

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dennet may have felt strongly that evening about the substance of his disastrous interview with Mr Larkins, but there was no sign of discontent the next day, nor was the matter raised again by him. The tennis sessions had been a success, but to continue next term on Saturday mornings was impracticable. Sunday morning would be inappropriate. The courts would not be available on either Saturday or Sunday afternoons, and evening sessions would be rapidly curtailed by the approach of winter. As far as Dennet was concerned the matter was closed, cut and dried. After a successful start, Richard found the impending cessation a disappointment, but he was prepared to concede that the Headmaster's decision was reasonable under the circumstances, and he was secretly pleased to see the commitment cancelled rather be transferred to another part of the week. He could not conceive, nor did he ever learn, what had taken place in Mr Larkin's study that had so outraged his colleague.

Letters from Eastgate arrived at regular intervals, and were replied to irregularly, giving a spasmodic account of events. He described his outing with Stephanie in great detail, but he omitted all mention of what he considered to be excesses by Dennet. He made a passing reference to the railway project at Hayes Close and censored all information regarding Eileen Cross. He stressed the good results achieved by the first year in their mathematics examination, an occurrence he found rather flattering, but omitted to mention the period of tuition undertaken by Mr Pennington prior to Richard's arrival at Rochester House.

"The results are good," said Mr Pennington, "though they have had three teachers during the year. And I think that the questions were every bit as stiff as those of the previous year."

Richard's letters home were devoured by the women at Eastgate who, reading between the lines, sought hidden messages and meanings, and guidance to indicate how his affair with Stephanie was really progressing. They found that the intimate, personal, information about her was essentially sparse but, when he wrote, Richard never informed them of the fact that he knew so little about her. They were absolutely convinced that he was deliberately withholding vital details. Mr Brown would hold himself aloof and not read his son's letters in front of his wife and daughter, but in their absence he scrutinised the text every bit as closely as they did. Attempts by Moira to discuss the content or purport were greeted with grunts and strong denials that he had as much as touched an envelope, leave alone read a letter. He relished their arrival, just the same.

The dates for Dennet's impending visit were agreed and fixed, but there was no mention in Richard's letters of Stephanie's intentions. Nevertheless, it was generally felt at Eastgate, based on the tone and substance of the letters, that they would be playing host and hostess to her, again, during that coming holiday.

Richard was now settled in his lodgings. He no longer heeded or heard the outpourings from the world that lay beyond the kitchen door, but he had not been admitted fully into the confidence of Mr Frobisher's equally weird pronouncements. The topic of the manifestations on the hallstand continued and was boosted considerably by the discovery of a pair of black, frilly, garters, complete with large red bows. The discussion that ensued eclipsed all other matters and this topic lasted for nearly a week, two days being wasted on distasteful speculation about Mrs Morgan's underwear, and another day went on further speculation on what might happen next. The opening and closing of the kitchen door was always the signal for the most extraordinary switch in the subject of the conversation in which everyone, including Mr Anderson, was allowed to participate. The transition could not have been smoother had they rehearsed it. Mrs Morgan would beam with sufficient force to draw Excalibur from the stone in submission, and then withdraw, content at the happy spirit prevailing at her gentlemen's breakfast table.

It might have been uncharitable, but Richard was beginning to suspect that the hallstand manifestations were actually the work of one of the 'gentlemen' and his suspicions centred on the meek Mr Anderson who cowered, almost silent, beside him, like a beggar invited to the Caliph's feast. The simile brought to mind a lurid picture of Mrs Morgan

dancing the role of Salome. But whose head was on the platter?

The week of Sports Day arrived. The day, itself, was Thursday, but a great amount of feverish activity and preparation occupied the days preceding it, especially the Wednesday. Richard went to meet Stephanie on the Monday as usual. "Are you sure that you would not like to come along to Sports Day?" he asked. "See me shooting boys and parents with my starting pistol? Don't you like blood sports?"

"I would like to witness that," she said, laughing. "Its not just the personal thing. There's a Banshee the night after."

"A what?" he exclaimed. Stephanie leant forward and lowered her voice.

"If you don't know about it, I shouldn't have mentioned it to you. Its a sort of - what shall I say? A secret gathering?"

"What, like Masons?"

"No. Not like Masons, though they do go."

"Not Black Magic?"

"No! How shall I describe it?" She paused and looked up at the ceiling. "They are large, exclusive, parties which allow many of the local bigwigs and professional people to let their hair down. They hold two or three a year, I suppose, but it is strictly by invitation only, and the date and location is supposed to be kept secret and known only to those who are taking part. There's even passwords and security to stop gatecrashers. Dress is optional. I will probably go as Messalina."

"Oh, I see! Its fancy dress!"

"Not really. Now I've told you none of that."

"Of what? You said nothing! And its Friday?"

"What is?" she asked, her eyes sparkling, and they both laughed. Later he tried to remember who it was that Stephanie said she would go as, but he could not, and soon he forgot her words altogether.

"You are coming to Sports Day?" he asked Eileen when he saw her next evening.

"Yes. I shall come, I think."

"I think it'll do you good - to get you out among people." But she seemed to show no enthusiasm, neither for the event nor for the benefit which might accrue.

"The doctor wants Jonathan to have an X-ray," she said with deliberation.

"An X-ray?" echoed Richard, not fully grasping the import of her words.

"A chest X-ray. Because of his cough."

"Hasn't he had the normal screening? In some places there's a mobile unit that comes around."

Eileen frowned. "There was, and it did. But he missed it - why I cannot recall."

"I'm sure that its a wise precaution and that everything will be all right."

"But he gets so tired so quickly," she said, becoming agitated. "Other children don't seem to be like that. I found him asleep over his homework the other evening, and its so difficult to get him up in the morning."

"He sounds quite normal to me," Richard shrugged. "Growing children do get tired. It takes a lot of energy."

"But he doesn't grow. If anything, he's losing weight. Look at his school record!" The urgency and intensity of her tone struck Richard. He could not recall seeing her so animated.

"You are obviously worried by it," he said. "May I be impertinent and suggest that it does not help?" She shook her head and looked away. "When does he go?"

"I'm waiting for the card. Later this week - or next week?" She gave a little shrug and lapsed into silence. Richard estimated that the result of the X-ray would not be known until after the end of that term, by which time he would be at Eastgate. He was tempted to offer her his home telephone number, just in case she wanted to contact him. But, then, would that not heighten her fears? And it would have no effect on the outcome.

"Of course he'll be all right," he told himself. Their conversation remained as a nagging worry in Richard's mind for a few hours, but then he became embroiled in the

preparation for Sports Day and, along with Stephanie's enigmatic statement of her intentions for the Friday party, he forgot it.

The day dawned bright, a blue sky lit by the early shimmering golden rays of a sun which hovered, tantalisingly, in and among the sooty rooftops before rising to make its time-honoured way across the heavens. For Richard it was a morning of apprehension, having been regaled by the stories of mishaps, mistakes, and the chaos of the preceding year. He had discovered, however, that despite Dennet's flustered attempt to recruit aid, this year the whole business was placed under the watchful, if only half-open, eyes of Mr Crompton. Richard thought that this might drive Dennet to new heights of indignation, but that was not the case, at least not outwardly. Even if he could not be described as having taken it with good grace, Dennet was relieved that he was not to shoulder more than a modicum of responsibility.

The morning's lessons were curtailed to allow the boys to go home early, they being reminded that their attendance was obligatory and that it was their duty to return in the afternoon accompanied by at least one Parent. All funds would go to something that was cryptically referred to as the "School Fund". At eleven-thirty they were dispatched except for a small number of volunteers who stayed behind to assist in the final preparation for the side-shows and the gymnastic display. Outside, to Richard's amazement, start lanes, and finish lines and other markings had all been mysteriously renewed in a brilliant white paint. Like mushrooms, they seemed to have sprouted overnight and were, he assumed, the result of the work of the legendary Mr Beadle, the groundsman, whom Richard had not yet seen, leave alone met. He had been told and had no cause to doubt the veracity of the story, that Mr Beadle lived in a wooden hut in the depths of one of the shrubberies during the Summer, and descended to the dark bowels of the school to dwell among the boilers for the Winter. He had earned something of a reputation. It was said that he had been known to attack boys with a grass rake when they ventured too near to his cricket squares. Others told of meeting a wild, black, demon brandishing a large shovel on excursions to investigate the precious "Lancashires". What ever he was, and wherever he might come from, the markings for the Sports were there, like magic.

At midday Mr Pennington suggested to Richard that they might stroll around to inspect the adequacy of the preparations. A large marquee had been erected beyond the pavilion, though this was not the handiwork of the elusive groundsman. Inside, helpers were setting out tables and benches pillaged from the dining room in long orderly lines while a cluster of women, none of who was known to Richard, were attending to a large silver urn. Strands of coloured bunting stretched from the pavilion to the marquee and beyond, tree to tree, until it reached the shrubbery. Small clear notices, the work of one of Mr Soretti's classes, had appeared at strategic points, indicating that programmes could be purchased for sixpence, or illustrating by means of a pointed finger that the high jump, or whatever, was that way. A web of radiating wires stretched from the pavilion to the trees, endowing the occasional one with the ability to give a little cough from time to time, followed by sinister hissing and the words "one, two, three, testing". When he passed one of these audible trees Mr Pennington would drop his voice down to a whisper as if he believed that Mr Crompton, at the helm of the public address system, was able to eaves-drop as well as use it for its conventional application.

"It is all looking rather good," he said, visibly pleased, as they arrived at the extremity of their walk. "You are the Starter today, Brown?" Richard nodded. Dennet had presented him with a blazer. Mrs Hiller had handed him a timed schedule of events. Messengers had been appointed and briefed to collect the results and carry them to Mr Crompton. Mr Fox was enrolled and commissioned to act as timekeeper, while Mr Simpson had been placed in overall charge of field events. It did appear to Richard that, with the exception of the physical education display, Dennet had been effectively stripped of all responsibility.

Although the afternoon was scheduled to commence at two-fifteen, the first parents wandered in, dazed, inquisitive, looking about them like tourists, at one-thirty. It was Mr Pennington's prediction that twenty-one percent would arrive over ten minutes early, thirty-five would be on time or within a tolerance of ten minutes either way, while the remainder

would be late, or not turn up at all. At two o'clock the Brass ensemble from the school orchestra took their places on the pavilion balcony and warmed up with a Souza march while, in the marquee, the tea urn began to hiss. By ten minutes past two all the officials and marshals had reached their appointed places, and Mr Crompton could be seen remonstrating with Mr Keller, the Senior Physics Master, because the public address system would not function. "This switch, here," said Mr Keller with infinite and Christian patience.

And thus it was that at two-fifteen precisely those parents present, many on their way, unsuspecting shoppers in the High Street and large, innocent and uninvolved, sections of the suburb's population, were startled by Mr Crompton, who welcomed them all to another Sports Day, informed them of the afternoon's events, that tea could be obtained along with sandwiches and cakes in the refreshment marquee, that there would be a gymnastic display in the interval, and that all proceeds would go to the "School Fund". Richard's involvement started immediately with the final heats for the sprints, the competitors being marshalled and dispatched down the track at regular intervals. He had devised a simple but effective system of signals with Mr Fox so that they could inform one another when ready, and so that Mr Fox could see when the race started rather than rely on the sound carrying. All of this worked rather well until the starting pistol malfunctioned, failed to fire, and the boys stayed crouched, rooted to their starting positions on the track. "Oh! Go!" Richard cried in desperation. They went.

Although he was engrossed in his starter's duty, Richard maintained a constant eye open for the arrival of Eileen Cross, half fearing that she might change her mind and not come. Dennet did come, smart in his tracksuit, and ambled over to him quite casually. "Its going very well," said Richard, reloading the pistol. "At least it is when this works!"

"I must say that this is the life! Just do a bit of prancing about in front of the boys and parents later. Otherwise I just wander around."

"Fine for some! You don't mean to tell me that you tried to organise all this last year, do you?" said Richard with a sweeping gesture which caused Mr Fox to start his stopwatch. Dennet looked hurt and pulled a face. Then his expression changed.

"Look at that!" he whistled through his teeth. Richard forgot himself for a moment and looked. It was Susan Larkins, standing alone, near the pavilion, wearing an eye-catching, tight-fitting, white and navy-blue dress. "Oh, oh, oh! I must get in there before anyone else does," exclaimed Dennet. "See you later!"

Richard watched Dennet jog away and present himself to the desirable Miss Larkins. To his surprise and slight annoyance, she smiled and took Dennet's arm. Then a field of impatient, potential runners demanded his attention, and he lost sight of the couple. He caught sight of Eileen for the first time as he was starting the Junior Two Hundred and Twenty yards final. She, too, was standing near the pavilion and appeared to be scanning the grounds, shading her eyes with her hand. She saw him and waved. His wave back started Mr Fox's watch and nearly caused a false start, but in a few moments she was close. Between events he dashed across to her. "I'm glad that you've come, Mrs Cross," he said. "In about ten minutes we have a twenty minute interval and I get a break. Perhaps I could show you around?" There was a moment's hesitation a slight tremble. Was it fear? Then she nodded. Richard returned to his task with renewed vigour and sent wave upon wave of small, white clad, athletes in the direction of Mr Fox, completing their part of the afternoon's programme three minutes early.

As they walked, side by side, towards the pavilion, they met Martin. "Have you seen Mr Dennet?" he asked breathlessly. "I have to find him. I've looked everywhere! Mr Crompton wants him for the PE display." Richard shook his head.

"We may have to go on without him!" called Martin as he hastened away.

"My friend, Dennet, is always in trouble, though you couldn't want to meet a nicer fellow," he said to Mrs Cross as he guided her into the marquee. A few minutes later they sat opposite each other at the end of one of the tables, eating gateaux and downing hot, sweet, tea.

"I really think that you are enjoying this afternoon, Eileen," he said, heedless of the danger. "May I call you Eileen?"

The clouds parted. There was the glimmer of a smile on her face as she spoke. "Yes, Richard. Just for this afternoon. When we are alone."

That twenty minutes evaporated. Richard did not learn then whether Dennet had been traced and brought to heel, nor did he worry about it. Neither would he have wanted to have been coupled with him, one who would leave his post, no matter how fair the lady. As they parted, he, reluctantly, to start the finals, she to find her son, each seemed to leave much unspoken. There was cruelty in it. And, as events were later to transpire, it was the last time he was to see her before the end of the approaching Summer Holidays.

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