

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The advent of the New Year was celebrated at Eastgate with the holding of a Civic Dinner and Ball at the Winter Gardens. As an Alderman, it was traditional, and an entitlement, for Arthur Brown to attend with his family, and his connections made it simple to obtain a further ticket for Stephanie and arrange the necessary adjustments in the seating plans. Mrs Brown's fears as to what Richard's (could she refer to her as intended?) young lady might wear were nullified when the young lady announced that she had come prepared for just such an occasion, and serenely appeared amidst the pandemonium of the Brown's preparations in a stunning, low-cut, olive green dress. "She is going to steal the show," whispered Mrs Brown to her husband and looking anxiously at her daughter. Sandra caught the glance and smiled. Of all the eligible young ladies present, Stephanie was the least to fear and, anyway, her chosen one would not even be there. A small ripple ran through the Browns when Stephanie was announced at the Reception. "So she has a surname," hissed Sandra.

"Of course she has," Richard retorted. The Mayor seemed to hold her hand for an improper length of time. Heads turned. Conversations stopped.

"You see?" whispered Mrs Brown, gripping her husband's arm. The five course dinner was quite forgettable and sadly bore the hallmarks of the problems that beset the act of catering for several hundred people in provincial kitchens. But the wine, arranged by Mr Brown with Stephanie's advice, was good and liberal, though Arthur drank little. The seating in the main conference hall was removed for the occasion and was set with small circular tables, each seating six, around the peripheral alcoves. The seating adjustments that resulted from Stephanie's inclusion left a spare chair at the Brown's table.

"That's for Dennet," said Sandra, wistfully. Dancing commenced and Richard, equipped with an armoury of apologies, took Stephanie on to the floor.

"Don't they make a splendid couple?" beamed Mrs Brown.

"She's too old for him," grunted her husband.

"Oh Arthur! She can't be more than two years older. Three at the most."

"Too mature, then. Too much for him to handle."

"She loves him!" Moira protested.

"Tosh!" exclaimed Mr Brown. Moira gave her husband a quizzical look, but he would say no more.

"You are the Belle," she said to Stephanie when they returned to the table. "You are stealing the show. If there was an award for Woman of the Night, you would walk away with it, no question about it!" Stephanie laughed, but Richard frowned. Once he had been proud to exhibit this possession. Now he realised he could find himself in the absurd predicament of having to defend and fight to maintain that position.

"I've got no hold over you, have I?" he said later when they were alone at the table, his parents quietly waltzing and reminiscing in some dark corner while Sandra gossiped with former school friends at another table.

"How do you mean?"

"Anyone here could come and ask you for a dance, you could accept, and I could do nothing to stop it."

"Would you mind?" He frowned. The question set him back on his heels, querying something which he assumed she took for granted. It could, too, lead to a dangerous subject.

"It's not relevant whether I mind or not. It is a question of fact."

"Then, yes, if you put it that way. Anyone could ask me for a dance and I could say "yes", but I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Not under these circumstances, when I am your guest. That binds me to you."

"I don't think I've enough rope," he said smiling, "not one strong enough, to bind you, Stephanie."

"No? Perhaps no man has," she said sadly.

"What will happen to you then? As you grow older? Spinsterhood?"

“Just a bottle of sleeping pills at the sight of the first grey hair.”

“Stephanie!” She brushed aside his protest.

“That little piece you said to me just then sounded strangely like the beginning of a dismissal. Are you trying to say goodbye to me?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It is my way of trying to tell you that I’ve started to make the adjustment, to bring my feelings down to your platonic plain. It is not easy.”

“No, it is not,” she said lowly.

“I don’t want us to stop meeting as we do,” he said hastily. “That is unless you wish to sever the relationship. But it mustn’t be too frequent. I couldn’t survive that.”

“Oh no,” she said emphatically. “I would like it to continue. I do enjoy your company. There is no need for us to change anything.”

Richard went to bed happy that morning, happier than he had been for a long time. There had never been much danger of Stephanie accepting any fresh proposal he made, but it was his own self that he could not trust. Now he had swam, once again, right out of his depth, and returned unharmed. Was he cured? It was a wonderful way to start the New Year!

A break in the weather brought a sudden thaw. Stephanie and Richard agreed to travel back to London together. “Has he said anything?” whispered Mrs Brown in her ear just before their departure.

“Not a thing. Nothing.”

“Give him time, my Dear. Two refusals can be hard on a man, but he’ll come knocking again. Give him time.”

“I dearly hope you are right, but I do have my doubts.”

“I am.”

“Then I will,” Stephanie said. There it was, the ultimate self-admission. From that time forth her situation would be hopeless.

It was hard for Richard to say goodbye to Stephanie at the flats. It would continue to be hard, but he would accustom himself to it.

Mrs Morgan greeted him with a smile that, had it been correctly directed and aimed would have both demolished the Wall and destroyed the Russian nuclear stockpile. It was remarkable, thought Richard, that her gentlemen did not, themselves, succumb. Clearly prolonged and repetitive exposure generated some kind of natural immunity. He listened to her apostation about the weather, politics and economics, before escaping upstairs to his room which he found intact, cold, and musty. A glance out of the window at the station sufficed to turn and focus his attention on thought about Hayes Close. He had to acknowledge that when he was in Stephanie’s presence, Eileen was totally eclipsed, but the spell was now broken and the hypnotic effect rapidly wore off. Now that they had separated, and even the memories of the Christmas Holiday were gathering dust and fading, his picture of Eileen intensified and appeared in sharper focus. He knew that he would have to go around to see her. He decided that he would go that very afternoon.

Eileen looked completely dishevelled when she opened the door. Her pale, gaunt, face was smeared with dirt and her dress and the loose scarf which was stretched across her hair, were both grimy. “Have I called at an inconvenient time?” he said, finding no sign of welcome in her features. “Has something happened?” She brushed aside a wisp of hair from her forehead and opened the door wider.

“Something has happened,” she said flatly, re-adopting last year’s gloomy monotony. “Come in and see.” His heart missed several beats as she led him upstairs and stopped outside Jonathan’s bedroom. “Look!” she cried, pushing the door back. Richard gasped. The room was in chaos. A large section of the ceiling had fallen, leaving a black, gaping, hole open to the roof tiles, broken only by the bare rafters. Debris was scattered across the bed, the floor, and the model railway which lay crushed, flattened under a heap of wooden slats and blackened plaster.

“Jonathan?” he said immediately.

“He’s in the spare room. We were lucky, if you can call it that. The first sign that there was any trouble was the appearance of a damp patch on the ceiling. Then, when a trickle of water started, I moved him. It was followed by a deluge, and this! It took me half an

hour to find how to turn the water off. I could have screamed and screamed! I still could!"

"The tank?"

"Split in the cold weather, and when the thaw started; just look at it!"

"You are insured?" She nodded gravely.

"Oh, yes. That's no problem, and the new tank is in and fitted. It was all done very quickly. The builder comes in tomorrow and I was just about to start salvaging any last things before it is all carted away. And look what has happened to all your hard work!"

"Is that Mr Brown, Mum?" called a voice from across the landing.

"Come and see him," she said with a sigh. The boy lay, pale and haggard, propped up with pillows. He seemed to have shrunk smaller than ever.

"You're not up out of bed yet?" said Richard.

"No," said Jonathan sadly. "I get told off if I get up. Have you seen the railway? Can any of it be saved?"

"I can have a look," said Richard, trying to appear, but not feeling, bright. "Perhaps I could get something going in here if enough can be recovered," he added, glancing upwards. "That is providing your mother assents, and nothing falls through the ceiling."

"Heaven forbid," said Mrs Cross from beside him. Richard returned to the bedroom and started to remove the heavy clumps of damp plaster.

"You don't have to do that," said Eileen. "It is very dirty."

"I'd better look now that I've said that I will. How is he? Has anything changed?"

"No," she hissed, pushing the door shut. "The doctor says he is uncertain as to how long he has. If you saw him at his worst you would be forgiven for thinking that it might happen very soon. But the general opinion is three to four months."

"And no hope?" he whispered.

"No," she whispered back.

The ceiling had been thorough in its demolition. The baseboard had split and folded along its central axis, buckling the trackwork and crushing items of rolling stock and such line side buildings as had survived the initial avalanche. The few items that had not been physically damaged in the collapse had all been saturated with water. Deep in the debris, near the bottom, he found his Christmas present, the Castle locomotive. It was battered and, probably, would not run again, but he cleaned it and added it to the small numbers of items that he thought might be serviceable. "It doesn't look very promising, I'm afraid," Richard told Eileen. "The damage is pretty extensive and comprehensive. Don't forget to include it all in your insurance claim."

"I'm sorry," she said as they, later, sat opposite each other at the kitchen table which had become the traditional venue for their meetings to talk things through. "I do seem to have become a mobile disaster area. You must not allow me to become a millstone around your neck. You have your job to do and your own life to lead. It shouldn't be so bound up in this seat of catastrophe."

"Perhaps I am the best judge of that," he replied quietly, thinking of how bold he might be now that the impediment of Stephanie was removed. She stared at him for a moment then, as if instinctively, she pulled the dusty scarf from her head which allowed her hair to tumble down over her shoulders. It had not been cut for weeks. It would soon rival that of Stephanie's in length.

"I like long hair," Richard thought.

"Did you have a nice Christmas?" she said with an effort.

"I did. But I cannot imagine that you did."

"It was awful," she said sadly. "It has been the first Christmas in my life when I could find nothing whatsoever to celebrate, no reason at all. And I felt so lonely, so alone in the World. I could have cried. I did cry. He had a bad day on Christmas Eve and went into a sort of coma in the morning, but he came out of it that afternoon and the first thing he asked me what day was it? Was it Christmas Day? I'm afraid that I simply burst into tears and told him that it was. I had this vision that he might die there and then and not see the next morning. And his presents! I had to buy him one. That was hard enough. But there was only yours and mine. Only those two! Nothing from Rhyl. I would have thought they'd remember and send

him something. Then I had to live a lie through Christmas Day itself. Oh, God, it was hard. I couldn't go through another Christmas like that again. And now, on top of all that, this! Where will it end? It really is too much."

"You mustn't go on like this. Let me take you out somewhere; to the cinema, a concert, just walking - anything to break the monotony and lift your spirits."

"You are kind, Richard, and I know that you mean well, but it is impossible. I couldn't. I am terrified at the thought of leaving him, even to just go to the shops. The doctor said it could happen quite suddenly at any time, without warning. And, if it seems hard for me, what can it be like for him?"

"I cannot imagine," said Richard.

The new term started a few days later. The usual brief social pleasantries were exchanged before the school settled down to the important task of building up to that year's examinations. Richard felt that his process of individual assessment and attention was beginning to show results, but he found that it was hopelessly time-consuming. It was not as simple as just paying attention to the boys who were struggling and leaving the remainder to cope unassisted. There emerged a small number of exceptionally bright boys who also warranted and demanded individual treatment and stimulus. It meant that the standard of difficulty of work set them needed to be above the average, and this undermined the uniformity of his original assessments. He now realised, and admitted to Mr Pennington, that there was no hope of ever extending the scheme to cover the other boys in the remaining seven Forms, but he did resolve to try and keep the pilot scheme running until the end of the academic year.

The builders arrived at Hayes Close, reinstated the ceiling and Jonathan's bedroom, cleared up, and left. Eileen did not move her son back into his room. Instead, with his assistance, but against Richard's advice and wishes, Jonathan was moved into her bedroom, Eileen maintaining that he might call out in the night and that she might not hear him if he was across the landing. Richard had to carry him because he found that he could not stand, appearing to have lost the strength in his legs. It soon became clear that he was having difficulty in gripping objects. Eileen thought that it was pointless to attempt to restore any part of the railway in her bedroom, but Richard voiced his doubts.

"Shouldn't we be doing something? Surely otherwise he'll suspect? He'll certainly think it odd. I mean - ."

"I think he knows," she said flatly. "He asked me why he couldn't walk. I told him that it was due to his muscles wasting as he had spent a long time in bed without exercise. But he hasn't asked me about his hands, despite the fact that I virtually now have to feed him, he's grown so weak. I'm sure its because he knows. Then he looks up at me with those huge eyes when I carry him into the toilet. Soon he'll be incontinent and - ." She broke off and shuddered.

"Shouldn't he go into hospital, then?"

"Why? What can they do for him that I cannot do? No, it is my duty to stay and care for him to the end, just as I did for Owen's mother. It's strange, isn't it, if you think about it, that the duty of care that parents have towards their children is now rarely reciprocated by those children. It seems a little unfair, not that it could possibly apply in my case."

"I suppose the children might argue that they have less say in their being born than do their parents. They don't ask to be brought into the World," said Richard defensively.

"I suppose you are right," she said, and then lost interest in the subject.

As the Winter progressed and Jonathan's infirmity spread, it became clear that Eileen's concern about her son was gradually developing into an obsession. At times she had to be almost dragged away from his bedside, though there were occasions when she would permit Richard to sit there in her place, just to relieve her and allow her, with some freedom of conscience, to slip away and undertake some essential or, even, non-essential task, not that she ever enjoyed any lasting escape from her anxiety. Jonathan sank lower. The loss of the use of his hands was followed by a paralysis which crept insidiously up his arms and legs as if

some awful disability had entered his extremities and was seeping its way through his tissues towards his heart. At times he would be alert and mentally responsive, but at other times, and such periods became longer in duration and more frequent in occurrence, he would relapse and the tide of his consciousness would ebb into a comatose state. The doctor came to visit them regularly and told Eileen that it was all to be expected, but he still would not predict with any degree of certainty, when the end would be.

Richard would sit at the bedside and read to the boy, or describe the model railway at Eastgate. Often, Jonathan would slip away out of consciousness while Richard, unaware, continued. Each visit seemed to be more harrowing than the preceding one, yet Richard could not but continue to call. With the exception of Mrs Howard and the family doctor, he was the only visitor to the little house in Hayes Close. It was as if the family was in quarantine while the hand of Death hovered overhead. The strain of those months had a dreadful effect on Eileen, sapping her strength and bringing her frequently to the brim of total collapse. Richard's fears for her sanity grew as she became increasingly possessive, protective and reclusive, shutting herself in the house, refusing to go out, and allowing no-one other than the indefatigable Mrs Howard to attend to her shopping. Once, when Richard arrived on a Saturday afternoon late in February, she refused to let him in, shouting something quite incoherent through the letterbox.

"She has a new fear," whispered Mrs Howard who had heard and came to his aid. "She now thinks that someone from the 'ealth Authority is coming to take 'im away from 'er." Richard groaned.

"Where will it all end?" he sighed.

"With 'er right 'round the bend if nothing don't 'appen soon," said Mrs Howard, loudly. On that occasion, hearing both voices outside the door, Eileen became rational, recognised and admitted them. But the experience left an indelible fear in Richard's heart over what he now saw as his plans for their future.

The visits to Hayes Close took their toll of Richard, too. Almost daily, they consumed his precious and limited spare hours. The problems there occupied and predominated his mind throughout the day. He would go to bed, but he would not sleep. Once again his appetite waned as his meals became erratic or non-existent. Worst of all, his grip on the Form and his grasp of his job began both to slip. "You really are doing too much," stressed Mr Pennington, kindly but clearly concerned. "Can you not eliminate your involvement in this sad Cross business?" Richard shook his head.

"It's impossible now. How could I? I couldn't just walk away and forget it. I am committed and there's no way out. There is no-one else."

"Cannot the Authorities help?"

"I think it is too late for that. As I understand it, they would have to take Jonathan away from his home, and Eileen has a pathological fear of that. It would just about finish her. I think her doctor thinks that there is nothing that could be done for Jonathan if he were to be transferred to hospital, but that it would push her over the brink to goodness knows where."

"But what of yourself? It isn't your problem, really. You have become far too involved. I did warn you."

"You did, and I understood perfectly. But, you see, I don't think my involvement really fits your stereotype. It is not the pupil - ."

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed Mr Pennington, knowingly. "Cherchez la femme, eh? Well, I do not think that things are necessarily seen that way around here. In fact, it has been suggested that there was someone else, someone quite different? Still, if that had been the case, my boy, it would appear to have been hopeless. But you must sensibly try to reduce your commitment, mark my words. If your health, your job, and reputation all suffer, you may be unable to provide the support and strength that Mrs Cross will undoubtedly need, when it is required. And, believe me, it will be required, sooner or later."

The words had a salutary effect on Richard. Until then he had concentrated all his practical thought and energies, other than dreams, on the immediate problem of Jonathan's illness and helping Eileen through it. He had his vague ideas about the future, but these were no more than aspirations, and he had never given any serious thought to what he would do, or

suggest that Eileen should do, in the weeks immediately following her son's death, when it came. Now he came to realise that his entire objective and its realisation lay beyond that unhappy event, and that he should be living, now, in anticipation of the day. Life would go on, and it would be worth living even, if scars remained. Somehow he had to make Eileen view the future in the same way.

That bleak and wintry term saw other profound changes in Richard's relationships. That with Dennet suffered, faltered, and degenerated. At first Richard assumed that it arose from his preoccupation, but gradually he realised that it was Dennet at fault; he who was acting oddly and rashly. His time keeping became erratic and when he arrived at school he frequently looked haggard, red-faced, bleary-eyed, and spoke with the semblance of a slur in his voice. He aged and there was little sign of the light-hearted comrade whom Richard had first met and befriended. There could be no doubt in Richard's mind that Dennet, like himself, was suffering some strength-sapping, demoralising, extra-school crisis. He tried to broach the subject in a considerate and friendly manner. "Haven't seen much of you recently, Dennet," he said as cheerfully as he could one afternoon when they found themselves alone together in the common room.

"Eh?" grunted the Instructor who appeared to be on the point of falling asleep in his chair.

"How is your mother keeping?" Richard thought that the trouble might lie there. Dennet roused himself, pulling his limp and reluctant body upwards.

"She's all right, I suppose. I must get over to see her; haven't been since the time we went together."

"Didn't you see her at Christmas?" Dennet gave him a fierce look.

"No!" he said vehemently. "Something came up." With that he slumped down again, closed his eyes, and would say no more. After several episodes of a similar nature, Richard gave up. Whatever was consuming Dennet, or whatever he was up to, he clearly was not prepared to confide in him. Nor did he show the slightest amount of interest in either Richard's problem at Hayes Close, or Sandra. Thus when, near the end of that term, Mr Crompton burst into the staff room, closed his eyes, sniffed, roared that he could smell alcohol and demanded to know where Dennet was, Richard shook his head and made no attempt to track down the wanted man to alert him.

Dennet was caught, and survived that carpeting, but it now became a favourite topic of conversation among the other masters as to how many more he would come through. Richard stood aloof from and took no part in such discussions, yet as he listened there in his heart was the black, gripping, fear that if Dennet was to be the first to go, he could be the next.

His relationship with Stephanie suffered too. She continued in her habit of eating at the restaurant, and he knew that if he went there, most evenings he would find her. So, he would go, now and then, when the mood took him, out of interest, out of boredom, or spite. She always greeted him kindly and enthusiastically, and she never once reproached him for his absences and inattention towards her. Nor did she query the causes of his absences, biting back her questions as they arose on her lips and contenting herself with the sparse morsels of information that he, defensively, felt obliged to throw her way. She listened and did not complain. Nor did he expect her to. Their relationship was platonic. It had been her wish. Yet, along with the other observers, she was alarmed by the cancer that was devouring his person and he came under mounting sisterly criticism over the matter of his irregular habits and his obvious lack of care for himself. As he listened, the irony was not lost on him. He was now the one who was to be reproached for being too elusive, reclusive, over absorbed in both his work and the 'other business' as Stephanie was accustomed to calling the commitment, about which she knew so little and suspected so much, at Hayes Close. She told him that he was becoming a dull Jack, all work and no play. He should go out more. All the very points he had made and levelled at her when they first met were now returned, and with interest. And, with a minimum of paraphrasing, he repeated it all to Eileen just as Stephanie said it to him, only now Eileen was the subject on the tirade, not Richard Brown. The circle was all but complete. It seemed unbreakable.

As the Winter term drew to a close, Richard wrote home to say that he would not visit Eastgate during the Easter holiday. He had purposely missed going home at half term and he was now less prepared to stray far from Hayes Close than he had ever been. He excused himself to his family, inventing an immense amount of schoolwork and the need to prepare for the critical summer examinations, all or any part of which could have been carried out at Eastgate. Curiously, his mother's reply to his letter arrived at Grove Crescent on the anniversary of his leaving home. He plucked it from the hallstand and carried it to the breakfast table. From the other end came an excited babble. "Coral Reef!" Mr Frobisher was saying, half on his feet and bobbing about in his place like a defective jack-in-the-box. "Coral Reef!" he repeated. "This is the big one!"

"Its an animal," someone said. "I thought you said stick to insects?"

"No, no, no! We've got to get into the Big League. This is it!"

Richard opened the letter. There had been a time when its bitter and reproachful tone would have shaken and hurt him, and would have pained him for days. Now he scanned his mother's words and arguments dispassionately, unmoved by the plea with which she closed. There could be nothing at Eastgate which could rank in importance with the matter of life and death at Hayes Close. Yet, the arrival of the anniversary did rivet his attention towards a review of the progress he had made in the year, a thought process which absorbed him. There was no doubt that he had started out well. There was no doubt that since Christmas everything had gone disastrously into reverse and was now in a serious decline. It simply had to be arrested. Mr Pennington was correct in his advice. No-one, not he, the boys, the school, his family, Stephanie or Eileen, would benefit should he falter and fail. A remedy was essential, and he had to find one that did not depend on the death of Jonathan Cross for its solution. It was still impossible for him to stop his visits to the house, or disassociate himself. He could only change the course of his life and Eileen's. Gradually, as he tossed the problem around in his weary mind, an idea of the means by which it could be achieved, emerged.

He folded his mother's letter and thrust it into his pocket. He neither read it again, nor answered it. A little later, when Stephanie saw him pass below on his way to the school, she could detect both a bounce in his stride which had been absent for many weeks and, on his face, was it a smile?