

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The telegram had arrived at Grove Crescent, next morning, some twenty minutes after Richard had set out for Rochester House. Mrs Morgan, certain that its contents must be both evil and urgent, redirected the delivery boy to the school where he eventually made his way into Mrs Hiller's office. She was, for once, undecided. Should she accept the telegram and sign the receipt, or should she take it, boy and all, to Richard? As Assembly was still under way, she took custody of the missive and assured the boy, who in a short while had become like post office putty in her hands, that it would be conveyed to Mr Brown with all possible expedition. The appearance of Mr Pennington in her office indicated that Assembly was over. "I have a telegram for Mr Brown," she said. "I was about to take it to him."

"It is bad news?"

"Telegrams usually are. People are rarely anxious to convey good news with the same haste as bad. Unless, of course, you have come up on the Pools. Will you come with me in case someone has to take charge of his Form?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," muttered Mr Pennington, but they went together. Their joint arrival in the doorway to his classroom alerted Richard to the fact that there was some kind of problem, but he was totally unprepared for its nature.

"It is my father," he said, shaken. "He's had a heart attack!"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Mrs Hiller. "Is it serious?"

"I don't know, replied Richard, looking around himself wildly as if the answer might be lying there, in the corridor, or inscribed on the wall. "Sandra does not say." As he handed the telegram to the School Secretary for her to read, Richard was joined again by Mr Pennington who had ventured into the classroom to maintain order, but had caught sight of their serious expressions, and returned.

"I think you should telephone home before you do anything else," he said once he, too, had read the brief document.

"You can use the telephone in my office," suggested Mrs Hiller.

Mr Pennington remained to supervise the Form while Mrs Hiller went to report to Mr Larkins and Richard tried to call Eastgate. There was no reply and he began to think that he had no alternative but to travel home immediately, in total ignorance of his father's condition, not knowing what he was going home to, not knowing even if he was still alive. A sudden inspiration made him think of calling Emily Logan at his father's offices, but in his confused state of mind he could not remember what the number was. When he did recall it and made contact, Miss Logan was not at all helpful. She told him that she knew very little and made it plain that she was upset because she was not being kept informed. Furthermore, it was a cardinal error for Richard to be in London at such a time, and there was more than a suggestion that it would never have happened had he not gone there in the first place. It had hurt Emily and she was at pains to ensure that others suffered too.

"Clearly, you must go home right away," said Mr Larkins. "We can rely on Mr Pennington to bridge the small gap remaining up to the end of the Term. Would you tie up any loose ends before you do leave and, perhaps, keep Mrs Hiller informed of your father's progress?"

"I am sorry about this," said Richard to the Senior Mathematics Master.

"My dear fellow. You mustn't worry about it. Your place, right now, is at your home and we must find every means to release you and allow you to get there as soon as possible. I only hope that your father's condition is not all that serious."

"But the Reports? I'm only half way through."

"No need to concern yourself about them. I can see to all of that."

"Will you inform my pupils? Just the bare facts? To stifle silly rumours?"

"You can rely on it! Now, run along!"

As he walked hurriedly back to Mrs Morgan's, Richard tried to take stock of his situation. Eileen Cross would hear from Jonathan who would learn the facts in class. Dennet would likewise hear at school, but he would wonder about his Summer visit. Richard decided

that he would have to write to him from Eastgate once he knew the extent of his father's illness.

Then there was Stephanie. She would be expecting to see him that evening so, once in his room he sat and wrote a short explanatory note, trying to remain calm as he did so, and placed it in his pocket. He gave Mrs Morgan a cheque to cover the reduced rent up to the end of August, and returned to his room to pack his essential belongings. His last task, before catching a train, was to make a detour and drop his note into Stephanie's letterbox at the block of flats. His imagination ran riot during the journey home. Why the lack of a reply from Eastgate when he telephoned? What if his father were dead? What would he say, and what duties would be expected of him? And if he were seriously ill or paralysed? He found that he feared the thought of his father being dead the most. Not just because of the loss but he assumed that, as the only son, the whole burden of the business and supervision of family affairs would fall on his shoulders. It was unthinkable, yet it was there, like a great, black, evil cloud, dominating his horizon.

By the time that the train had pulled into Eastgate Station he had run the gauntlet in his head enough times to be prepared for most eventualities. If he was ready for, and believed, the worst, he could also hope for better things and that he was mistaken. His mother and sister were at home when he arrived. "What's happened?" he said immediately, striding into the hallway as soon as the front door was opened to him. "Where is he?"

"He's at the hospital, in a private ward. They don't think that it is serious, but they want to keep him under observation. You cannot be too careful."

"I must go and see him," he said impetuously. "Can I go now?"

"Richard," said his mother, severely, "he must not be excited. You may visit him only on the strict understanding that you will not argue with him. You are to watch what you say. Do you understand?" She had not spoken to him in that way since he was a child and he was angered at the implication. If she blamed him for his father's condition, she, by acting as his only ally throughout his campaign, would have to bear her share.

"You need not worry," he replied from the door. "If I thought my visit was likely to upset or affect him in any way, or that I could not trust myself to control the situation, I would have stayed in London!" The words were foolish, hasty, ill-conceived, and once outside he regretted uttering them. Sandra suddenly appeared at his side.

"I'll drive you," she said.

"You've been sent to spy on me?"

"Don't be silly. Mother is very cold, calm, and collected at this moment, but you have no need to worry. She did not send me. And I don't propose to come in with you. I'll stay in the car." Richard went into the reception area and explained the purpose of his visit.

"Which ward is he in?" asked the receptionist.

"I think it's a private room, off of St Dunstan's," he replied.

"Brown? I can't find him here."

"He would have been brought in this morning, early. As an emergency," he said, becoming impatient.

"Are you sure that you're in the right hospital?" asked the receptionist, running a finger up, down, and over a chart littered with names written in a variety of hands and colours. "Oh, no, here he is. Go up to the second floor, turn left, and you'll see the Sister's office on the right. She'll take care of you."

The ward Sister was elderly, but not unattractive, with the kind of face in which one could read years of experience and which fills one with immediate confidence and an impression of limitless resource. She greeted Richard in a broad Scottish accent. "One word, to explain the situation before you see your father. He is all right, and you've no need to worry. The attack was a minor one and we must all think of him as very lucky. But it is a warning, Mr Brown. Life is full of such warnings. Some are insignificant and pass without being noticed. Others are of such a magnitude that you cannot ignore them. If you do, it's at your peril. Such is your father's case. It has not affected him, disabled him, and in a couple of weeks he will be home and be able to continue to lead a normal life. But that normal life must be kept free from exceptional stress and excitement. He could do it with the assistance of

drugs. We could keep him sedated, but he will live longer and happier if he is able to do it for himself, unaided. Except he'll need the aid, encouragement, assistance, and support of his whole family." Her words seemed to pierce Richard with a new terror.

"Have you something specific in mind?" he said, dreading her answer.

"No. Nothing specific," she replied, looking at him closely, as if his question had aroused her suspicions. "Your father must learn to control his excitability. Those around him really must assist and support him. Otherwise he'll be back in here in less than six months, or worse!"

She led him through the corridor of the ward until they reached a door labelled "Brown A.R.". "He's awake now, but no more than ten minutes. I will come and fetch you."

The room was bright but spartan, furnished with a chair, a small table heaped with apparatus, a trolley equally laden, and the bed in which his father lay. He looked much older and struck Richard, for the first time in his life, as being helpless, feeble, and very mortal. He was propped up and connected with numerous wires to what looked like a hi-fi set on the table beside him. His eyes opened and a half smile spread over his features as Richard entered. "This is very silly. I'm really OK, quite fine. I could get up and walk straight out of here, but these women are determined to make such a fuss! These women - such a fuss.." He closed his eyes. Richard could not tell if it was because he was tired or he was just summoning up the next thought before going on.

"Hello Dad," he said softly. His father's eyes opened again.

"Ah, Richard. I do want to talk to you - about things - but I feel so sleepy." Richard had his own suspicions concerning the substance of what his father would say. It would be exactly as he feared. Worst of all, the forces could well be arrayed against him now. Miss Logan, his family, even the Ward Sister. What was he to say? The patient appeared to have dozed off, so Richard sat there silently studying his father's features, his heart torn between pity and fear, half-longing for the Sister to return and take him away

"I must talk to you!" said the old man, suddenly surfacing and moving a hand. "Oh, these confounded wires! I seem to be plugged in everywhere."

"Don't worry about talking to me now. There's plenty of time. I've come home indefinitely. Tell me about yourself - how do you feel? How did it happen? Is there anything that I can get for you? Or do for you?" His father yawned and sighed like a man trying to shift an impossible burden.

"I?" he said. "I'm just tired."

"When did it happen?" asked Richard earnestly.

"I don't know - in the early hours. I was dreaming that I was suffocating. Then I dreamed that I was awake. There was this iron clamp around me, closing, gripping, squeezing the breath from my lungs, forcing the sweat out of my body through every pore imaginable. I couldn't breath or move, and the pain! Your mother switched on the light and called the Doctor. And, before I knew it, I was here. It was all very unpleasant - but nothing really."

He lapsed again and the seconds crept past. Richard wondered how long vigils at deathbeds were. He would never be able to sit through one. Those ten minutes seemed to be going on for ever. Even the hands on his watch appeared to have stopped in the Ward's timeless zone. For a moment his thoughts strayed back to London, to Stephanie. Would she have received his note? And to Eileen - she might not know yet. They both now seemed to be so far away, and it all seemed such a long time ago. The awful thought struck him that he might never see either of them again. There was so much to lose! Even now, the thread was being spun, and the web weaved, that would ensnare and incarcerate him here for the rest of his life. Must it be?

"Richard? Ah, yes, there you are. For a moment I thought it was a dream. I must talk to you - it is so very important." Richard slowly shook his head.

"Nothing is so important as you resting and recovering. The Sister said that I was not to stay for more than ten minutes, and that you were to rest and not worry about anything. I'm sure I can hear her coming to fetch me."

His father sighed again and muttered inaudibly. And, true enough, like the American Cavalry appearing over the brow of an Indian-trodden hill, but looking undeniably prettier,

the Ward Sister arrived and firmly drove Richard from his father's bedside. "Come back this evening, Mr Brown," she said as he was hustled along the corridor. "He'll be quite safe in our hands."

Richard's heart was pounding as he went down the stairs. He had escaped for the moment, but the trap was sprung and he could not avoid it for ever, except at a dreadful price. He could hear his father's voice saying, "come and run the business now that I cannot. It will kill me if you refuse." What other answer could he give but "yes"? Sick at heart, he found Sandra and sat beside her in the car. "He's sleeping now," he said softly, his thoughts still on the matter of his future career.

"No problems?" Richard shook his head.

"None at all."

They returned to the house where lunch awaited them, after which his mother cornered him in the lounge while Sandra, by pre-arrangement, made her self scarce elsewhere. "We must discuss this matter of your father's health," she began, placing a tray of tea on the occasional table and purposely sitting opposite. Richard steeled himself.

"I think I know what you are going to say," he said weakly.

"Do you? Then it should make it all the easier. But I'll say it, none the less." Richard bowed his head. "A few months ago, when you decided to accept your teaching post, I took your part against your father and supported you. It caused some unpleasantness in the family at the time, not between your father and I, I hasten to add, but I felt that you deserved your opportunity to make your own way in the world. In fairness to your father, I must also add that although he has felt bitter about the events, even betrayed, he has never ceased to love you and has followed your progress carefully and secretly, though he could not keep it a secret from me. Not that he has changed in his attitude. Nor has his devotion to me, nor I to him."

"But your freedom of action then was based on the reasonable and valid assumption that there was no need to call upon or invoke any latent responsibilities you might have towards the family. We were all well, fit, and prosperous. Your father's wish for you to join the business, whether promoted by love, vanity, or a sense of duty, could be overruled and negated by your desire to follow your chosen career. Now I think matters are fundamentally changed. Your father now has a vital need for you. I think he sees you as the sole person to whom he could entrust his affairs. It is true that there are others who could take it on, but I don't think your father would be at all happy at such an arrangement. Indeed, he might be constantly worried by it. He could continue, himself, to run the business, but that might kill him. What I am saying is that you must seriously reconsider your position. I can no longer support you in what you are doing. Quite the opposite. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," said Richard, trying to maintain his composure and hide his bitterness and sense of betrayal. "You are saying that if father asks me to come and take over the running of the business - ."

"Which he will."

" - I am to say, yes, Father, when would you like me to start?"

"Richard! If you say it like that there's no saying what will happen!"

"There's no saying what will happen, anyway. You must understand that I have responsibilities. I have given my word to the school. I am pledged to the boys."

"They can always find another mathematics teacher. You will not find another father, nor he a son."

"That's unfair, Mother!"

"It may be. Life rarely is fair, unless people make it so artificially. We cannot all do as we please. Sometimes we must go where our duty leads us, no matter how unpleasant it is, or the sacrifice involved. So, if your father asks you, what will be your answer?"

"I don't know. Its not the sort of decision one can take in five minutes over a cup of tea."

"You are prevaricating, Richard!"

"I'm not! Honestly."

"You think about it, then!" He paused and searched for an escape. A possibility

presented itself.

“There is one solution you have not mentioned.”

“What is that?”

“He could sell the business.”

“What?” cried his mother. “Sell his company, his lifetime's work? You must be mad, Richard. Don't you dare suggest that to him. Nothing could be more guaranteed to give him apoplexy!” Still bristling his mother swept out of the room, leaving her son miserable, reflecting. Was this to be the pattern of his Summer holiday? Would there be a Summer holiday? It was not a trap, after all. He was going to be beaten into a submissive pulp by sledgehammers and mallets. They would keep up their pounding until he did submit. And he had not yet survived through his first day of his weeks-long break!

Early that evening they all went to the hospital. “He's coming along fine,” said the Sister, “but he is very anxious to talk to you, his son. He keeps asking for you.”

“You had better go in first, Richard,” said his mother, giving him a look which said far more than her words. “We'll wait outside.” His father opened his eyes as Richard sat beside him. He looked brighter and less fatigued than he had earlier.

“Ah, Richard, my lad. There's something I must talk to you about.” Emotion swelled inside him and a lump formed in his throat. Impulsively he grasped his father's hand.

“Dad,” he blurted, “I know what you are going to say. I don't want you to worry about it. I'll do exactly as you want, what you want, what you all want - everything! Just don't worry. Now, Mum and Sandra are outside. I'll send them in!” Hastily, confused, unsteady, the blood drained from his face, Richard staggered into the corridor and waved to the astonished women. “Go in!” he said hoarsely. “It's done - all over. I'll walk home.” And, so saying, he ran down the stairs and disappeared into the cool evening.

It was as well that he chose to walk home. It reduced the tension and frustration, though he probably aroused a great deal of curiosity as he progressed, arguing with himself and waving his arms about wildly. It seemed to him that his whole life was crumbling, that he had parcelled it up and thrown it over a high cliff into the sea, leaving it to sink to the depths of the oceans, committing it never to be seen or enjoyed again and to become no more than a fading memory. Was that really how it was to be? Was the Castle that was his independence undermined, breached, and over-run? Four months of his life, of freedom, then this! What about his relationships? With Stephanie? What about Mrs Cross? As he walked and the resignation grew, he composed letters to them both, and one to the school. Poor Mr Pennington! Let down again! Then he would have to write to Dennet, to say goodbye and to cancel his visit. Even if there were a chance, even if Sandra wanted him to come, he could not bear the thought of seeing him, to be constantly reminded of all he had lost, or that had been wrenched away from him. No, if there was to be a break, it had to be clean, and final.

He was wretched. All those years of study, preparation and planning were now for naught. All his dreams and fantasies were to be shattered. It was true. The sands on which his whole future life was to be built had shifted and he was as alone as ever. There was no counsel to whom he could go to discuss the matter, or to seek advice; expert, unbiased advice. He imagined a conversation with Stephanie, but she told him that he must do his duty and obey his conscience. There was no point in discussing it with Dennet. He would not take the matter seriously. And Eileen? No, it would be unfair to burden her with his worries. What about Mr Pennington? He would side with Stephanie. So that was the integrated sum of it. Bearable or unbearable, he had made the only choice possible under the circumstances. His friends, his family, could live with it. Could he live with them?

He carefully avoided extended contact with either his mother or sister that evening and, later, he sat alone in his bedroom, in familiar and what should have been friendly surroundings, armed with a small stock of headed notepaper. He started a letter:

“Dear Eileen,

I expect you have heard from Jonathan that my father has been taken ill and I have

returned to Eastgate.”

Here he stopped. What did he want to write to Eileen Cross? That he would no longer be a visitor at Hayes Close? Was that all? He addressed a letter to Stephanie in a similar manner and ground to a halt in the same place. He could not make her letter final, yet what should he say? Should he repeat his proposal? He balked at this idea. It was not easy to say. It would be worse to write. And words are ephemeral. Writing is there to last. Then, again, he could not bring himself to write both a proposal of marriage to Stephanie at the same time as he wrote “farewell” to Eileen. It seemed wrong. Thus he sat, motionless, locked in indecision about his future and his treatment of the two women who occupied and now dominated his thoughts. He could not escape the nemistic idea that the relationships were at an end and it was he who had to terminate them.

A clock struck one. It was no use. He could not write such a letter and end it all. Not then. Not that night. Whatever the morning might bring he would accept, and adjust to, but there and then, writing it in black and white was unthinkable. He redrafted both letters to contain an apology for his precipitous departure and an optimistic bulletin on his father's condition, coupled with the promise that he would write again after a few days. He addressed the envelopes, sealed them, and prepared to go to bed. He did not fall asleep. Instead, he lay awake in the dark for a long time, unable to suppress his thoughts and rippling emotions. He had tried, but he had been beaten, not by his own failing, but by the invisible family-spun wire which had neatly tripped him as he sought to escape. It was no-one's fault. He could attribute no blame, nor bear any malice. But oh, oh, the futility of it!

Nothing was said to him on the subject at breakfast, which was providential because he had no desire to discuss the matter. But his mother, employing a strange, unusually cold and remote formality, did seek clarification during the morning. “You said something at the hospital last night, after you saw your father. I am uncertain that I understood you clearly. I think I did, but - .”

“Didn't he tell you?”

“He did not. He was tired and confused, I think. What did you say to him?” Richard bit his lip. It had to be said.

“I told him that I would come and run the business, as he desires. But the whole idea is alien and painful to me at present. I would rather not discuss it.”

“You gave him your word?”

“I said that I would comply with his wishes, if that is giving my word. I shall not change my mind.”

She looked at him strangely, as if she did not believe him. She had been compelled to make a clear choice between her son and her husband. She had chosen her husband, but Richard neither understood nor suspected the pressure under which his mother was acting. At that moment he could think only of betrayal and his sacrifice, and no one else.

He went to post the letters, holding them suspended in the jaws of the post-box for a while, wondering if he was right to send them at all. But he released his hold, heard them drop, and it was done.

The next visit to his father was arranged for early that afternoon. Again the whole family went and, in view of Arthur Brown's model recovery, all were permitted together into his room for a while. Pleasantries were over when he asked to speak to Richard alone. He seemed again brighter and very, very, calm and self-possessed. “We spoke briefly last night,” his father began. “I was, unfortunately, less coherent and explicit than I wanted to be, and it is likely that I did not make things clear.”

“I think I understood you.” His father's eyebrows were raised. “I said,” continued Richard, anxious to swallow all the distasteful medicine as quickly as possible, “that I would conform to your wishes in respect of running the business and anything else that is humanly possible to do.”

“You are prepared to do just as I wish?” Richard nodded. “Absolutely? Without reservation?” Again Richard gave a reluctant nod. “I can see that hurt,” said his father,

hoisting himself up in the bed. "Pull your chair nearer and let's talk, man to man, cards face up on the table, eh?"

Richard did as his father commanded, but he could not help wondering what it was that was different about him. Something had changed. "Firstly, let me make it clear that I am quite sane. This thing, the stroke or what ever it was, has not affected my brain in any way, whatever your mother may ultimately think. But the fact that it has happened has had a dramatic affect on my sense of values. It sets you back on your heels, alters your views on life, your assessment of priorities, your very values and ambitions. I have not lain here long. I have no wish to. But I have had sufficient time to take stock and think things through. Now, you will be under pressure from your conscience, and external pressure from your mother, to come to my aid, to throw up your job and come home."

"She has said as much."

"She's a good woman and means well, but she is wrong in this instance. I want you to ignore what ever it is that she has said. We struck a bargain four months ago, a settlement I shall call it. The principle was that you would leave home and not return in less than two years."

"Yes. For whatever reason, but - ."

"That was a bargain struck between two rational adults. We might have both been excited at the time. I might not have been very happy then. I might still be unhappy, but I dictated the terms. Can I make it clear that I am not prepared to see it broken under this kind of duress? If it is to be broken, it must be by mutual assent, given freely, not as now."

"Do you mean - are you saying, that you do not want me to come and run the business?"

"Do I want you to take over the running of the business? Hell, of course I do! I have always wanted that. I will always want that."

"What then?"

"I could not allow it under the present circumstances. You do me no justice. If ever you come to me under your own free will, because you want to, because you feel your attempt to be independent has failed, it will be there, providing I have the strength to keep it going. Do you understand what I am saying? A foolish question! I can see from your face that you do!"

"I think I understand you perfectly. But what about your health? Your heart?" His father smiled.

"Yes, it could be the death of me one day. We all have to die, sooner or later. Allow me to feel that my priority is to ensure that your mother and sister are taken care of, and that you are settled and happy. I'll keep the business going. If it gets to be too much, and you don't want to take it on, we can put in a Manager, or sell it. No, you've not heard me talk like this before. You may never again. In two months time I may feel differently but mark my words, if I do I shall be wrong then. I am right now!" Richard could not believe his ears. It was all too sudden, too diametrically opposed to that which he had expected, a marked positive to his negative. "I've talked to the Specialist," his father continued. "He thinks there's lots of life left in me if I keep calm. Especially as I neither smoke, drink, or chase after women! There we are - nothing to worry about! Now, you had better go to your mother and Sandra. They will be worrying."

"She will not take it well, the idea of you carrying on," Richard said as he reached the door.

"No," said his father. "Send her in and let me talk to her. If I cannot persuade her, I will threaten to have a tantrum. That will make her give in."

Richard could see that his mother was both displeased and suspicious following her discussion with her husband. It was clear, too, that his father had maintained his position against his mother's barrage of arguments, though Richard was puzzled to find these maternal forces still employed against him, this from one who had been an ally. "He has told you?" exclaimed Richard, barely concealing his excitement at having won such a memorable victory. She gave him a dark look.

"I am not happy about it," she said, brushing by and heading towards the exit.

“You mustn't worry about it, Mother,” said Sandra once they were home and Richard was out of earshot.

“Some-one must.”

“But why? Everything's turned out all right.” Moira shook her head.

“Do not be fooled,” she said. “It is a false dawn.”

“But you said that father said - .”

“Yes, he did. And it was your father speaking. But what happens when he comes home and changes his mind? Or does sell the business because he cannot carry it on alone? Or has another heart attack? Your father is the brittle one. Permanent adjustment will break him. It is Richard who is supple and pliable. He could have adjusted; should have.” Sandra gloomily watched her mother as she talked and busied herself in doing nothing. She could not understand why a simple issue, which appeared to have been amicably resolved, should become so complicated. So she sat, patiently and almost silently, and listened to her mother. She heard, and understood every individual word, but she could not grasp the overall meaning. Eventually it was time for dinner and the subject was dropped.

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