

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Richard returned to London a little over a week before the new term was due to start. At Mrs Morgan's he received a warm and friendly reception, with sincere enquiries regarding his father's health, but these did not deter him from his resolve to find fresh accommodation. He placed his belongings in his room and laid out the school books and other work that he had undertaken during the holiday. It gave him a thrill to wonder if Stephanie was back. Her last card had been vague on the subject of the date for her return, although Richard understood that it was imminent. He looked forward to going to the restaurant. Perhaps he could even slip around to her flat? That would surprise her!

The first person he encountered at Rochester House was Dennet, halfway up the main staircase, bubbling over with news and excitement, though Richard could not imagine any reason for him being there. "Have you heard?" he called as Richard approached. "Old Pennington's gone and got himself married - to Mrs Hiller!"

"It doesn't surprise me," said Richard.

"What? Doesn't it? To her? And like that? In the holiday without a word to anyone? All the school's talking about it."

"Mrs Hiller isn't exactly unattractive," said Richard, reflectively, but Dennet did not answer. Instead he appeared to start to stamp on the ground as a demonstration of annoyance and impatience.

Richard found that he was both happy and sad at the news. He would have liked to have been a participant at the ceremony, perhaps the Groom, though that would preferably have been with the girl of his choosing and not Mrs Hiller despite the many skills and attractions she was able to offer. It led him to resolve to pursue a fresh and more determined courtship of Stephanie: a new campaign to be launched forthwith and to extend throughout the Autumn: a fresh strategy: a more aggressive stance. Here was something else to be worked at, and what a prize there would be should he succeed!

"Well, I was surprised," said Dennet sourly, and he turned to stamp away.

"Oh, Dennet," called Richard after him. "Sandra sends you her love and asks you to write." Dennet's reply was unintelligible.

Richard received an unpleasant shock when he realised that Mr Crompton was there, above him, standing silhouetted against the large window at the top of the flight. Had he witnessed the whole of the conversation with Dennet? Richard felt inexplicably and unaccountably guilty as the scenes from Mr Larkin's study flashed across his mind: the accusation levelled at him of mixing with undesirable characters, and his own reconstruction of the dispute with Dennet over the tennis coaching sessions. "Ah, Brown," said the Deputy Headmaster, fixing his aggressive stare through the narrow, pill-box, slits on Richard as he descended the staircase with an assumption of majesty. "You have returned. Very promptly, too. I trust that your domestic matters are now in order?" He leaned forward and opened his eyes so wide as he reached the end of his question that Richard automatically stepped back a pace. "Ready for the new term, are we?" he continued. "Ready for your first intake of little, undisciplined brats? Eh?"

Richard felt that if the new intake was undisciplined, it would be his fault despite never having actually set eyes on them before.

"Just keep order," said Crompton, fumbling for his glasses. "And the rest will follow. You cannot knock sense and knowledge into undisciplined, disorderly, minds. You will come to see that. We have met the parents and their grubby offspring during your absence. I swear that they get worse year by year. You can never have seen such a rabble! But we will knock them into shape, eh?" Richard nodded and was relieved when Mr Crompton ceased being what was for him friendly and swept away along the corridor towards his study. He found Mr Pennington in the staff room, buried in exercise and textbooks.

"I understand that congratulations are the order of the day?" he said, sitting opposite. Mr Pennington beamed.

“What? Oh, yes - Mrs Hiller - Joyce - I mean Mrs Pennington. I should explain that we have agreed that she will continue to describe herself, and would wish to be referred to, as Mrs Hiller while acting in her capacity as School Secretary. It makes things simpler. A wonderful woman, wonderful! Such a catch. You must come and see us; have tea with us, one Sunday I think; before the Summer is over. You really must.” Richard had the impression that Mr Pennington was talking a little like a man who has just bought an exotic, exciting, racy, vintage sports car. The question was - would everyone be allowed a drive?

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’d love to.”

He had not been entirely fair with Dennet. Although he could readily understand the association of Mr Pennington for and with Mrs Hiller, the combination did not fit together so well when assembled the other way around. What had he to offer her? But Mr Pennington had proposed, and she had demurred. He had persisted. There had been an understanding, and she had agreed. He did not give Richard details as to what the understanding was, but Mr Pennington assured him that it was all cut and dried. “Why not next Sunday?” said the Senior Mathematics Master, all sharp and bright.

“Isn’t that a little precipitant?” asked Richard. “What about Mrs Hiller, eh, Mr Pennington?” Mr Pennington seemed to pause as if the matter raised doubts in his head. Then he suddenly became very assertive.

“Nonsense,” he exclaimed. “She’ll be delighted. Is it settled?” It was settled when Richard mentioned that he would like to talk about his ideas for pupil assessment, and Mr Pennington eagerly seized upon this as the overriding reason for inviting Richard to tea. He would inform his newly-wedded wife, though Richard had the growing impression that it would be no more than a confirmation of a matter already agreed in principle. He left the school and walked back into the town centre. Like to a magnet his eyes were drawn sideways and upwards, towards the Flat, to where Stephanie might be at that very moment. How he longed for her, to see her, to touch her. Impulsively he turned off the High Street and made his way to the entrance to the flats. There was the call button. His finger trembled above it, ready - but he did not ring for Stephanie. Alongside the number was a new card and in an unknown hand and fresh ink was printed the name “Miss R.J.Harris”. In vain he sought among the other names, but “Waterhouse” was not there. She had gone!

Dazed, he made his way back to the High Street, oblivious of collisions with passers-by. He could have been run over by a bus or car and not known anything about it. Unconsciously, he turned into the park and sat on a bench near the bandstand. Around him life went on as normal. Children were playing and shouting, mothers were calling. Someone was listening to a transistor radio and sharing its broadcast with half of the population. Farther away, the siren of a police car burst into audible life, then died away. Birds sang, bees buzzed, and the water rippled and lapped melodiously beyond the bushes at the edge of the lake. What did it mean? Had she gone? Had she just disappeared, without a word, leaving no clues as to her whereabouts? Could she do a thing like that, to him? To anyone? The shock paralysed his thoughts. He had no idea of what to do if it were true and Stephanie had disappeared without trace. And, as he sat there, he lost all sense of time. It was only as the sun slipped behind the distant rooftops and shadows stretched before him that he became aware that it was evening, and was chilly.

“Are you feeling all right, sir?” A burly policeman stood over him, peering down his peaked cap. “We’ve had you under periodic observation for sometime now, and we wondered if you were - quite well?”

Richard stood. “Thanks,” he said weakly. “I’ve just had a nasty shock - personal, you know. I had better get back to my lodgings.” It half crossed his mind to report Stephanie as a missing person, but the policeman was watching closely and suspiciously. Indeed, all the way to the park exit Richard was uncomfortable, aware of the man’s presence there, not far behind him. He did not relax until he reached the sanctuary of his room in Grove Crescent. Once safe, he took out Stephanie’s cards and slumped into a chair. He had saved and brought all of them, planning to lay them, one by one, before her as she recounted details of the cruise. Slowly he examined them meticulously, reading and rereading the short, cliché-ridden, text, desperately searching for some clue, some hint or indication of her intentions. He found none.

The messages, unless they were written in some extraordinary code, were all innocent and absolutely straightforward. Could she have had an accident? Or fallen ill? Neither would explain her abandonment of her flat and its occupation by another. It seemed hopeless. He could not bring himself to go to the restaurant. His appetite had vanished. Indeed, he wondered if he would ever eat again. Nor did he stir from the chair. He closed his eyes and drifted, reliving the few happy memories he had; on the cliffs at Eastgate; and on the Serpentine.

He awoke with a start at two o'clock in the morning, chilled and cramped, the light still on, an un-drunk, once hot, drink unaccountably placed at his side, now cold. Dazed and half-asleep, he undressed and crawled into bed where he shivered and tossed until the dawn of the new, unwelcome, day.

The Penningtons' cottage lay a little way out of the town centre in an area that was described by the locals as countryside and termed by the planners as "Green Belt". They had set up their new domestic partnership in Mr Pennington's cottage pending a decision as to what should be done about Mrs Hiller's flat. As such it might have been of interest to Richard, had it not been so large and expensive. Sunday was fine and although his spirits were low, Richard elected to walk rather than offer himself as a hostage to the intermittent and unreliable Sunday bus service. Walking allowed him to think, yet his thoughts seemed to have worn through the groove in which they had so often run recently. There was nothing new to think about, nothing at all.

The cottage amazed him. In fact he walked past it two or three times before he had the courage to open the garden gate and pass the rose covered fence which marked the boundary. It was clearly of great age, with hung-tile elevations above brickwork, surmounted by picturesque leaded dormer windows nestling in a row in its low-pitched thatched roof. At the gable ends, ornate and in Elizabethan style, stacks rose high above the ridge. Across the tiled porch a rose or two attempted to compete with an ancient wisteria which smothered the facade. The front garden was small, snug, intensely colourful, with several steps leading down from the road to the threshold. And there, in the shade of the porch, stood Mr Pennington.

"I saw you pass by," he called, beckoning Richard towards him. "Many people do that the first time. Come along in, Richard. Come and see my castle and its fair maiden."

It was a dramatic transformation, passing from the warm sunlight into the dark, cool, interior of the cottage. They stepped directly into a large room, far longer than it was broad, furnished with a three-piece suite, bookcases, several antique tables, and dominated by a huge open hearth which virtually filled one end wall, up to which were drawn two large armchairs. Two doors led from the opposite end, one situated under the long open staircase which rose along the rear flank wall and merged into the soffit of a short open gallery. From the other door the new Mrs Pennington emerged, smiling, wearing a tightly bodiced pink dress with a flared skirt which spun seductively from her hips as she walked. "Richard!" she exclaimed in her huskiest voice. "I thought we could have tea in the garden as it is such a lovely afternoon. But first I'll let Henry show you around. It's fascinating, isn't it?"

"Come along, Richard. You have seen very little so far," said Mr Pennington and hustled him towards the other door. Mrs Pennington smiled, but there was a strange element in her look that he did not fully understand. "The kitchen is through there," said Mr Pennington, indicating the door through which his wife had recently arrived. It was at this point that the overall size of the cottage became apparent. At the rear two arms extended backwards into the garden, trapping between them a protected rectangle of grass and paving, in the centre of which was a substantial ornamental pond. One of these rearwards extensions housed the kitchen and a scullery. The other, into which they walked along a short, half-glazed corridor, was devoted to Mr Pennington's study. "This is where I hide away sometimes, when I'm not wanted."

"It is a fabulous cottage," said Richard, exploring the new angles and elevations visible from the triple-aspect room.

"Oh yes, there's no doubt of that. Mrs Hiller fell in love with it at first sight. She said it was plainly too large for me to live in alone, but I felt that I could not give it up. See!" he

said, moving behind the large pedestal desk, "I can sit here and look across the patio, and see Joyce in her kitchen. Come, I'll show you upstairs." Above the lounge was a long, narrow, master-bedroom, furnished with two single beds. Over the study was a small second bedroom, while the bathroom and toilet were situated above the kitchen. "We lose a lot of floor space upstairs because of the angle of the roof, but with one large bedroom and two small ones, we are amply provided for our needs and most eventualities."

"Two small bedrooms?"

"Yes. I didn't show you the one at the front," Mr Pennington said with an air of mystery. "That's Joyce's room. I have my study, Joyce has her room. I, honestly, don't go in there unless she invites me. And that isn't at all often." They went downstairs and into the kitchen.

"Have you shown Richard the garden?" Joyce said brightly.

"No, no. I thought you might like to show him your kitchen first."

"Men are not interested in kitchens," she said fussily. "Take him into the garden!" Mr Pennington nodded almost submissively. Richard followed him out onto the dazzling, sun-drenched, patio. The garden was long and attractive, the upper third being formal, with lawns and flower beds. Then came a short section of laurels and rhododendrons which shielded the neat, vegetable garden from the cottage. It terminated in a small orchard, thick with fruit. "Of course, we have help with the garden. Quite a young fellow, too, but he's very good, as you can see."

Tea was laid under an apple-green sunshade on a white table set in the middle of the patio. Richard tried to introduce the subject of his scheme for assessment at school, but Mr Pennington waved him aside. "Later, later," he said. "Have a look at the Philadelphus. You've come too late for it to be at its best, but just take a deep breath - oh! What perfume!" It made Richard think of Mrs Hiller.

"Come and sit beside me, Richard," she said as they approached.

"Thank you, Mrs Pennington," he said.

"Here, you can call me Joyce. That's in order, isn't it, Henry?"

"If you say so, my dear." The tea made Richard's mouth water. Buttered scones, home-made strawberry jam, cream, and dainty little butterfly cakes. It was just like being at home.

"It's just like being at home," he said. Mr Pennington beamed and his wife's eyes sparkled. Richard thought how attractive she looked, her greying hair adding to her maturity. As Richard looked closely he realised that every minute detail of her toilet had been carefully and sensitively attended to. It made a brutal contrast to the self-neglect of Eileen Cross, and a subtle contrast to Stephanie's overstatements and emphasis. Oh, where was she now? He returned to studying Mrs Pennington's face. Yes, she had fine features, and there was something vaguely familiar there, reminding him of someone, a look she gave, now and then, but who? She must have been very good-looking in her youth. Even now she was no mean catch for any man. He was not at all surprised that Mr Pennington had wished to marry her. Why was Dennet?

"You don't take sugar, do you?" she said, pouring the tea.

"Sweet enough, eh, Richard?" laughed her husband. But at the sight of his wife lifting the teapot lid and peering inside, Mr Pennington frowned and rose to his feet. "I expect you want me to replenish the pot?" he said and wandered away in the direction of the kitchen without waiting for a reply.

"I expect you are wondering why we got married?" she said.

"N - no," he murmured. "You were in love, I suppose?" She pinched his thigh and smiled, squeezing her eyes tight with delight.

"Love? With Henry? Oh, goodness, no!"

"No?" he said, dumbfounded.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "When you've lived as long as I have, you look for something more than love in marriage. Love is like the living-room carpet. After a while, with use, it wears thin."

"Oh, you can't be that old," he said, feeling that a little flattery might not go amiss.

After all, she did appear to have hold of his leg.

"No," she said softly, giving him a knowing look, "love is mainly for the young. What I want from marriage is companionship. A woman can become very lonely, left alone. It's not good for your sanity. Companionship, and a stable, rock-steady, relationship. That is what Henry offers me. And I owe him it as he has done a great deal for me in my life. Not that I'm anything other than a normal, red-blooded, woman, with all her normal urges and desires, and an insatiable appetite. That's a little beyond Henry's scope to satisfy." Richard sat back, rigid in his chair. No woman had ever talked to him like that before! And she knew it. "We have an understanding," she added. "A perfect, harmonious, understanding. We have to have, else I would go frantic with frustration!" She could judge from Richard's petrified look that her husband was now returning with the teapot. She smiled, and playfully slapped Richard's knee before turning to greet the great man. "What kept you?" she purred.

"The damned kettle!" he complained. "We will have to get another one. Its too damned slow!" Tea was poured and they sat for a moment in silence. Richard felt distinctly uneasy and Mr Pennington had a worried look on his face. "Tell me, Joyce," he said in a tense voice, "will you want me to take the dog for a walk this evening?" She looked at Richard and smiled, a look which seemed to devour him.

"No," she said softly. "I don't think we should exercise him tonight. Another time, I think." Mr Pennington seemed to give a little sigh of satisfaction, while his wife adopted a posture of resignation.

"Good," he said after a further period of silent contemplation. "That means we can discuss that matter you wished to talk to me about, Richard, while Joyce sees to the dishes. And, perhaps, a little vintage port?"

Richard made a poor job of the exposition. The subject had been all but driven from his mind during the brief period he had been left alone with Mrs Pennington. Even now he was beginning to doubt that he had heard correctly, or understood. He could hear her singing softly to herself through the open kitchen window, just as if everything was normal and nothing unusual had happened. No, he must have misunderstood her. And, as if to reinforce that conclusion, it was the normal Mrs Hiller, at her school secretary best, that joined them later at the table. "The trouble is that your assessment will depend entirely on your own subjective view of the boys' capabilities."

"That can be updated and revised in the light of developments and achievement," countered Richard, rallying his scattered thoughts.

"But how will you distinguish between a failing in one of your pupils, for what ever reason, and an error in your own assessment of him? Then, will there not be a tendency for the actual results and your assessment to coincide? What do you think, Joyce?"

"I think that Richard should put his idea into practice this year, but privately, just to see if it can be made to work and whether it is of benefit to either himself or the boys he teaches. But you should keep it to yourself. Most of all, Mr Crompton should not hear of it."

"I think that is a valid point," added Mr Pennington. "Almost axiomatic in respect of anything new. But I would ask you to keep me informed of your progress. You may find that it turns out to be more trouble than it is worth. These things often do."

Richard walked slowly back to Grove Crescent, his heart fluttering as he thought of some of the aspects of the afternoon. "You must come again," Joyce had said at the gate. "Soon." As he lay on his bed, listening to the dull rumble of the printing presses, he felt disappointed. Had he really missed some kind of opportunity? Had it all been real? Then he thought of Mrs Hiller, the efficient school secretary, Mr Pennington's remarkable woman. No, he must have imagined it, misunderstood her. What an idiot he would have made of himself had he tried anything!

Still aroused and excited, he tried to focus his thoughts on Stephanie. Gradually he dozed off, and there she was, a butterfly in the woods of his childhood, being stalked by him, net poised, erect and ready. How beautiful she was as she fluttered from flower to flower, gliding, sparkling, through the sweet-smelling sunlit glades. He watched her disappear over a dense clump of brambles which he was forced to circumvent in his pursuit. She was still there, perched on a tall thistle, wings nakedly open to the rays of the sun, exposed to the

sunlight. He was there, creeping stealthily towards her. He lunged, and she was his. But in the net, writhing and clawing at him with blood-red talons was Joyce Pennington. "A most remarkable woman," said a voice in his ear. "Most remarkable!"

The dream haunted him through breakfast and all the way to school. He did not look up at Stephanie's flat, her former flat, at first, hoping to be able to pass it by. In vain did he succumb. There was no indication of life. And it was the School Secretary that he met on that flat Monday morning, in her sweater, jacket, and skirt, wearing her snake bracelet, looking prim and efficient. They greeted each other with absolute normality. The cottage and its patio lay light years away. "Thank you for yesterday," Richard said when he came upon Mr Pennington in the staff room.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"It was an unforgettable experience. Your cottage is superb."

"I'm glad that you like it. I do hope that Joyce wasn't too womanly and familiar with you. I have told her that she mustn't spoil young men." Richard frowned, but before he could comment Mr Pennington swung away, onto the topics of the new term, the curriculum, and Richard's expanded duties.

The new term started for the pupils the following day. Richard stood with Mr Pennington as they watched as the groups of boys, some happy and full of anticipation, others dour and full of dread, appeared along the road and were marshalled by Prefects through the gates into the school. Mrs Hiller had sent the normal set of school instructions to the parents, explaining when their sons were to arrive, where they were to go on arrival, but still one in three of the new boys was either found wandering about the school completely lost, or was simply late. "It does take a few days to get the discipline established," said Mr Pennington.

It was traditional for form masters to rotate, but this year there was a break from the precedent because Richard, to his delight, was asked to retain his form in their second year, it being argued that this was more sensible than exposing a relatively inexperienced master to a hoard of new, unbroken, boys. He was pleased, therefore, to be greeted by familiar faces in the classroom, and familiar names in the Register, while it was left to other among his colleagues to battle it out with Crompton's rabble. Nonetheless, he had to take the new year for mathematics. There were no absentees when Richard called the Register. Jonathan Cross was there, even the sickly Lilly was present. "We have a full house," said Richard. "That's quite remarkable. We must try to keep it that way." Lilly sneezed and Cross coughed. "I trust you all had a good holiday?"

There was a sort of murmured "yes Sir".

"And you are back, replenished, fighting fit, eager to go, ready to knuckle down?"

This prompted a chorus of groans. "I've said this before, and I'll say it again. I want this form, my form, to be an example to the whole year. And I want you to be a credit to yourselves. I don't want to have to tell your parents that you could do better! I want to be able to tell each one of them that you have worked hard and done your best. You cannot be asked for more. And remember that although school can be fun, you are here to work, to prepare yourself for the day when you go out into the wide world to earn your living, and stand on your own two feet."

"Or someone else's," said a voice. A titter ran around the classroom.

"See me after school, Jones," said Richard wearily as the assembly bell rang. He dismissed the class and the boys made their way out of the door. Only Jonathan Cross seemed to linger for a moment, but then he ran off to join the others.

It was a busy week. Richard found that he was staying late at the school, then taking work back to Grove Crescent. He was enthusiastic about his assessment scheme but he had already discovered that trying to assimilate and prepare individual data for each of two hundred boys was a daunting and time consuming task. By Saturday he had reached the point at which he wondered whether or not he should run a pilot scheme for his form alone. But would that have the effect of polarising his teaching efforts to the detriment of the others? He was approached by Cross and Martin and he had, almost reluctantly, been deliberately vague about his intentions, hinting that it was possible that he might have time to go around to

Hayes Close that next Tuesday. He positively ruled-out the possibility of a Sunday afternoon visit. He half hoped that he would receive another invitation from the Penningtons, but this did not materialise.

It was only in the evenings, when hunger caught up with him, that his thoughts turned exclusively to Stephanie. He made a couple of visits to the Chinese restaurant, but that dull, cheap, restaurant drew him like a magnet and he went there, cherishing the forlorn hope that She might be there. True, his times were irregular and at least half an hour later than that at which they would have normally met. She was not there. The customers were different. The food, transparently unappetising, was the same. By the arrival of the weekend he had lost the last vestiges of hope, and was resigned to eating elsewhere, anywhere, anywhere better.

He started scanning the local newspaper and shop windows in the hope of finding a small flat. The sight of Mr Pennington's cottage had, indeed, accelerated his wish to leave Mrs Morgan's, and in his blacker moments he relived his cherished memories of Stephanie's flat, or her former one, he had to remind himself. In addition, he discovered that with a little care, he could generate an excess of income over expenditure. Apart from placing a small sum aside every month, something better might be afforded. Dennet was highly sceptical when Richard announced his accommodation plans over a pint after Saturday morning sport.

"Sure its nice to be comfortable," said the P.E. instructor, "but it is damned expensive too, especially if you have any hidden costs. Key money alone can set you back a couple of hundred pounds!" Richard had not that kind of money. "Yes, you do need a lot of money to set yourself up properly. I'd stay where you are if you're in the least bit comfortable." Richard fetched another round. The landlord was serving at that side of the bar and he was forced to wait for a while before their favourite barmaid returned. "You've got to watch out for sharing, too. Its a favourite trick. They show you a decent room, and you say that you'll take it, but when you turn up they've moved half a dozen beds in and you're in there with a load of blokes, trying to sleep."

"I couldn't share with anyone."

"Not a bloke, at least," sipped Dennet. "I could ask Mrs O'Halleron if she knows of anything decent going, if you like?"

"Oh, no - no, thank you," Richard replied, suppressing a shudder. "I'm not in all that much of a hurry. I'll look around quietly and leisurely, I think."

"Fine," said Dennet, not seeming to be offended and emptying his glass. "The offer is there if you ever want to take it up. Another round?"

Later, they stood outside and surveyed the afternoon High Street shoppers. "Have you written to Sandra?" asked Richard as they were about to part.

"Heck, no," muttered Dennet. "Tell you what, I'll go home and write it right now!" And he was gone, leaving behind him little or no confidence in Richard that Sandra was likely to receive a communication during the coming week. Still, he could only ask.