

CHAPTER SIX

Mr Wick interviewed her. He was a short, dark, middle-aged man who, everyone agreed, had done very well for himself in life. Joyce had met him a number of times at social functions before she came to take a seat opposite him in what he described as “the Board Room”. She supposed it was reasonably well appointed, not resembling in the least the photographs of the first class interiors of the Titanic that she remembered from a book Debbie had on great ocean liners. It had a long, dark, polished table with leather covered chairs. There was an equally polished side board which, no doubt, contained the alcohol that soothed the fevered brows of the directors as they sweated over their corporate decisions. Mr Hiller had said that he thought he might make it on to the Board one day although there appeared to be no sign of that happening.

Joyce had to admit to herself that there was something about Mr Wick that she did not like. It was not something he had said or not said. It was not something he had done or omitted to do. It was not the way he looked at her as that was no different to the majority of other men. Perhaps it was his omission of finding someone to marry him? But then, was she unjust as it was not a criticism she had levelled of Mr Pennington? With Mr Wick, she thought, it was different. In some respects he and Mr Hiller appeared to her to be kindred spirits. She was sure Mr Hiller would never have married had a potential wife not presented herself at his front door one day. But Mr Wick remained a bachelor and looked like remaining so as age gradually plucked him from the eligible category.

The company's offices and yard were set back from the High Street on the opposite side, not very far from the Phoenix Tea Rooms into which Joyce would occasionally go at lunch time, and next to a small coach operator's premises who occupied a plot on which Mr Wick had long had his eyes. For Joyce it would be every bit as convenient as working at Woolworth's where she had yet to hand in her notice. She felt quite saddened when the day came for her to do so. The interview was short and very much to the point. She explained her qualifications, all of which appeared to be familiar ground to Mr Wick, and assured him that she thought she could do the job. Mr Wick appeared not to be all that interested and she quickly concluded that he must have another candidate in mind. Perhaps, she thought, she would present him with a means of escape. It would be so much nicer than being told that she was not suitable. “Would it be a problem?” she asked coldly, “with both Mr Hiller and myself working here?”

“A problem?” asked Mr Wick, looking slightly uncomfortable. “What kind of problem?”

“Mr Hiller said he thought there might be a company rule about husbands and wives being employed at the same time.”

“Oh, that,” said Mr Wick dismissively. “That's just to stop hanky-panky in the office. It wouldn't apply in your case.” There was something in the tone of his voice that made her feel there was some other factor, as yet not revealed, that was pre-occupying him. She could not imagine what it might be other than there being someone else more suitable and he was looking for the words to tell her. She was tempted to say that she might want to work there for only a short while if that would have made it easier for him but dared not, not until the school position was really certain. It was one thing her talking about it as if it were cut and dried as Mr Pennington described it, but until she received something in writing she could not assume anything. The awful thought struck her that she might lose both positions and have to start looking all over again. Why, oh, why did he not stop reading the papers he had on the table in front of him and say something? Her thoughts started to drift and she was just imagining the questions she might be asked at an interview for the assistant school secretary's job when he did speak. “When can you start?”

“I beg your pardon?” she said, startled, sounding as if he had made an improper suggestion.

“I asked when you could start?” he replied.

“Oh, I have to give only a week's notice,” she said hastily. “It has to commence on a Monday so it would be Monday week.” As she spoke she wondered if she was being too hasty. Did she really want to hand in her notice before she was certain of the part-time position at the school? Yet Mr Pennington had assured her that it was hers but for the formalities. Could she risk not taking this opportunity? Neither job would be much use without the other.

“Monday week,” he said thoughtfully.

“I don't think I could make it earlier,” she said.

“The accounts are in a bit of a mess,” he said apologetically, “and the year end is coming up.”

“That isn't all that important,” she said. “It is the timing of the auditors' inspection or the Inland Revenue that matter?”

He smiled slightly. “Of course you are right. Perhaps I am worrying unnecessarily. However, I am anxious to start getting things sorted out and there will be a lot of things to show you. Would you be able to work for a couple of hours some evenings next week? I would pay you, of course.” She was conscious that her mouth was open. “It would be all above board,” he added. You would simply start your employment here before you ceased to work for your present employer.”

“There is a backlog of work?” she asked nervously.”

“I am afraid that there is. In fact I have been toying with the thought that I might ask you to work full-time at least until we are up to date, but your husband tells me that you are in line for another part-time job to complement this one.”

“I must admit that is true,” said Joyce, trying to think clearly. So he had discussed matters with her husband. Why had he not told her about it? Was there a chance that he would say “no” if she did not agree to work in the evenings? After all, as far as her family was concerned it would not be materially different to when she went to night school except she would be paid. “I hope to get the position of part-time assistant school secretary at Rochester House. I have been assured that I am in the running but I have heard nothing definite as yet.”

“And that is a position that could become full-time when the present secretary retires? Don't worry, Mrs Hiller. I am well informed. I know several of the governors and I am sure they would not object to me saying that you are indeed in line for the position.”

“There's no guarantee that I would get the full-time job,” she said defensively.

“I don't think that need concern us now anyway. About starting next week? I could meet you here at, say, seven o'clock on Tuesday evening and show you the systems, such as they are, and get you started. And for evening work I will pay you time and a half. How does that sound to you?”

“Very attractive,” she said.

“Is it a deal?”

“Yes,” Joyce said and went home to compose a letter of resignation.

She approached the other interview, when the call came, with much more trepidation than she did the first. Joyce took very special care over every aspect of her appearance before she went to sit before the Headmaster and two of the school governors. “I must say you come with admirable references, Mrs Hiller,” said the Headmaster, beaming at her and receiving the nodding support of his two colleagues.

“Thank you,” she said demurely.

“Now,” he said, “I think we need to ascertain that you are fully aware of the nature of the post and the specific requirements.”

“Mr Pennington did explain it to me,” she said, feeling a little pang of apprehension. Supposing that he had got it wrong and she was being interviewed for a completely different job!

“I think I would be happy and I dare say so would my fellow governors, if we were to go over the duties, just to make sure there is no misunderstanding. We wouldn't want to get off on the wrong foot, would we?”

“No,” said Joyce.

“Now, I should firstly explain that it is a part-time job but that subject to our mutual satisfaction it could become full-time when the incumbent school secretary retires which should be, all being well, sometime next year. She wishes to work to her full retirement age to get her maximum pension, you see.”

“Yes,” said Joyce, turning slightly in her chair so that he could examine her from a different angle. The Headmaster's reaction was totally different to that of Mr Wick who had been, as far as Joyce could establish, completely indifferent. Perhaps the builder was inhibited by the fact that her husband worked for him and was, at the time she was interviewed, only a few paces from the spot in which she was sat. There was no such impediment here and there was something about the way in which the Headmaster had said the words “mutual satisfaction” that made her wonder if there might be more to her duties than those described by Mr Pennington. She did not mind appearing smart, even femininely decorative, if that was required of her. Then she thought of the boys. How many were there? She ought to know. Mr Pennington had said about six hundred. Imagine being adored by six hundred young men! It sounded much better to call them “young men” rather than “boys”. She was then suddenly seized by the thought that she was sounding just like her daughter and tried to put such ideas beyond the reach of her mind.

“The duties are very straight forward,” the Headmaster was saying in a voice normally reserved for Assembly. “They are well set out and Miss Higgins will be only too pleased to explain them all to you. Part of the idea of bringing you in now on a part-time basis is to shadow her so that you will be able to take over full-time when she retires. However, I do not think there is any need for me to go over them in detail here unless you have some specific questions or any misgivings.”

“No,” said Joyce, conscious that they were studying her closely. “That is all they want to do,” she thought, “just look at me. They are not interested in whether I can do the job. Mr Pennington has taken care of that. They just want to look at me and make up their minds whether they want to see me sat every morning in the secretary's office.”

“There are the general clerical and secretarial duties,” continued the Headmaster, “keeping the school records, maintaining registers, timetables of the lessons, and so on. I am sure that Mr Pennington has told you about these things.”

“He has,” she said softly. “In very general terms,” she added quickly in case they felt inclined to ask her detailed questions.

“And there are some accounting duties, such as dealing with dinner money, petty cash, paying suppliers bills, and maintaining the school's cash books. However, I think you will find it all pretty straight forward. Perhaps you could tell us a little more about your background?”

“Where shall I start?” she began. “You will be aware from my application form that I am married and have a teenage daughter who obviously does not attend this school. I went to Dover County High school and was training for the ballet when I met my husband and married him. He had the opportunity to change his job which is what brought us eventually to Bromley. And I had my daughter which put an end to my ballet career before it ever started. I started work during the War and continued afterwards working in Woolworth's in the High Street, but as soon as I could go to night school without affecting my daughter I did, taking book keeping and a secretarial course. My husband works for Wick's the builder, and I have a part-time job there too, keeping the company books and doing general clerical and secretarial duties. I don't think there is much more I can tell you. I know there is still a general feeling that married women should not go out to work and that their place is in the home, but I can assure you that I have gone out to work for years without it having any detrimental affect on either my daughter or my marriage.”

“Oh, I do not think we harbour that kind of old-fashioned prejudice, Mrs Hiller! Do we, gentlemen?” The other members of the board shook their heads in silent assent.

“Can you handle the two jobs together?” said one suddenly. “And what will you do when your job here goes full-time?”

Joyce had expected such a question. “The answer to your first question is an unreserved “yes”. The hours of my job with Mr Wick are very flexible and I can work around

the school hours. As for what I do when, or if, the position here goes full-time, well I have told Mr Wick of this possibility. I will set out to ensure that his books are in order and that there are well established systems that can be followed so that I can hand it all over to a successor."

"He will let you go?"

"I do not see why he should not."

"Good, good," said the Headmaster. "That all sounds very satisfactory. I think that there is no reason why we should confer, gentlemen? None at all! So, Mrs Hiller, there is one final question - when can you start?"

Joyce felt her heart leap at the question which was the second time she had been asked such a thing that month. Mr Pennington had assured her it was a formality yet she had doubted him. And now there it was, at her feet!

"I told you that you would get the job," Mr Pennington told her when she conveyed the news to him. "There was never any real doubt about it. No doubt at all!"

"I decided I must not take it for granted," said Joyce smiling. "So I went looking my best."

"So I have heard."

"It wasn't a mistake, was it?"

"It doesn't appear to have been but I would caution you that you will be virtually the only female in a school with six hundred boys and some twenty-nine masters. I think it would be advisable to dress more soberly when you are at work, especially if you do not wish to earn Mr Crompton's displeasure."

"Mr Crompton?" said Joyce.

"The Deputy Head. Oh, they wouldn't have him on the board or they would never have engaged anyone younger than fifty and with a face like the side of a bus."

"I see," she said softly. "Be that as it may, I am greatly indebted to you. It is all I ever dreamed of."

"Let us hope it lives up to your dreams, your expectations."

"I dare say it will. And although I dreaded the interview, I feel a lot more comfortable taking on the school secretary's job than I do the one for Mr Wick."

"Wick!" said Mr Pennington disparagingly. "I do not like the thought of you working there. The sooner we get you to the school full-time the better."

Joyce wondered at the time why he said that, but concluded it was because when she was in the builder's offices he could not keep a watchful eye over her. After all, was that not the reason why he had lobbied and promoted her for the school secretary's position? "I wonder just how long that will be," she said. "Isn't there a chance that Miss Higgins will ask to work on after her normal retirement age as she won't be on her maximum pension?"

"Ah, I see you have been talking to her. In confidence now, but you are bound to realise this after a short while, the poor woman is unable to cope with the simplest of tasks. That is why this part-time position is being created. The school governors are not able to retire her early without denying her part of the pension she would have received if she worked until normal retirement age, but I cannot imagine for one moment that they will let her work a day over. As for Miss Higgins, she would stay there until she dropped even if she was serving no useful purpose and as it is I anticipate that we will have trouble dissuading her from putting in an appearance once she has been retired. How did you get on with her?"

"She extolled me to dress modestly. As if I would dress immodestly!" Mr Pennington laughed, shook his head and wagged his finger, but Joyce had the wildest thoughts, the kind of thoughts that she had not really had since she was her daughter's age and her innocence was under siege. They were thoughts that she had once tried to lay out in the confessional with shocking results. She had tried to confide with her best friend who had treated her thereafter as a pariah. They were the kind of thoughts that she no longer shared with anyone, not Mr Pennington, not even Michael.

"It all depends upon your definition of immodesty," said Mr Pennington. "What is immodest to a woman may be more than acceptable to a man, and you are a very striking

woman if I may say so, very striking indeed!”

“You may,” she said lightly, “and thank you. I think you can rely on me to dress in accordance with the demands of the occasion.”

“I am sure I can,” he said and the subject was dropped.

Joyce might have faced the school interview with more trepidation than she did the one with Mr Wick, but things were totally reversed when it came to doing the work. At the school there was Miss Higgins, watching, guiding, fussing, acting almost as if Joyce were the child she had never had. There were established procedures to follow, files in which to file papers and ledgers in which to make entries. In the builder's offices she found nothing but chaos. “It is sheer chaos,” she told Mr Wick. “There's no system, no organisation, nothing!”

“Can you cope with it, organise it, you know, sort things out?”

“I expect so, but it is going to take time. You may have to delay the auditors.”

“Oh they are use to it being in a mess,” he said. “In the past I have relied upon them to sort matters out.”

“Haven't you got an accountant?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact I have. You will meet him: a chap called Frobisher, but he works in the City as an investment analyst. He has some pretty useful tips from time to time if you are interested. There is also Mr Brooks who comes in and looks at the books from time to time. Easy to remember him, isn't it? Books and Brooks.”

Joyce shook her head and went to talk to Mr Pennington. “I thought it would be that way there. You will end up working your fingers to the bone sorting things out and not be appreciated in the least.”

“Oh, I don't think that Mr Wick would be ungrateful,” she replied. “It is just knowing where to start and how I am going to get everything sorted out whilst coping with the current work. I can't let that get into a mess. As if is I am going to have to work some evenings just to make an impression on it, and then I expect I'll only be scratching the surface.”

Mr Pennington shook his head, but he did spend the next half hour telling her what to look for and how to organise and record all the documentation. “If you approach it systematically and logically you won't have any major problem. Be thorough and patient. Don't panic as that never helps in the long run no matter how attractive it might appear at the time. Look for all the elements in the audit trail and satisfy yourself you have found all the papers. You will soon see some order arising from your chaos. With creditors, start from the order book, assuming they have such things, and try and tally up the invoices. Don't be surprised if you find invoices without orders, but try and get them into a discipline by which an order is sent every time something is bought: none of this just picking up the telephone lark that goes on now-a-days. On the debtor side, see if there is a list of jobs, contracts or house sales and link your invoices to those. You will find it easier if you give the jobs and contracts unique numbers in the same way as the orders. Do they have a system like that?”

“Not as far as I can see,” said Joyce. “As far as I can see there is no system at all.”

“And no procedures?”

“None that I have come across. Mr Wick says he had an office manager but he left. There is an accountant who works in the City.”

“And how do people get paid?”

“Oh, there is a young cashier who is very good really, but he concentrates on the absolute essentials of seeing that time sheets and wage sheets are completed and wage packets made up. That, together with processing sales and bought ledger invoices takes up all of his time.”

“What does he do with all the documentation, then?”

“Just puts it in a pile and that is where it stays until someone sorts it out, that someone being me.”

“Dear oh dear,” said Mr Pennington. “It all sounds like a successful business that has grown too quickly. It is fine when the money is coming in, but when it stops - .”

“You don't think Mr Wick is going out of business do you?”

“No, I didn't say that, but running the business that way he would not know if he

was!”

“Were?”

“Were. Now, I suggest that in dealing with the backlog you try starting with the last audited accounts. There must be some books that show the position as recorded at that point. Find those and work away from them. It will all gradually fall into place, at least most should. I fear under these kinds of circumstances that you will find gaps, papers will be missing, and it will be rather untidy. I cannot bear things to be untidy. As for the present work, get a grip on ordering and the work carried out. Everything will fall into place once you have done that.”

“I think it is the magnitude of the task I find daunting,” she said. “There is so much to do and I am worried that things are just getting worse day by day. I wonder,” she said lowly, “if I have bitten off far more than I can chew.”

“Nonsense!” said Mr Pennington. “You could do the job standing on your head, if you will pardon the use of the expression.” He paused and then asked, “how are you getting on with Mr Wick?”

“All right, I suppose,” she said, puzzled. “He does appear to be a little odd at times but not in a way that worries me. Why did you ask?”

“No reason at all,” said Mr Pennington, evasively. “I just wondered.”

“Mr Wick is very impressed with the work you've been doing,” volunteered Mr Hiller one evening over dinner. Joyce stopped eating and looked across the table at her husband, then at her daughter who seemed to react at the sound of the builder's name. “He is very impressed indeed. You have made a real mark there. It can only lead to bigger and better things.”

Some months had elapsed since Joyce had plunged headlong into the maze of paperwork she found at the builder's office. She had followed Mr Pennington's advice and worked patiently, diligently, logically and progressively, uncovering in the process that there were several jobs that had not been charged for and many more that had been undercharged. Mr Wick had good reason to be impressed. “I have set up a system which if maintained will ensure that all work, including extras on new houses, is properly recorded and charged for,” she told her employer.

“If maintained?” said Mr Wick. “You sound as if you are about to leave us. That is not the case, surely?”

“No,” said Joyce reflectively, “but you haven't forgotten that I did tell you that I am more than likely to take up a full-time position at the school.”

“No, I had not. It is something I have been meaning to talk to you about.”

“In what way?” asked Joyce, suspiciously.

“I was wondering, as you are doing such a good job here, whether you would consider continuing to work for me, a couple of evenings a week, say? Just to keep the books and maintain an overall check that things are running smoothly.”

“I am not sure whether the school would permit it,” she said.

“Can I take that as a conditional yes?” he replied.

“It is still some way off.”

“So it may be, but I believe in getting these kinds of things sorted out well in advance. As for whether the school authorities will object, I can take care of that. It is more a question of your willingness to be able to do it. I would make it well worth your while. You have already recovered your costs ten fold. It makes me wonder what there is that we have not charged for in previous years that you have not found yet.”

“I hadn't planned to look at previous years,” she said. “I started with just this financial year. I had no plans to look at last year or the year before. I am not even sure where the relevant papers are.”

“They are all up in the loft. The auditors put them there when they've finished with them.”

“I haven't seen up in the loft. It is kept locked.”

“And I have the key,” he said darkly. “I do keep it locked. I don't want any one up

there rummaging about, but I would be quite happy for you to go up there. You will know exactly what you are looking for.”

“I have still quite a lot of work to do to get this year's affairs straight,” she said doubtfully.

“Oh, that is no problem,” said Mr Wick. “If there is gold up there, it will keep. We can talk about it again when everything is up to date and you think you have nearly worked yourself out of a job. For the present I would just like you to think about my proposition of you continuing to work after you have started your full-time job at the school. If you are happy to come in on some evenings I have no doubt I can smooth the way.”

“He wants me to continue working after I have taken on the full-time work at the school,” she told her husband. It was his turn to stop eating.

“How could you do that?” he said.

“He would like me to go in a couple of evenings a week. He says he would make it worth my while and sort out any problems there might be with the school. How do you feel about it?”

“I don't rightly know,” said Mr Hiller exchanging glances with Stephanie. “I suppose it wouldn't be all that different to what happens now. And the extra money is useful.”

“That's all very well,” said Joyce, “but I do think that I am spending my life working.”

“Then we will have to do more around the house to help you,” said her husband. “Won't we, Stephanie?”

“I suppose so,” said her daughter. “It doesn't bother me much.”

“Doesn't it?” asked Joyce softly. “I do feel as if I am never here.”

“But we've got use to that,” said her husband. “It has been going on since you started night school. We've come to adjust our lives to fit in with it. I imagine we would not know what to do with ourselves if you were to suddenly give it up. What exactly would he want you to do? I thought you said you would have everything sorted out before you started full-time work at the school.”

“He has it all worked out. I would keep an overall check on the day to day business and work my way through previous years' papers to see what undercharging there has been.”

“He thinks there has been some?”

“Based on this year it seems certain. He tells me I have already recovered my costs several times over. I just wonder what his clients will think when they suddenly receive a bill for work that may have been done a couple of years ago. I would have thought it would have been more sensible to write off previous years and forget it. Anyway, I was told I could have access to the loft, keep my office key and set the burglar alarm in future.”

“Goodness, you are being trusted! He will be asking you to be Company Secretary next.”

“You are joking of course,” said Joyce.

“No I am not,” said Mr Hiller. “I can see it happening.”

“But I am not qualified.”

“You don't have to be qualified. Imagine that, Stephanie, your mother is climbing a ladder that may lead to greater heights than I may ever achieve.” Stephanie grunted and pushed her plate away from her.

“You haven't eaten all your dinner, Stephanie! Is there something wrong with it?”

“I'm not hungry,” said her daughter sullenly. “And I don't like vegetables.”

“But they're good for you,” Joyce protested. The course of the dinner conversation had changed. Although there were questions still lurking in the back of Joyce's mind, they did not return to the subject and they all remained unasked.

“He says he can iron out any difficulties with the school authorities,” she told Mr Pennington. “How can he do that?”

“Let me get this straight,” said the Mathematics teacher. “Mr Wick is now asking you to continue working for him after you have taken over the school secretary's position full-

time? Why would he do that?"

"Oh, that's simple. I have done a very good job for him. The books and records for this year are almost straight and up to date. I have put in systems for ordering and invoicing. I am looking to put in a system for cost recording as a second line check on whether work has been completely charged for. And in doing all this I uncovered a fair degree of undercharging. He says I have done a very good job for him so far."

"I am sure that you have."

"He would like me to look at previous years to see if there are items of work there that have not been charged for as well as keeping a watch on the current work to ensure that nothing is going wrong. Mr Hiller thinks he may be thinking of making me Company Secretary."

"Company Secretary, eh? That would be something indeed."

"I don't believe it. I would place no weight on it. It is pure speculation. But I must admit I am puzzled by the request. There may be undercharged work from previous years but I can't see his clients being all that willing to pay for it when they think that they've settled their accounts. The more I think about it the more silly the whole exercise becomes. It is almost as if he is trying to hang on to me."

"Perhaps he is. Perhaps what your husband says is correct, that he is thinking of thrusting greatness upon you. And I should correct myself: it would be greatness you earned. Who is the present Company Secretary?"

"Some accountant who works in the City. He did mention his name but I have forgotten it."

"And your family? What do they think of it?"

"Oh!" said Joyce. "They appear to be all for it! Flattering, isn't it? It is almost as if they did not want me home in the evening! My husband says that we could use the extra money, and I am sure that is so. My daughter is indifferent."

"I suppose the truth could just be that he thinks you are worth your weight in gold, which I am sure you are, and simply wants to retain your services. You have not made up your mind yet?"

"No," said Joyce. "If anything I am inclined to refuse, yet the thought of possibly being a Company Secretary does appeal to me."

"You said it was pure speculation."

"I know," she said wistfully. "And so it may be. It may be no more than a mirage, but it has appeared there before me and somehow I feel I may have to go in pursuit of it just in case it is real, just so I know. I wouldn't want to let such an opportunity slip through my fingers. On the other hand I do want to take on the school job."

"Well you do have plenty of time to make your decision. Miss Higgins is not due to retire yet."

"There's no possibility that she will decide to retire early?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Then I suppose that you are right. I only wondered if there was a chance she was thinking of going early as Mr Wick appears anxious to get this sorted out. It is what the school will think of it that worries me. Do you think they would allow it, the moonlighting? That is what it is called, isn't it?"

"I don't know what they would think about it," said Mr Pennington reflectively.

"But he says he can fix that. Do you think that is so?"

"It is quite possible. I would not be surprised. There are circles here where influence can be wielded."

"Circles? What do you mean?"

"There are groups of people, influential people, who have common interests and who meet behind close doors. Mr Wick may have access to the right circles."

"Not the Round Table?"

"No!"

"Do you mean Masons?"

"No, I do not mean the Masons," said Mr Pennington, smiling. "It is hard to explain

as I know so little about it, but just as you might have music circles or drama circles there are levels and groups within the society here, bodies that you are admitted to only by invitation, wheels within wheels. As I say I know little of them except I know that they exist and that they cut across all professions. It is more than likely that Mr Wick would rub shoulders with some of the school governors at these gatherings.”

“But they are like secret societies?” asked Joyce.

“In a way except they are not as formal as societies. They are more like secret gatherings behind closed doors, as I said. Most people would be unaware of their presence, but most of us may well be affected by what happens there. I do know there are some quite wild parties from time to time.”

“Wild parties? Have you been to one?”

“Good gracious, no! They wouldn't ask the likes of me anymore than I would want to go to one.”

“I have never heard of any wild parties,” said Joyce.

“Nor would you be likely to unless you were invited. There are some who think it is a great privilege to get such an invitation. I am not one. But what I am saying is that if Mr Wick has access to these kinds of circles he might well be able to clear any difficulties there may be with the school authorities.”

“I see,” said Joyce levelly. “What do you think I should do?”

“Me? I am not sure that it is for me to advise you in such matters. You have said that the money would be useful, that your family does not mind, that good things could flow from it, and that it could be that it will create no difficulties with your school appointment. I suppose the one thing that might concern me is that it is all above board and that Mr Wick has no ulterior motive.”

“Ulterior motive?”

“You are a very attractive woman, Joyce.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “I don't think that sort of thing has entered into Mr Wick's mind. If it has he has shown no indication of it. I think it is all above board, really I do.”

“Then I can find no reason why you should not go ahead and do it,” said Mr Pennington. “None at all.”

She had Mr Pennington's blessing. There was reluctance in his voice when he gave it as if there was something else he wanted to say, words he wanted to use against the proposal, but which he could not find or formulate.