

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You've gone from the sublime to the ridiculous,” Richard told himself as he went back to his lodgings carrying a briefcase full of error-laden exercise books. It was barely a week since he had been worrying about his inactivity, having nothing to fill what he thought of as his spare time. Now there was the tennis on Saturdays, the Sports Day heats on three evenings a week, and this creeping, indefinable, commitment towards the Cross model railway and whatever else those tracks might lead to. It was something that he could not, in all conscience, easily escape. To drop it now would result in loss of face before all the boys, the class, the year, possibly the entire school. Nor could he procrastinate for any period without running a similar risk. Yet the railway could not advance further without the provision of electricity and there lay another dilemma. From what he could see under Mrs Cross's stairs, the reinstatement was not a simple five-minute task. He could not force Mrs Cross into having the work completed, always assuming that she could afford to do so. Nor could he find it within himself to turn around and tell the two boys that the venture was impossible as long as the supply remained disconnected. Here, indeed, was a mantle to be picked up and colours to be worn. But could he, and should he?

The boys duly congregated at the tennis club at ten o'clock that Saturday morning for the first coaching session. Richard ensured that Dennet would be there by calling at his flat on the way to the Club. Roland Fountain kept his promise, turned up, to help and to keep a watchful eye. Whatever Dennet might have lacked in his ability to deal with paperwork, it was more than compensated by his extraordinary aptitude for manually instructing children. Richard watched him demonstrate and guide each of the children through the basic service motion, performing a magic which Richard knew he could not emulate. Two of the boys were left-handed, a problem that floored Richard. But Dennet changed hands and demonstrated that he could serve equally well that way around, or any other.

“I didn't know that you are ambidextrous!” shouted Richard.

“I'm not!” came the response, “I'm an atheist.” The party laughed, but Richard felt that neither the Headmaster nor his Deputy would have approved had they been there to hear Dennet's stale retort. The session appeared to be a success. Three of the older boys demonstrated a standard of sufficient quality to guarantee them club membership on the basis of Mr Fountain's recommendation. The others all went away happy, noisily looking forward to the next one.

“Perhaps we could get a school competition going?” asked Dennet, downing his second pint in what appeared to Richard to be one gigantic gulp. “You know - a cup, fought for annually - called the Dennet-Brown trophy?”

“You're not serious?”

“Am I not? Perhaps not - heh! Have you been gambling yet?”

“I don't gamble,” said Richard, not thinking.

“But you were asking about gambling clubs!”

“Oh, that! I was thinking of writing a book and just looking for authentic locations,” said Richard. It was an utter lie, but it was the first thing that came into his head.

“A book?” exclaimed Dennet. “Gosh, that's great!”

“Only thinking,” said Richard flatly, scared that it was going to get out of control. “And I'd be obliged if you would keep it quiet. I really shouldn't have mentioned it.”

“Of course. I won't tell a soul. What's it about?”

“Oh, I shouldn't say.”

“Come on. You can trust me. I won't tell.” And, like a gambler who has placed a bet and not met with the success that he expected, Richard found himself extending and elaborating his play. It was his round, which allowed him to enjoy a brief period to collect his thoughts and shape some kind of plausible fabrication. But face to face with the pretty, busty, barmaid he forgot what he was thinking about and began to wonder why it was that she never looked at the customers, only down at the counter, the drinks, or the money. Had she grown weary of finding that the customer's gaze was inevitably averted elsewhere?

“Come on then,” said Dennet as Richard sat, “what's it about?”

“What?”

“This book of yours.”

“Its about a PE teacher, quite a nice bloke, really, but too nosy by half, who asks too many questions and ends up being found under some bushes in the park, dead, strangled by an exasperated colleague. Or I might have him pushed from a train and electrocuted!”

“Oh,” said Dennet, sounding hurt, and lapsing into a few moments silence as he deliberated on what to say next. “I only asked in the first place,” he continued after his reflective pause and half-draining his glass, “in case you still wanted to go. There's one near here. I'm a member. We could go tonight if you are doing nothing else. I've cause to celebrate!”

“No - I don't think so. Not tonight.” Richard's refusal arose more from his lack of mental preparation than from any sense of propriety. It was true that it had burned furiously inside him a week earlier, but the subsequent events had changed his order of priorities and this remote line of enquiry had dropped well down his list. It was not that he had anything positive in mind for the evening, though a hazy idea for filling Sunday was beginning to materialise.

“Another time, then?” said Dennet, still sounding disappointed.

“Yes, another time,” murmured Richard, after which the subject was dropped.

But the plans for Sunday lingered there in embryo form. So, he occupied that Saturday evening in marking and correcting exercise books and elected to take an early night. He would sleep on it. Breakfast the next day found him as uncertain and undecided as he had been the night before. While his fellow boarders conversed excitedly, Richard sat silently, debating what he would do if he did not, and what he would say and do if he did. The temptation was strong as he closed the front door. It was a nice, warm, morning. A little walk might resolve his dilemma. It was no coincidence that he found himself, fifteen minutes later, strolling under the trees along Hayes Close. He paused on the pavement opposite No.28 and studied the outside of the house. The curtains were open. One might assume that the household was up. Still undecided, he crossed the road.

“Why, Mr Brown!” said a familiar voice from behind him. It was Mrs Cross, coming out of a neighbour's gate, carrying an empty teacup. She seemed surprised and, was she pleased? “I didn't expect to see you here! I was returning some sugar I borrowed. I never like to be in debt to anyone - for anything.” His heart fell. What he had half proposed to say would inevitably make her feel that she was placed under an obligation. Would she tell him that she did not accept charity too?

“I was just passing,” he stammered. “My Sundays can be a little idle, and it is such a nice morning.”

“Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?” Her expression became bland again, but the question had been asked in a manner which Richard would have described as “jolly” by her normal standards, had he been asked.

“If its no trouble.”

“It is no trouble.” Richard noted a flutter at the net curtains of the house that Mrs Cross had just left. She must have seen it too because she added, “please come in. Otherwise you will earn me a bad reputation.” He did wonder whether his following her up the garden path to the front door was likely to enhance her reputation or, for that matter, his. He tried to picture what Mr Larkins would say. “Jonathan is a little poorly,” she said, thrusting the kettle under the tap. “He had a bad night so I've left him in bed.”

“Perhaps I shouldn't stay?” Some emotion showed in her face.

“I would like you to stay,” she said firmly. “But, then, it would be wrong of me to detain you,” she added as the trace of confidence evaporated. He sipped his tea. Now he did not know what to do or say. She seemed quite different, yet he sensed that her equilibrium was finely balanced and that the slightest force, a thoughtless word or nuance, would upset and topple her. And still those deep, dark, eyes were lifeless. Was it his role, his destiny, to restore them to life? “I've planted some seeds this weekend,” she announced, looking out at

the garden. "I find that if I'm careful, I can turn the earth over slowly. Its been well fertilised. The soil's good."

"Composted," thought Richard, but remained silent. Again he had this feeling that she was addressing herself and not him, acting almost as if he were not there. "What have you put in?" he asked, trying to draw her and become the object of her conversation. She turned slowly and seemed to have to think about the answer.

"Oh, carrots, beetroot, lettuces, and things like that. I found the seeds in a kitchen drawer." There was a pause. "If they come up, they'll help my budget," she added, again to herself. The conversation lagged. Richard felt his throat go dry and took another gulp of tea. His heart raced as he realised that he had not the courage to say all that he wanted to say.

"I ought to be on my way now," he did say.

"Oh?" she said as if suddenly waking up. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said gently and smiled. "I'm sorry about Jonathan. If he's not better tomorrow, keep him at home, won't you?"

"Of course," she whispered. "Please drop in, anytime, Mr Brown. You are always welcome. It is nice to have someone to talk to."

"Thank you, Mrs Cross. I expect I'll be back to do with the model railway as soon as Jonathan's on his feet again." He walked away, seeing only the pavement below his feet, cursing himself for his cowardice. What he did not see, did not know, nor could have known of, was Mrs Cross, slumped back against the front door after it had closed behind him, her eyes screwed tight shut. When she opened them again, they were full of tears.

"Phew!" gasped Dennet when Richard met him crossing the quadrangle the following morning. "I feel quite queer. It was a hell of a celebration, though! You missed a good night!"

"Celebration? What are you talking about?"

"Saturday night! I went to the club - you remember? I mentioned it in the pub: asked if you wanted to go?"

"Oh, yes," said Richard vaguely, starting to walk away.

"It was a cracking evening. I won a little and there was this cracking redhead who was wearing such a low dress that."

"Redhead?" interrupted Richard sharply.

"A real stunner! Her dress! And she reminded me of - ." Richard stopped dead in his tracks.

"Did she work there?" he asked hoarsely.

"Great Scott, no!"

"Did you talk to her?"

"You must be joking! It was hard enough to keep her in my sight leave alone get near her. She was the centre-piece of a party of Americans: oil men I think. You'd never get near to a thing like that! But I couldn't take my eyes off her - phew!" A cold sweat broke and spread across Richard's skin. For a moment the perpendicular seemed to fail and oscillate, then righted itself. "Are you all right?" queried Dennet, peering into Richard's face.

"Yes, I think so," Richard nodded. Outwardly he might appear so. Inside all was total turmoil

"Did you have a good weekend?" asked Stephanie. It was her standard Monday evening greeting, innocent, innocuous, and normally Richard would have replied casually. This evening he was on his guard.

"Yes," he answered hesitantly. "So-so. And you?"

"It could have been better."

"Did you go out at all?" he asked a little tersely. Stephanie frowned.

"I suppose I did," she said.

"Did you go to a club called the Black Die?" Richard added. "A friend of mine says he thought he saw you there." Stephanie paled visibly. "Saturday evening," he continued.

"No," said Stephanie, slowly and deliberately. "I was not in the Black Die on

Saturday evening. I was in the West End. Your friend must have been mistaken.” Her voice was cold and confident. Richard was rocked back on his heels.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s funny.” She was still looking at him closely and suspiciously.

“Your friend,” she added, “he knows me?” Richard shook his head and looked downwards shamefully.

“No,” he confessed. “It was his description. It sounded so like you - I was sure - and I was upset because he’d asked me to go with him to the club and I’d declined. It was the thought of having missed seeing you.” It was, he thought, the first time that he had really lied to her, but, then, had she been open and honest with him? Did either of them have the right to expect absolute honesty from the other? Because he had proposed? How many lies passed between married couples, then? His foot accidentally touched hers under the table. “Sorry,” he said, making the word embrace the whole situation, not just that minor incident. Normality was restored. So he told her about the coming heats for the school Sports Day, but this was the pattern of things. He would talk, she would listen, nod her lovely head, make a few comments, and rarely say a word of significance herself. So she had been to the West End? Had he to start looking for her there?

“One day I will discover the elusive combination which will unlock you and your secrets,” he said one evening.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “So I am a safe, am I? Well beware! You do not know what you may find when you open the door. It could be quite unpleasant!” They had laughed, but it had crossed Richard’s mind, albeit for only a fleeting second, that someone else might have been there before, and that the safe might now be empty.

The preliminary heats for Sports Day got under way. Dennet supervised the events while Richard stood at his side, or at the finishing line, armed with a stop watch and clipboard. Mrs Hiller expressed delight at each completed form when Richard handed them in. Mr Crompton looked over her shoulder, then up at Richard and shut his eyes. “You have failed, of course, in one particular, in which your predecessor and present-day accomplice had unparalleled success. In no race, so far this year, has the same boy finished first and fourth.”

“Nor,” added Mrs Hiller with a little merriment, “has any boy cleared in excess of eight feet in the high jump!” She laughed, Richard laughed, but the Deputy Headmaster remained impassively cold and silent.

Jonathan Cross remained away from school. Richard informed Mr Pennington that he had seen the boy’s mother though he did not elaborate on the circumstances under which the encounter had occurred. The Senior Mathematics Master, who now thought of, and described, his junior master as his protégé, thought that if Richard was on speaking terms with Mrs Cross, it might be a nice gesture for him to call around, if he had the time or was passing, to make sure that everything was all right. It could not be easy for a young widow, with a growing, ravenous, son, left like that, without a husband, without a man around the house, without a man’s income. All this Mr Pennington thought. “Of course,” he added, “there are lots of widows about. Did you know that Mrs Hiller is one, or a sort of one? By that I mean that she is divorced. And there’s no shortage of widowers, too; lonely men; I expect Mrs Cross finds it difficult - difficult even for her to go out to work herself.”

Richard avoided expressing an opinion, but this conversation provided him with what appeared to be, or what he thought might be, a legitimate school reason to call again at No 28, Hayes Close. He selected Friday evening as being the best to suit his arrangements. He would call around then, always assuming that Jonathan Cross did not reappear at school. He knew that he should plan to keep his visit as short as possible, yet there was that lingering, attractive, hope that it might extend to fill his evening. He forewarned Stephanie making, he thought, the first specific reference, as far as she was concerned, to the situation at Hayes Close, though he did not mention Mrs Cross by name. “I may be late tomorrow,” he said. “One of my pupils is away ill and I want to call ’round to his house to see how he is.” It was transparent and full of flaws, he knew. Perhaps he should say as little as possible?

“I didn’t know that teachers were expected to make house-calls,” said Stephanie,

frowning. "Its not normal, is it?"

Perhaps if he did not tell her that Mrs Cross was a widow, it would appear quite harmless and ordinary. "This is an abnormal case."

"Must be!" she snapped.

"The mother has just lost her husband," he blurted out. "The boy is exceptionally bright, but may be disturbed by the loss of his father."

"It does happen," she said coldly.

"She's in an awful predicament, you know - no man about the house." That could only make matters worse.

"And you feel that you should step in and help her?" There was something close to being derisory in her tone and he smarted.

"I don't know. She does appear helpless. Do you think that I shouldn't?"

"That is an unfair question. I do not know your widow. Is she young, attractive, and wealthy?" Richard paused before he answered.

"She is youngish, I think. And attractive, in a way, I suppose. But not rich; definitely not rich." As he felt that Stephanie was vexed by the whole issue, he added, "You're not jealous, are you?" She let out a brittle laugh.

"Jealous? Me? No, I'm not jealous."

"So, what do you think I should do?"

"Sisterly advice, then," she said, leaning forward and becoming more like her normal self. "Examine yourself and your motives carefully. Then, when you fully understand, do what your conscience dictates. In the ultimate, it is that you have to live with, not what other people think or say."

"That sounds very philosophical and edifying."

"It did!" she said brightly. "Please don't ask me to say it again!"

Richard did not know if Stephanie understood, or was correct in her surmise of, what was in his mind when she advised him to follow his conscience. He had no doubt whence his understanding of his conscience and duty would lead. When he thought of it, it was not shyness that held him back. It was the fear of an absolute rejection, yet every visit courted such a catastrophe. It was a fact that Stephanie had rejected him and he had lived through it, though he had not asked her again, yet. Their relationship had not suffered directly. It had not prospered as he would have wished, either. And he had this inexplicable feeling that such might not be the case as far as Mrs Cross was concerned, But, then, there was no established relationship there, anyway.

He walked slowly back to Grove Crescent. Mr Pennington had more or less given his mission official approval and now Stephanie had endorsed it by implication. Had fate really singled him out? Still he hung back from the commitment to himself. He would call at Hayes Close, but with the sole purpose of asking after Jonathan's health. With this resolution planted firmly in his mind, he went to bed.

Next morning, as he made his way to the classroom to call the register he was seized with the fear that Jonathan might have returned that very morning and might be actually sat with the rest of the Form waiting for him to appear. His excuse for visiting the house would be completely destroyed. But the desk was vacant and Richard felt relief, followed by a surge of excitement as he marked him absent in the Register. "I will call tonight," he told both himself, and Mr Pennington when he queried the matter.

"You could wait until Monday, or I could ask Mrs Hiller to call. It wouldn't be very much out of her way. I think she has met Mrs Cross before. I'm sure she'd go."

"No, no," said Richard, trying not to appear anxious about the prospect of someone else becoming involved. "I will go."

A low sun broke through the late afternoon sky as Richard walked back from the school and turned in the direction of Hayes Close. He thought it was a good omen, though he would not have admitted to entertaining superstitions. But if luck was being distributed, he felt that he should have his rightful share. The ringing of the doorbell at No 28 brought no response. He paused for a moment, wondering if Mrs Cross could be out and if so, where. At

a neighbour's house? Or at the Doctor's? He selected the second as being the most likely and had retreated as far as the garden gate when the front door opened.

"It's Mr Brown!" said Mrs Cross. "Oh dear!" There she stood, her turbaned head and dressing-gowned shoulders protruding around the slightly ajar door. He returned cautiously, unable to establish whether she was pleased or annoyed by his presence. It was possible that she was both. "I was washing my hair. I'd only just started to dry it when you rang."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I only called to see how Jonathan is. Shall I come back another time?"

"Oh, no. Please come in, if you'll excuse my appearance." She showed him into the lounge, a room he had not previously seen. "Can I leave you for a moment while I straighten myself up?" she said. He nodded, and she disappeared upstairs.

The room was attractive, decorated in light, soothing colours, fawns and greens, furnished with a small three-piece suite, a large bookcase, and an upright piano. Automatically he lifted the lid and struck a C-major chord. It was out of tune, and he closed the lid quietly when he remembered that Jonathan was somewhere and was also rather quiet. A electric fire had been installed in the fireplace, but it did not work when Richard threw the switch. Several photographs stood along the piano top, one of which, in particular, attracted his attention. It was of a wedding, her wedding. There stood Mrs Cross, looking immeasurably younger, and next was the groom whom Richard took to be the late Mr Cross. And the very pretty bridesmaid? Her features were vaguely familiar. They set his heart racing. Surely he must be mistaken? He could not be right!

"I'm afraid that it is sadly out of tune," said Mrs Cross in her flat voice. "It was my mother's, but no-one plays it now." She still had her hair wrapped in a towel but had substituted her familiar black for the dressing-gown.

"I like this room," he said. "It has harmony, a pleasant atmosphere."

"Yes," she said sadly. "We had some happy times here." It seemed like a subject that was going to lead nowhere.

"And how is Jonathan?" he asked.

"He's asleep, resting, just at the moment. I have to take him back to the Doctor's on Monday and then, if he's happy, he can go back to school. He's never been very strong, physically. He seems to tire easily. I think he's one of those children with all brains and no brawn. I'm sure you've come across plenty of them?"

"It does seem to happen."

"Yes. The Doctor thinks he'll start growing rapidly soon. But, then, I'm not that tall, and nor was his - ."

Richard glanced at the photograph. It was true. Owen Cross had not been tall, about five feet eight inches Richard guessed. "He is bright," he said. "We must see that he does not miss too much schooling." She nodded and seemed to lapse into reflection. Having discharged his commission, Richard was on the point of announcing his decision to leave when she suddenly came back to life, apologised, and offered him a cup of tea. He readily accepted.

"Thank goodness the power is on in the kitchen," she said as she plugged in the kettle. "Otherwise I don't know what I would do."

"I wonder if I could help in that respect?" he asked impulsively. Those were the words, uttered without thought. He had dived. What was the temperature and how deep was the water into which he was now plummeting?

"Help, Mr Brown? How do you mean?"

"Please do not take offence at what I am about to say, but I think I could help you - as far as the wiring is concerned. For a start, I have quite an amount of spare time, at the weekends in particular, and I need something to do in it. Secondly, I know how to do the job. My father is a builder and I was taught all the rudiments of most trades right from childhood. He always believes that you should be totally conversant with a man's trade if you are to supervise his work. He wanted me to take over the business, you know - still does."

"Your father is a builder?" she said with a slight showing of real interest.

"Yes. He started up after the War. I think he worked for a design consultant as a clerk

of works, or something like that, before. He has built up quite a sizeable company.”

“That's what Owen hoped to do,” she said, sitting opposite him at the kitchen table. “He went self-employed a couple of years ago. I kept his books for him.”

Richard thought of the wedding photograph. “I wouldn't have thought you were old enough - when you got married,” he said innocently. Mrs Cross frowned, not understanding what he was implying.

“I married young, perhaps too young. And Jonathan really came too soon. It was frightening. We both worked very hard, and for what? All that effort, wasted! I'm sorry, Mr Brown, I didn't mean to try and burden you with all my cares.”

“That's quite all right, Mrs Cross,” he said. There was so much that he wanted to say, and would have said, had it not been for the danger of it all sounding cliché ridden. “What do you think of my suggestion?” he did say. For a moment she did not seem to understand his question.

“I don't know,” she said. “There's no way in which I could repay you.”

“There's no need to worry about that, nor any need to worry about the cost because I suspect that all the materials are here. I don't think it'll take more than a couple of weekends. Well?”

“If you think its all right,” she said reluctantly.

“Good!” said Richard, almost triumphantly. “I'd like to start on Sunday. Shall I call at eleven, or earlier?” Bewildered, Mrs Cross nodded, and the time was set at ten o'clock. And, despite the energy-sapping, claustrophobic, effect that his periods with her could have on him, there was a very noticeable bounce in Richard's step as he returned to Grove Crescent that night. Had he, at last, learned to swim?