a situation that ruled out all prospects of future development of the tennis facilities. but which leant itself to the attractive idea of closing down, selling up, and moving to a more spacious location on the strength of the proceeds. Such a proposition was even now before the club committee. There was nothing imposing about the entrance, indeed, many local people passed by daily quite unaware of the club's existence. One turned off of the High Street into a narrow unmade drive which ran between a faded wool shop and the anonymous betting-shop, along a common access that led to the rear of the commercial properties and the club's meagre car park which suffered frequent invasions from knowledgeable shoppers. Being on foot, the problem of car-parking bothered neither Dennet nor Richard as they negotiated their way around the puddles and along the gravel path that led to the ship-lap clad clubhouse. Here, by some mysterious arrangement, they found the Committee Chairman, Mr Wardle, waiting for them.

“Hello, Dennet,” he said. “Ah, you must be Mr Brown. Mr Larkins has spoken to me and I must say that I like the sound of your scheme but, naturally, I'd like to talk it through with you. Would you both like to sit down? Can I get either of you a drink?” Dennet looked at Richard and raised his eyebrows. Mr Wardle had already retreated behind the bar, leaving Richard admiring the way he seemed to be at home there.

“I think I'll just have an orange juice,” he said. “Its a bit early in the day for anything stronger.” Dennet, however, asked for and received a whisky and water, and called the Chairman “Jack”, receiving a black look from the man in question every time he did it.

“I'd like Roland Fountain, the Club Professional, to join us, too. If you'll bear with me, I'll pop and fetch him.” The Chairman disappeared and returned a few minutes later with a stocky, grey haired, weather-beaten, man wearing a white sweater and long white trousers.

“Just call me Rolly,” said the newcomer.

The burden of outlining the scheme fell to Richard. The Chairman and the Club Professional listened patiently, but Dennet seemed to fidget and was continually interrupting with irrelevant comments. Richard was tempted on more than one occasion to tell him to “sit still and be quiet”, using his best school masterly voice. “It does sound promising to me,” said Mr Wardle. “You appear surprised, Mr Brown?”

“Oh, no - only I did expect more opposition.”

“Really? Why?”

“I don't know,” he answered, feeling foolish and knowing that if he had told them the true reason he might expose his friend to ridicule.

“What do you think, Roland?” asked Jack Wardle.

“Yes. I'll give it my support. If you were charging for your time I would, of course, object strongly. And I think we need to agree a common approach to the rudiments so that we don't end up with you teaching your pupils bad habits that I cannot eradicate.”

“The next step, then, Mr Brown?”

“I'll speak to Mr Larkins about getting a notice put up at school and we'll then see what the response is. If we receive more applications than we can cope with then we'll have to introduce a system for selection I'd think it unlikely, though.”

“I'd be pleased to assist if the case arises,” said Mr Fountain. “Quite gratis, of course.” They all rose and Richard and Dennet were about to depart when the PE Instructor stopped, remembering something.

“Richard! You were going to join the Club,” he said. So Richard became a member of the Tennis Club and, later, had a warming-up session with Dennet on one of the hard courts. “We'll take it easy, eh, old chap? As you have not played for quite a while. Don't want to strain anything,” said Dennet who then proceeded to pound balls at and past Richard. The recovery of his timing and control of his strokes and balance gradually returned and after half an hour he began to find his rhythm and range.

“Heh! You're not bad!” yelled Dennet as Richard drove a top-spin backhand clean through him.

“What do you think, Rolly?” asked the Chairman as he and the coach watched from a distance.

“He's not bad - clearly been properly coached. I think he'll be an asset.”

As they were coming off court Dennet caught hold of Richard's arm. “Look!” he hissed. “The girl!” An attractive, buxom, girl was coming out of the clubhouse with three other players, laughing and joking, and something of their lively chatter reached the two teachers. “Don't you know who that is?” he added in a loud whisper. Richard shook his head, feeling from Dennet's tone that there must have been something sadly lacking in his education that could render him so ignorant. “That's Susan Larkins! The Susan Larkins!”

Richard looked more attentively. She certainly was attractive and it struck him forcibly that she would undoubtedly qualify as being the “right kind” of wife in more than one respect. But would she be looking for a “right kind” of husband, and could he qualify for that? “She moves in a different sphere to us mortals,” Dennet continued. “Very upper crust and a là. But you can rub up against that stratum here even if it is difficult to penetrate. Not as bad as the golf club. Do you play?” Richard shook his head and watched Susan Larkins, all smiles and self-awareness, bounce onto a court and start to warm up. “Smithson does, and he's good. Plays off of four. Wish I could get down to that.”

They showered and dressed. “Dennet,” said Richard on an impulse, “do you know of any gambling clubs locally?”

“Hey! That's a strange question! I hadn't got you marked down as a gaming man. But as a matter of fact, I do. Why do you ask, anyway?”

“Oh, nothing really. Just something I thought of.”

Richard did not pursue the question with Dennet. For a start, he did not want to expose his motives and, secondly, he now realised that the Gaming Clubs would almost certainly appear in the yellow pages and they would all be accessible on payment of a fee. It was doubtful such a venue would be deemed suitable for a Rochester House master to visit. But, then, if he were to be seen in one, the viewer would have to be considered as culpable as the viewed. And, anyway, he had not settled on that particular line of attack as yet.