

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Are you going home for Christmas?” asked Stephanie at one of their now irregular, and no longer frequent, meetings.

“Yes,” said Richard, wishing he could prevail upon Stephanie to persuade her so-called aunt to improve or vary the menu. “Would you like to come?” he added, impulsively, almost recklessly. His heart leapt as he asked the question for the circumstances in truth were now changed. Yet she was beautiful, so incontrovertibly beautiful. How could he not be in love with her?

“Do you mean that seriously?” she said, studying his features closely. Had he given himself away? His heart pounded and he almost had difficulty in breathing as he tried to maintain an inscrutable exterior.

“Yes,” he said, after a moment's hesitation, “but you're bound to refuse.” She laughed and gave him an enchanting look of devilment.

“And are you banking on that?” she said, mischievously. His heart leapt again.

“Goodness, no! How can you say that?” She looked down and her expression became serious.

“Because you have changed. Things have changed, too, between us.”

“That's not true,” he protested hoarsely.

“Oh, but it is, Richard,” she insisted. “I know. I can sense it. I can read the signs. We've seen so little of each other, for a start.”

“Who's fault is that? Who is always too busy to go out?”

“Yes? Who? Now?” It struck home.

“I've had a major commitment,” he said weakly.

“I know,” she said calmly, “and I have not reproached you over it. I don't know why, but the fact remains that your feelings have changed.”

“They haven't!”

“If I were to say now,” she said gravely, looking down at the table cloth, “that I would marry you if you asked me, you would not ask.” His heart stopped beating altogether. At least, it felt as if it did. Wild ideas, schemes and dreams ran through his mind; the alluring image of Stephanie as his wife, something he had once sought above all else. But now, as he sat there, it was all but negated when he thought of Eileen Cross. What had happened to him? It would be impossible to stay there, working at Rochester House, and marry Stephanie, would it not? And there were still those hard economic facts. Her life style was one that clearly could not be supported on his meagre salary. And why was he even considering the idea? “Don't worry,” she continued. “I'm not going to say that I'd marry you. But your hesitation has demonstrated, even proved, my point. Not so long ago you would have jumped at the chance, and probably have dragged me out of the restaurant and up the High Street to look at engagement rings. Yes, you were impetuous, beset with passion. Now you've cooled, and it's a different story. I knew it would be. You've learnt.”

“I've learnt to take marriage seriously, and that you cannot get married on a prayer and my salary.”

“Ah, but that decrees only when you get married, not whether you marry at all!” she declared triumphantly. He felt weak. He was cornered again. There was no doubt who had the upper hand. She would make a formidable wife. “And, as far as your first question goes,” she continued as he struggled to recall what his first question had been, “perhaps I would, just as long as I wasn't in the way. I do not think that I ought to come for Christmas Day itself, but perhaps I could come the day after Boxing Day and stay for the New Year?”

“I'll have to check with my parents,” he said lowly. “I'll 'phone later.” Stephanie nodded and smiled broadly as if she was enjoying some huge private joke, and it was entirely at his expense. Matters became worse when he telephoned home. His mother, anxious to conform with what she assumed to be her son's unspoken wish, insisted that Stephanie should go down before Christmas Eve and stay with them for the full holiday. His attempt to explain her reluctance was feeble and non-effective because he was terrified of exposing his own

thoughts on the subject. So he was forced to humbly carry the invitation back to Stephanie. Mercifully, she was adamant, declaring that Christmas Day should be a family affair, and that as she was not family, yet, she would travel the day after Boxing Day. Richard did not argue.

This matter was no sooner settled than Sandra put in her plea for Dennet to be invited, receiving the full support of Mrs Brown who had worked out an intricate, but socially acceptable, scheme for coping with the sleeping accommodation. So Richard was commissioned to go off in search of his colleague, which he did even more reluctantly. "I'd love to," the PE teacher said, "but I can't leave London. I've got rather a lot on over the holiday. Some tricky manoeuvring."

"And I suppose that you'll spend Christmas with your mother?"

"Mmmmm? Yes, oh yes," he asserted. "But you'll give my love to San, won't you?"

His parting at Hayes Close came as the biggest wrench, though he did not find it hard to leave Jonathan, having temporarily hooked up the railway so that it could be remotely controlled from the bedside. He gave Eileen a small present for her son. "It's a Castle," he said. "A locomotive for the railway." She took it from him almost hesitantly, as if to accept it in some way compromised her.

"I'd like to repay you for all you've done," she said. "But I do not know how."

"You make it sound almost final," Richard protested. "I'll only be away for just under four weeks."

"Anything could happen in that time," she said gravely.

A combination of excitement and alarm gradually began to build up inside him. He had been in this situation before, of having Stephanie coming to Eastgate as a guest, yet he harboured the instinctive, unspoken, wish that it could be Eileen in her stead. And, as had happened before, it was Jonathan who had innocently precluded such an occurrence. Richard's excitement was amplified by the realisation that if Jonathan were to die, one major obstacle would be removed. For a moment he flirted with this thought, then tried to dismiss it in a flurry of guilt. But it remained. "If anything does happen," he said seriously, "I want you to call me, no matter when, day or night. Here's my parents' number. If you need help or advice, please call. You will, won't you?" She nodded submissively and placed the piece of paper on the top of the piano under the wedding photograph. Their parting was brief, but it was hard and painful. No kiss, hug, or caress. Just a wave from the gate. It left Richard feeling very miserable.

The Christmas celebrations at Rochester House were in a relatively low key and fell far short of being sufficient to raise Richard's spirits, let alone be described as festive. A semblance of decoration appeared in the common room, the final serving of school dinner had a seasonal flavour, and it was said that Mr Crompton had managed a brief, weak, smile when the season's greetings were professed in his direction. But Mr Larkins' discreet little sherry-party, held towards the end of the last day, failed to meet Dennet's idea of a celebration. "Sherry!" he said in disgust. "Let's go out and do the town!"

"You'll never get to be one of them if you speak like that," said Richard sourly. Dennet looked at him askance, his eyes narrowing.

"What do you mean?" he asked aggressively.

"Oh, nothing! It's just a silly private joke between Mrs Fox and me."

"But she's not here!" cried Dennet, looking around and now bewildered.

"I know," replied Richard lamely. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said it." However it was clear that he had said enough to dissuade Dennet from going and celebrating, there and then, with him, at least.

Once the Term was over, Richard suddenly found himself anxious to get away from the school, Mrs Morgan's, and all connotations of the Suburb, and to be at Eastgate. He travelled down the next day, armed with a considerable amount of schoolwork, which gave him an excuse for indulging in a taxi to take him from the station to his parents' house. "I didn't expect you today, Richard," said his mother, quite sharply, when she found him on the doorstep. "You said you'd come down on the twenty-first. Is everything all right?"

"Did I say that? Sorry. Yes, everything is all right. I just needed a change. It is no

problem, is it? I mean you haven't let my room to a lodger?"

"No, no! Of course not. And we're pleased to see you. Just surprised." Feeling disturbed he went up to his room. To his dismay, he found that everything had been changed. The walls had been decorated, a different carpet laid, and the furniture replaced in a new arrangement. He sat on the bed with a worrying sense of treachery. What did it all mean? Slowly he unpacked and laid his schoolwork out across the dressing-table. Among the books, obvious and unavoidable, was his progress chart on which he would base the next term's work and his individual plans for selected pupils. And there, near the top, taunting him, was the line referring to Jonathan Cross, an accelerating deterioration culminating in an abrupt end. That was life, though, was it not? And did he really wish that was the case? Did he really see the boy as an obstacle, an impediment to be removed from his path? It meant more than an acceptance of the hopelessness of Jonathan's condition, for a start. Was it actually his hope, his wish, that what Eileen had said was true? That the illness was incurable?

He caught sight of his face in the mirror and recoiled. How could he be sat there thinking such things, on the eve of Christmas of all times? Where did they originate from, these thoughts? And if that was the way his mind was going to run, he had better stay away from Hayes Close and devote his attention to his work, and Stephanie. After all, he had proposed to her, several times, and although she had refused and absolved him, there had to be a residual obligation of duty for him there. She would be with them in a few days. What would he say to her, bearing in mind their last conversation at the restaurant? What would they do? These thoughts began to scare him every bit as much as those concerning Jonathan Cross.

"I'm sorry about your room," said his mother at dinner. "We started to make preparations in case Dennet came, and you caught us in the process of replacing everything. Your father thought it would be sensible to decorate while we had everything upside down, which did put us back a little."

"It isn't his room," muttered his father from the end of the table. Sandra paled and studied her napkin intently.

"It is a shame that Stephanie isn't coming for Christmas Day," Mrs Brown continued, "and a pity that Mr Dennet could not come at all."

"You did ask him?" said Sandra with ferocity.

"Of course I did. Several times. He said he was going to his mother's for Christmas and had some intricate, I think that was the word he used, business to attend to. Oh, and he sent you his love, Sandra." She brightened slightly.

"Did he?" she asked pensively. The remainder of Richard's first meal of the holiday at home passed in relative silence. Later he joined his father in the lounge for coffee.

"How's the teaching going?" asked Mr Brown, somewhat gruffly.

"Very well," replied Richard brightly, mistaking totally the intent behind his father's question. "It is going superbly. I'm enjoying every minute of it."

"And, your life, away from here?"

"Just the same. Wouldn't change it for the World!"

"Oh," grunted his father. There was a pause before he spoke again. "You weren't thinking of wanting to break our agreement? To come home?" Richard shook his head.

"No, Father. Things are working out pretty well for me. I've no wish to go back on anything we agreed." Yet as he said it, phantasmal doubts crept, like grey, sinister, wisps, across his mind; complex doubts, about his projects, his future, and doubts about his father's intentions in respect of the family business. Was he thinking of selling it?

"That's good," said Mr Brown in a strained voice. "I am pleased to hear it."

"How's the railway?" His father seemed a little uneasy.

"I have not touched it much this Autumn. Seem to have lost all interest."

"I expect it will return."

"I suppose so," grunted his father, and the conversation ceased.

In the days that followed, Richard was cautious and said little, preferring to spend much of his time in the room, which was not his, working on his schoolwork. He realised that his father had aged since he saw him last, not only in appearance, but in his mobility. He

stooped slightly and moved slowly with no semblance of the agility he had once possessed. Richard recognised, too, that there was a tense atmosphere, quite alien to his memories of the sunny household in which he had grown up, which had been maintained in a calm and happy state through many a crisis by the application of his mother's indefatigable spirit. "Is anything wrong?" he asked her in the kitchen, on Christmas Eve.

"Wrong?" she said sharply. "What should be wrong? Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he said, fumbling. "It just seems - oh, I don't know - tense?"

"Well, I've a lot to do for a start! There's the final preparations for tomorrow and Stephanie's arrival. My woman's not in again until New Year's Eve. Sandra is swanning around somewhere, lovesick. And you're in my way! Move!" He retreated, and went away convinced that something was wrong, but not knowing what.

Christmas Day was relatively quiet. The whole Brown family went to Church in the morning and Richard expected his father to preach, or play some role in the service, but he did not. Something of the old family spirit returned when, on arriving home, Sandra rallied herself and bustled around with her mother in the preparation of the traditional dinner. They watched the Queen's message, then settled to play Scrabble for a while until the game disintegrated and was terminated in a squabble over pluralities.

Boxing Day, however, brought a dramatic change in the weather. Early in the morning it began to snow, at first lightly, then heavily and persistent, driven by a bitter north-easterly wind. As the day progressed it became evident from the news bulletin that the whole of the East of England was suffering this wintry grip and people were already talking of the worst falls in their lifetimes. Roads could not be kept open and drifting was reported to be threatening many railway lines, including that from London to Eastgate. Richard's hopes gradually rose as the reports grew in seriousness. The conditions would undoubtedly delay Stephanie's coming, perhaps sufficiently to stop her altogether. As if in answer to his unspoken prayer, the blizzards continued into the next day, heaping snow upon snow up against the Brown's front door. It was announced that the roads were impassable, and that the railway lines to London had been blocked during the night, but that it was hoped there could be a limited service later in the day. Further indications of the storms' severity were received when there was a two hour power cut in the morning and they were unable to extract any response out of the telephone. Richard's hopes were high as he shovelled away at the snow in the drive.

It was in the late afternoon when the telephone indicated its revival by ringing. "It's Stephanie," called Sandra. "She's in a call-box. Do hurry, Richard!" His heart leapt. She would be calling to cancel her visit. The conditions were too bad! They were atrocious! Only a fool would attempt to travel under such conditions! He was armed with his prepared statements and ready to be sorry and very sympathetic.

"I'm at the station," she announced in her soft, velvety, voice which even the telephone system could not disguise.

"Station?" he gasped. "Which station?"

"Here, Eastgate, silly. I couldn't get through to you by 'phone earlier due to some technical problem. So I thought I'd call you from here, just to give you advanced warning."

"Shall I come and collect you?"

"No, no. I'll take a taxi."

"Are there any?"

"Oh yes. I'll see you shortly." Almost dumbfounded he replaced the receiver.

"She's on her way from the station," he announced to the hallway and hastened up to the privacy of his room to collect his thoughts. He was still incarcerated there when Stephanie arrived and was admitted by his mother who bustled her into the lounge to share the roaring fire and plied her with tea and cakes. Not even the rigours of a cold and arduous journey could either reduce her beauty or the impact he felt when he entered the lounge and saw her. She stood to one side of the fireplace, blending perfectly with the surroundings, looking at home and just as if she belonged there. Somehow he could not imagine the insignificant figure of Eileen Cross, transported from her semi-detached in Hayes Close, standing in the same spot with anything like the same degree of harmony.

“Hello, Richard,” she said with a slight element of triumph. “You see I have come. I am here.”

“I do see,” he said slowly, beginning to wonder what all his fears were about. “And I am pleased that you could, and have, come.” His reply was a little stilted, but she smiled and nodded.

“Now, I must go and sort myself out. Do you mind?”

“No, no. Not at all. Can I give you a hand with your case?”

“All taken care of,” she said firmly. “I won't be long.” But it did seem like an eternity to Richard before she did reappear.

The remaining hours of the day were passed communally in small talk. Richard could sit and feast his eyes on this Goddess, but he was not left alone with her for sufficient time to allow him to develop any intimate conversation. He was proud, yet vexed, to see how quickly Stephanie adjusted herself, accommodating to and becoming, as it were, one of the Brown family, without appearing in the least pretentious. Understandably, Stephanie elected to go to bed early. A little later Richard said goodnight to the rest of his family and went to his bedroom. Instead of undressing, he stretched back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. His emotions had received another severe jolt. It was not long since he had consciously repudiated and rescinded the notion that he would marry Stephanie if she would have him. Was he now on the verge of reinstating it? He had to concede to himself that it was not an unpleasant thought.

He lost track of time as he lay there, contentedly musing. He might even have dozed off for a few seconds. A cold numbness in his legs aroused him and directed his attention to the more immediate problem of getting to bed. For a moment he listened. The house seemed silent but for the whine of the wind. He opened his door slowly and went quietly out onto the partially lit landing. He had not advanced far in his quest when a slight click of a door opening made him turn around. There, in a doorway, silhouetted against the light from her bedroom, wearing an exotic, wispy, gossamer-like night-dress, her hair falling and tumbling in reddish-golden, confused, coils across her shoulders, down her back, and onto her breast, stood Stephanie.

Richard gasped and visibly flinched. She saw his reaction and gave him a coquettish smile, yet moved her hands to afford some modesty. He was transfixed. He could not take his eyes off of her. “I'm sorry,” he whispered after a few moments of staring. She came closer and stopped before him. In her bare feet she was noticeable smaller and he realised that he could see over the top of her head. “I didn't expect anyone to be up now,” she whispered. “Were you going to the bathroom?” He swallowed and nodded. His pulse rate appeared to be rising in a geometric progression and tiny beads of sweat broke through his forehead. Yet there they stood, face to face, neither moving, not touching, trapped in a suspension of time, each reluctant to be the first to go their way and break the spell. “You had better go first,” said Stephanie at length. “I'll leave my door ajar and I will be able to hear you when you come back.”

“I could go downstairs,” he said naively. She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. Her night-dress rustled and brushed against him. It was agony.

“I'll listen for you,” she repeated and retreated. Coming back a few minutes later he tapped on her slightly-ajar door, whispered through the crack that all was clear, and fled to his bedroom where he flung himself on his bed. He could have wept with frustration. He had been immersed in desire, filled with the overwhelming temptation to carry her bodily back into her bedroom and have his way. Perhaps that was what she wanted, even expected? No, that would not conform with the views expressed that evening in her flat. At best he would have soured his relationship with her and betrayed Eileen. At worst he could have landed up in court. A master from Rochester House charged with the rape of the School Secretary's daughter? The shame, disgrace and ignominy, not just there, but at home, in his family. Yet there had been a moment when he had been on the very brink of taking such an action! He punched the pillow with rage at his self-deception. It was not fear of the consequences that had made him hold back. It was not respect for either Stephanie or Eileen. It was fear of appearing clumsy, inexperienced, amateurish, of fumbling it or, perhaps, not succeeding.

Perhaps he could have learnt from Mrs Hiller? But to take lessons from the mother to practice on the daughter? No, it was repulsive! Heavy-hearted, he turned over and eventually fell asleep.

Next morning Stephanie made the briefest of allusions to the incident. "I thought you acted admirably last night," she said, smiling. "Almost like a gentleman."

"Only almost?"

"You stared so. A gentleman would have averted his gaze."

"I'm sorry he said, abashed, but feeling his desire aroused again. "You are so beautiful. I find it hard, no, impossible, not to look at you."

"After all the time we've known each other?"

"After all that time, yes." She laughed and the subject was dropped, but his passion remained. Outside fresh falls of snow piled up in the drive and greatly restricted their mobility. Walking was difficult. Driving was both difficult and hazardous, but Richard accompanied his father to the office to help him sort out the papers for the year-end accounts, leaving the three women in the house. It was not long before Stephanie found herself, alone but for Mrs Brown, in the lounge.

"Can I talk to you, my dear?" Moira asked. "On a matter of a personal nature?"

"About Richard?" asked Stephanie, almost sharply. Mrs Brown nodded. "Yes," added Stephanie, cautiously, "of course."

"There are, you see," continued Mrs Brown, "certain matters about which you should be informed as they could influence your relationship with him."

Stephanie frowned. "I see," she said, meaning that she did not.

"I am sorry," smiled Mrs Brown. "I made that sound awfully formal. May I asked if the two of you are engaged? Secretly?"

"No." Stephanie shook her head slowly.

"Has Richard proposed, then?"

"Hasn't he told you?"

"Sons do not always tell their mothers everything, especially if they don't meet with the kind of success that they seek. Success is of great import to Richard. I take it that he has, and I must therefore assume that you have rejected him?"

"Twice. Both occasions were quite some time ago."

"But you think he'll ask again?" Stephanie paused and considered.

"Yes, I think he may," she said, reluctantly.

"And, if he does, will you reject him again?"

"Oh! That's a hard and unkind question, Mrs Brown, though I'm sure you didn't mean it to be. If I say that I would turn him down, what am I doing here? I would lay myself open to all kinds of accusations. And if I now answer, yes, I am compromised. May I say, then, quite honestly, that I do not know what my answer will be. Had you asked me six months ago, I could have told you positively and truthfully that I would turn him down. Now I am not at all sure. I'm not even certain that he will ask. I think that his feelings may have changed over the last couple of months."

"But he did ask you down. He must have had something in mind."

"Indeed, but don't be offended if I say that it could have been out of politeness, or boredom, or for some other reason that I cannot begin to guess at. We do enjoy each other's company. He may have no matrimonial intentions whatsoever."

"I'll be very cross with him if that is the case," exclaimed Richard's mother.

"Oh, you mustn't be hard on him, not on my part. I did make it clear that I wished to put him under no restraint and that I was prepared for our relationship to be purely platonic. I did say that."

"Yet, if he doesn't propose again, how will you feel? Oh, don't answer that, my Dear! Just think on it."

"I can answer it," said Stephanie, stubbornly. "I know how I would feel. I would feel disappointed, but I would know that I had received exactly all that I deserve."

"That's a very brave attitude to adopt, some might say foolish when applied to affairs of the heart. Can I talk to you now about the situation here? You will recall that my husband

had a heart attack last year?"

"Of course."

"You know about the problem that arose over the business. That he wanted Richard to take over the management, even before the problem of his health arose?"

"That Richard's father opposed his following a career in teaching? Yes, and I know that it has caused him much heartache."

"It has caused the whole family great distress," said Mrs Brown with a sigh. "Arthur's illness has exacerbated the situation. When he had the first attack - ."

"He has had another?"

"I was coming to that; after the first attack, the one last summer, Arthur refused to renege on the stupid agreement that he and Richard came to."

"I think Richard did reach the point at which he was prepared to give up his teaching at the time," said Stephanie softly.

"There is no doubt that he was prepared to do that! I felt that he should, but his father was determined that he would not be the cause of any change of heart that Richard might undergo."

"And now?"

"Arthur's view is unchanged. If anything he is more stubborn. He has had two further attacks, both minor, but they are all warnings, the specialist said. He can't go on much longer. Yet I am under sentence of death, or worse, not to tell Richard, who really ought to know."

"Not to tell his son?"

"No. As Arthur sees it, he is on the horns of a dilemma. If he tells Richard, or Richard finds out, he feels it will increase the pressure on him to give up teaching. But rightly or wrongly, he believes that Richard will still change his mind of his own accord and return, and therefore he's not prepared to dispose of the business. He doesn't dare consult Richard over its future in case it arouses his suspicions. Yet it will kill him! The work and all the worry will be the death of him!"

"What would happen if you did tell Richard?"

"And disobeyed him? Oh, you do not know my husband in his blacker moods. The rage alone when he discovered my treachery might give him an apoplexy. And if he survived that, he would never assent. It would be hopeless."

"Would you like me to tell him? Richard could then pretend that he did not know."

Mrs Brown gave an abrupt little laugh. "Richard? Pretend? He's hopelessly transparent. He couldn't begin to hide the fact that he knew and conceal it from his father for one moment."

"Then why have you told me?" said Stephanie, sharply. Mrs Brown gave a little wave of her hand.

"Oh, my dear. Do you not see? As one who possibly might become Richard's wife and my daughter-in-law, I cannot let you go ahead thinking that you may be marrying a teacher. It is something his prospective wife must know, and something that he cannot tell you. And I cannot even risk waiting until you are formally engaged as you might go off and get married without telling us. I know, but young people do such strange things now-a-days. And I'm quite sure that Richard is capable of arriving home with a wife with no forewarning. So, I felt that you should know the full situation before you enter into any firm commitment. It is only fair."

"I understand," Stephanie said, after a pause. "Thank you for telling me, but it is a dreadful responsibility."

"Does it make any difference to your feelings? Do say that it does not. I think I would more than welcome you as a daughter-in law."

Stephanie paled. "Oh, don't say that!" she cried.

"Why not, my dear? Is there something wrong in it?"

"No, no," she whispered, visibly losing her normal composure. "Its just that - ."

"That you wouldn't want to come and live here? Do say if that is the case."

"On the contrary," said Stephanie lowly. "I'm beginning to think that I would love to." Moira studied the young woman for a few seconds before announcing that she would

fetch a pot of tea. It was the recipe for defusing emotional climaxes. It never failed. Stephanie was left alone to reflect. Unwillingly she had been brought to the point of admitting something she did not wish to accept. The house, the home at Eastgate, the escape from her life in London, it was all so desirable. It might be impossible to marry Richard and continue to live in the suburb, but at Eastgate the impediments were all distant. But oh, no! These were wild thoughts, mere fantasies. It was quite impossible! She was deluding and fooling herself. Her life had long been set on a course which precluded such dreams. "Mea culpa," she whispered to herself.

"You asked a question earlier," she said calmly when Mrs Brown returned with the tea tray. "Whether or not the question of Richard's possible involvement in the family business affected my feelings as far as he is concerned. I can honestly say that it does not. It will have no influence on my decision whether or not to marry him, should he ask me again. You may rest assured of that."

"I am glad," said Mrs Brown. "So very glad." The question burned cruelly, dark and red, in Stephanie's heart for the rest of the day. Here was this golden object which, if offered, would be within her grasp. Yet she could not take it. She knew that she could not thrust her hands forward into the fire. She quietly cursed the streak of capriciousness that had made her come to Eastgate. Clearly it had been a bad error of judgement. But if Richard did propose again, could she trust herself? Oh, how she wanted him to, yet how she dreaded it above all else! Her punishment was to spend those few days, which clustered together before the coming of the New Year, in the grip of a mortifying terror, but the proposal did not come.