

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Richard was late down to breakfast and was delayed further by the discovery of two letters which had arrived in the first post and which were waiting for him in the hall. As he plucked them from the board, Mr Frobisher passed by and whispered in his ear, "buy into caterpillars. They're going to take off eventually." The comment had scant relevance for Richard and before he could seek clarification, the broker had gone out of the front door. The letters were both from Eastgate. One came from Sandra, imploring him to speak to Dennet on her behalf, having taken up the pen herself in case her mother's letters did not carry sufficient weight. In the other, his mother apologised for the need for Sandra to write - obviously, she had not been explicit. Richard decided he would write home that weekend and explain that his friend was very good-natured, but was not an able man of letters. He had a clear weekend before him, except for the commitment to go to Hayes Close on the Sunday and, apart from meals and natural breaks, and the letters home, of course, he could devote himself to school work. He had excused himself from helping at the Saturday games period. There were no distractions. Yet he could not concentrate. As he sat at the small table, alone in his high-perched room, his mind kept returning to the sensations of joy and terror he had experienced the night before. He had no doubt that the evening had been one of great significance yet, like on so many occasions with Stephanie, it seemed to pose more questions than it answered.

Was she really in love with him? Had the evening concluded with a tacit acceptance of his proposal of marriage? It was true that she had not exactly said 'yes', but had that not been in her mind, unspoken? Why else would she have asked him to her flat for dinner in the first place? But there was this feeling of disquiet, a strange unease, he had begun to feel when he thought of her moral observations, her secrecy, the flat itself, and her mysterious occupation. Not that he entertained the thought for one moment that she might do anything immoral! Was the air of secrecy just a ploy to intrigue, captivate, and capture him, just as her gentle hint of immorality was a lure? He also felt a sensation of guilt. There had been moments, which he recognised more fully now that he looked back on the evening, when she appeared to have read his thoughts concerning Mrs Hiller, as if she could see into his very soul. He had done nothing of which he felt ashamed, but - . Oh, she was so delectable, whatever the truth of the matter, and he loved her to distraction! If this was the present, what was left for the future to hold?

Step by step, erratically, and not without error, he marked the school work. It was quite improper to make mistakes in marking, making corrections to corrections as it were. Perhaps the boys would not notice. Whether or not he liked the thought, his Sunday morning visit to Hayes Close was an unavoidable duty. One problem did correct itself, however, without the sacrifice of too much time or effort on his part. At the garden gate as he approached stood the redoubtable Mrs Howard. "Wanted a quick word with you, ducks," she said, seeming to look around furtively.

"How is she?" he said, fearing the news of a relapse.

"Fine! That's what I wanted to tell you. I think she's ready to stand on her own two feet again."

"Until the next time," Richard thought.

"I'll keep a watch out, just in case. But I don't think there's no need for me to go in regular like."

"Thank you, Mrs Howard. You've been magnificent. I don't know how your husband has put up with all of it."

"'arry? My 'arry? Lor, I don't think he noticed nothing different! 'e's never 'ome. 'e's down the pub now."

"Goodness," thought Richard, "the man must be an alcoholic."

Eileen did look better. Her face had filled out slightly and her skin had a faint suggestion of colour, but she still struck him as looking untidy and drab. "I don't know what I would have done without you and Mrs Howard. If you hadn't been here, goodness knows what would have happened. Thank you, Mr Brown. I wanted to say that before you went, or

went out to the railway. They're out there now. And now I've said it!"

"You have no relatives near by? I think I've asked you before."

"I was an only child. There's Owen's sister, Megan, but she lives in North Wales. No, there's no-one really. I wish that there was." He went off to see what the boys were doing. The railway was now operational and working. They were considering the problems of landscaping.

"We'd never have done it without you, Sir," said Jonathan.

"You will continue to call on us, won't you, even if it is only occasionally?" said Eileen anxiously when he returned from the garden. Although he talked about being busy with that year's work, he could not bring himself to say "no". The outcome was that the Tuesday evening visits were reinstated with more or less mutual consent.

As half term approached, his life developed into a more settled, pleasant, routine. Gradually he learned how to organise the week and cope with the essential school work in a progressively decreasing time. With some reluctance he abandoned all hope of applying his system of blanket assessment to the whole year and concentrated his attention on its application to Form 2A alone, where he established a pattern of specific homework followed by regular, related, tests. Even in those first weeks he could detect patterns and trends in the work of individual pupils. One trend in particular, more pronounced than the others, annoyed him. Jonathan Cross's work was clearly deteriorating. His homework was careless and silly elementary errors were creeping into the answers he submitted in the tests. Richard started to watch him closely in class and realised that the boy was day-dreaming and losing his concentration. Could it be the attraction of the model railway? He sought the opinion of the other teachers who took Form 2A and discovered that there was a consensus. The boy's application and standard of work were slipping.

He continued to meet Stephanie at the restaurant several evenings a week and developed the habit of walking back with her to the main entrance to the flats. Their conversations ranged over an enormous variety of topics, but it never again touched on the disturbing philosophy she had pronounced on that special evening. Dining with her had one lasting effect on Richard. At one time he had never been able to imagine Stephanie in a domestic setting. Now there was no doubt, no question of her ability to cook and manage a house. Why should she not make a more than suitable wife for a teacher? For him? Yet, he hung back from pressing the question and proposing again. The reasons were complex and, to a degree, beyond his rational comprehension. One he did clearly understand. He would never be able to maintain her in her life style on his miserable salary.

He found that he re-examined and changed other of his attitudes. He would now meet Joyce Hiller and wonder how she could have appeared to him, even momentarily, attractive and alluring. Now she seemed to be just another middle aged woman who was, indeed, old enough to be his mother. An invitation to the Penningtons' might have come as an embarrassment. Fortunately, none came. Dennet, however, seemed to be off-hand and elusive, even secretive.

"What are you up to, Dennet?" said Richard one afternoon when he encountered the PE teacher in the common room. "I have hardly seen you in weeks and I do have a sister who makes my life misery because you are too lazy to put pen to paper."

"Busy," ejaculated Dennet, aggressively. "Too busy! Anyway, you can talk. I haven't seen you around many Saturday mornings this term. What's happened to you?"

"I can be busy too!" laughed Richard. "I have been! Shall we call a truce? You write to Sandra, and I'll come along and watch you kick a football on Saturdays."

"Oh, all right then," said Dennet grudgingly, "but I've no idea what to write."

"You'll think of something."

"Have you found your new lodgings yet?" asked Dennet later.

"No. I've thought about it and I think I have changed my mind."

"You'll stay where you are?"

"No, not quite that. I think I'll save up and try and buy something of my own."

"Goodness! That will require a fortune, just to raise the deposit. What ever gave you that idea?" Richard could not launch into an explanation concerning his plans for a life with

Stephanie somewhere other than in her flat, or in his room at Mrs Morgan's. He did not relish the thought of living in a house or flat provided by his wife. It was up to him to provide the family home, the Englishman's Castle.

"Oh," he said, "I saw Penningtons' cottage. That was enough."

"You've been to Penningtons'?" asked Dennet, suddenly showing great interest.

"Yes."

"Did he take the dog for a walk?"

"No?"

"Good! That's all right, then. Nasty, savage brute. You didn't see it?"

"No," repeated Richard, puzzled.

"That's all right, then," repeated Dennet, and he walked away.

Richard did not only detect a deterioration in Jonathan's work. As the Autumn approached and Eileen grew stronger in herself, the boy appeared to become increasingly weak, pale, and emaciated, although he undoubtedly grew, thin and lanky. At times a lethargy seemed to envelope him, which angered Richard. On other occasions Richard came close to shaking him to rouse him from his trance-like day-dreams. And if this angered Richard, it made Mr Crompton furious. The Deputy Headmaster took a savage delight in chasing the boy around the school, never missing an opportunity to shout at him or, if he was within arm's length, give him a hearty, reviving, thump. "Perhaps it is his growth?" said Mr Pennington. "Is he outstripping his strength? It happens, you know."

Richard did know that by some curious trick of fate, as the model railway grew, Jonathan waned. And, as much as it concerned him, Richard could not bring himself to raise the subject with Eileen. Ever since that day when she had burst, inexplicably, into tears at the sight of her son through the French window, he had treated the subject as a sort of taboo. She must have seen the deterioration, he reassured himself. She must know. The wedding photograph on the top of the piano in the lounge at Hayes Close held a strong and strange fascination for him and he would take it down and study it when ever the opportunity presented itself. Eileen looked very pretty, beautiful even in a delicate and intricate way. He studied the young bridesmaid. She was then, perhaps, in her late teens? And who were the few guests ranged behind? Eileen had said that she had no relatives, and that Owen had only the sister living in North Wales. Who were they? Workmates, friends, acquaintances?

"That does seem a long time ago," said Eileen, sitting at his side and smiling at his embarrassment when she caught him one evening. "Oh such hopes, plans and ambitions! What was going to be done to this house. You have them when you start off. Then they turn out to be mere castles of sand. It was a happy day, though."

"You looked very nice. And isn't she pretty?"

"Yes," said Eileen wistfully, taking the photograph from him. "She was always good-looking as a child and became a beautiful woman, though wicked and corrupt. You wouldn't believe, would you, that she was only just sixteen then? To look at her butter wouldn't - !" She pointed to a face among the guests.

"Wicked and corrupt?" thought Richard looking closely. "Can we be talking about the same person?"

"We were, I suppose, friends then," said Eileen curtly. "But we do not even talk to each other now."

"I suppose, that you won't come with me to the school dance?" he said, eager to divert the conversation in a different direction and colouring.

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know. Will you?" She looked at him doubtfully. "It will do you good," he said, warming with enthusiasm. "You ought to go out more. It would do you good. Otherwise you are just going to vegetate here."

"I have not been to a dance for such a long time," she murmured to herself. "I did take lessons, once."

"Why not come, then. I can easily get tickets."

"Are you really saying that you'll take me?" she said, suddenly brighter.

“Yes,” he said positively, though he felt a tinge of alarm at his apparent treachery. What was it that Stephanie had said? He was confident that she would not accept an invitation to the dance, and she did say that she did not mind what he did. And, anyway, what would be the harm in it?

“Very well,” she said, to his utter delight. “I’ll ask Mrs Howard if she’ll come in and look after Jonathan.” Walking home he realised that he was surprised that her acceptance had cheered him. Was it because it was an achievement in the “cheer up Mrs Cross campaign”? Or was there something deeper, personal, and a little more serious? And if it was so, was it dangerous?

He travelled to Eastgate at half term. “Your father is a bit grumpy,” said his mother by way of greeting. “I don’t think it has anything to do with you. He’s been like it for a couple of weeks and I think it has something to do with the business. He hasn’t said much about it, not to me, at least, which is unusual.” Richard found his father in his customary place, shunting.

“Trouble at Mill?” he asked.

“We’ve got this office renovation contract for the council. Fortunately it’s only a small one,” Mr Brown grumbled. “You remember that the risk of defective timber and plaster was always one down to the council. That’s where we made all our money. Well, they’ve brought in some wiz-kid of a quantity surveyor who’s rewritten the contract to the effect that we have to include for all making good and replacement of defective materials. What happens? It becomes an enormous risk item, but we all price it sensibly, and the price of tenders returned goes up. The council comment on this, so he, this clever dick, brings in some firm of cowboys from London. No-one knows that they’re on the list, and they, of course, undercut everyone else by such an enormous margin that the Ways and Means Committee insist on a re-tender. So, we re-tender, and I sharpen the pencil, the cowboys, no doubt being fed information by our friend, bring up their price, and suddenly we’re the lowest. Had it been a normal job, everything would have been fine. At the very least we would have covered our costs. But as we’ve revealed, we’ve exposed large areas of defective brickwork, which he says has to be underpinned, cut out and renewed at no extra cost! At my cost! Oh, not without a big argument about what could or could not have reasonably been foreseen by an experienced contractor and all that claptrap. Do you know what he then does? He goes through all the earlier jobs he can lay his hands on and takes great delight in trotting out graphs and statistics to show that the condition of this building is no better or worse than most of the renovations done in the last ten years!”

“But surely you’ve got sufficient influence?”

“Yes, I’ve plenty of influence. I can apply all kinds of pressure and leverage. But you have to be sure that there’s no danger of breaking the lever in the process. I’ll win in the long run, I’m sure of that. But in the interim, it just makes me mad!”

“And you are not supposed to get excited.”

“I know! I keep telling myself that. I keep getting told that, which doesn’t help.”

“Is there anything that I can do while I’m down here?” For just a moment his father looked as if he was going to implore him to come and take over the running of the business, to remove the burden from his shoulders, to help fight young blood with young blood, but he shook his head and Richard felt a surge of relief.

“I’ve received a letter from Dennet at last!” Sandra announced triumphantly. “Except it is such an odd one. Look!”

“I shouldn’t read your letters,” Richard laughed.

“You can read this one. Here!” Richard took the document. The writing was very untidy, barely legible. It looked as if the letter had been written while Dennet was out, jogging.

It began conventionally enough with the words “Dear Sandra”. Then followed: “Richard has asked me to write to you”. At this point something had been crossed out, and it then continued: “As I am pretty hopeless at finding words to put down on paper, I thought you might be interested in the following facts.” At this point there were further crossing-outs

before the letter restarted with: "Did you know that the Schools Class locomotive was the most powerful of its type in the World at its date of introduction?" The letter continued in the same vein with curious items of information on Ames, Bradman and Hutton, the Delahaye car, famous racehorses, Boxers, Pitt the Younger, and the Royal Dragoons.

"It is very original," said Richard weakly. It was not really true. It was obvious to him, at least, that Dennet had plundered his cigarette card albums.

"Isn't it strange?" asked Sandra. "Do you think he knows all these things, or has bought an encyclopaedia from a man at the door?"

"I don't know," lied Richard. "Somehow I don't think that it has come out of an encyclopaedia. At least he's written."

"Oh yes," breathed Sandra, and pressed the letter to her breast.

"That was an original type of letter you sent to Sandra, or perhaps I should say that it wasn't," said Richard when he next saw Dennet.

"Well, you did say write anything. I did. And, how about coming to see my Mum?"

"I didn't say write anything! I said you'd think of something. And don't change the subject."

"I did think of something. And I'm not changing the subject. Sandra's letter is your subject. My Mum is mine. How about it?"

"When?"

"This Saturday."

"If it will make you happy."

"I don't know if it will do that, but I would like you to come." The visit to Dennet's mother had assumed the vector and dimension of both the Force of Destiny and Nemesis. Richard was convinced that if he did not go, and lay this particular ghost to rest, Dennet would be waiting for him in the next life armed with the self same invitation. "Are you going to the school dance?" said Dennet as they walked down the mean road in Willesden, past clusters of poor shops and decaying houses.

"Yes. I have a confession to make. I'm taking Mrs Cross."

"Mrs Cross? Its getting serious, is it?"

"No its not," said Richard defensively. "I've no-one else to take and it should cheer her up a bit. The poor woman's had such a terrible time. She deserves a change."

"But what about this - Stephanie, wasn't it?"

"She cannot go, for personal reasons."

"Uh, hum," muttered Dennet with a strange stress and tone which made Richard feel he ought to ask a question, if only he could think of what it ought to be. "Here we are," said Dennet. They had arrived outside a drab, paint-peeling, Estate Agent's office which had a grubby window displaying faded photographs which depicted equally drab, indecorous, squalid-looking abodes.

"I thought you said that your mother lived over a fish and chip shop," complained Richard. "Or was it an off-licence?"

"Domestic licence," rejoined Dennet. "There's the Indian Restaurant next door if that will serve your purpose. This way." He turned into a narrow, noxious, dustbin-lined passage, which ran between the Estate Agents and the Restaurant, and proceeded through an unlocked door into a large hallway, dimly lit by a discoloured, octagonal, window high above their heads. Richard began to form a notion as to why Dennet found his own flat so acceptable. "We go up the stairs," Dennet said, leading the way. The wooden staircase was dusty and creaked loudly in protest at their weight. They reached a landing off of which radiated a number of dark corridors. "This way," breathed Dennet, starting along one. After a dozen paces he turned to his right and started to climb a further, unlit, narrow twisting staircase, the entrance to which was dark enough to guarantee its non-discovery by all except the initiated. "Keep close behind me," called Dennet. "I wouldn't want to lose you." Suddenly they emerged through a door into blinding daylight on a square, flat, chimney-stacked roof. "We're here," he announced. "Actually, this is the back way in. We could have come in by the front way, but there's some kind of dispute with some of the other tenants over access, and Mum

doesn't like to make too much of a fuss. Come along in and meet her." He opened another door, set half in a wall and half in the roof, and Richard was guided into a small, cramped, kitchen. "Mum? We're here!" Dennet called.

A small, sharp-eyed, wrinkled woman, with her hair tied up behind her head in an untidy grey bun, emerged from the interior. "Oh, you've brought a guest," Mrs Dennet exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. "How delightful!"

"This is Mr Brown," Dennet said in a louder and more ponderous voice than normal. "He is the math-e-ma-ti-cian I told you about."

"There's no need to shout at me!" she said crossly and turned to Richard. "He has this strange notion that all old people are deaf. He shouts at me and my friends. They find it unpleasant. I don't like it, but he's a good boy and I don't complain often. How d'you do, Mr Brown?"

"I'm fine, and I'm pleased to meet you," said Richard with a slight bow.

"There! I heard that perfectly. I said that there is no need to shout at me. Would you like to come through?" She gestured towards the inner door and Dennet waved his arm a little impatiently. Richard followed Mrs Dennet into her living room.

"You must make allowances for, and excuse, the state of the room. When you reach my age, you no longer have even the expectation of receiving special visitors, and you find you have no appearances to keep up. Its a clutter, I know. Just move something; sit anywhere."

The room was large and dim, with a dark wall paper of nondescript, long-forgotten, colours and an indistinct pattern. Mrs Dennet's reference to clutter was borne out by the fact that every available surface that approached being horizontal, including such areas of the floor that conformed to that description, was home to an object of one kind or another. However, to Richard's eye, two types appeared to be predominate. First, there were numbers of glass-topped trays full of exotic butterflies, looking as if some enormous global entomological collection had been distributed around the large room. Secondly, Richard found himself up to his knees in piles of sheet music, thousands of copies, of all kinds and representing a wide range of music and composers.

"I spent all day moving things around. Sometimes half the night, too," she said. "But it seems to make no difference. It looks just as untidy when I've finish as when I started. I don't think the room is really large enough, do you, Mr Brown?"

"If you had a larger room," interrupted Dennet in his loud voice, "you'd only want to collect more, wouldn't you?" Her eyes lit up.

"I expect I would. But, then, there's no question of my moving. What do you think of my butterflies, Mr Brown? Are they not beautiful? I love to just sit here and look at them. I do that for hours. And they're all labelled. Look! Here's their Latin names."

"You collect these?"

"It is really Mr Micklewright."

"Yes?" said Richard, looking puzzled.

"He works for the Estate Agent as a valuer. He handles cases of probate. Its sad, really. All these people die and they have no kin. Mr Micklewright values the probate and arranges for the disposal of their belongings. Things like these, no-one seems to want. They would just go on a bonfire, or to the rubbish tip at Neasden, if I did not take them in, which would be criminal. Think of it, Mr Brown. Books people will take, but sheet music? Some of it is ever so old. Some still has uncut pages. Look, here's a first edition of Tannhauser. And the butterflies, poor little things. It may have been wrong to kill them in the first place, but to now burn them." She shuddered. "I just could not permit that kind of thing to happen."

"Sometimes he finds the odd cigarette card, too," added Dennet.

"Yes," wheezed Mrs Dennet. "My beefy, grown up, boy collects cigarette cards, and he would defend them with his life!"

"I would too!"

"They were all the rage when I was a girl." She paused for a moment, lost in a maze of nostalgia. Then she was back in the present, alert and bright-eyed. "I am forgetting myself. Tea? And cakes? Bread and butter, and honey? That used to be his favourite when he was a

boy. Made him grow up big, didn't it? And strong."

Mum! You're embarrassing me!"

"Well, I'll be embarrassed if you don't do me a tiny favour and run along the road to get some tea. I'm all but out and I don't think Mr Brown ought to be scrimped. Not as he is a special visitor. There's a good boy."

She cocked her head on one side and gave her son a look which, almost certainly, had not changed materially since the days when he wore short trousers. "He's a good boy," she said when Dennet had gone. "He's all that I have left. All the others are dead and gone. But he looks after me. He supports me, did you know?"

"No, I didn't."

"Oh yes. He pays the rent and rates, and insists on giving me an allowance for food and necessities. I wish he didn't. I don't spend it. I can get along without it, but he insists. I think it leaves him short, and he'll be wanting to get married one of these days. It takes every penny you can raise. So I save it for him. I've managed to put aside quite a little nest-egg for him. He'll get it all when I go. He deserves it." She paused for a moment, hovering near the kitchen door as if she was uncertain about going out and leaving him alone. "You are Susan's brother?" she said suddenly.

"No, Sandra's."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully. "I'll put the kettle on."

"You're not married, are you, Mr Brown," Mrs Dennet asked as they sat around a partly cleared table and she poured the teas.

"No."

"Are you courting, then?" she added, smiling. He glanced at Dennet who was licking honey from his fingers.

"Not really," he answered. Her eyes narrowed.

"But there's someone special, isn't there?"

"I suppose there is," he admitted, reluctantly.

"I knew it! I can always tell. I could see it in him, too."

"Mother," interrupted Dennet. "You are being indiscreet."

Mrs Dennet scowled. "It's a great institution, marriage, if you make the right choice and you're both willing to work at it. I never regretted a moment of it, did I? The best years of my life! And don't leave it too late, either." Richard listened and nodded in the right places, but he felt that her comments were directed more at her son than at him. Perhaps Dennet had heard it all before. After his initial interruption, he took little notice and concentrated on finishing off the jar of honey, being rewarded by being called "a pig" by his mother.

"Well, then. What did you think of my mother?" asked Dennet as they walked down the curving hill, back towards the station.

"She does seem to be very sprightly for her age."

"I told you she was!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "She has this view that the old need to mix with the young in order to themselves stay young. I'd never get her to go into a old peoples' home. I think it would kill her. Or she'd kill me!"

"All that music, though," said Richard, almost to himself. "And, excuse me if I'm wrong, but I didn't see any musical instruments."

Dennet laughed. "No. You wouldn't. She cannot play or read it. Probably wouldn't like most of it if she heard it. She just likes to collect it. And it's harmless enough, isn't it? There might even be some latent social good in it."