

CHAPTER TWENTY

He was repeatedly tackled by Cross and Morris in their anxiety that he should continue to assist them with their model railway activity. Of all of Richard's decisions, this had caused him the greatest trouble. He had already been forced to abandon one of his summer resolutions. It was not so much the thought of the Tuesday evenings. It was the worry that he would be drawn into some kind of open-ended commitment towards Mrs Cross that gave him cause to hesitate. Yet, confronted by the two eager faces, it was difficult for him to give them an unqualified refusal. He did try to qualify his involvement and their faces immediately fell. They cheered up when he capitulated and told them that he would definitely call around at Hayes Close on the coming Tuesday evening. In the event he wished that he had been more resolute and had not gone for, when he arrived at No 28, Eileen opened the door and he was shaken by her appearance. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes dark and bleary due to lack of sleep, her face was haggard, thin and taut. She had visibly lost weight and her grubby black dress hung loose and awry. In his view she had fallen to a mere shadow of her former, pitiful, self. "Oh! Mr Brown," she said softly, her eyes lowered as he stood on the threshold. "You'd better come in."

The house was dirty and untidy. In the hall lay heaps of unwashed clothes. The kitchen was littered with the evidence of several meals and unwashed dishes. Clearly something was wrong. "They're in the garage," she whispered, and opened the door to the garden. He went out, but he found it hard to pay close attention to the boys' activities. He kept wondering what had happened and what he could, or should, do. After fifteen minutes, he set the boys several tasks and slipped back into the kitchen. He found Eileen sat, slumped over the table, her head resting on her hands. She did not even look up at his entrance.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, sitting opposite her. She looked at him but did not appear to understand the question. Her face was expressionless, bland, quite dead. "With you?" he added. "All this?" He looked around, then back at her.

"I'm just a little behind," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I have not been very well - not myself. I don't seem to be able to sleep properly."

"Have you been to the Doctor?" She shook her head slowly. "Is there anything I can do?" She ran her hand through her knotted hair and around the back of her neck, and appeared to attempt to rally herself.

"No," she said softly. "I don't want to bother you."

"What about your neighbours?" She shook her head again.

"They are very good, but they have their own lives to lead. I wouldn't want to bother them either. I'll be better tomorrow. I can catch up then."

"I'm not happy about leaving you like this," he said. "Are you sure that there is nothing I can do?"

"No, no," she cried, almost emphatically. "Please!" He left her and went to see how the boys were progressing. He found Jonathan coughing again, almost choking.

"What a family!" Richard thought. "What should I do?" He repeated his offer of assistance at the front door as, a little later, he prepared to leave. It was refused, but he found himself telling Mrs Cross that he would call in, the next day, to see that she was all right.

So, once again, he took up the burden of Hayes Close. He took it back with him to Grove Crescent, nursed it through the night, transported it to school, and returned with it to Hayes Close the following evening in fulfilment of his promise.

"You're Mr Brown, aren't you?" said a cockney voice from within a recess in the hedge. "Sorry, ducks. Did I give you a turn? Only I saw you last night and tried to catch you then. I said to my 'usband - aint that Mr Brown - but you 'ad gone off when I got to the gate. Then I saw you coming down the road just now. 'Didn't want to miss you again. Can we talk for a jiffy? About 'er, Mrs Cross? Would you like to pop in?"

Eileen Cross's neighbour lived in a gleaming house full of plastic veneer and gilded ornaments. "The kettle's on," she chirped. "I'm sure you'd like a cuppa. With or without? She used to be such a lovely little soul, gay, full of laughter. You look at her now! It aint right.

Someone's gotta give 'er a 'elping 'and. It aint that she's stuck up, you know, Mr Brown. But she's got her pride like the rest of us. That's what it is. Even after all the troubles she's 'ad, losing her 'usband and what, and that problem with that other woman! Now she's just fading away, wilting like a flower without water. Something's got to be done. That boy's not much 'elp, neither. He's a right sickly creature. A puff of wind would blow him away. What do you think, Mr Brown?"

"I wouldn't disagree with you, Mrs - ."

"Cor, bless me. I forgot the civilities! Mrs Howard, but Vi to you."

"How can we help? I was staggered when I saw her yesterday for the first time in several weeks. She seems to have gone completely to pieces."

"You must talk to 'er. Make 'er see sense. Tell 'er that I'll come 'round and 'elp out until she's well again. I don't mind, nor does my ol' man. I don't want nothing for it, neither. I'm sure she'll listen to you, Mr Brown. It's different coming from a man. I'd send my 'arry but 'e's no good with words, and with you being educated an' all that - ."

"I can but try," said Richard, feeling that Heracles had an easy life in comparison with his. "I'll go in and talk to her. Then I'll call back and tell you what happened, if that's acceptable?"

"Oh, feel free. My 'arry won't be back until they shut."

With a heavy heart he rung the bell at No 28. What ever he had composed and prepared to say, and had practised throughout the day, was all but demolished by Mrs Howard's intervention. But it was an outstretched hand, one that had to be grasped and held firmly. The hell of it! He was not that good with words, anyway. What experience had he of dealing with distraught women? What experience had he of women? Unwittingly he pictured Joyce Hiller. Yes, he was frightened and his mouth and throat were painfully dry when Eileen opened the door. He followed her into the kitchen, learning that Jonathan was upstairs tackling his homework. A glance around told him the worst. Nothing had changed.

"I'm sorry," he began, searching for words. "Can I talk to you? I know it is impertinent, and that you might tell me to mind my own business, or leave, or both, but I must speak. I can see that you are not well, and that you are not coping. Is there no-one who could come in and help you? Have you no close relations who could come, just while you get better?" Her face, pale and blotchy, was turned towards him. Her lips moved and quivered as she ejected the hiss-like sound,

"No!"

"There's no-one?" She shook her head. "Would you allow Mrs Howard to help you?" For a brief moment a different, defiant, light shone in her dark eyes, but it faded and the glassy, flat, stare returned.

"I don't know," she murmured so softly that he could scarcely catch her words. "I don't - care - Oh, God!" Her head fell as she collapsed forward onto her folded arms. A sense of panic seized Richard, but he fought to overcome it. His sole instinct was to go and find assistance. And the assistance arrived in the form of Mrs Howard. It was very effective. Once admitted to the house, she took immediate and absolute control. Eileen was half carried off to her bed. Jonathan was informed and fed, and Richard was enjoined in a progressive clearing, cleaning, and washing campaign.

"Soon as I saw you coming back, I said to myself- 'e's been quick. She's either chucked 'im out on 'is ear'ole, or she' thrown in the towel. Poor mite."

"Should we send for the Doctor?"

"Naw. Let 'er see if she can get a good night's rest, free from the worry of all the 'ousework and making ends meet. It can get on top of you, you know."

"You think that she's hard up?"

"Stands to reason, don't it? I can remember the struggle we 'ad when my 'arry was out of work and Arnold was still at 'ome. An' we'd the dole money. Naw, with her 'ubby gone like that, must be 'ard. She ought to take in a lodger, or something."

It was late when Richard walked back to Grove Crescent. The night was warm and under the star-speckled sky the streets were drenched in silvery moonlight. The evening had

been eventful, exhausting, and now he was very thoughtful. There was more than enough about which to think. His resolutions were on the very brink of being over-topped and totally swept away. Already he had been forced to promise that he would call around again tomorrow evening. Mrs Howard had thanked him and said that she would go around in the morning to see that Jonathan had his breakfast and went off to school at the right time. "I'll take a latch key and let myself in," she had said. "Harry won't mind." Richard was rapidly developing a feeling of awe concerning Mr Howard and pictured him as a brawny, heavily tattooed, giant with limbs like tree trunks, who spent most of his life in one pub or another, but he did not say as much.

Almost unconsciously he detoured into the High Street and paused to look up at the Flat. He could see that there was a light on. The curtains were not drawn but though he lingered, he caught sight of no-one. "That's silly," he thought. "It's the new occupant, isn't it?" He could go and ring the bell and ask the new occupant if she knew where Stephanie had gone. But the chances were that she would not. "What's the use?" he asked himself aloud. The approaching footsteps of a policeman brought him to his senses. As he passed the officer under a street lamp he recognised him as the one who had spoken to him in the park several days earlier. "Goodness," he thought. "He'll arrest me for vagrancy or loitering with intent if I don't watch it."

Then there was this idea that Eileen Cross should take in a lodger. It was an attractive idea with which to flirt, to explore and elaborate in his fantasies. He would much rather have lodged with Stephanie. And, as far as Mrs Cross was concerned, it might be a sound way to underpin her financial situation in the long term, but it had to be out of the question while her health was in jeopardy. Yet, he would not wish to leave Grove Crescent and set himself up somewhere else if there was the chance.

Jonathan Cross appeared at school normally the next morning. Richard caught him before Assembly. "How is your mother?" he asked. The boy looked slightly confused.

"She's in bed, Sir," he said. "Mrs Howard got my breakfast, just as you said."

"Good. I'll call in this evening to see that everything is all right."

"Yes sir," said Jonathan, hanging his head.

"Off with you, then!" He scampered away like a scared rabbit, while Richard followed at a more orderly pace. There had been a look of annoyance and disappointment on the boy's face when he had said that he would visit that evening. Why? Was he jealous of Richard's attentions towards his mother? What attentions? Now that Mrs Hiller had entered into his equation relative to womanhood, and Stephanie had dropped out, Eileen Cross was fairing very badly. There could be no further thought of him paying her any attention of that kind! Still, Jonathan might not exactly see it that way.

Encapsulated in the day's business was a staff meeting to discuss two of the Autumn term's social events: the School Play and the P.T.A. Annual Dance. Both embraced a particular vexed topic which, Richard learned, was hotly debated every year. This centred on the question of how to deal with, for the boys' school, the 'opposite sex'. The choice of Play continually presented a problem. It was not considered healthy to ask, or allow, the older boys to dress up as woman and try to deliver their lines in squeaky voices before a hoard of goggling younger boys and incredulous parents. Two years before they had produced an all-male version of Macbeth, amended by the Junior English Master. The Wizards had gone down rather well, but when Macbeth, who's voice had not completely broken and which sounded slightly effeminate, introduced the masculine substitute for Lady Macbeth as his 'friend', the audience had collapsed with laughter and the performance was on its knees.

So once again the question of collaboration with the girl's school was under discussion although it had to be noted that the young ladies seemed to have no compunctions about dressing up and playing the parts of men and did it rather well by all accounts. It would almost certainly be one-way traffic. Mr Crompton made it clear that he was totally opposed to the idea of borrowing young ladies. In fact he appeared to be opposed to the idea of allowing any women, regardless of age, shape, or size, into the school, as if the boys had taken the vows of some strict monastic order. There was, of course, the notable exception of Mrs Hiller,

who could not be considered as asexual by any stroke of Richard's imagination, nor by her own private admission. And Mr Crompton would permit Parents' Evenings, under strict supervision. But when it came to the Dance - .

The same question plagued this function. As it was held on the school premises it necessitated the admission of hordes of females into the school buildings and grounds. But the counter-argument ran, if it were held elsewhere, that the cost of hiring alternative premises would consume the benefit, and might even call for a subsidy from the School Fund. At it would still remain the school's responsibility. Mr Crompton was cold and clinical. As long as they realised that he would take no responsibility for the fun and games that would go on in the school grounds and any consequences that might arise. That was all. He made the inference, or suggested that others might, that these 'fun and games' were to be organised by the school, or at the very least, encouraged. But there were those who thought that any couple who were likely to indulge in the kind of activity that Mr Crompton pictured and obviously did not relish, would find somewhere more suitable and comfortable than the school grounds on a cold, damp, November evening. The meeting ended with two decisions, though one was inconclusive. The Dance would be held in the school hall, as in previous years. And the school play, what ever it was to be, would not be an all-male version of Macbeth.

That week Richard became a nightly visitor to Hayes Close. He was over awed by the energetic and resourceful Mrs Howard, though not once did he see her husband. With her effort and his words they brought Eileen Cross back to sanity, leading her, step by step, away from the edge of the ever-present black abyss that threatened to consume her. The return of inner confidence was marked and signalled by small external indications, in her features, and in a renewed interest in her appearance. By Sunday they could agree that she was approaching the stage of what passed, in her case, as normal.

"You've been wonderful," she said from the armchair in which she sat with her feet raised, resting on a cushion placed on a small table. "I can never repay you."

"It was Mrs Howard, really. I did nothing."

"Yes. She's been magnificent. I shall never be able to repay her. But you, it was you who unlocked the lock - otherwise - ." Her voice tailed away for a moment and she sank and was lost, deep in thought. "I don't know which is worst," she said as if to herself, "the knowledge or the expectation." Jonathan suddenly appeared at the French window and pressed his face against the glass, distorting his features grotesquely. It was a game, to frighten his mother, and he ran away laughing. "Oh God!" she cried, seeing him. "Its so unfair! So dreadfully unfair! And so terrible!" She burst into tears, letting her head flop lifelessly sideways on to the arm of the chair. In the same sudden movement, her feet slipped, overturning the table. The cushion rolled across the floor and came to rest at Richard's feet like a severed head.

"Eileen?" he said, tenderly. He was embarrassed and hesitated to approach. She lifted her head and looked at him through watery eyes, a saltish stream running across her face, below her ear, and down her neck.

"I'll be all right, but would you leave me? Just for a moment? Don't go away. Just leave me for a moment - alone - ." Perturbed, and feeling chastised, he went into the kitchen. Mrs Howard was at the sink.

"She's crying again," he said. "I don't think it was something I said."

"Poor dear. There's something there, something wrong, which she's not telling us. Its just like a play which we watched on the tele. Crying'll 'elp, but 'til she gets it out - . Its a real shame that sister-in-law of 'ers is so far away, though from what I remember of 'er, I don't reckon she'd be much 'elp. We'll just 'ave to wait and look after 'er ourselves, won't we Mr Brown? My 'arry doesn't mind."

Mrs Howard's Harry might not have minded, but Richard had found the week tiring and disruptive. His routine was in pieces. His resolutions were wrecked. He now ate either at all hours of the late evening or not at all. And he found himself sat well into the small hours of the morning desperately trying to keep up with marking and other school work. Once he fell asleep over a pile of exercise books. There was no longer any spare capacity in the day. Most of the spare periods he had enjoyed during the previous term were now taken up with

the teaching of the first year. Yet there was something apt and masochistically attractive in this vision he had - of plunging, the same hard, grey, mill stone dragging both he and Eileen Cross to the bottom of the pond. Why not? Stephanie was gone. She would never know. Yes, they would perish together.

"I think young Cross looks worse," said Mr Pennington. "Don't you think so?"

"Looks?" asked Richard, lifting his head from the marking. "It could be. There is an awful lot of trouble at home. It cannot but have a bad affect on the boy."

"Trouble?" Richard had to play it down. Getting involved with one of the parents sounded unethical, and even if it were not, it could bring him to the Headmaster's carpet, an experience that he would prefer to avoid. "His mother's been ill, but I understand she's getting better now. I think that Cross is disturbed by it, coming right on top of the loss of his father."

"Ah, yes," said Mr Pennington, knowingly. "Domestic problems." Richard thought that might have been a suitable cue for an invitation to visit the Penningtons again, but still it did not materialise. He had watched Mrs Hiller and had come to the conclusion that she was observing him, but her conduct towards him remained just as it had always been at school, proper and efficient. And now he could console himself with the thought that had an invitation been preferred, he would have had to refuse it on the grounds that he was, quite truly, desperately busy.

The pressure was not relieved until, in the middle of the following week, Eileen began to take up the reins of her domestic duties once more. She was nervous, timid, unsure, unsteady, and given to making strange and quixotic utterances, but it was clear that she had surfaced and found a narrow, fragile, ledge on which to stand. It seemed that they would not accompany each other to the bottom after all. "I think I have come to terms with it," she would say. Richard did not fully understand the relevance of her words and Eileen never elaborated, so he ascribed them to the loss of her late husband, the state of her domestic circumstances, and the misery of life in general. He was too embarrassed to ask; scared that any poking or prying through the shattered fragments of her tormented mind would release fresh dark thoughts and new terrors.

"She's through the worst of it," agreed Mrs Howard, and gradually they withdrew their support. Thursday was the first day since the previous Tuesday week on which Richard could risk not calling at Hayes Close. But he was frightened. It was like leaving a semi-alcoholic in charge of a crate of whisky. Yet, now he could begin to pick up the minute threads of his own life and devote his time and effort to his teaching, just as he had promised himself during the summer holiday. All else he would forget.

He did not think twice about the question of eating that evening. Pre-occupied, he had sat down and ordered his traditional meal in the High Street Restaurant before he realised his error and that he no longer ate there. He looked across, sadly, at the table at which Stephanie had once sat and tried to picture her. It was only a matter of weeks since he had seen her last, yet already her image was fading in his mind. How dreadful! And what a lot had happened in that brief period! All the things that he could have told her -except, when he thought about it, there really was little that was suitable for onward transmission. Could he have told her about Joyce Hiller? He shut his eyes and smiled. He could still picture her, and that pink dress, and -

"Richard!" said a familiar voice. "This is wonderful!" He looked up in amazement. There, in a green suit and a white blouse which had an abundance of frills and an enormous ruffle, stood his beloved. "Stephanie!" he gasped, standing awkwardly and catching his knee on the table. "Stephanie - I thought - I don't know what I thought."

"*You* thought?" she said, smiling brightly. "I thought I'd lost *you*. I could see you mornings, but you didn't come here evenings. I didn't know what to think, and there was little I could do."

"You could have come to the school."

"And asked Mrs Hiller? Why, she could have been the reason why I'd lost you!"

"You know her?" he said, confused and flustered. A strange look crossed Stephanie's face, smug, yet tinged with anger.

“Better than ever you will,” she said darkly. “It is utterly impossible for the two of us to meet under normal circumstances. I sometimes see her socially, but then we give each other as wide a berth as possible. Now, don't ask me why. It isn't at all important, anymore. Where have you been? What have you been up to? And how is your father? Goodness, there's so much to tell you!”

“Slow down, please, slow down. Where have I been? No where, actually, but I thought you had moved, so I stopped coming here every night. There seemed no point. It isn't that up-market.”

“It happens to be owned and run by my adopted Aunt.”

“Really?” he said, at once shocked and embarrassed. “That's why you come here?”

“That is why I come. She's stood by me and advised me, not like - oh, never mind. What did you mean, moved?”

“I walked around to your flat when I came back after the holidays. I forget why now - perhaps to see if you were home from your cruise. But there was a new name up by the buzzer. I simply assumed that you'd moved. Have you?” She burst into peals of laughter.

“Oh, Richard, Richard!” she cried. “It's my fault, really, but I didn't notice it, didn't even think of it!”

“Of what?” he said, suddenly wondering if she had cause to change her name.

“When I went off on the cruise, I let a friend, a girl friend, use the flat while I was away. She must have put her name there. It makes me wonder what else she got up to while I was away, sunning myself. And you thought that I'd gone away, just like that, without telling you? Oh dear, it's too funny! I ought to be angry with you for thinking so badly of me, but I can't! It's just too funny!”

Although Stephanie's hilarity reduced after a few minutes with her complaining that it was not good for her complexion, she continued to snigger on and off for the rest of that evening. It acted as a perfect foil to any pointed questions he might have asked on the subject of the cruise. And, anyway, he was too overjoyed at their reunion to raise any thing that might be in the least contentious.

“This really calls for a celebration,” Richard declared, later. “Let's go and have a drink.” Stephanie paused and thought for a moment.

“No,” she said calmly. “We won't do that, not now. It is late, and a real celebration calls for careful planning if it is to count for anything. It is Thursday. Would you like to come and dine with me, in my flat, tomorrow? As my guest? I am quite an accomplished cook, you know. Or perhaps you do not know, but it is time that you found out.” Richard's mouth fell open with delight. He did not have to voice his answer. “Come at eight, then,” she said softly, “for dinner, a drink, and a social evening. No less, and no more. Until tomorrow?”

It was only as he reached the front door in Grove Crescent that he remembered that he had promised to call around to Hayes Close on Friday evening. Still, he could submit his apologies, could he not? Which he did. He made certain of them reaching Eileen by taking the trouble to call around straight after school, explaining that he was unable to stop because he had to go out again that evening, quite early.

“That is a shame,” Eileen said. “I had been looking forward to your coming. Will you be calling 'round over the weekend?” He was poised to answer 'yes', but he thought of Stephanie, and the school work.

“I'd like to,” he responded, “but I will have a lot of school work to catch up on.” She looked disappointed and forlorn.

“I'm sorry. I have taken up too much of your time. It is very wrong and selfish of me, and exceedingly generous of you, except - .” Perhaps it was because Mrs Howard had made the suggestion and put the idea into his head, but he was certain that she had come to the brink of confiding something in him, then drawn back. One of these days he would seize her and shake it from her.

“You are feeling much better?” he asked.

“Oh, yes!”

“And Mrs Howard?” Eileen looked at him plaintively.

“How do I ask her to stop? Could you?”

“Let me see if I can get around on Sunday morning. We'll talk about it then.” He had wanted it to sound conditional, but she took it as affirmative and definite. There was no escape.

“Until Sunday, then” she whispered as they parted at the door.

Richard had spent most of that Friday in a state of elation and anticipation, a fact which did not pass un-noticed. Indeed, he was a little surprised by the number of comments he received on the matter. Obviously he was watched very closely. “You have been a little grumpy this week,” said Dennet.

“Have I?” queried Richard, feeling almost pleased about it. He did not think that the image of a young, happy, light-hearted fellow suited either a school master or the way he had felt up until Thursday evening.

“Very!” commented Dennet, sourly. “And if you want to ask again, I have not, but I will.”

“Will what?”

“Write to Sandra.”

“Oh? Oh, yes! Fine!” said Richard, assuming that he had taken Dennet to task over his failure sometime earlier in the week.

“I'm going to see my little, old, mother tomorrow afternoon,” said Dennet, a little brighter. “Want to come?” It mystified Richard why Dennet should persist in asking him if he would like to go and meet his mother. Perhaps Dennet saw it as a way of paying him back for the visit to Eastgate, like for like, or nearly so. And there was something intriguing about Dennet having an old mother. The arithmetic did not altogether add up.

“You keep on calling her old, Dennet. How old?”

“Oh, positively ancient. Seventies, eighties, but you wouldn't believe it. You'll see when you meet her. She's as alert as a sixteen year old - and a damned sight more than some!”

“Seventies, eighties?” questioned Richard, frowning.

“I was something of a late child. A bit of a surprise.”

“I bet you were.”

“Like to come?”

“I'm sorry, Dennet. I must catch up with my school work. Next time, maybe?” Dennet gave him a sceptical look and stalked away, leaving Richard with a distinct feeling of *deja-vu*. It did seem that he could have any number of blank, boring, mind-numbing, weekends, then every possible social occasion would arise at once. It needed only Mr Pennington to invite him to tea and the circle would be complete. He was almost pleased when no invitation came.

His early visit to Hayes Close left him with more than enough time to return to Mrs Morgan's, where he was sure to find the bathroom empty, change, and then walk to Stephanie's flat at a casual and relaxed pace. His heart missed a beat when he suddenly wondered if she had said seven-thirty, but he convinced himself that it had been eight. He had another shock when he looked out of the window and spotted the figures of Jonathan Cross and Colin Martin standing at the end of the platform. He did not want to meet them, or even be seen by them. It was as if he was ashamed of his duplicity and intended destination. The fears were foolish as the chances of his leaving the house and them leaving the station at the same time were so remote as to be disregarded. But he had to look again. When he did, they were gone.