

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"I really think we are going to have another hard winter," said Mrs Brown from her observation post at the front window. "There seems to be lots of robins about, and the berries are so red. Shall I bring some in for decoration?" Sandra stopped her writing, mid-sentence, and looked up. "I'm sorry. I'm stopping you from working, Dear. I'll try to be quiet."

"I could always take it into the lounge, Mother. It is only a minor article for the paper - on cooking, this week's tips."

"No, no. I'd like for you to be here, on hand, when he arrives. I will be quiet." A sudden gust of wind sent the leaves flurrying into the air, red, brown and gold, shimmering in the late afternoon sun. Still more were stripped rudely from the trees and bushes and came drifting across the window like huge flakes of gilded snow.

"We'll have to have the drive swept again. I really think it would be better to burn the leaves. I know it makes a lot of smoke, but they don't seem to be all that good for composting."

"Oh, Mother!" Sandra exclaimed, looking up again.

"I know," said Mrs Brown. "Its gardening, not cookery."

"Not that! I mean, there must be half an hour to go, yet. Can't you sit down and read a book, or do the dishes, make the beds, or something? Anything?"

"I do not know how you can sit there and be so calm, Sandra. I'm bursting with excitement and anticipation. Are you not excited?"

"I've nothing to get excited about." Mrs Brown crossed the room and sat opposite her daughter and stared at her.

"Yes," she said, "isn't it strange? I use to be the one who remained calm, collected and - but now, well, it has been such a year, hasn't it? Your job; your father's illness; all of Richard's mysterious troubles. How can one stay calm and not get just a wee bit excited? I could have screamed at times. I could still. I cannot believe that it is all over, that he'll walk up the drive, come in the door, and say that he is home this time for good."

"Father believes it," said Sandra, flatly.

"Your father believes lots of things."

"You don't mean to say, do you, that Richard might not come home? Father is absolutely confident."

"Oh, I'm sure that he'll come. I am certain that he is on his way. But will he actually stay? Or will it be a "hello Mum, hello Dad, I'm here for a few days, then I'm off", like last time?"

"Father does not see it that way. I think he was actually expecting the telegram."

"The telegram! What does it mean? What does he mean when he says that he will not be alone? I do think that it is grossly unfair of him to treat his mother thus, but I won't say anything. And I can't help it. I am excited." Mrs Brown stood and circled the room making minor adjustments to the ornaments, pictures, and the smaller items of furniture.

"I don't think he will worry much about the appearance of the house and the orientation of the furniture," said Sandra. "In fact, I am quite sure of it." Mrs Brown bowed to her daughter's observation and stood wringing her hands, staring out into the front garden. "Why don't you make a pot of tea?" suggested Sandra.

"Not until he arrives. Oh! This is dreadful. Why could he not have been more explicit? All we get is a handful of words, a telegram to say he is on his way home, and hopes to catch this or that train. And that he is not alone. What does it mean?" Sandra shrugged and lowered her head. "We know so little," continued her mother. "He never use to be so secretive, not as a child. He use to be completely open about things. It all started when he went to that school and started to mix with those weird people." Sandra looked up and glared at her mother, but Mrs Brown did not notice and continued, "He's barely written more than a couple of letters, and he told us next to nothing when he came home after all the trouble."

"We will just have to be patient, and wait," said Sandra, taking up her article again. "I do not see what all the fuss is about. He will just waltz in, and waltz out again, if you like."

"Oh, Sandra! I wish you'd be a little more accurate and apposite in your descriptions."

For a potential author you are a little loose with your metaphors. You know Richard cannot dance. And when you have a family, you'll learn that sons are particularly important to their mothers."

"As if I didn't know," said Sandra bitterly. "Anyway, I can see no hope of that ever happening."

"It will," said Mrs Brown, back at the window. "You've years of womanhood still. There's no hurry. Why, Richard's not even married yet!"

Richard had, indeed, been relatively uncommunicative on the occasion of his return home from Rochester House. He had woken late on that fateful Saturday afternoon, high in his dingy little room in Grove Crescent. He had packed his bags and travelled straight to Eastgate by train, without a second thought, without looking back. A tearful Mrs Morgan witnessed his departure, mourning the loss, then, of the third of her gentlemen that week as well as a substantial proportion of her lifetime's savings. Such a disaster had never before beset her in all her years of letting rooms.

He had arrived at the Browns' house, dazed, unshaven and tired, telling his confused and anxious parents that he felt unwell, that he had decided to give up teaching, and that he was home to stay if they would permit him so to do. Then he had gone straight to bed. Next morning, before breakfast, Richard had sat down and written what purported to be his resignation, and had placed it in the hallway in a stamped and addressed envelope, ready to be posted. He came to breakfast as normal, but had sat, reflective and quiet, until his father found himself unable to suppress a comment on something he had found in the morning paper. "It must have been a bit of a rough day up your way, yesterday," said Mr Brown, emerging from behind the printed screen. "There were two fatalities, then!"

"Fatalities?" whispered Richard. The women looked up.

"Yes, two - here. One is in the main news, the other in the stop-press."

"Male or female?" Richard asked anxiously.

"Just a minute; let's see. One was in the park. Some school children found a body of a middle aged business man by the lake hidden in some bushes near a Bandstand. Would you know the spot? The police reckon that he'd been there for a number of days. Death was by strangulation." Richard paled and his gaze momentarily met that of Sandra across the table.

"And the other?" he asked hoarsely.

"Then," continued Mr Brown, "there's this bit in the stop-press. It doesn't say much. The body of a young man, a teacher, was found on the railway line near Grove Park early this morning. It is believed that he fell from a passing train and was electrocuted."

"How awful!" exclaimed Mrs Brown. Richard again looked at his sister. She seemed to convulse and thrust her hand between her teeth. "Dennet!" she gasped.

The police called later next day. It was a routine enquiry, unavoidable. They had identified the late Anthony Frobisher and had to trace and interview all of the broker's associates and acquaintances, who were legion, and most of which, it later transpired, had more than enough reason to throttle the unfortunate man. And amongst the potential suspects, they said, was the young man who had fallen from the train near Grove Park, although the police were quick to stress that they were treating this as nothing more than an accident. The dead man, it seemed, had been drinking heavily. Richard told them the little that he knew, made and signed a brief statement, and heard no more.

Other than a request to his father to be released from their agreement, and the repeated statement that he was abandoning for good his career in teaching, Richard told his family little, or nothing, of the dreadful events which had precipitated his return home. Mrs Brown had initially thought that she knew the reason, but she was relieved to find that she was incorrect. "Richard!" she had exclaimed when she opened the door to reveal his dishevelled figure in the darkness. "Thank goodness you are all right. I was so worried about you! I thought that you had not received my letters." Her son muttered something, reached in his pocket, and produced both of them, crumpled, unopened and unread. Somewhat sheepishly he handed them to her.

"I've come home," he said in the hallway. "This time it is for good. if you'll allow me."

“Then you will have no need to read these,” she said, tearing the letters into shreds. “They are quite irrelevant now.” He had left the cause of his return open, unanswered, unexplained. And although Richard was not prepared to say anything beyond “it just didn't work out”, the subject was frequently and extensively discussed by the remainder of the Brown family in his absence. They concluded, unanimously, that there had been some kind of emotional crisis, a severance with Stephanie, and they agreed that in view of this, no questions would be asked of him. Instead he would be allowed to convalesce, recover, and tell them in his time, when he was ready and felt able to do so. Richard, for his part, had nothing that he could initially say. The first few days at home were full of mental torment and turmoil. He found it hard and severely painful to think about what had happened, and impossible to piece together a clear understanding of the shattered fragments of his former life. It had all collapsed at the touch; simply vanished before his eyes. How could he begin to talk about it when he could not understand it himself?

He had one unassailable premise from which to start. There was no question of him ever returning to his teaching post at Rochester House. He might have been rash in tendering his resignation so quickly, but time, and such reflection as he had been able to accomplish, had not modified his attitude, nor the wisdom of the decision. Perhaps his attempts at teaching had been successful; he had achieved encouraging results, but his personal life had been a disaster. To have so mismanaged one affair, and so misjudged another! His belief in himself, as a person of integrity, as a teacher, was gone. His faith in, and opinion of, some of his fellow teachers at Rochester House had been drastically shaken. Then, if he were to return, there would be the memories, the places, the people, the chance of meeting Stephanie. How could they ever come face to face again? No, his decision was right. Even without the new consideration of his father's failing health and the growing dependency of the Brown family on his return home, he could not return to Rochester House. Nor could he seek a reference from Mr Larkins. If one were forthcoming, which seemed unlikely under the circumstances, it would not be worth the paper on which it was written. His career, such as it had been, was at an end.

Yet they nagged and tugged at his heart, these two women who had entered his life. One had walked out on him. He had walked out on the other. Both partings had been hasty, precipitous, and ill-conceived. Both left too many things unsaid. Though his decision to abandon his teaching was clear cut and irreversible, and he could now take shelter behind his father's illness when he was asked for justification, his confused feelings towards Stephanie and Eileen could not be summarily dismissed. Very gradually, but still in those early dark days, he came to the realisation that he would have to go back to see Stephanie. He had to find Eileen, too; to go to North Wales, or where ever she was. If he did not return and see both, the thought of them would haunt him throughout the remainder of his years.

One bright, warm, Midsummer morning, without warning, he left. The decision and announcement were as precipitous and dramatic as had been his homecoming, and his action totally dismayed his mother. Richard had been compelled by his conscience to give a brief and confidential explanation to his father, who thereafter added only token support to his wife's objections. Richard told his father that his personal life was in a mess, but that there was nothing of which he was ashamed. It was not money, nor any other kind of trouble. There were these untidy loose ends which, if not attended to and tied firmly, might remain as an irritation for a very long time. How long it would take, he did not know. What, if any, would be the consequence of his mission, he would not predict. All he would do was promise faithfully that he would return, and that when he did, it was for good and with the object of taking over the running of the business, providing that was still his father's wish. And so he went.

During his absence, which lasted many months, communication with his family was sparse and infrequent. They were given little indication of where he was, nor what he was doing. And now the telegram had arrived, announcing his impending arrival, throwing the Brown household into pandemonium. Mr Brown was out on business when his wife tried to telephone him to break the news, and could not be contacted. Fretting, Mrs Brown had left a message with Miss Logan, although she had been informed by the secretary, somewhat

acidly, that it was unlikely that Mr Brown would return to the office in time. It vexed Mrs Brown that Richard might arrive and his father not be there to greet him.

"Doesn't time go slowly when you're waiting for something to happen! Oh, we should have gone to the station!"

"And hang about all day? He might have missed the train," sighed Sandra. "He wasn't that positive as to which train he would travel on. Please relax, Mother. They say that a watched kettle never boils."

"Do you want a cup of tea, then?"

"Oh, Mother, please sit down!" It was no use. Mrs Brown would worry, pace the floor, watch the drive. Nothing other than her son's appearance would bring it to an end and pacify her. "I do wish your father would come or phone. Shall I phone Miss Logan again?"

Oh, Mother!" exclaimed Sandra.

A fresh flurry of leaves fell mournfully from the trees to lie in the drive. Through and over them, crunching the muffled gravel, came her son, carrying two suitcases. "It's Richard!" cried Mrs Brown. "He's coming up the drive, alone!" Sandra rose slowly and crossed to the window.

"He does look brown," she said dryly.

"Fit as a fiddle!"

"And he is alone." Her mother turned and looked at her, puzzled.

"What does it mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Sandra. "Hadn't we better open the door for him and find out?" Richard had perceived the two women at the window, stopped, and was now gesticulating towards the front door.

This was a different kind of homecoming. Tears, hugs, kisses, even Sandra, who would rather have stood aloof and apart, was swept along by the emotional tide, and submerged. "Come into the lounge," said his mother. "I'm sure that you'd like some tea. We would have made it before but we didn't know what time you'd be here."

"Tea? Not just yet," said Richard. "There is something that I must say to you first."

"Oh, oh!" said his mother, becoming anxious. "Something's happened?"

"Nothing has happened," said Richard soothingly. "Nothing, that is, you need worry about. Please, shall we sit down?" The women did, but he remained standing. "I suppose the first thing I ought to tell you is that I am married." Mrs Brown leapt to her feet.

"I knew it!" she cried, colouring, "Richard, how could you do such a thing? Oh, the disgrace!" He smiled with a calmness which took her breath away and added to her confusion.

"Sit down, Mother, while I tell you the facts, just as much as you need to know for the moment. And don't ask me questions yet. There will be plenty of time for that, later."

"But, this wife of yours?" demanded his mother, back in her chair, but perched on the extreme edge, "where is she?"

"Have you married Stephanie?" asked Sandra, slyly.

"Those sound like questions to me. All in good time! All will be revealed, I promise you. Just sit back quietly and listen to me for about five minutes. It won't take longer." He gave them a brief account of his experiences which culminated in his leaving Rochester House, although he was careful to omit the less savoury details and all mention of Dennet. He told them of Jonathan's illness and of his sad relationship with his mother. He told them how his courting of Stephanie had come to nothing.

"But you're wrong," interrupted his mother. "You are so wrong!" Richard waved aside her objection, and briefly recounted the two disasters that had preceded his return home from London.

"I couldn't decide what to do," he went on, "but I knew that I had to do something. At Rochester House they had talked about marrying the right kind of wife. I didn't really understand what they meant at first, but I think it was that I should be married to someone who was prepared to act out the life of being a teacher's wife, whatever that entails. I somehow couldn't imagine Stephanie as a teacher's wife. The life would have been too restrictive and cramped. Yet I felt that she might have fitted in here."

“She was happy here,” said his mother.

“And, although you never met Eileen, I think she would probably have made a good wife for a teacher. There were times when I felt I could have willingly married either, or both. But I wasn't at all certain that either of them would exactly entertain marrying me. Then, again, there was the thought that perhaps I shouldn't get married anyway. The more I thought about it, the clearer I became in my mind. I realised that I loved both of them, but in quite different ways. If I had to make a choice, assuming that there was a choice there to be made, I had to pick the right one, the one most suited to both me and my future, as I see it. That was not an easy choice. If you want to build a sound house, you must have good footings. If you want to make your marriage into a citadel, a stronghold, a castle which will withstand the ravages, strains and fortitude of life, it must have the very best of foundations.”

“Richard! You do talk a lot of nonsense! Neither your father nor I went through all this twaddle when we met. We loved one another. He proposed to me in the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral. I said “yes”, and that was enough.”

“Yes Mother. Perhaps your choice was simple and clear cut. Perhaps Father didn't have to choose between a courtesan and a morbid widow who had just lost both her husband and her only son.”

“You are too hard on Stephanie.”

“It was her word. The way that she described herself. Yes, I went to see her. She actually found a few harsher words to say about herself at the time.”

“And Mrs Cross?”

“She took some finding, but I eventually traced her through the Estate Agents who handled the sale of her house, using simple deception.”

“It hardly seems fair, to go to see each of them with a proposal of marriage.”

“Ah, but I didn't. I had already made my decision. It would be that one, or none at all. But I had to go and see the other, just to make matters clear, clean and tidy. To get it off my conscience. And to say goodbye.”

“So, where is she, this wife of yours?”

“Is it Stephanie?” repeated Sandra. The doorbell rang.

“There!” exclaimed Richard. “Dead on cue. I asked them to give me a little time while I explained the situation to you.”

“Them? Who is them?” cried Mrs Brown as she ran to the door. “Why, its Arthur! What is going on?”

“Explanations later,” said her husband. “Suffice it to say that I met these young folks at the station, and we waited outside in the car while Richard gave you his address. Now is the time for introductions. Mrs Brown, meet Mrs Brown. I'm sure that the two of you will get on famously together.” Moira stepped back in surprise, then tearfully threw her arms around her new daughter-in-law.

“Welcome to Eastgate, my Dear,” she whispered. “I hope that you'll be very happy.” Behind her, the door swung slowly and noiselessly, shut.

Many miles away, as dusk was falling, the lone dark figure of a woman could be seen as she picked her way through the local cemetery until, among the newer graves, she stopped before one that excelled all others in its neatness and floral decoration. Slowly she knelt and, with a slight rearrangement, placed a fresh bouquet against the headstone. For a moment she was still, head reverently bowed. Then she took a small white card from her handbag, kissed it beneath her black veil, and laid it alongside the flowers. On it were printed, in script, the words;

“In continuing memory of Owen, my Dearest Love”

to which she had subscribed in her own hand,

“And my Darling, Richard”.

The Sun was gone. Night had come, and a new darkness fell over the Earth.

THE END

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