

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Arthur Brown's recovery was nearly as dramatic as his attack. Within less than a week he was home and on his feet. "The heart is only a machine," he would announce as he made his slippered way across the lounge carpet. "Overwork it and it complains, even fails. But fail to use that machine, and all the parts seize up." It was clearly evident that normality would soon be restored to the Brown household.

Richard was pleased to receive a number of letters. The first, in an unfamiliar hand, was addressed to "Dear Mr Brown", and not "Dear Richard". It brought colour to his cheeks as he unfolded it and saw the signature. It was short, sympathetic, yet as he read it, it caused an unpleasant feeling to run down his spine and he felt suddenly chilled. "Who is Eileen Cross?" asked Sandra, resting her folded arms on his shoulder. He explained that she was the mother of one of the boys whom he helped with the railway modelling. Watching his father closely, he told, too, her history as far as he knew it.

"That's very sad," said Mrs Brown, coldly. "You mean to say she's alone, with no-one to support her and a growing boy? That's dreadful."

Several letters arrived from the school, including a formal one from Mr Larkins, and a more personal joint communication from Mrs Hiller and Mr Pennington. One day later, another letter arrived. It was brief:

"Darling Richard,

I have your epistles. I am sorry as I can see that your father's illness could have a long and lasting effect on your career and our little relationship. Our cruise starts at the end of the month. Please try to write to me with fuller details before then. And give your father my love, and say that I wish him a full and speedy recovery. My best wishes, too, to your mother and sister,

Love,

Stephanie."

Richard dutifully sat down that morning and wrote four letters in reply, finding three easy to compose, but struggling with that intended for Eileen Cross. Sandra, who had purposely remained silent on the subject up until now, queried Dennet's visit. Would not he still be able to come? Should Richard write to him? Thus it was agreed that the invitation should remain in force, and Richard wrote a fifth letter, addressed to him care of Mrs O'Halleron, to inform him of the facts. A last communication was sent to Mrs Morgan's and formed the main subject of breakfast conversation one day when developments on the hallstand had entered an inexplicable lull. Arrangements were made, by telephone, with the school, to have books and the relevant documents to next term, sent down by post to Richard, rather than entrust them to the care of Dennet. At last, Richard felt that he was set for some sort of holiday.

An uneasy equilibrium settled on the Brown household. Arthur Brown's progress towards good health and a resumption of normal life continued without a hitch. His wife was watchful, slightly hostile, but there was no excitement. And, as far as Richard was concerned, his father stuck to the words spoken in the hospital, even going so far as addressing his son on his career prospects, carefully avoiding all questions, no matter how remote, which might have suggested, or hinted at, an ulterior motive. For Richard, it was a brief, golden, age, paralleling in many respects, the bliss of his childhood. He would have liked a more comfortable accommodation with his mother, but that was not available. And even the absence of Stephanie, who had replied to his last letter in a light-hearted vein with a promise of postcards from all kind of exotic places, did not detract from his enjoyment.

Mrs Brown remained uneasy and watchful. She watched as they played chess,

Richard and his father, a game which Richard invariably won. But on one evening the game followed a different course. Richard had castled and withstood his father's initial attack. A counter-attack failed, and Richard found himself in difficulties. "Your Queen!" his father suddenly exclaimed. She was lost, placed beyond hope of rescue or recovery. For many minutes Richard stared hopelessly at the board, seeking in vain for a solution, but there was none. His key piece, the very core of his strategy, was swept away and his whole defence fell. It was such a catastrophic event that Sandra was called to the board to witness the end. Before he suffered the ultimate ignominy, Richard resigned.

Mr Brown went back to work, at first on a reduced basis, and Richard took to going down to the office with him, finding he often had little else to do. He was unable to fulfil a permanent function, but he knew the work backwards and happily tackled anything that was outstanding as a result of his father's indisposition. Miss Logan was appraised of the situation. "I'm very pleased, Arthur," she said. "Very pleased to see you back here. Very pleased to see that harmony is restored between you and Master Richard. Extremely pleased to learn that he is continuing with his teaching career."

"It wouldn't have worked," said Arthur from behind his paper-strewn, time-worn, leather-topped desk. "If he had come here under such circumstances."

"No," said Miss Logan mournfully. "It would never have worked."

"But it is still what I want," he said softly. "I have not given up the idea of the company becoming Brown & Son. I will never do that."

As the date for Dennet's scheduled visit grew near, Sandra began to get excited and insisted in carrying out the preparation of the guest room herself. "What are his Christian names?" she asked Richard, as she sat planning flower arrangements.

"I have not the faintest idea," he said.

"You do make peculiar friends," she exclaimed. "One without Christian names, and a girl friend with no surname. Its most unreasonable of you!"

"I suppose it is," he said casually, and went away. Sandra's question, and a series of little digging, superficially innocent, questions from his mother, set Richard thinking. It was true to say that his thinking did not occupy his whole day, but it was compressed into the first half hour of the morning, spent between his bed and the bathroom, and the last thirty minutes of the day, spent between the same places but in reverse order. It was also true to say that his thoughts were once again dominated by Stephanie, and that they were generally inconclusive, save in one respect. He agreed with himself that, if she would have him, he would still marry her. Yet the racing thrill and burning lust were gone. He began to fear that he was coming to the point at which, denied the object he desired most, he was discovering that he could live without it. The alternatives to marrying Stephanie were legion and ill-defined. The truth was that his vision of married life with her still had many gaping wholes in the fabric. He awaited her first postcard with the anticipation of a gambler awaiting the next race. It had been posted at Brest, and had taken nearly ten days to reach him. Its arrival prompted another series of oblique questions and Richard's frank, embarrassing, admission that he did not know why his sweetheart was on a yacht crossing the Bay of Biscay, heading for the eastern extremity of the Mediterranean. His mother and Sandra found themselves in accord. Richard's friends were very strange.

Richard accompanied Sandra to the station to meet Dennet. He appeared to have brought a minimum of luggage and Richard suspected that it might be all that he possessed. He queried the vulnerability and fate of the family heirlooms, but Dennet confidently informed him that he was sure that the cigarette cards would be safe under the watchful eye of Mrs O'Halleron. "My landlady," he added, catching Sandra's eye, "she never misses a trick. Best lodgings I've ever had." Richard noted that Dennet's description had slipped from a flat to lodgings, and wondered about his own. Now with the first term and a half over and a new school year starting, his career apparently launched in the right direction and a new harmony with his father, maybe it was time for him to start the hunt for better accommodation. The sight of Stephanie's palace had started his dissatisfaction and he was now discovering all kinds of little irritating problems at Grove Crescent. The worst was environmental and concerned his room which, because it was set high in the roof, became hot and stuffy on

sunny days. The dormer window was too small and low to afford reasonable ventilation and, when he did open it, the noise of the printing works, which seemed to be in use for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, was unbearable. Shortly before his return home he had suffered a couple of wretched sleepless nights. To seek an alternative became a second summer resolution.

Dennet appeared sporting a flamboyance which was a new experience for Richard and a side of the PE teacher that he had not seen before. "Hello, hello, hello!" he greeted them vigorously and enthusiastically. "Ah, the fair Sandra! I am overwhelmed." He took her hand and there, in the middle of Eastgate Railway Station, kissed it. Sandra giggled and loved it. Dennet was taken home, introduced, settled in, appeared at dinner and was, all that day, the model guest. Richard dismissed all his doubts concerning his friend's ability to conduct himself properly. Dennet had brought with him some very winning ways, and he won.

A vague itinerary had been drawn up for Dennet's visit on the basis that there were certain landmarks in the locality that a visitor should see, though the natives, all knowledgeable of their existence and location, might never go to see them, except to show a visitor. The outline of the planned trips was described to Dennet who declared that he thought it sounded magnificent, expressed overwhelming enthusiasm and was not concerned at the qualification to the effect that the order and progress would depend on the vagaries of the English weather. A fine day was selected for the visit to the nearby Cathedral city. It was Dennet's first visit and Richard thought it could be Dennet's first visit to any Cathedral. At least Dennet said that it was his first visit, but he then amazed Richard and the rest of the Browns by displaying an extraordinary grasp of English medieval history.

They spent several interesting hours in the precincts of the Cathedral. To the amusement of their children, Arthur and Moira detoured around the courtyard, hand in hand, trying to determine the exact spot on which he had proposed to her. "It was dark," he explained, apologetically. "In fact I think it was well after midnight." "There was a moon, though," said Moira as if he was to blame for the uncertainty. Tactfully, no-one was prepared to question how they came to be within the precincts in the early hours of the morning. Inside, a service appeared to be in progress and a number of reflective minutes were occupied standing at the rear of a diminutive congregation, awed by the majesty and serenity of the building's atmosphere.

"What a place in which to be married," whispered Dennet.

"Oh, yes!" hissed Sandra, perhaps imagining herself being led to any one of the altars.

"Was it founded by St Dunstan?" asked Dennet, turning to Richard. He was uncertain. There, vaguely tucked in one of the recesses of his mind, placed there long before, was the idea that there was some kind of connection between St Dunstan, St Augustine, and the founding of several religious establishments in the area, among them the Cathedral. Dennet was surprised that he should not know, and said as much. They chose to picnic in one of the public gardens close to an ancient City Gate, picking a sheltered spot before the shallow, fast-flowing river. Dennet seemed to enjoy the idea of the carefully planned impromptu meal and was a willing creature of burden for more than his fair share of the goodies from the Brown's kitchen. After they had finished eating he showed Sandra how to make miniature boats from paper and they each dropped one in the river.

"See which reaches the footbridge first!" he cried, taking her hand. Sandra's boat came through, proudly buoyant, mid-stream. But it was alone. Dennet's had caught in the weeds, turned on its side, and sunk.

"Shall we try again?" she said with enthusiasm. He shook his head, seeming to be unwilling to expose himself again to a second disaster.

From paper they went to real, wooden, boats and were punted precariously upstream and down, under bridges, even under buildings, and past the fascinating convoluted backs of otherwise orderly houses. Dennet thrust his hand in the water. "Its warm, you know. You could swim in it."

"Oh no," said Sandra, "its far too shallow."

"And far too dangerous," added Mrs Brown. "People have drowned in the river,

trapped in the weeds.”

“If you fancy swimming,” inserted Mr Brown, “there's always the sea.”

“Which is filthy,” commented Sandra.

“Or there are several good inland pools in the area. I'm sure Sandra wouldn't mind taking you to one or more.” So, the prospect of a swim or two was added to the itinerary. The remainder of the afternoon was occupied in exploring the narrow, congested, streets off the High Street, peering with fascination into antique shops, examining books and curios, wandering until they emerged onto the city walls near the Cathedral.

“What none of you other than your mother knows is that before the War I used to work in an office over there, by the wall. But I'm afraid that this end is being re-developed,” said Mr Brown, dwelling on the fact that he had none of the work. “It will destroy the character totally. It did suffer terribly during the War, which was a crying shame, but I sometimes think that our architects are hell-bent on doing what Hitler failed to do. Just look around you! You can probably imagine what it was once like.” Dennet nodded and opened up a weighty discussion on the wastage of war and the follies of reconstruction of inner cities, a debate which was terminated only when Richard asked about tea.

They found a small cafe, perched above an ancient Dickensian bookshop, and squeezed around two of its wobbly tables. Their presence greatly excited the curiosity of the proprietress who appeared to match the premises in her antiquity. Tea was taken with a selection of cakes, and Sandra and Dennet were discovered to be holding hands though no comment was passed. Richard never discovered who had taken hold of whom, or whether the act had been mutual and simultaneous.

The next day was dull. Richard accompanied his father to look at another block of hotels which had been given planning consent for conversion into flats. Arthur Brown was one of the contractors invited to tender for the work, though Richard's father was not optimistic. “It isn't our job,” he said as they walked around, leaving Richard somewhat puzzled. Sandra took Dennet to show him the town of Eastgate. Unlike her brother weeks earlier, she had no desire to exhibit her captive. Instead she clung close to his arm as if she thought he might run away should she release her hold. Late in the morning they found their way into the Brown's yard and came into the office.

“Come on, Richard,” said Dennet. “Show me around, then.” Mr Brown nodded.

“Go-on,” he said. “I'll entertain Sandra as she has seen it all before.”

“Its a nice little thing you've got here,” said Dennet as soon as they were alone in the yard. “I don't know why you want to scratch around for a living, if you can call it that, at Rochester House, when you could have all this!”

“I want to be my own boss,” grumbled Richard, feeling disinclined to reopen a painful subject he had so recently, gleefully, closed. “Would you like to do something like this?” A strange look appeared in Dennet's eyes. For the first time Richard realised that there was always the prospect that Sandra might marry, and the business could pass to her husband.

“I'm not so sure that I wouldn't,” replied Dennet, obviously relishing the idea.

“There's an awful lot of paperwork in it.”

“Oh, I'd get a Manager in to do that. A professional, you know.”

“The business wouldn't support a Manager,” said Richard stubbornly. “There's not enough turnover.” But he showed Dennet around, outwardly calm, inwardly trembling. He had received a severe jolt. It had been easy to refuse his father, but here he was, at the first threat, clutching at, and trying to take back, something he had previously, willingly, declined. Was that really the case? Or was the family business like some dreadful, wave-washed, mist-shrouded, magnetic mountain which would never permit his little boat to escape, and would ruthlessly strip it of its nails and ironmongery should he sail too close?

“We are going to the amusement park this afternoon,” said Sandra, radiant. “Dennet is treating me! Do you want to come?”

“No,” Richard said flatly. “I'm not in the mood.”

“Is something wrong?” his father asked, later that day, finding his son much changed since the morning. Richard shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Not really. I feel a bit off-colour. That's all.” He announced that he would walk home from the office, but he ambled off in the direction of the town with no fixed purpose in mind.

“Hey! Richard!” called a voice from behind him. “You're home then!” It was Ken, more red-faced than before. “Come and have a coffee at Antonetti's,” he added. They sat at the rear of the shop, isolated from the passing world beyond the plate glass windows, not far from the deafening juke-box which emitted an endless series of unmelodic tunes over a pitchless pounding bass. “What are you doing, then?” shouted Ken.

Richard did not answer immediately but sat silently fascinated by his friend's nose which had grown huge and porous and which, redder than the remainder, seemed to be a sort of bulbous, crimson, nucleus set in the centre of his face. “School holidays,” he murmured during one of the rare pauses between successive records. “And you?”

“Sick leave.”

“Oh!” Ken did not look ill, but then he never did appear to be ill and was, in all probability, immune to ninety-nine per cent of all known germs. Nor was it necessary for him to actually be ill in order to take his sick leave, though it did seem to be a little early in the year for him to risk claiming the privilege. A familiar laugh arrested them. Stood in the doorway was Sandra clutching a large red teddy bear. Behind, courteously, came Dennet. Neither noticed Richard who was masked by Ken. Instead they took a table in the window to which Dennet carried the two steaming coffees. Ken's face became very animated and his nose glowed a deep purple. “It's Sandra!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Richard, trying to appear disinterested.

“Who's that with her?”

“Our PE teacher. He's staying with us for a couple of weeks.”

“Is he? He's very free and easy with her!”

“Oh?” When Dennet planted a kiss on Sandra's cheek, Richard realised that Ken was bristling and appeared to be on point of leaping to his feet and rushing over to their table. For a moment Richard considered letting him go. It might be to his advantage if Dennet were in a fracas of some kind, especially as he was putting on such a good act at present. Although an incident of that kind might eliminate the possibility of his father considering Dennet as a likely future proprietor of the business, it might equally enhance his position in Sandra's eyes beyond all recovery. And, then, Ken was in no condition to take on the fairly fit P.E. Teacher. So he caught hold of his friend's arm and restrained him.

“Don't,” he said. “He's bigger than you, and much fitter.” Ken turned to stare at Richard and frowned as if he neither believed Richard nor understood him.

“She is your sister,” he protested. “And I could have him arrested. One word from me, that's all it would take!” Richard shrugged.

“Sandra's over twenty-one. She's a big girl now. And you don't want to have him arrested, Ken. What would Sandra think of you if you did?” But it struck a vibrant, nagging, chord inside him, adding a new topic to Richard's periods of contemplation, a kind of division of the family fortune, coupled with his father's illness, and this new prospect of Sandra marrying. It was not necessarily Dennet, either. She could marry anyone! Ken, even? Well, nearly anyone.

Another card arrived from Stephanie next morning. It had been posted at Gibraltar. “It is a shame that Stephanie is not coming down this summer,” said Mrs Brown over breakfast. Richard nodded, but Dennet was frowning, thinking, slowly assembling and joining together the pieces of a mental jigsaw puzzle.

“Stephanie?” he asked with great stress. Richard felt alarm.

“You know,” said Sandra, “only you don't know her. Richard's girlfriend. I told you about her yesterday. Only you weren't listening.”

“Do you know her, Mr Dennet?” said Mrs Brown, more astute than her daughter. Dennet gave Richard a strange look before answering.

“No, I don't, not Richard's girlfriend.”

The execution of the itinerary continued with a visit to a nearby cliff-top castle,

mediaeval ports, and a picnic high on the wind-swept chalk cliffs. Sometimes Sandra and Dennet went alone. On other occasions the whole family accompanied them. One such trip was particularly nostalgic for Richard. It was to the dense, extensive, woods which had featured large in his childhood trips. They walked into their depths and settled in a pleasant, grassy, sunlit glade which appeared to miraculously be free of thistles, nettles, and wood ants, but which was adorned with a galaxy of wild flowers and exotic butterflies.

“Don't wander off too far,” called Mrs Brown as Dennet and Sandra prepared to set out to explore. “We might never find you again.” She had said the same to Richard and Sandra when they had been children and the sound of these words evoked mixed feelings in Richard. The picnic was laid out and divided upon their return.

“I think woods can be quite frightening places,” said Sandra listening to the mysterious rustling and cracking which seemed to be all around. “Especially if you're alone. They certainly were when I was a child.” Richard looked towards her. It had been his task then to protect her. Now she was looking at Dennet.

“I don't suppose they have changed much,” said the PE teacher.

“No,” she continued. “You can understand how all those folk tales and fairy stories about children disappearing, witches, gnomes, goblins, deep in the forest - .”

“Perhaps we had better all stay together,” said Mr Brown darkly.

“I'll protect you!” said Dennet. They laughed, all except Richard who sat there, brooding. The sound echoed through the trees and seemed to mock him. A large flock of birds, disturbed, beat and fluttered their way through the upper branches and escaped to the sky.

“Don't go too far,” called Mrs Brown, again. Arthur dozed off, just as he had that day with Stephanie up on the cliffs. Clearly he was not concerned by the prospect of being overrun by swarms of wood ants. Richard was alone with his mother. “Your father seems much better,” she said softly and spontaneously.

“I think he seems to be virtually normal,” Richard said. He wanted to add that he also was better-tempered, but suppressed the words. She nodded and sat silently contemplating the form of her sleeping husband.

“How many years more?” she asked herself. “And what then?”

The afternoon slowly slipped by. Dennet and Sandra did not return. “You'd better go and see if you can find them while I start packing,” said his mother. So Richard started off, a little reluctantly, in the direction in which they had left, pausing at regular intervals to listen for the sound of their voices. He thought of calling out, but the act of thus addressing two adults seemed childish. As he progressed, he came nearer and nearer to a stream. Then, as he reached the brow of a steep slope, he heard the faint sound of lowered voices above the rippling of the water. Still, he did not call out but cautiously descended the twisting slippery path towards the stream. Suddenly he stopped short. There, bathed in a shaft of sunlight, partially hidden from his view by intervening trees, was Sandra, sat with her back to him. He could just see her head, her bare shoulders, and her bare legs and thighs. He could not see Dennet. He paused, transfixed, watching her lean forward, her body appearing to be quite animated. What was she doing? She stood at his approach and let her skirt drop, brushing out the creases with the palms of her hands as she looked around for her shoes. “Is it time to go?” she said. “We've had such fun!”

The stream swung in a wide arc across the valley floor, almost doubling back on itself. Dennet stood a little distance away on the furthest bank. He had found some paper. They had been making and sailing boats.

Dennet's visit passed all too quickly for Sandra, filled with swimming, further afternoons in the amusement park, games of tennis, and other activities. Richard found himself awkward and frequently in their way. He could join them for swimming, but three could not easily play tennis together. It was clear to the Browns that some kind of relationship had developed between the young people, but definition of the depth or extent was elusive because of outward manifestations were limited. Apart from the occasional kiss and holding of hands, they seemed to keep one another at arm's length when in the company of a third party. Richard's view was that they had become “good friends”, and although he had been

forced to reconsider and reassess certain qualities of Dennet's character, he still found that his colleague fell short of the requisites he desired in a brother-in-law. But it worked on Sandra like a tonic. She seemed to blossom, visually and spiritually, with a hitherto unsuspected maturity and happy confidence. "Have you learned his Christian names yet?" Richard asked her on the eve of Dennet's departure. She shook her head.

"He said that I would have to marry him to find out what they are. I asked him if the knowledge was worth the effort. He said that it wasn't."

Sandra braved the next morning with the fortitude of a Christian martyr, clinging to the belief that there would be life after the impending parting. Everyone said that the time had passed so quickly, and regretted that there appeared to be no chance of a further visit before Christmas. "I could come up to see you," she said softly in a moment of consuming rashness. But Dennet did not hear, or chose not to hear, and she did not repeat the statement. Like a cortege, they made their sad way to the station. Richard went with them, but found a suitable excuse to not go onto the platform, affording his sister her final, private, farewell. "Will you write to me?" she said, looking up as he leaned out of the carriage window. "Just now and then?" He lightly kissed the top of her head.

"You're a girl in a million," he said. "I'm not very good at writing. In fact I'm not very good with paperwork. Richard will tell you the same." She was determined not to cry.

"Just a word?" she pleaded.

"I'll try."

She watched the train creep forward and glide away, recalling that she had stood on the same spot and waved goodbye to Richard. How many other people had stood there and witnessed the departure of their loved ones? How many had been innocent of the knowledge that it was for the last time? It was a morbid terror that gripped her and without knowing why, she backed away from the platform edge and the deadly, newly installed, electrified rail. She was possessed by a dreadful fear that her happiness in life was going to consist of no more than this brief, now past, period. He would never come back. Downhearted, downcast, she returned to Richard.

"He's gone, then, San," he said gently.

"I enjoyed having him here," she said slowly. "He was good to have around. It was fun. It won't be the same without him." As she spoke she wondered if her life would ever be the same or whether, in some irretrievable way, it was changed for all time.

"He's a good sort, Dennet," Richard felt safe in saying. "Always in trouble, though."

Sandra said no more. Whatever she felt, it would be painful beyond bearing to expose her inner feelings, emotions, and desires, to the cold, critical, light of day. She remained silent.

The little that remained of that school holiday seemed to slip by almost unnoticed. Postcards from Stephanie continued to arrive at random, the last indicating that she was on the return voyage. And while Richard maintained his harmony with his father, his mother watched and waited. Richard prepared for the coming academic year with one major resolution. He proposed to throw himself unreservedly into his work at school, to the exclusion of all peripheral and outside activities. He debated the continuation of the Tuesday evening visits to Hayes Close. Clearly those on Sundays would have to be curtailed. There was no question of having idle Sundays any more, with two years' pupils to teach, books to mark, and tests to set. He began to toy with the germ of an idea: to allow himself a period of assessment for the boys in the new intake, then to establish what he thought their end of term examination results should be. It would allow him a subjective means of measuring his own effectiveness as well as each pupil's progress. There could be a whole Plan for the Lower School Mathematics built around the syllabus, but with set objectives measured against actual results.

His scheme began to take shape in his mind. He bounded with enthusiasm and spent hours in his room making notes, writing a sort of thesis on the subject, and drafting a chart of target assessments for the second year boys. After a few days of this he was itching to get back to the school to discuss his plans with Mr Pennington and to start to put his ideas into practice. Yet what was an unmitigated success as a holiday ended on a low, ominous, note.

His father again beat him at chess, and once again it was by virtue of Richard offering up his Queen, although they agreed that he had made some patently bad moves and that his disaster seemed to arise out of a trick of fate and the unusual way in which the game developed. Still, he told himself, it was only a game. Perhaps it was all a game?

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