

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Richard barely left his room at Grove Crescent that weekend. He sat for hours, vacantly staring at the wall or out of the window. It rained continuously, a fact that provided him with an ample, if superficial, excuse for not going out. Really, there was only one place that he should go. He was mortified by the thought of visiting Hayes Close, yet he knew that sooner or later he would have to go. The affair could not be left as it was, but her words, loaded with anger, hatred, and a quality of ultimate finality, still echoed in his ears. If he had to go, better that it was later, rather than sooner. Eileen might calm down and be in a more receptive mood after a few days. At present, he felt instinctively, his presence would serve no purpose whatsoever. And if there was the tiniest risk that a visit from him would worsen matters, he would be advised to stay away. Could he sound out the ground by calling to see Mrs Howard? There was the risk that Eileen might catch sight of him. If only he knew Mr Howard. He could always scour the public houses in the area in a search. But that was a pretty futile idea as he had no clue what 'arry would look like.

He toyed with the idea of writing a long letter of condolence, regrets, sympathy, but with the emphasis on the future. What was in the past, was - . Yet, there was the nagging thought that if he did write to her, he had no way of knowing what her reaction was if, and when, she read his letter. She could just screw it up and throw it away, and he would never know. At least, if he could meet her face to face he could argue in his defence. But when could and should he go? There was now Stephanie's party to consider. He would not want to be committed to going if Eileen had a change of heart and was receptive to his olive branch. He resolved to leave the visit for as long as he could into the coming week. He would call around at Hayes Close on the Wednesday, straight from school. If Eileen refused to see or talk to him, or was difficult and threw him out, he would go with Stephanie, just for the hell of it!

He noticed, that Monday morning, that both Mr Hughes and Mr Frobisher were absent from their places and breakfast. No-one commented, wondered if they had either been sucked out into the fifth dimensional kitchen, or consumed by the insects they were so fond of talking about. Then, it was not unusual for the Technical Sales Representative to be away at times in the week, but Mr Frobisher? Perhaps the truth was that he had gone on holiday? Dennet had gone missing, too. He did not appear at school that day and no-one knew where he might be, nor what might have happened to him on Friday afternoon. "He is going to be in awful trouble when he does come in," said Mr Pennington. "But I really didn't expect to see you, Richard. Should you be here?"

"I might as well be here as anywhere."

"I'm sure Mr Larkins would let you have a couple of days leave, if that would help."

"Thanks, but I don't think it would. Being here might help take my mind off of things."

"I reckon that it is all off," Mr Pennington told his wife later in the day.

"Richard and Eileen? If so, it is for the best."

"You think so?"

"She would never have made him a suitable wife. Not from what I know of her. Not with his career prospects in mind," said Mrs Hiller, rearranging the files on her desk.

"You think not? What is he likely to do, then? Marry your Stephanie? Larkins would fight that tooth and nail."

"Yes he would and for all the wrong reasons. Michael thinks it would benefit her, but I think if it did, it would be more than it would him, but then I don't think she would. Stephanie is an independent woman, with a mind all of her own. I know that more than most!"

"And a reputation." Joyce Hiller screwed up her nose.

"I do not think she would marry him. She says she will never marry anyone. If she ever does marry, which I would have thought highly unlikely, she will aim much higher, at some-one who can change her life and take her right away from this area and all her

connections. Richard Brown just does not fit the bill.”

“But our compact stands?” She smiled wistfully.

“That I will leave him alone? Have no fear of that, though - .”

“Though?”

“I could help him. There may be things about life that my daughter will not have taught him but which he needs to learn. If the situation arose and the conditions were right - .” Mr Pennington shook his head.

“Joyce, Joyce,” he said woefully. “What have I done?” She gave a sharp little laugh as he shut the door after him. It now needed only the right opportunity.

Richard's nerves remained on a knife's edge for the next two days. A terror would seize and possess him every time he thought of Hayes Close. He was unable to erase the vision of Eileen standing at the top of the pavilion steps, ready to attack him. She sought her retribution in wild and grotesque dreams. She dogged his footsteps as he passed to and from the school. She was there, at corners, in doorways, in gateways, poised, waiting for him. Wednesday came. At Grove Crescent Mr Frobisher still had not returned. At school there was no sign or news of Dennet, though no-one appeared to query his absence anymore. The day passed and the coming of the late afternoon filled him with trepidation. How easy it would have been to just walk away, indeed, not to go at all. If he did not go then, he would never go.

He rang the door bell. There was no response. He hammered on the door-knocker, called her name through the letter box, all to no avail. The house appeared dead, empty, unoccupied. In despair, he walked past the garage to the back garden. There was the kitchen, and the table at which they had so often sat and talked, surviving so many problems, surmounted so many barriers, only to fall and be torn asunder at the last. There was the workshop behind the garage. A year ago he had worked happily in there with three bright eyed boys. Now all was gone, passed for ever. What dreadful changes the passage of time had wrought!

“Lord preserve us, it's you, Mr Brown! I 'eard all this thumping and banging and I thought if must be the bailiffs!”

“Hello, Mrs Howard. Actually, I was looking for Mrs Cross,” he said quietly, trying not to appear concerned.

“She's gone away. Straight after the funeral. Oh, it was such a sad affair. Such a small coffin. No-one would have believed he could have fitted into such a small coffin.” She swept up the corner of her apron to brush away several tears which threatened to appear. “But you didn't go, did you?”

“I was unable to,” he said defensively, wondering if, and doubting that, Eileen had denounced him to Mrs Howard. “You say she's gone away?”

“She didn't tell you?”

“She was uncertain of her plans when I saw her last. She was rather over-wrought.”

“As far as I know,” said Mrs Howard, drawing him confidentially close, “she's gone to stay with 'er sister-in-law in Wales. Met 'er at 'er 'usband's funeral, I did. The 'ouse is to be sold and everything else wound up. Perfect tragic, my 'arry says.”

“Did she leave a forwarding address?”

“Not with us, she didn't. It was all a bit 'asty; decided rather sudden, you know. If I 'ear from 'er, shall I contact you?”

“Oh, please do, Mrs Howard,” Richard nodded. He walked slowly back to Grove Crescent. It made sense. Eileen would want to get away from the house which contained so many dreadful and unpleasant reminders of the past. He would have done the same thing himself. Yet she had made no attempt to make contact with him. Would she write to him from Wales, or was it now really at an end? He let himself in. He had a half an hour before he was due to meet Stephanie. Mrs Morgan called out to him as he started up the stairs.

“There's a parcel for you, Mr Brown. On the hallstand. It's quite heavy. I cannot imagine what it is.” Puzzled, he took it up to his room. It was long, rectangular, and weighed several pounds. He was expecting no such object. On the outside he could find no clue as to the sender. His name and the Grove Crescent address were neatly typed, so it was from

someone who knew him there. The postmark was perfectly smudged in the best post office practise. There was no indication there. With a mounting curiosity, he tore open the brown paper wrapping.

Inside, wrapped in corrugated cardboard and tissue paper, was a damaged railway locomotive. A lump came to his throat as he recognised it as the one he had given Jonathan Cross for Christmas. Feverishly he hunted through the packaging for a note, but there was none, nothing but the engine. Sadly he crossed the room and stood it on the mantle shelf. So, she had made contact. It was over.

Stephanie was waiting for him when he eventually arrived at the restaurant. She was looking concerned, but brightened at his approach. "I'm sorry that I'm late," he said breathlessly, "but I had things to do."

"I was beginning to wonder if you were coming at all, if you'd gone somewhere else." He stared into her eyes.

"I did," he said slowly, callously watching the pain growing in her expression. "She wasn't there. She's gone; gone to North Wales. It is all over."

"I see. What will you do now?"

"Do? I don't know - nothing, I suppose. Come back to seeing you in the evenings?" It was a risky thing to say. She would be within her rights to simply dismiss him there and then. What was it she had said about receiving second-hand men? But she smiled.

"I would like that. I would like that very much. Now, about Friday. Are you still interested in going?"

"I suppose so," he said. He was not that interested, but what else was there to do other than mope about in his room.

"Then I'll give you all the details now as I will be unable to see you tomorrow. Do you want to write it down?" He did not, but he did. A code number, a password, the address and the time. It all seemed pathetically childish.

"Please be on time," she implored, gripping his arm. "This is most important! Don't be late. For my sake, don't be late. Promise?" It was Stephanie being her mysterious self again, trying to weave her magic web around him. He was immune to it, yet her words seemed to have some special import, so much so that they haunted him right up to the night in question.

"I won't be late," he said.

"You won't regret it," she whispered. "I promise."

He returned to Grove Crescent and went to bed. He was still deeply depressed, yet was there a ray of light? If Eileen was lost forever, could he pick up the wisp-like threads of his former attachment to Stephanie? The end of the Term was near. Perhaps she would be willing to come down to Eastgate for part of the Summer Holiday? Something might be made, or come, of it. But she had declined him before and it would be foolish to nurture any hopes now. And why was he bothered, anyway? Suddenly, as he lay there in the dark, trying to shut out the printing presses, he remembered the two letters which still nestled in his jacket pocket. He got out of bed and took them out, but on a wild impulse, instead of opening them, he placed them on the mantle shelf behind the Castle locomotive. After all, he was thoroughly exhausted, unbearably tired. He could read them in the morning.

Richard had a bad night, restless, disturbed, dreaming the same, ghoulish, dream, over and over again. He had experienced it first fifteen months earlier, now it had returned to torment him, with Sandra and Eileen exchanging places, and then seeming to fuse into each other. And the inescapable end in Mr Larkins' study, try as he might to avoid it, continually confronted him. Inevitably, he overslept and had to dress and dash out of the house without breakfast. That day, dull and lifeless, passed by slowly and uneventfully. Everyone around Richard seemed to be depressed and preoccupied and there was no Stephanie to go to in the early evening to cheer him up. Things were much the same on the Friday morning. Breakfast was taken in an uncanny silence and from a morose Mrs Morgan there was not the slightest threat of a life-threatening smile. Richard went to the school, returned in the late afternoon,

and sat in his room, staring at the Castle and the two envelopes tucked behind it. The locomotive memorised him, stirring tender memories, but that was all in vain. It was over, he told himself. Something was needed to shake him out of this morbid, turbid, state of mind.

He heard Stephanie's ominous parting words, ringing in his ears. He would not be late. In fact, he set off earlier than necessary to assure his prompt arrival. The address that Stephanie had given him lay a fair walk away, well beyond the park. He knew the area as one of tree-lined, wide, quiet, roads with large, spacious houses set in immense plots at the heads of lengthy secluded drives, all very exclusive and desirable. It was a toss up between taking a taxi and walking, but as it was a fine evening, he chose to walk. Walking would also allow him to think, though his thoughts of late seemed to be wearing through the circular groove they pursued around his head. For an unaccountable reason, he turned the wrong way and found himself outside the restaurant in the High Street. Perhaps it was sheer habit and a lack of attention that took him there. To his surprise he found it closed with a notice in the window which apologised to the regular customers and explained that it had been forced to shut down. There was no explanation, and Stephanie had not given the slightest indication that her aunt was planning to close the business. What did it mean? As he stood and contemplated this new threat to the routine and stability of his life, a familiar voice, slightly slurred, made him jump. "Richard, old chap! Fancy running into you! What a plea-s-ant surprise!"

"Dennet!" he exclaimed, turning around. "Where have you been?"

"Troubles, troubles, old boy," said the Physical Education Instructor, waving a finger and drawing close. "Troubles. You can not imagine how they can all accumulate and rain down on you."

"Perhaps I can," said Richard.

"You must come and have a jar. For old time's sake," said Dennet, catching hold of his arm and nearly pulling him over. "You must!"

"Just one, then. Then I must go." They went into the Saracen's Head.

"I'll buy this round," announced Dennet and returned with two pints and two whiskies.

"You're on chasers? You're celebrating?"

"Commiserating. Celebrating the end of the World; the end of life; of society, as Dennet knows it. It's all collapsed; fallen apart at the seams; shattered. You couldn't begin to imagine, Richard, you really couldn't." Richard looked up at the clock. Dennet was gulping his drink as if the World really was about to end, there and then. "Your round, Richard," he announced before Richard was a third of the way down the glass.

"Just one, then," said Richard getting to his feet. "Then I must move on."

"To the Dog and Bacon?"

"It is in the right direction," said Richard weakly. "You still have not told me what has happened to you," he said, a little thickly, as they downed another pint in the Magpie. "And I will have to go soon. I really must."

"You cant leave me yet. Not until I've told you all and got your advice. That's what I need - good advice; from a friend?" Dennet slumped forwards, holding his head in his hands. "God, its awful," he continued. "Its terrible. I'm at my wit's end. I just don't know what to do. You'll listen, won't you? You'll help me?"

"I'll listen," said Richard, eyeing the clock. "I don't know if I can help."

"It's Crompton behind it all, not Larkins. I was wrong all along. It is Crompton! Be warned! Have you noticed his eyes?"

"He keeps them shut most of the time."

"They're too close together. And his eyebrows meet in the middle."

"I hadn't noticed that."

"Of course you haven't!" said Dennet, becoming very animated and waving his hands about. "Of course, you wouldn't. Most people wouldn't because he's deceitful and plucks them!"

"Go on."

"He does, you know."

"How can you tell?"

“Little red marks there; in the morning.”

“I thought that was just his blood boiling, or a birthmark.”

“No, no! He's the embodiment of evil, and architect of others' misfortune, and he disguises the fact so that no-one will suspect or find him out.”

“I thought he was a pillar of moral respectability.”

“Mo-ral respectable - respecti - . None of them are!”

“Is.”

“None of them IS! They're all rotten at the very core. Monsters, perverts! Don't let them fool you, Richard, don't. Take my word for it. None of them, not Pennington, not Larkins. Do you know what they have done? Do you know what that butcher Larkins has done? He's taken my little girl and packed her off to Switzerland. To Switzerland, would you believe? And what are they going to do there? What? They're going to slit her open and take it out! Cut her right open! What do you think of that? There's moral resp-ect-a-b-il-it-y for you!” He slumped back and contemplated his empty glass, holding it up to the light and examining it closely. “Someone's drunk my drink,” he said woefully. “Some bastard's drunk it!” He looked around. “Crompton's here,” he hissed. “He's around here somewhere, or one of his agents is. It's just the sort of dirty trick he'd play, finishing a fellow's drink when he's not looking. Let's sneak out and go to the Hen and Chicken. I don't reckon that they'd let his kind in there.”

“I've got to go.”

“Got to go?” said Dennet loudly. “Got to go? What's so damned important that you've got to go?”

“I've got to go to a party.”

“A party?” Dennet almost shouted, seeming to address all who turned their heads. “We are talking all this life and death stuff and you've got to go to a party! You did say a party? God, Richard, I don't think much of your priorities. I really don't! And I thought you were - a friend.”

“I'll take you to the Hen and Chicken,” said Richard lamely. “But that's got to be an end of it.”

“I can manage,” said Dennet, irritably drawing his arm away. “There's no hurry.”

“Crompton's coming,” Richard whispered in his ear.

“I'll kill the bastard!” cried Dennet, looking around.

“It's all gone,” said Dennet suddenly after Richard had bought the first round in the Hen and Chicken. “All gone, all of it.”

“What's all gone, Dennet?”

“My nest egg, all of it,” shrugged Dennet. “The bailiffs, Mister Crompton's bailiffs came and took it all away.”

“Took it away?”

“Broke down the doors. Took it all. I tell you, its the end. I can't go on. Really, I cannot.”

“What have the bailiffs taken away?”

“Everything. I got home and they were there, everywhere, and the O'Hallerons had disappeared. Said the rent had not been paid for months, waved a piece of paper, took everything in the house and threw me out onto the street.”

“Everything?”

“Cigarette cards - gone!”

“But they couldn't touch your nest egg, could they?”

“Sunk!”

“Pardon?”

“It sunk!” reiterated Dennet, becoming impatient at Richard's inability to comprehend. “Ship didn't come in. It sunk, or was scuttled. Some Australian Mining speculation, I don't know; to take minerals from the Barrier Reef; took advice of broker chap, too. One of Crompton's agents. Put the lot in, he said. Big killing - it's collapsed. Lost everything. Won't see it again, nor the broker chap. I saw to that. I tell you, Richard, it is the end. What do you think, Richard?” Richard's heart leapt as he realised that it was a quarter to

eleven. "Nothing to go on with," continued his companion. "Came down today to see a legal fellow. Can't even afford to pay him. No hope, no job, no references. What d'you think? What would you do?"

"I don't know, Dennet. I don't know what to suggest."

"I suggest," said Dennet in a new, ponderous, voice, "I suggest that we go to the Moby Dick. They stay open later there. Who's for the Moby Dick, eh? Yooooou'll come along, Richard, won't you?" Richard went along, not because he had any desire to do so, but because he was now afraid to leave Dennet alone in his present state of mind. The least he could do was to see Dennet safely to where ever it was that he was going; or at least on to a bus or a train. But Dennet clearly had little intention of going home, wherever that might now be. "The night's young!" he cried with bravura. "And it could be the last! Go home? Home? Got no home to go to! The bailiffs have taken it! K-crompton's bailiffs!"

At the Moby Dick, Richard desperately watched as the precious minutes slipped away. She would be there, waiting, wondering where he was, whether he would come, and eventually giving him up for lost. Dennet became almost incomprehensible and, at around eleven twenty, he fell asleep. "He's had more than enough, Mr Brown," said the bartender. "A friend of yours?" Richard started at the sound of his name, wondering if he had encountered one of Crompton's agents.

"Sort of. But how do you know who I am?" The bartender smiled and leaned forward.

"I'm Harry Howard. I've seen you often enough when you've called next door in the past. Terrible business, that, especially the way it ended up. An awful shock."

"Has anyone heard from Mrs Cross?" asked Richard as he recovered from his shock.

"Not a word, but, then, I don't expect that we will. She'll want to forget, I reckon. What is he trying to forget? I'm glad he's got you to look after him." The bar closed at midnight. Richard aroused Dennet with difficulty and manoeuvred him out into the street with Mr Howard's help.

"Where now, Dennet?" he asked loudly. "Where are you going to?"

"Station. Got a ticket - home to mother - that's right." Richard half-carried, half-walked, Dennet to the railway station. Although it was a short distance, Dennet moved at a snail's pace punctuated by long irritating rests. When they arrived there, Richard found the ticket office closed and the barrier deserted, so he guided Dennet onto the platform and placed him in a train that was standing there. "I won't forget, Richard," Dennet slurred. "You've been a real friend. The only one. I won't forget this." He slumped back and closed his eyes. "Whatever will become of mum, now?" he said sadly, rolling his head from side to side. "Who'll look after her? What will become of her?" Richard closed the door quietly. Through the window he could see that Dennet was now sat motionless. Perhaps he had fallen asleep. It was the last time ever that he saw him.

With a sense of growing panic, Richard almost ran through the deserted streets to the address that Stephanie had given him. The house was in a wide road, shaded by profuse trees which masked the occasional street lamp. When he eventually located the number, his doubts rose. The long drive was devoid of cars and outwardly there was no sign of life. The house appeared to be in complete darkness. It hardly seemed the venue for a party, certainly not of the kind described by Stephanie. Yet this was the address he had written down. Perhaps he had made a mistake. Perhaps it was all a waste of time. With fading hope he started up the drive. What would he say if he woke the sleeping occupants and dragged them from their beds? But as he came approached the building he had the uncanny feeling that he was being watched and he thought he heard loud and distinct whispers from the bushes on both sides of the drive. As the moon slipped behind a cloud and the drive was clad in darkness, he stopped walking, and the noise ceased. Was it his imagination, the result of too much drink and exhaustion? His tension grew, coupled with a mixture of fear and despair. If it was there, if she was there, what, then, would he say? Explain that he could not leave Dennet? Would she believe that and accept his sense of priority? Did it matter? Did anything matter? The urgency that gripped his body told him that it did matter. He found that the outer front door was ajar, revealing a darkened lobby from which came the reassuring, merry, sound of a girl's voice. "Halloo," he called.

“Who's that?” said a man's voice sharply. “What do you want?” A dark figure loomed before him, then a second reared out of the gloom behind the first. “Are you one of the guests, Sir?”

“Yes,” said Richard, nervously.

“Then you will be in possession of certain information, the aforesaid being the requisite number and the password.” For one terrifying moment Richard thought that his memory was about to fail him, but it came and he quoted the information that Stephanie had given him. It worked and he was ushered through the inner door into a huge, dimly lit, hall. “You may have some trouble in finding anyone in particular, Sir. They're all over the place now.” And the door swung shut behind him. The size of the hall surprised Richard. It would have been a credit to the most grandiose of hotels and Richard had the instantaneous impression that the whole of the house at Eastgate could have been fitted inside and still have room to spare. A long, wide, curving staircase arced away upwards before him through the balustrades of which he could see the indistinct shapes of couples. A short buxom blonde girl, who appeared to have a problem with the maintenance of her equilibrium, produced by factors other than her ample proportions, appeared out of nowhere and addressed him.

“Have you seen Frankenstein?” she murmured, rubbing his shoulder and reaching up to kiss his cheek. “I've lost him, which is very naughty of him. And he's a perfect monster! Come on, you will do instead!” She half pulled, half led, him into a room opening off of the hall which was sparsely populated with couples, caressing and in various stages of love-making. But Richard sought only Stephanie, and she was not there. Without a word he broke free from the blonde girl, just as she was in the act of spreading herself over a vacant settee, and burst through a pair of double doors only to find a scene similar to the one he had just left. A further set of doors leading from the second room, revealed the same situation. Stephanie's prediction of the nature of the party had been honest.

“Richard! How wonderful!” said a familiar, velvety, voice from behind one of the doors. “I didn't expect to find you here.” It was Joyce Hiller, still wearing her snake bracelet, her hair ruffled, lipstick smeared, and her low-cut white dress creased and askew.

“I'm looking for Stephanie,” he cried in despair at what appeared to be becoming a nightmare.

“Stephanie? Always Stephanie!” she replied, tugging at her shoulder straps. “You're too late, anyway. She's been taken. Have me instead.”

Panic and utter desperation drove him to flee, almost running from room to room, repeating Stephanie's parting valedictory words to himself, over and over. A few heads turned, but most of the couples were too deeply engrossed in each other to care about him. He flew upstairs, stepping on and stumbling over the prone figures and outstretched limbs. He had looked in seven rooms in vain before he fulfilled his quest. Two women were cavorting on the large bed. One, naked, was kneeling astride the second who, apparently dressed, lay on her back. At his sudden entrance, both looked around in astonishment. “Richard!” gasped Stephanie in horror.

“Brown!” said the other woman in a deep masculine voice, moving so abruptly that the wig fell to the floor. It was Mr Larkins. For a moment the three of them froze, fixed, as if turned to stone, trapped, fused into the apices of an eternal triangle suspended in time. Then Richard broke free and turned.

“Richard!” called Stephanie, frantically. “Oh God, Richard! I did wait. Really I did, but you didn't come. Why didn't you come? Richard?” He closed the door. As he went down the stairs his pace quickened. Above him he could hear her on the landing, calling after him, his name mingled with sobbing. He did not look back.

Once in the street he broke into a frenzied run which gradually reduced firstly to a trot, then to walking pace. He walked aimlessly for several hours, not in any particular direction nor with any purpose other than to put as much distance between him and the dreadful house he had just left. He ceased to care about time. He stopped thinking. His brain was bruised and numb. He felt desolate. He paid no attention to his surroundings, but went on in a trance-like stupor, like a man, lost in the desert without water, hopeless, doomed to wander until he succumbed and dropped, or someone rescued him. His first encounter with

reality was the police car stopping beside him.

“Are we going somewhere, Sir?” said a voice from within. The face was familiar, and the policeman recognised him. “Or coming from somewhere, maybe?”

“A party,” muttered Richard, resenting the intrusion.

“Celebrating? Is that it, Sir?” he said, opening the car door.

“Quite the opposite,” said Richard, beginning to recover his senses.

“Misfortune, then? A lot of it about. My wife says that the PTA's funds have disappeared, and I've had my own share, too. Lost my savings in a venture. Can't let it get us down, can we? Life's got to go on.”

“Not savings,” mumbled Richard.

“Girl friend, then? Or family? It's all the same. I see it all. But it crumbles, tumbles, and you pick up and start again. Are you sure you'll be all right?” he added, looking closely at Richard.

“Yes,” said Richard quietly. “I'll find somewhere to sit and think it out.”

“We can't give you a lift somewhere?” Richard looked around him. Suddenly the road and the buildings took on a familiar appearance. He had walked in a gigantic loop.

“No. I haven't far to go,” he said slowly. “Thank you all the same.” The policeman scrutinised him for a moment, then returned to his car.

“Take care, then, Sir,” he said. Richard watched him drive slowly away, then started to shuffle in the same direction. Around him, life was beginning to reappear as the dawn broke upon the houses from the East. A milkman, bottles clinking, passed and stared at him. The lights shone from the Newsagent's and a van stood outside with its engine running. The park gates were open. Richard went in and sat on a dew damp bench near the Bandstand. He tried hard to think, but no thoughts would come. Logical, progressive, thinking eluded him as if his total mental process had been purged. He watched a thin segment of a blood red sun appear and edge its way through narrow slivers of cloud above the distant roof-line, upwards, ever upwards. It was no use. His mind was quite blank. There was nothing there. What was he to do? What should he do? It did not appear to matter what he did. It would all fragment and fall apart. It would come to nothing.

The sun grew higher and larger, but he sat there, still. People passed, on their way to work, exercising their dogs, walking their children. Some stared openly at him. Others glanced sideways and furtively, slyly and secretively. It mattered not to Richard. Yet, seeing them made Richard feel angry. How was it that their lives seemed ordinary, well ordered and straight-forward? Why were they not pulped and beaten flat by disaster and misfortune? The warmth of the sun seemed to restore a semblance of life in him, yet in that same instance he felt appallingly tired. As he rose and made his way towards Grove Crescent the rigours of the night took their toll. His strength drained away and fatigue took possession of his body. It was but a short distance, but his journey was one long, grotesque and frightening, nightmare. Ultimately, when he had found his key, let himself into both the house and his room, he fell, fully clothed, onto his bed. His head seemed to be bursting with pain as the room spun and oscillated. He shut his eyes. Soon sleep would overtake him. Perhaps he might never wake up.