

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sunday was in danger of becoming an empty boring day. The centre of the suburb was deserted and took on the resemblance of a ghost town. Richard's brief experience before the Easter Holiday had underlined the problem and it was clear to him that he would have to find a worthwhile activity to fill his time. On reflection he thought that it was a shame that he had suggested Tuesday evening for his visit to the Cross household. However, a visit on a Sunday might not be socially acceptable. There was the potential of the Tennis Club to be tapped, except he had no particular desire to spend the whole of his weekend there, unless it could be with Susan Larkins. And one could not ignore the caprices and general unpredictability of the English weather. Leading the life of a bachelor did not appear to be that gay. It was, as far as Richard could see, lonely.

His personal entreaties to Stephanie continued to meet with no success. She told him that she was normally busy at weekends and, as if to prove it, did not come to the restaurant on that Saturday evening. So he went, rather forlornly and full of self pity, to the cinema and wandered around the streets for half an hour in the ridiculous and, it turned out, vain hope that he might see her, or Dennet, or Susan Larkins, or anyone whom he knew.

There was always the public library. He decided that he would catch up on his reading of the Classics. So he selected and borrowed "Can You Forgive Her?", and started to read it, but his mind wandered, back to the cliff top, to their first meeting and then, through a sequence of logic which he did not fully understand, to Mrs Hiller, the Parents' evening, and, ultimately, Mrs Cross. He went out for a stroll in the park. The sky was dull and there was a hint of rain. He had not walked far when it started to drizzle. In the centre of the park, near the spacious but polluted lake, stood a bandstand where, before the War, the local amateur symphony orchestra had given well attended concerts. He took refuge under its rotting roof and felt even more miserable as the drizzle transformed itself into a steady fine rain. From a distance he heard the laughter of a young couple, who then came into view, proceeding at almost a trot under a shared umbrella. He resented their merriment. The girl had red hair. That hurt.

A steady torrent of water now fell from a gap in the gutter and cascaded down the steps to escape across the grass, through the bushes, and into the lake. "Its typical," he said to himself. "A typical Sunday afternoon. You couldn't play tennis in this anyway." He could always take up modelling. The possibility had not occurred to him before and he wondered how Mrs Morgan would react to cement, solder, and paints in his bedroom. "She'd probably complain about the smell," he said aloud.

That Sunday came to an end, as all Sundays ultimately do, and the next morning he found himself back at school, quietly slipping into his routine. It was still a novelty to him that he had so few problems with the boys or, to be more precise, had problems with so few of the boys. Discipline was there, established, and the threat of caning or, worse, expulsion, appeared to remain, like the best kind of deterrent, no more than a threat.

"I'm sorry I missed you yesterday," said Stephanie that evening. "Did you have a good weekend?"

"No, I didn't," he said forcibly, choosing to ignore the visit to the tennis club and the satisfaction received when he presented Dennet with the cigarette cards, an action for which the recipient continued to profusely thank him at every available opportunity.

"Oh, I am sorry," cried Stephanie. She sounded concerned.

"Why can't we meet?"

"Oh dear. That's very difficult. I never know exactly when I'm likely to be free. And what could we do?"

"I could think of something."

"Like?"

"Go for a walk in the park," he suggested, thinking of the couple he had seen the day before.

"That would never do," she said firmly. "If we are to go out, then we've got to do

something special, and it must not be around here, not somewhere local where we would be seen.”

“Well, then, there's the Tower of London, Hampton Court, Kew Gardens, Regents Park Zoo, a trip up the river, a trip down the river, Southend, Eastbourne - Brighton?”

“I don't like the way you said, Brighton,” she laughed.

“It's not the done thing to go for a day, is it?”

“Then we'll leave Brighton out of the itinerary!”

“But, what about it? It is pretty miserable around here on my own while you're being busy.” She gave him a strange look, a look that worried him, both then and when ever he thought about it after.

“Its awfully difficult,” she said after a pause, “but I'll try. I couldn't manage each Sunday, but, maybe, occasionally. I will try.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, silly, I promise.” It was her turn to promise him something. He went back to his lodgings in a happier frame of mind. A promise from Stephanie, even if it concerned something quite indefinite, had to be seen as a step forward, in the right direction.

At the end of the following afternoon Richard made his way with Jonathan Cross and Colin Morris to the quite ordinary, commonplace, semi-detached house in which Jonathan resided. Mrs Cross opened the door to them, looking, he thought, older, more care-worn and undoubtedly drabber than when he had seen her a couple of weeks earlier. “I trust Jonathan mentioned my coming, and that it isn't inconvenient?”

“No,” she said flatly. “It is not inconvenient. I'm pleased for someone to come and help him with his hobby.” But she neither looked nor sounded as if she meant it.

The two boys led him to the rear of the garage and into a large well-constructed room. “This was going to be Dad's workshop,” said Jonathan. “Mum says we can use it now. We can have all that, too!” He pointed to half a dozen sheets of blockboard and a pile of sawn timber laying against one wall. Richard examined it closely. There was more than enough for quite a sizeable layout, a fact that he conveyed to the boys.

“But first of all,” he added, “you must do a scale drawing of the layout you propose to have. Have you much track?”

“Oh, yes, Sir,” said Jonathan.

“So have I,” said Morris.

“Good! Make an accurate list of it, and mark each item with your initials so that it doesn't get muddled up.”

“And our rolling stock?”

“That isn't quite so important to do at this stage, but it is worth doing if you have similar items. Now, let's see about the electricity.” Jonathan looked glum. “Its not working, Sir,” he said and started to cough.

“Not working?” asked Richard, eyeing the sockets with suspicion and wondering if it might have been cut off. “Perhaps its a fuse gone. Can we have a look?” The fuse box, he learned, was situated in a cupboard under the stairs, but Mrs Cross seemed anxious when Richard asked if he could look at it. When he prevailed upon her to allow him to open the door, he understood why. A maze of wires greeted him, some originating from a cluster of boxes near the floor, others protruding from a new distribution unit place higher on the wall. “Are you having the house rewired?” he called.

“Oh dear,” said Mrs Cross. “My husband was in the middle of doing it when he - . It was one of the jobs which didn't get finished.”

“Most of the upstairs doesn't work,” said Jonathan.

“I think you will have to get the wiring completed,” said Richard, closing the door. “I'm not a qualified electrician, but I am sure that the Electricity Board will have strong objections when they see it.”

Mrs Cross looked dismayed. “I know, Mr Brown. I've been afraid to open the door to the meter reader. What shall I do?” It seemed a rhetorical question, asked mainly of herself and one that Richard was not required to answer. But there, under the stairs, half of the house

appeared to be connected to the, as yet, dead new box while the remainder, although the wiring looked new, was still hooked into the old system. It seemed likely that the workshop was connected to the new unit and it was obvious it would take more than a repaired fuse to render it live.

He found it an embarrassing moment, but two things came to his rescue. The first was Jonathan suggesting that they should go and examine his track work and rolling stock. The second was Mrs Cross asking him, in her flat, unenthusiastic, voice, if he would stay to dinner. "Please do," Mr Brown," she added. "It will be no trouble." How could he refuse? Especially when she said it was steak and kidney pudding?

"It was Owen's favourite," she said as he sat in the small kitchen watching her preparing the vegetables at the sink. She turned and caught his expression. "Don't be embarrassed about my husband, Mr Brown," she added with a little more animation. "He is dead and it is I who have to come to terms with it." She bent back over the potatoes and continued to talk in her strange, self-addressing, monotone, "I have heard it said, or I read it, or perhaps it was on the television, that the soldiers who came through the horrors of the first World War talked about their experiences, their traumas, for years after, the same thing again and again, as if they were trying to wear out and erase their dreadful memory. Perhaps I have years to look forward to, but I must talk. I cannot help it." Her voice trembled and, at first, Richard thought that she was going to break down, but if tears were there, they remained hidden from his view. The potatoes were transferred to a saucepan and that was placed on the gas stove. "Do you mind if we eat out here?" she asked, wiping the top of the formica-covered table. "I really have not got the strength of purpose to set the dining table."

For a moment he felt like an unwanted guest, but there was no hostility in her expression, only sorrow ravaged by fatigue. "Jonathan," she called from the kitchen door. "Dinner will soon be ready and Colin will have to go home before it gets dark." She turned back to Richard. "They are as thick as thieves, those two. I'm sure that Colin spends more time here than he does at his own home, if you leave out the time he's asleep. He comes from a good home, too. They're quite well-off. But he makes a good companion for Jonathan. He's level-headed and they have their mutual interest."

"Oh, yes. The model railway."

"He tells me that you have one?"

"No, it belongs to my father. Believe it or not, it is his pride and joy. We think he thinks more of it than he does of his wife and children!" Richard regretted his choice of words. Mrs Cross's face seemed to go whiter and her eyes widened, but the moment passed.

"Is that what he would say?" she asked herself aloud. "Tell me, Mr Brown, what made you become a teacher?" The question was delivered so casually that Richard was taken unawares.

"For a start," he said, "my name is Richard."

She paused and studied him. For a fleeting moment her features appeared to relax as if she found the idea, or something she was contemplating, attractive. Then clouds closed over again. "No," she said. "I'd rather call you Mr Brown, especially in front of Jonathan. Oh where is he? Jonathan!"

Richard did not answer the original question as her son appeared and the subject was dropped. Dinner was served and eaten with a minimum of inconsequential small talk. He noted that Mrs Cross did not once mention her husband and he was careful not to allude to him. As he ate, he had an opportunity to study the kitchen more closely. Yes, it was fitted, but not finished. There was every suggestion that Owen Cross had been modernising his house when he died. He studied Mrs Cross over the table as she consumed her meagre portion. Black did not suit her. With her slightly plump, well-proportioned, body and her dark features, it had the effect of making her look much older than she surely was, perhaps like a Sicilian peasant. But she did have fine features, high cheek bones and those deep, black, eyes! If only they could be brought back to life! "Is it all right, Mr Brown?" she said, suddenly becoming aware of his attention.

"Oh yes, its fine - very good! Really delicious," he blustered.

"What are we going to do about electricity, Sir?" asked Jonathan, starting to cough.

“Turn your head away from the table when you cough,” said his mother, sharply. “And use your handkerchief!”

“I don't know,” answered Richard, trying to sound normal. “We will have to think about it. How did you get on with your stock-take?”

“We did about half of mine, and Colin's going to start his.”

“He's got quite a lot,” said Mrs Cross, indicating towards her son.

“Good! We can have a look at yours after dinner, if that is all right?”

“Should we use two-rail or three-rail, or both?”

Richard smiled. “It depends on how much you have of each already, including rolling stock. You can use both, but you will have to keep them separate because they're not really compatible.”

Dinner was over. It had been a good meal, but it was one which left a bitter taste in Richard's mouth when he realised that he had been given, and consumed, the lion's share. He had to concede that it was vastly superior to that which he could have expected at the restaurant. But he did not say so. “Shall we have a look at your stock now?” he said as they stood up. “Then you ought to get on with your homework!”

“Oh, Sir!”

Richard was shown to a small bedroom at the front of the house, with a window that overlooked the porch. It was remarkably tidy, but one by one Jonathan produced his treasures; tickets, timetables, wagon plates, photographs, all kinds of railwayana which he, or his father on his behalf, had collected over a number of years. The model railway items occupied and filled a large wardrobe which stood at the foot of the bed. “We bought a lot of it second-hand,” explained Jonathan. A little later, while Jonathan was established at the dining table in the front room to do his homework, Richard sat at the kitchen table and watched Mrs Cross.

“Would you prefer tea or coffee?” she asked. “I've got both.”

“Which ever is most convenient.” She sat opposite him. Outside it was now dark. He would have to go soon.

“Jonathan's cough?” he said. The question seemed to slowly wake Mrs Cross, as if from a dream. “His cough,” she murmured. “He's got some medicine. I think it's working, don't you? If it doesn't I've got to take him back to the Doctor's.” Richard made another mental note that he had still not registered with a doctor and wondered where his medical card was. He had better not get ill.

He found his thoughts preoccupied with the Cross household as he walked back to Mrs Morgan's, tabulating the problems, the incomplete rewiring and decoration. He thought about Jonathan's bedroom and store of treasures, comparing these with Dennet's collection. More than anything, he found himself thinking of Mrs Cross. He wondered what she was doing at that very moment. He pictured her locking up, writing out her shopping list, washing, ironing, and getting ready for, and going to, bed, all in the dark.

The notice announcing the proposed tennis coaching had gone up on the school notice boards and Richard had announced the subject to each of the forms he taught. Thankfully, the response was not overwhelming, most of the boys being, understandably, reluctant to enter any activity which was supervised by their masters in what they saw as their free time. By the end of the week a dozen names had been registered with Mrs Hiller and it was agreed that the first session would be held on the following Saturday morning. Richard mentioned it to Stephanie, who had not commented on his absence on Tuesday evening which made him wonder if she had been there, or had been there but had not noticed, or simply did not care. “Do you play tennis?” he asked, forgetting that he had asked her once before.

“Me?” she laughed. “Goodness, no!”

“That's a shame,” he said. She shook her head furiously.

“Its not my style. I might look good at decorating the bar in the clubroom, though I expect that I might be accused of lowering the tone if I did!”

“Ridiculous!” exclaimed Richard. “I don't believe that!”

“It is true,” she cried, light-heartedly, and laughed again. Her tendency towards self-denigration disturbed him and he was tempted to reprimand her for it, but he did not.

The proposal to construct a model railway aroused wide interest among the boys of the first year. Although it was essentially a private project, in a private location, Richard's involvement appeared to give it an essence of school authority. A number of boys had approached both Jonathan Cross and Colin Morris and, subsequently, Richard to see if they could participate. The prospect of him arriving at Mrs Cross's house with half of the first year embarrassed him and Richard had to painstakingly explain that the venture was exclusive, and that his personal involvement was incidental and entirely advisory. And the decision to increase the number involved, if ever the scheme got off the ground, was the sole prerogative of Mrs Cross and not his. His explanations worked and the interest diminished, yet there was, at the back of his mind, the un-erasable image of him cutting timber, erecting baseboards, directing the track laying, completely filling his Sunday.

"Have you thought any more about my suggestion of a Sunday trip?" he asked Stephanie who was still amusing herself with the mental picture of her at the tennis club.

"I have. The situation has not changed, nor will it just because I think about it. If I get the chance of a free day, I'll let you know."

For reasons which he did not fully understand, Richard consciously and deliberately omitted to tell Stephanie about the model railway scheme and his involvement. It was not because he feared she would think of it as childish. Indeed he recalled her unalloyed pleasure in the model room at Eastgate. Perhaps it was a response to her dogmatic secrecy about her life, or perhaps it smacked a little of the rebuff he had received from Mr Larkins when he floated his idea for a modelling club. That painful event had stuck in his mind and seemed to constantly haunt him. Whatever the reason, he withheld the knowledge from Stephanie for as long as he could and when he was eventually forced to tell her something, he revealed no more than the barest details and nothing at all concerning the people involved. Then, all the time, there was this strange, exciting, feeling he felt when he pictured and thought of the unfortunate Mrs Cross, a sort of tingling magnetism. He looked across the table at Stephanie, beautiful, gay, happy, vivacious, then considered the dark widow in her kitchen, drawing her curtains, dusting her shelves, ironing, washing, counting, no doubt, the coppers. Stephanie would do none of these things. One might be black, the other white. They were poles apart and there was no way in his imagination that he could reverse them.

"Dennet tells me that you are prepared to assist him with Sports Day," said Mr Crompton, fixing him with almost closed eyelids. "Is that so?"

"I would be happy to assist, yes," said Richard, "though I am uncertain as to what it entails."

"Nor is Mr Dennet, as he patently demonstrated last year. But it is his responsibility, something which we would not wish to see abrogated. You appear to be able to relate to and communicate with him which is more than can be said for the majority of staff here. It is not just the question of the day itself. There's the organisation and supervision of the preceding eliminatory events which are held three evenings a week between now and a couple of weeks before the actual day. It is vital that these are run correctly and that the results are properly recorded. We had all sorts of disputes last year. Perhaps you would like to look at it? I don't want to force you into it, as you are new to us, and very much in a probationary situation."

Richard, smarting from the aloof, supercilious, manner in which he had been addressed, went in search of Dennet. "It is true," said the Physical Education teacher, apologetically. "I'm not very good with figures and pieces of paper. Never was my strong point."

"Just go and talk to Mrs Hiller," said Mr Pennington brightly when Richard sought his advice. "She will organise it all. She'll prepare the lists of events, a week by week programme for the heats, lists of the participants as the whole thing goes forward, all on proforma. You have only to fill in the times, distances, and results. You can't go wrong, really. Go and see Mrs Hiller. She's a most remarkable woman."

He was more than happy to take the advice, and went to see the school Secretary. Her

face lit up when he mentioned the purpose of his visit. "Oh, I'm sure you can manage it, Mr Brown," she said sweetly. "I hear such good things about you."

"Oh, do you?" he responded, filling with pride and self satisfaction.

"Only, last year Mr Dennet caused such confusion. I'm sure he wrote everything down from memory because we had boys entered in finals when they had not been in the preceding heats! Young Williams in 2B, for instance, was down for the hundred yards final when he'd had his leg in plaster for nearly six weeks! It needs an orderly mind, and you mathematicians have such orderly minds. I think I like mathematicians!" Richard began to look at Mrs Hiller in a new light. When he had come for his interview she had struck him as attractive and handsome, but cold, efficient, and officious, too. Now she seemed warm, alluring, and remarkably feminine. Patiently she explained the programme, the forms, and the methods for recording the results of the events. "That's all you need to do, if you wish. I can reschedule the participants in the heats based on your records of the results. It is very simple."

It was. He left the Secretary's office in a daze, clutching a new file labelled "Sports Day", nearly colliding with Mr Crompton in the corridor. The Deputy Headmaster brushed him aside, went in to the office, removed his glasses, and raised his eyebrows opening his eyes wide in an unspoken question.

Mrs Hiller pursed her lips and laid her hands flat on the blotter before her. "He will do it," she said.

"Ah!" said Mr Crompton in an outlet of breath.