

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Saturday came and Richard went to the tennis club, but neither this, nor anything else, gave him any satisfaction. He ought to feel elated, bursting with plans for the forthcoming excursion. But he found he could address his mind to little other than thoughts of Hayes Close. She would have now read his second note, re-read it, then screwed it up, thrown it away. Richard knew that it must have taken an enormous effort on her part to write her note in the first place. What, now, would she think of him? Would she see through his off-white lies? He was tempted to go around and attempt to explain. Why had she said Sunday? Why had he not suggested Saturday? He knew that an explanation, face to face, would become complicated, convoluted, and there was more than a chance that he might say the wrong thing. The risk was too great. His note would have to suffice.

Sunday dawned bright. For the first time, Richard devoted all his mental efforts towards the excursion and began to feel a growing sense of excitement. He might as well enjoy the day. He might not have many such opportunities. The address of Highlands Court, given to him by Stephanie, was that of a block of new flats set in a wide road close to the High Street which, while not towering, were high enough to command a view of this thoroughfare, and beyond. He arrived and the main entrance at the appointed hour and found it un-openable. It took him a little while to realise that the door was protected by a security device and that it was necessary for him to call Stephanie over an intercom to gain admission. She had omitted to tell him that! The name "Waterhouse" opposite the number of Stephanie's flat caught his eye. Could that be her surname? He pressed the button for her flat and her voice, distorted into unfamiliarity, crackled, "Yes?"

"Stephanie? Its me, Richard."

"Come up, Richard. My flat is on the top floor." The door opened as if by magic and closed gradually, but automatically, behind him. A fine device, he thought. A whole battalion could have slipped in with him! He took the lift to the top floor and stepped out into a dark, carpeted, corridor. As far as he could ascertain, there were three flats on each floor, with the lift and services occupying the fourth quadrant. So each flat had a multiple aspect. And her flat was immediately on his left. She opened the door at his knock, looking striking in a green and white, loose-fitting, dress.

"Come in," she said. "You are very punctual." The flat awed him. It appeared to convey a semblance of taste and luxury completely beyond his wildest imagination. "It is nice, isn't it?" she said, proudly, seeing him look around in astonishment. "It has taken me a long while to achieve, and it is not something that I would readily give up."

He crossed the expansive lounge to the window and looked down on the High Street. This, then, must be where she sat and watched him in the mornings. "All this grandeur," he said softly, almost meekly, "it is incredible."

"You like it?"

"I am overwhelmed by it. It must have cost a fortune."

She smiled again. "Come! We've plenty of time, and there isn't that much to see." So, he was shown the intensely feminine bedroom, the neat, clean, polished kitchen with its adjacent dining area, and the austere bathroom. He thought of Mrs Morgan's, the hovel in which Dennet lived, the house in Hayes Close and, lastly, his parents' house at Eastgate. Not one could be favourably compared with this. "It is incredible," he repeated.

"You mustn't develop a taste for it," she said, coquettishly. "Remember, I am a single girl, no dependants, no car, don't smoke, drink, or gamble. I like something to show for my money."

"Goodness! You've got it!"

"So, perhaps we had better set out, now?"

They walked together, but not arm in arm as they had at Eastgate, along the High Street to the railway station. Richard was still in awe, knowing now how Aladdin must have felt when he was first lowered into the cave. He realised, too, that this was the first occasion on which he and Stephanie had been out together locally, other than their meetings in the restaurant. Might Mrs Cross come along and see him? That was a calculated risk. They caught

a train to Charing Cross, walked to the Underground station on the embankment, and travelled on the Bakerloo to Regents Park. Once there, in comparative anonymity, Stephanie took his arm and they walked to the south entrance of the Zoo. "You've been here before?" she asked.

"Only once. A long time ago on a school outing. Its all very hazy. I can remember the reptile house, and a snake pit - something about spiders - and the aquaria - boys getting lost - that sort of thing. It is all very vague. As long as it doesn't remind me of school!" Stephanie gave him a knowing look, and smiled.

The remainder of the morning was spent wandering around the Zoo, peering onto dark cages, admiring, wondering, holding their breath at times. Stephanie was vivacious, always ready with a sharp and appropriate comment. Richard was courteous and attentive. It was fun, harmonious, and anyone observing them and invited to comment would have pronounced that together they made a fine couple. "What would you like to do for lunch?" he said as the hour of one o'clock came and slipped past and they walked slowly back across the park.

"Well, let's see. I know a couple of good restaurants in Bayswater, one of them is a superb Italian, but I don't wish to strain your budget."

"Don't worry about that," he said casually.

"Oh, but I must. I know that teacher's pay is not very good, and that junior teachers are very shabbily treated. It would be wrong of me to encourage you to overspend, even if I thought for one moment that your father would bail you out, were you in difficulty."

"He wouldn't, and I wouldn't accept it if he did." Richard responded stiffly. She stopped and looked closely at him.

"No," she said. "You are very like me in that respect. You wish to be independent. Only you have not as yet achieved it."

"Not on the scale that you have."

"That may be true," she said slowly, "but then I do have an advantage. I started my career earlier, at a much younger age than you have. I can work as many hours a day as I like, and I can trade on my looks which have an immediate appeal. They represent a commodity much in demand. Your means of earning are limited in all manners of ways, though my looks, clearly, will not last for ever."

"Come on, Stephanie. Tell me what your job is."

"No! I cannot."

"Not in one simple word?"

"Not in an unlimited number of complicated words. It is difficult to explain. You might easily get the wrong impression. Then the day would be spoiled."

"I know," he said brightly, "you're a leading fashion model."

"Oh, no! Would that I was."

"Then you are Stephanie Waterhouse, that up and coming starlet, shortly to be featured at Cannes?"

"My, my! You have been observant, but, whatever she might be, I am not."

"Oh, I give up then. I will make no further guesses."

"Perhaps we can think about lunch, then?" she said demurely.

They walked slowly on, under the trees, where the sap rose, intent on bud bursting, on into Belgravia. Stephanie's obdurate refusal to confide in Richard no longer upset or frustrated him. He had learned where she lived. He had learned, at least he thought he knew, her surname. Even should Stephanie fail to extend her confidence further, his knowledge should ultimately suffice to allow him to make the necessary queries and solve the mystery. It was only a matter of time, and on a beautiful Spring day like that, in such company, only a fool would have been in haste. "Are you enjoying this little outing?" he asked over lunch.

"I am, immensely. It makes a wonderful change."

"We should do this more often."

"I would love to, if I could." Richard paid the bill. It cut deeply into his fluidity, but it was a price that he was prepared to pay.

"What now?" he asked.

"I'd like to walk for a while, then perhaps we could find somewhere to sit down?" They walked South, reaching Hyde Park, and on across the grass until the Serpentine came into view. "Oh, boats!" she cried excitedly. "Take me in one, please, Richard!"

He bought the tickets and they joined the queue, Richard taking care, when their turn came, to select a boat which was not demonstratively leaking and was not, therefore, about to sink. "Have you done this before?" she asked as an assistant forced the vessel away from the landing stage with his foot.

"Nope," he said, trying to fit the oars into the rowlocks and persuade them to remain there.

"I would have thought that someone who has lived most of his life at the seaside would have learnt to row at the very least!"

"The sea is a bit large for rowing boats," he said, managing to make the boat go round in a tight, neat, circle. "And boating pools are there for holidaymakers, not the natives. Give me a moment. I'll soon get the hang of it."

"Watch that fellow over there!" she cried, pointing. "He knows what he's doing." After a while, Richard managed to manoeuvre the rowing boat out into the centre of the lake with a minimum number of collisions with other crews, the majority of which seemed to be experiencing similar difficulties.

"Must be novices' day," he said, resting the oars and allowing the boat to drift along on the strength of the gentle breeze. Gradually they approached a footbridge which crossed at one end. "Isn't it strange out here? There's people all around, yet we seem to be totally isolated, you and I. Quite alone."

"Its rather nice," she said. "I'm glad we came."

"Did you notice what the time was when we started?"

"No."

"Neither did I. It isn't marked on the tickets, either!" They drifted on, under the bridge and came to rest against the chains stretched across the arches to discourage rowers from venturing farther.

"This is about as far as we will ever go," she said suddenly and looked away.

"Stephanie?" There was sadness in her face as she turned again to look at him. "Would you like to come down to Eastgate this Summer?" he asked suddenly. Stephanie's eyes narrowed.

"When, this Summer?"

"During the school holidays. August, say?"

"How very strange that you should ask me that, here, in the middle of all this water. I don't think that I can. I have an invitation to go on a cruise to the Greek Islands."

"For how long?"

"I do not know. Its a private yacht and the trip is open ended. It could last a month or two." Richard sat, silent, and stared at the distant wooden platform across the water, from which they had earlier embarked. Stephanie, the real living person who was Stephanie, was every bit as far away as that. If he extended his arm, what would he touch? Not a real woman. "I always seem to be saying to you that I am sorry," she continued, "but you must remember that I do not enjoy holidays."

"Its not a holiday?"

"No. Its a sort of working trip."

"I see," he said, but it was not true. He did not see. He was disappointed, confused and tempted to sulk.

"Had we not better start back?" she said, looking around. He caught her inference. An ominous slice of greyish-black cloud was sliding in from the West across the sky, shutting out the blue, threatening the sun.

"Would you like to row?"

"I'll leave that pleasure to you," she said brightly. "I'll just sit here and decorate this end of the boat." And that was what she did! Heads turned, binoculars were directed and focused. "Lucky bloke," the male onlookers agreed. "Shame he can't row." Indeed, Richard found that he had extraordinary difficulty in staying on the seat. Each time he fell off, she

laughed.

"I'm only doing this for your amusement," he grumbled. By the time he came to ram the landing stage his hands were blistered and sore, but it came as a relief to him that there was no excess to pay.

The afternoon was only half spent, but the clouds were growing thicker and lower. They agreed that it was time to go home. "Perhaps we could have a high tea somewhere," Stephanie suggested, forgetting for one moment her self appointed duty to protect his budget. "I could treat you," she added as she watched him doing rapid mental arithmetic.

"We could try the museums. They are only just across there."

"Are you sure that they'll be open on a Sunday? Anyway, they usually give me a headache." So that idea was dropped. Eventually they arrived home at their suburban railway station, happy and content, once again united.

"Are you going to the usual place for dinner?" he asked.

"I'd like to freshen up first. We can go to my flat." That was how Richard was admitted for the second time that day, and the second time in his life, to the treasure cave.

"This really is a red-letter day," he thought. "I shall remember it for as long as I live." It was true that, later, he would never recall being quite so happy.

Not half a mile away, Eileen Cross sat alone and dejected. She had, that morning, for the first time in many weeks, baked a sponge cake, lavished cream upon it, and iced it. She had busied herself around the house, cleaning and tidying, decorating with flowers, and completing small details in her preparation for an expected, important, visitor. She had dressed and attended to her appearance with the greatest of care. Everything was in order. But, throughout the long wait of the afternoon, no-one came. Eileen sat alone in her kitchen and wrung her hands. At four o'clock Jonathan came down from his bedroom where he had been playing. "Is Mr Brown not coming?" he asked.

She bit her lip. "Perhaps he's been delayed," she said. "Or something may have happened. Go back to your room and play." By five o'clock her heart was weary and she burst into tears. It was abundantly plain that they would receive no visitor that day. She put the cake away.

"Can't we have some for tea, Mum?" said Jonathan.

"Not today," she said, feeling bitter. "It was for a special occasion and I do not feel in the mood for it anymore." At seven o'clock she slipped outside and dropped the cake into the dustbin. It was not until much later that night, as she was preparing Jonathan's school clothes for the coming week, that she found the envelope addressed to her in his blazer pocket and read Richard's second note. "Oh Jonathan!" she said quietly, sitting on the end of the sleeping child's bed. "How could you do such a thing?" She took the piece of paper into her bedroom and, before going sorrowfully to bed, placed it in a drawer in the dressing table where it came to rest on Richard's first note.

When Richard visited the house on the following Thursday, a fresh cake, baked on Monday, was brought out and there was no mention of the incident. Eileen had redressed her son on Monday morning, ensuring that he knew and understood where the omission and fault lay. The visit heralded the start of a brief period of blissful settled routine for Richard in the run up to the school examinations and Sports Day which lay beyond. He became a regular caller at Hayes Close on Tuesday evenings where the projected railway began to take shape. Simplicity and minimum cost were the key words. Mrs Cross had never discussed her financial situation in any detail, but he now knew that she struggled and that it would be pointless and incorrect to approach her for funding. Nor should he lead Jonathan into, or permit him to entertain, any inclination to do the same. As for himself, he was able to contain his expenditure within his income, but the margin was tight and had he made many expeditions of the kind he had made with Stephanie, he would have become seriously embarrassed. Even so he bought minor items for the railway, small necessities, just to keep the project rolling.

Ownership was a potential problem. Colin Morris brought trackwork and buildings.

Each item had to be clearly marked or labelled to identify its origin. A third boy, Douglas Hughes, was admitted to the group, bringing with him a modicum of possessions and an abundance of natural skills in achieving things with his hands. In school he was marked down by each teacher as a duffer, a slowcoach and, at times, troublesome. But at Hayes Close he surprised Richard with his ability to grasp, understand, and to read drawings, and transmit this information into solid, material objects.

“When do you think that we'll be finished?” asked one of the boys.

“We've a long way to go, yet,” piped up another. “Not before Christmas, I'd imagine. What do you think, Sir?”

“I think you are right,” said Richard, wondering if the boys would ever be able to agree on what would constitute “finished”.

“Perhaps we could charge for admission, then?” said Douglas.

“Admission!” cried the other two, scornfully.

Richard also became a regular visitor on Sundays, usually in the afternoon. He willingly carried out all the little jobs that had gone unattended in earlier months and, despite the frequent presence of three boys, he preferred to sit in the kitchen and talk to the mother, rather than work on the railway. The subject of their conversation ranged over all kinds of topics; politics, music, literature, religion, but never love. And throughout she remained serious and intense. Not once did he see her smile. He was forbidden access to certain areas, and not allowed to undertake certain tasks. For instance, she would not allow him to touch the garden, meticulously weeding and cutting the grass herself. At least, he noticed that it would get cut sometime between Tuesday evening and Sunday afternoon. And she would not allow him to touch her. When he had reached across the kitchen table for her hand, she had rapidly withdrawn it before he was able to make contact. When he had unintentionally brushed against her as they stood together, one afternoon, outside the door looking at the garden, she had recoiled and stepped sharply aside, as if the slightest touch was painful. He never once talked to her about her situation, but as the Summer approached and the nights grew light and warm, he felt that her periods of deep depression and withdrawal gradually diminished in both duration and frequency. In his mind, it became his self-appointed task to be the crutch on which she could lean as she learned to once again walk the path of life. It did not occur to him that she might never be able to walk unaided again.

At school, preparation for the examinations and Sports Day ran in parallel, although with unequal intensities. Richard assisted Mr Pennington in the setting of an internal paper for the first year and was allocated the duty of supervising the sitting and marking the results. But his involvement in the Upper School examinations was minimal and restricted to little more than the supervision of the sitting of the school certificate paper. It felt strange to stand there, between the rows of sighing, bent, heads, safe on the other side of the fence. “Read every question carefully,” he found himself saying. “Allocate your time to each selected question and work to the clock.”

“You mustn't mind,” said Mr Pennington. “You must allow yourself to come into things gradually. Remember that next term you will have a year of new boys to contend with as well as your present year. You will find that you have very little time spare then.” And, indeed, as if to reinforce the prediction, before the term ended, Mrs Hiller presented him with a draft list of the names of next year's pupils.

The evening Sports heats being over, Mrs Hiller worked her organisational magic on the results and not only produced schedules of events and competitors, but also organised the printed programmes for the day. Richard now found himself echoing Mr Pennington's words about the School Secretary's remarkable prowess.

The evening meetings with his beloved, elusive, Stephanie fell into their routine. He had searched the telephone directory for Waterhouses, but none of those there fitted Stephanie. So, her telephone was ex-directory, and to think he had missed the opportunity of noting the number while he was in her flat. Research was temporarily abandoned. Their meetings remained convivial and he enjoyed them greatly. He steered away from contention,

did not press her to go out with him, did not raise the question of Sports Day, or the Tennis Club, or her Summer holiday. If he had been truthful and analytical, he would have admitted that he was content purely to sit and look at her, allowing Stephanie to do virtually all of the talking. "You've changed," she said, frowning. He looked down at his trousers.

"No, I don't think that I have. I wore this suit all last week."

"Not like that, silly. You've changed in your person, but I'm not sure how."

"For the better?" Stephanie sat back and looked at him.

"I do not know. From who's point of view?"

"You mean that one man's gain is another man's loss? That sort of thing?" Her face fell momentarily.

"Or woman's," she said sadly.

He had, too, the routine of the Saturday morning tennis coaching sessions. Attendance was good and consistent. Standards improved and the obvious success led to a considerable debate as to what should happen in the Autumn Term. Saturday mornings were then, traditionally, allocated to school sports, football, rugby, and hockey, for the first three years, and Mr Larkins was anxious not to introduce a conflicting activity which would divide his resources and participants. Jack Wardle had presented the view of the pro-tennis lobby not only directly, but also through the unlikely agency of the Headmaster's own daughter. Finding Susan taking up the cudgels against him and receiving sparse support from his wife, infuriated Mr Larkins and he concentrated and vented his anger quite forcibly on Dennet.

"The trouble is, Brown, old chap, that we've messed everything up by making such a dammed good job of it. Had we messed it up, that would have been wrong, too, but not half as bad as doing it right. I don't know - make a mess of things and that's wrong. Do it well, that's wrong. We should never have started." They were sat in The Saracen's Head and Dennet was downing his eighth pint and chaser, though Richard suspected that he was not exactly sober when they had met. "But I told him - I told him!" Dennet muttered and grimaced. "I told him!"

Dennet's visits to the Headmaster's Study were not infrequent but usually he would emerge and, somewhat light hearted, dismiss the affair. It was exceptional for Richard to find him so overwrought. He began to wonder what had been said. "I told him plain," continued Dennet. "The overbearing, self-opinionated, pompous, ass."

"He is the Headmaster, Dennet."

"He's typical of that class. Wants to take all the credit - wants to stamp on all initiative - just in case some of the plebs get uppity - any sign that you're making a good job of something. Any sign that you're about to put your head out from under the stone and - splat! I'll get even with him, and Crompton. I'll get even with them both! I will!"

"You shouldn't feel this way about your employer," said Richard, trying to dilute the intensity of Dennet's feeling.

"My employer? He's not my employer! I am employed by the Education Authority! All right, they may complain about my conduct, even my paperwork, but they've got no cause for complaint about the way that I do my job. Let them find another, better, fitter, PE master. Let them try!" Richard began to fear the worse.

"You have not given in your notice or resigned, or anything silly like that, have you?"

"What? Me tell them to stuff their job? I wouldn't give them the pleasure. But I'll get even, even if it takes the rest of my life - I'll find a way to get to him - he must be vulnerable somewhere."

"Who?"

"Larkins, Crompton, what does it matter? Not that I'm a person to normally bear a grudge. And I always remember my friends!" He slapped Richard's knee so hard that the sound seemed to reverberate around the crowded bar. "You're a friend," Dennet slurred. "I don't forget a friend, but that bastard - !"

"Dennet," said Richard, looking him in the eyes, "you're not going to do anything silly, are you?"

"Silly? No - Richard - friend. Don't you worry. Act in haste? Not on this occasion. I'll

wait. Bide my time - then splat! I'll splat him!"

It was a heavy evening, but not one that Richard readily forgot. He had become accustomed to Dennet's blunders and blinders, but he had never before seen him in such a ferocious mood. With concern he accompanied Dennet to the door of the house in which he lived. Dennet found his key which appeared, in his hands, to be larger than the lock into which he was trying to insert it. Richard dispossessed him, opened the door, and tucked the key back in his friend's pocket who fell headlong into the pitch-black hallway as the door slammed shut behind him.

"Are you OK?" hissed Richard through the letterbox. From inside he could hear rustlings and muttering, but nothing intelligible. "Dennet," he repeated, "are you all right?" A pair of eyes appeared at the letterbox. They did not belong to Dennet.

"Is that you, Mr Brown?" said a woman's voice.

"Mrs O'Halleron?" he asked incredulously. He could hear someone moaning from beyond her.

"Be still, will you," she hissed into the darkness. "And mind where you are putting your foot."

"Is he all right, Mrs O'Halleron?"

"I t'ink so. T'is my husband. He's drunk himself, and there's no sleeping in the same room as he. The children are in the kitchen except Mary and meself, and we're in the hallway. I'll see that Mr Dennet gets to his bed." There was something in her voice that assured him that his colleague was in safe hands.

"Goodnight, friend," echoed Dennet's voice, promptly hushed by his landlady.

"Goodnight, Dennet," Richard said softly to the door and went home to his own bed.