

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was a few days later when an event occurred which was to dramatically change the whole course of Richard's life. Although in itself it was serious and caused him a great deal of concern, he did not suspect for one moment that it was likely to be of lasting personal importance or that it would grow so much in significance. Nature provides many parallels. Odd, small, stones may precipitate avalanches. Slight tremors may be the precursors of momentous earthquakes. Gentle rivulets merge together to form the raging, dam-topping, torrents. The softest of breezes can unite and conspire to form the most dreadful of storms. Who knows what other phenomena pass unnoticed by those who innocently do not link their occurrence with the ultimate catastrophe that overtakes them ages afterwards? Richard had set the boys of Form 2A some written work in order to keep them quiet and with their little heads down while he marked their homework. A glare from him now and then had sufficed to still the merest whisper until, near the end of the period, one of the boys thrust up his hand and announced, in a mixture of awe and unwarranted glee, that Jonathan Cross appeared to be ill.

A sudden pain stabbed at Richard's heart, a mingling of unknown fear and guilt. Because of the set work and the absence of oral activity in the class, a sick boy might easily pass un-noticed for quite a time. How long had the fact been obvious? Jonathan Cross sat motionless, almost as if he was in a deep trance, his head inclined, his mouth slightly open, his face turned an ashen grey. The pen had slipped from his grasp and rolled down the surface of the desk into his lap, a motion which had alerted the nearest boy. Richard's first instinct was to go for assistance. Commanding the class to utter silence and the continuation of their work, he went out into the corridor. As a babble of excitement broke out behind him, he saw Mr Smithson approaching, hurrying to his next Latin period.

Jonathan flinched as the Latin master placed his hand on his neck and felt for his pulse. "I have no idea what it may be," he hissed to Richard, "but we had better send him home. Someone will have to go with him. We can get his address from Mrs Hiller."

"I know where he lives," said Richard automatically.

"Good! You can take him. You can use my car. Here are the keys. Now, do you think you can walk, Cross?"

"I think so, sir," said the boy in a strained voice. "Only, I don't feel very well."

"I'll carry him," said Richard stoutly. When he lifted the boy he was horrified to find how little Jonathan weighed. The class was left temporarily in the care of the Form prefect, and they made their way to the car park.

"What is it?" exclaimed Mrs Hiller as they met her outside her office.

"I don't know," said Mr Smithson. "It could be a form of epilepsy, or diabetes; anything! Brown is going to take him home as he knows the address. Can you arrange for someone to take over his class?"

"Do you want me to come with you?" she called after Richard. But he was already out of earshot.

"Mr Brown! Richard! I didn't expect a visit at this time of day," said Eileen when she opened the door.

"It's Jonathan," he stammered. "He's in the car!" She appeared to stagger backwards into the hallway as if struck by an invisible blow, and clutched the edge of the door for support.

"He's.....?" she began.

"He's not very well. I brought him home in Mr Smithson's car. I'll carry him in."

Her mouth dropped open as she nodded dumbly. "Take him straight up to his bedroom," she whispered. "Can you manage?"

"It is no trouble," called Richard from the gate. "He's as light as a feather!"

"Oh!" she breathed. Nervous and brimming with dread, she watched Richard carry her only son into the house and up the stairs.

"We should call the doctor?" he asked over his shoulder as she followed him. Eileen

nodded as she began to massage the inflexible limbs.

"I'll do that as soon as I get him settled. I expect you'll be wanting to get back to the school?" He did not reply, but lingered while she administered to the sick boy, comforting him with soothing maternal words as she mopped his brow.

"I ought to," he said after a while. "If only to return Mr Smithson's car." He paused in the hallway. "I am worried about having to leave you like this. There's nothing I can do?" Her dark eyes looked up at his, nervously searching. For not the first time ever, but the first time since many weeks, he felt a surge of passion and emotion. Almost unconsciously he placed his hands on her forearms. She did not resist. "You will be all right once I've left you alone?"

"I will be all right," she said firmly, then looked away as if ashamed to look him fully in the face. "I have been expecting it."

"Expecting? "

"Yes. For many weeks now, I have known. I have come to expect it. The anticipation, the uncertainty, it was dreadful. To watch him go off to school every morning, not knowing if - ."

"I don't understand." Her eyes, tortured by some deep inner pain, met his again.

"It is terminal," she said lowly. "He will not leave his room again - alive." Her small, plump, body seemed to sag as if exhausted by the energy-sapping effort needed to make the whispered statement. At last! She had said it! "He does not know," she continued. "No-one else knows, other than the doctor."

"How on earth can you be so certain?" gasped Richard, horrified.

"Sssshhhh. You will disturb him. The doctor says that there is no hope. It could take weeks, even months, but there is no known cure or treatment."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," she said softly. "You've been so good and kind to me. And I can cope now, now that the uncertainty is removed. Now that I know what I am dealing with. I just have to sit and wait, and be sure that I am there when he needs me, and with him at the end. I couldn't bear to think that he could slip out of this rotten life all alone."

Ashen and trembling, Richard left her, vowing to return to Hayes Close immediately after school. Although he found it impossible to believe her words, back at Rochester House he could not keep the matter to himself and reported the conversation exactly as it had happened, verbatim. He found that he had little appetite for work. Mr Crompton was cruelly sceptical, but Mr Pennington expressed sympathy and offered advice. "It comes as a shock, but you must learn to leave it at that. They are rare, but these incidents do happen. You will lose other boys at times in your career. We all do. They all matter, but you must avoid shouldering the distress it causes you. It has to be shrugged off, and you must carry on as if nothing had happened. If you become emotionally involved, your work will suffer, you will undoubtedly suffer and, possibly, worse."

Richard was grateful for the words and the sparse comfort they brought. Yet they were easily said, easily heard, too likely to be easily forgotten, and incredibly hard to put into practice. Back in the classroom, the empty desk caught his attention and taunted him, yet he could not think of reorganising the seating in order to fill it. If he did that, he had accepted that all hope was lost.

"There is no hope," Eileen told him that evening.

"How can you say that, Eileen?" he implored.

"The doctor says it. I know it. Life has taught me. Hope is an illusion. One might just as well built castles in the air. Its all in vain, and it would be wrong and wickedly unkind of you to attempt to corrupt me into believing otherwise." It was a damning and emphatic statement and one which Richard was not able to accept, and quite prepared to contradict.

He went to see Jonathan in his room, longed to be able to cheer him up by telling him that he would soon be better, yet he was forced to bite back his words with Eileen's bitter utterance still ringing in his ears. If there was no hope, what, then, was there? It was easy for Mr Pennington to tell him not to become emotionally involved. It was too late for that advice. The plain fact, as Richard now saw it, was that he was emotionally involved, and had been all

the time to a greater extent than he had ever suspected. As he sat in the darkening kitchen it seemed that it was he who had taken the blow and now felt wretched and aggrieved, while Eileen appeared to be calm and resolute. She spoke again of her duty, to stay close to her invalid son, to be there, to attend to his every need, until the end. That was her duty. She saw it clearly. What, he asked himself, was his? "How can you be so sure?" he repeated.

"Because I know," she said firmly.

"But can you not get a second opinion? Surely somewhere there is someone who can help, can cure him?"

"And raise false hope in me? No, I've had the second opinion. It was learned, too. It was private, and it absorbed what little un-entailed savings I had, but it produced exactly the same diagnosis. His condition is incurable. He doesn't know it, but it is a fact. I am sure because I know!"

Richard returned to his lodgings, angry with life, angry with the world, angry with medical practice and science that could allow a bright young being to wilt and fall by the wayside. His emotions were, once again, in a turmoil as he realised that the strange morbid magnetism of Hayes Close had grown stronger, and that he would now find it increasingly difficult to break free. In the light of the suffering there, worldly matters, such as Stephanie's flat, paled into irrelevance and insignificance.

It was the signal for the start of a new austere pattern in his life. Not just the knowledge, but a visit to Jonathan's room endowed him with a new inescapable commitment. He was propped up in bed and appeared bright and alert. "How are you feeling now?"

"Fine," said the boy. "Except my feet are a bit tingly. A sort of pins and needles."

"We'll soon have you up and back at school," said Richard, bravely. Jonathan frowned.

"Mummy said she thought I could be here a long time. Until Christmas at least." When he said that he missed the railway most of all, an idea flashed into Richard's mind and he spoke almost without thinking.

"I suppose we could put you a small layout in here if your mother doesn't mind. We could have the controls by your bed so that you could operate it when you wanted to."

"It would be wonderful if you could," Eileen said when he explained the proposal to her. "He seems to talk of nothing else and none of his friends will come and see him now. I expect their parents think its catching or contagious, but it isn't. Could you do it?"

"I've said that I will," he said confidently. It was not a task to be completed in five minutes. He did not, could not, sacrifice his schoolwork. Time had to be found, so the commitment was explained to Stephanie. It was she who was to be sacrificed.

"I have no hold over you, Richard," she said soothingly. "As I am not prepared to be put under any obligation to you, I cannot expect anything different from you. It does sound awful. He lives nearby?" Richard nodded, but still, instinctively, held back from telling Stephanie the full details, and who the boy was. "I think it is a wonderful thing for you to do it, selflessly," she added. "I'm so proud of you."

The building of the new miniature railway occupied many evenings, but it gradually took shape. At the same time, without telling Jonathan, Richard dismantled the large layout in the workshop and arranged the return of the equipment that belonged to others. It almost broke his heart to thus rip and destroy what had been, until so recently, the centre of so much youthful work and aspiration. That which grew close to Jonathan's bed had no such hope. He met Mrs Howard at her gate one evening. She knew of the purpose of his visits and had gone out of her way to explain and broadcast their propriety. Tongues will wag, though. "I don't think I'm there long enough for any real scandal," he said.

"Maybe, but you should watch yourself, 'specially as you're a teacher and 'aving a position in society to maintain. I seen more innocent things in the Sunday papers, ducks."

He was not concerned about his reputation, though he still smarted when he thought of his brief dressing-down in the Headmaster's study. He was conscious of Eileen's position, and Mrs Howard's comments expunged for ever the half-lingering notion that circumstances might permit him to lodge at Hayes Close. If he were now to come to live there, it would be on terms quite different to those of a boarder.

His regular visits had the effect of gradually breaking down Eileen's reserve. She started to talk, and would talk freely about her husband and her marriage, though she was inevitably guarded when she came to that one large crisis that had fallen across her path to happiness. "He was wrong, of course. What he did was wrong, very wrong, but I thought I loved him, and I let him stay. That was my weakness. But love does not obey the rules of morality. I found couldn't turn off my feelings just because he went elsewhere. Leaving him would have been only a defence. Perhaps he didn't love me. Perhaps he loved only her, right from the very beginning. I don't know. Do you know that since the funeral, I have not visited his grave? Am I punishing him? Or myself? She was a beautiful girl. She is a beautiful girl. She came to the funeral, uninvited. I should have been pleased that someone else cared for him, but I couldn't bring myself to talk to her. Perhaps her love was the greatest. We had happy times together, don't think that it was otherwise. Perhaps it is as well that he is gone, seeing how things are working out. He wasn't clever, or intelligent, but he would think things through, slowly, logically. His talent lay in his hands. Jonathan inherited none of that. He takes after me. Did I tell you I kept his books? All the accounts? Perhaps I could go back to book keeping when - ."

Piece by piece, as the end of the year approached, Richard constructed a picture of Eileen's life, the way she remembered it, a kind of golden age, before it had been destroyed by the vandals of fate. It was not complete, but he knew enough to attempt a full reconstruction of the recently disassembled mosaic. Piece by piece, too, the small railway took shape, assembled in stolen hours, time that Richard could ill afford. He could not afford for his school work to suffer and once again he would frequently work late into the night to ensure that it did not. No-one could find justifiable fault and recriminate him in that respect. What did Stephanie think of it all? Did she ever wonder if there was more in the relationship between Richard and this un-named widow other than a work of charity and sacrifice? If she did, the thought stayed locked away, suppressed and unspoken.

Richard knew full well that Stephanie would not go to the school dance. He began to doubt that Eileen would go, though, vainly hoping, he did ask her. "I couldn't!" she exclaimed. "It would be quite impossible. I couldn't leave him!"

"I'm sure Mrs Howard would come in and look after him."

"Oh, no!" she said fiercely. "What if something happened? I could never forgive myself. No, it's completely out of the question!" Richard had cause to regret that he had asked this particular question because it had the effect of polarising Eileen's mind on the problem of leaving Jonathan or, rather, not being there, with him.

"You are coming to the school dance, still?" said Dennet on the Saturday morning before its holding.

"I don't know," replied Richard somewhat wistfully. "I've lost both of my prospective partners. I don't really fancy going on my own."

"That was careless of you. To be so fortunate as to have two from which to choose, then to lose both. Anyway, I'm in the same boat, except I didn't have two or any to start with. We could always take our landladies." Richard shuddered as he pictured the school dance band shaken off-beat and out of pitch by a leer from Mrs Morgan.

"I don't think so," he said. "I told you my problems when we went to Willesden."

"So you did. Well, let's just go together. There's bound to be one or two unattached females. If there's one, we'll share her. If there's two, yours is the short, squinting, one with the limp."

"Oh yes? You'll take the bald one with the artificial leg?" It was settled. Despite the lack of prospects or enthusiasm, they went.

The school dance was an event which was, at first sight, out of place and anachronistic. It had been introduced during a period when it was considered advantageous for the older boys to demonstrate that they could dance and it allowed them to meet, under formal and closely observed circumstances, genteel girls of their own age for whom the experience was, in all probability, equally harrowing. At the time of its inauguration the suburb was an isolated village and the guest list was drawn up with great care by the

Principal's wife and daughter. On such occasions, cards were carefully marked and scrutinised afterwards. The progress of the years destroyed its necessity and purpose, but the holding of the dance persisted. It had now become the property of the PTA and was termed a "Halloween Dance" though it was held some four weeks after the night in question and contained no particular reference to the practices associated with that evening.

Despite his well voiced opposition, the dance was expertly organised by Mr Crompton. He probably never gave a moment's thought to its origins, or the fact that few, if any, of the boys knew the steps to the sequence of dances he selected. If he had been asked, it would have been his opinion that learning to dance was slightly immoral, and that it was not a suitable occupation for a young man, and this in spite of the fact that both he and his wife were enthusiastic and talented dancers. Somehow the art of dancing had become associated in his mind with sex. It was for consenting adults only. And these modern wriggling, unmentionable, antics that were termed "dances", well, they were for the natives in the jungle, who could be excused because they knew no better, not for his boys, and certainly not for inclusion at his Dance. So the programme contained a large helping of safe items, the Military Two-step, the Veleta, the Gay Gordons, a sprinkling of Waltzes, and even a number of more risqué Quicksteps and one Fox-trot which taxed the band's ability to the extreme and which, the cynics said, was included solely to allow the Cromptons the facility to demonstrate their ballroom prowess on a temporarily clear floor.

Richard had found it easy to agree with Dennet to accompany him to the event. Casual conversations with casual people easily lead to shallow thought and indifferent decisions. But he suffered subsequent misgivings and found that his conscience forced him to inform both of the women in his life and, perhaps, seek their acquiescence, although he would never have admitted this fact to himself.

"Of course you must go," said Eileen. "I think, if I can put it this way, that you have devoted far too much of your spare time to us. It is a school occasion. You should go. I - just cannot." Her response had been spontaneous. It was much later, as she thought herself to sleep, that the nagging question of why he had felt compelled to tell her, presented itself. "It is because he asked me in the first place," she told herself firmly. That thought consoled her.

Stephanie forced a smile in response to Richard's half-question, half-statement. "I don't know why you should tell me. Why should the evening of the school dance be any different to any other? I hardly ever see you now." It had not been a happy meal, but Richard obtained what ever it was he sought, though it did leave a bitter taste in his mouth. And Stephanie, though she thought she understood his motives fully, asked herself why she had become so angry. Perhaps it was, as Richard had said, one of her rare bad days?

It was arranged that Richard would call for Dennet, and they arrived at the school together. "I'm not going to stay until the end," announced Dennet firmly.

"Can't say that I blame you," muttered Richard.

The Assembly Hall bore the minimum of decoration for the event. The band, drawn, as was customary, from the school orchestra, was perched on the stage behind closed curtains, but the evidenced their presence with the emission of a wide range of unmusical sounds. The floor had been chalked, though it retained the frictional coefficient of sandpaper. Parents were assembling, in odd pairs, or anxious clusters: people of all shapes and sizes, the men largely in suits, the women arrayed in a wide variety of dresses of all styles, shapes, ages and shades. Many were worn for that one occasion in the calendar, and some bore witness to that fact. A drink described as "punch" was served from a table set at the opposite end of the hall to the band. The drink, having been prepared by the Chemistry Master, struck Richard as tasting rather like orange flavoured petrol. The band, having warmed up but still somewhat in disarray, were unveiled promptly at eight o'clock. They broke into a rather sedate quickstep and the Dance was under way. A handful of couples scraped across the floor. Inevitably, among them were the Cromptons.

By eight thirty the band had got going, the punch had produced its individual and unique effect on everyone who had tried it, and the evening was in full swing. Driven by desire, duty, boredom, or drink, a large number of parents had come, some bringing with them, seemingly willing to expose, their young, quite eligible, daughters. The school sixth

form was also eligible to attend, and they swarmed and swooped like vultures on the living flesh, leaving Richard and Dennet with neither partners nor hope of obtaining them.

"It looks pretty hopeless," said Richard as he swallowed his third glass of punch and the room momentarily rocked in time to the music.

"Never give up," said Dennet, purposely scanning the dance floor. "What did I tell you? Look! There's Susan Larkins. Excuse me one moment. I'll bring her over and introduce you." If that was Dennet's honest intention at the time, events precluded him from fulfilling it. Richard was left, holding Dennet's half-drained glass along with his own, feeling rather foolish. He watched him battle his way across the floor and greet the Headmaster's daughter, who smiled. He saw him take her hand and start to dance. Then they were lost from sight and thereafter he caught no more than an occasional glimpse of the couple.

"Hello, Richard! Have we been jilted?" said a husky voice from behind him. It was Mrs Hiller, in a high-necked, close-fitting, purple velvet dress. She was alone. "You are going to dance with me, aren't you?"

"I can't dance very well," said Richard defensively, searching for an escape though in his heart he knew there was none.

"Never mind," she said in her ripe voice. "I can show you how to do it." They started to dance, at first very much at arm's length, but gradually she drew him closer and closer until her body touched his and they rubbed together. "Mmmmm," she said wickedly. "You are so soft. I'd love to cuddle you." In response to the look of panic on his face, she changed the subject. "How's Jonathan?" He reported that the boy did not get any better, nor was he visibly worse. He also told her, in an attempt to be vindictive, that he had proposed to bring Eileen to the dance, but that she had chosen to stay at home, bound by her duty to her son. "Poor woman," said Mrs Hiller, with little sympathy audible in her voice. "She has had a hard time of things. Still, I'm certain that her luck will change."

Richard wanted to turn the conversation around to Stephanie. He was sure that Joyce Hiller knew something and could, maybe, tell him the answers to many of the questions that still lingered in his mind. It was dangerous, but it was worth trying. "You knew her when she got married," he said suddenly.

Her eyebrows raised as her lips parted in a smile, and she pulled him just a little closer. "I did," she said. "That was many years ago, though I do have some pleasant memories.. He was a nice fellow, her husband; and so strong!" She closed her eyes momentarily, then whispered in his ear, "Do you really want to stay here all evening? Wouldn't you rather go somewhere else?" Richard could not suppress the memory of Mr Crompton's "going-ons" and had a horrific vision of Mrs Hiller, skirts raised, romping through the school shrubberies on that damp November evening. He scanned the floor for assistance, but neither Dennet nor Mr Pennington were visible. His gaze fell on Mr Fox who was dancing with a strikingly pretty, dark-haired, girl in a full length, black dress.

"Who is that dancing with Mr Fox?" he said, hoping that it might change the subject and fully expecting Mrs Hiller to tell him that she had not got the faintest idea.

"That's Mrs Fox," she hissed, turning her head. "Quite a dear, but nothing upstairs. About as thick as two short planks, one might say."

"Oh I must meet her," said Richard, feeling that Mrs Fox would serve as a port in this particular storm. Mrs Hiller looked at him with a knowing, triumphant, smile.

"Very well," she said, "I'll introduce you. But this is not a gentlemen's excuse-me, you know." Whatever Mrs Hiller's designs were, the stratagem worked. Richard found himself seated between the Foxes, insulated from Mrs Hiller by Mr Fox. He was relieved when she allowed herself to be swept and waltzed away by one of the Upper Sixth prefects to whom dancing with Mrs Hiller was second in risk only to removing the pin from a grenade and not throwing it. The school Secretary's observations about Diana Fox did appear to be shrewd. She was pleasant, but she babbled and was prone to giggle at almost any comment. She noticed, however, that Richard's eyes kept darting away from her face, scanning the dance floor.

"Are you waiting for some-one?" she lisped.

"No. I was looking for Dennet. You know him?"

“Oh yes. He's one of us.”

“One of us?” Diana gave a little shrug and casually lifted her skirt to examine her shoes and revealed a pair of pretty little ankles.

“Its Aubrey's term actually,” she said, sounding serious. “He says that there is an inner circle here in society. The rest of us are in the outer circle, if you understand me. The inner circle is elite, exclusive, and difficult to penetrate, if you will excuse the word. It is a sort of none-too-nice secret society, like a mix between the Masons and the Mafia. I don't think it is really worth belonging to, but Aubrey reckons that if you want to get anywhere, here, you have to get in.”

“How would one join?”

“I don't think you join. If you're not born into it, you just get drawn in, swallowed up, ingested. To some it means getting on in the World. To others it is like being trapped in a corrupt quicksand whilst being asked to give things you would rather not give in order to receive things you probably could do without. On the whole, I think I prefer to be a no-one, outside.”

“Dennet said something like that - what was it? Look! There he is now!”

“Trying to bridge the gap and get his entry ticket,” said Diana, giggling. Dennet whisked past, firmly clutching the Headmaster's daughter, ready to defend his position against any potential cutter-in, but generous enough to selflessly release his grip sufficiently to give the tiniest of waves.

“They'll not let him in,” she commented.

“No?” Diana smiled.

“No. Aubrey thinks that they might take you. He thinks that you are good and that you will soon be adopted by Mr Crompton as his protégé.”

“Never!” laughed Richard. “Its out of the question. He cant stand the sight of me! We're like acid and water.”

“You'll see. But beware. Do not be fooled. They are no better than us. They do not lead a more exemplary life, or anything like that. On the contrary. It is just a division between the have-it-alls, and the have-nots.”

“Oh, I belong to the latter, very much so. I can never see me even becoming as much as a have-some-of-it!”

“I don't believe that for one moment, Mr Brown.”

“Richard, please.”

“Richard, then. It is not a simple as just having money. That's not even necessary, though it is a great help. Being rich is no guarantee of admittance, though Dennet hopes it will assist him with his ticket.”

“Dennet? I thought he is as poor as a dog.” She laughed again and her eyes sparkled.

“I shouldn't tell you this, really. He's not that poor. He scrimps and scrapes, but he also saves. And he gambles and speculates on the Stock Market, not without success from what I've heard. All to amass a fortune, all to buy himself in and to become a 'have'.”

“I've never thought of him that way. I've always seen him as a sort of mild eccentric, a sort of non-conformist, someone who'd put up two fingers at Society, leave alone seek to join an inner elite. Are we talking of the same person?”

“Oh, Mr Brown! Are you really fooled by the act that people put on? Do you think that's real, the Dennet we love and admire? I'm talking of the real Dennet, the inner core, the nucleus that motivates him. None of us are really what we appear on the surface to be.”

“Oh, I am. I'm quite transparent and honest,” Richard exclaimed, then coloured as he recalled the tiny deceit he had practised on Stephanie.

“I'm sure you are, Richard. But you know what I mean. Surely you have learnt not to take anyone at face value? Its all an act.”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I am learning.”

During the night a dense, freezing, fog descended over, and gripped, London and the Southeast. It was one of the topics at the breakfast table at Grove Crescent, though everything was upstaged by the discovery on the hall stand of a repulsive object which was identified as

a monkey's paw. "Its a good luck token for the rightful owner," said Mr Hughes, brushing the cornflakes from his moustache. "But it means inescapable bad luck and misfortune for anyone who steals one. That's what they say."

"I thought that was a rabbit's foot," wheezed Mr Anderson with a sudden rush of abandonment. "Look! I always carry one!" With a triumphant flourish he laid a shrivelled object on the breakfast table before them. Richard found it almost impossible to continue eating after that.

"Centipede Securities," hissed Frobisher around the ensemble. "Don't forget!"

Once outside Richard was rudely reminded that he needed his overcoat and turned back. In the hallway he found Mr Anderson crouched over the hallstand gleefully clutching his rabbit's foot. "Always carry it," he chuckled as he started his painful journey up the stairs. "Only fools would court disaster and go without one."

Richard found that the fog disorientated him. Buildings and vistas were no longer connected. Landmarks could barely be discerned. Pedestrians would suddenly loom up out of the darkness and collide with one another, Traffic was reduced to a crawl at best, or a complete halt. There was no chance of Stephanie seeing him and waving from her window this morning, even if such had been her habit. Arrivals at school were spasmodic and disjointed. Richard discovered that Dennet was among the absentees, and that when he did arrive after midday, he looked bleary eyed and haggard. He looked even worse when he emerged from Mr Crompton's study. "What happened to you last night?" Richard asked him at the first opportunity.

"Phew," gasped Dennet. "I went off with Susan Larkins to some night club she knows, drinking and dancing to all hours. None of that rubbish we had last night at the school dance, either. She's a real raver, you know."

"I don't," said Richard, feeling pangs of jealousy. "And what does her father say?"

"Oh, Daddy doesn't mind," replied Dennet, assuming a cultured falsetto. "I've got my own door key and I can come and go as I please."

"I find that hard to believe."

"She's been to finishing school," added Dennet in his normal voice. "She can't put a foot wrong. Reckon I'm in there."

"We shall see," murmured Richard. "We shall see."