

## CHAPTER SIX

Richard sat in the office as he read Gwilym's letter. He was not at all pleased with the speed at which Gwilym replied to Eileen's letter. It came by return, so quickly that it seemed it might have been written even before Eileen had walked to the post box and dropped her envelope into its jaws. He suspected that Eileen had telephoned Rhyl, discussed the matter, yet omitted to tell him, a thought that simply added to his worried about her motives. Except Gwilym had not possessed a telephone when he had been up in North Wales. Nevertheless, he was sure that she had been in contact with him, somehow. The letter was well written with a variety of words and sound grammar, not what Richard thought he expected from a workman. It informed them that he, Gwilym, would be pleased to come down. It said more than that. He was packing his bags and would be, by the time the letter arrived at Eastgate, no doubt, on his way! Richard stood and looked out of the window, searching the extremities of the yard, just to ensure that he was not already there.

He was relieved to see that the letter also said that they were not to worry about accommodation whether their house was ready or not. He would find lodgings as soon as he arrived, something he thought should be relatively easy in a seaside town. Anyway, he was accustomed to that kind of thing, and they need not worry about paying him a large wage initially, just so long as there was enough to pay for his digs and to send something home to Megan who had managed to get a job herself. "Pay him a large wage, indeed!" thought Richard. The thought that Gwilym appeared to be ruling out coming to live with them sweetened the bitter pill that Richard assumed he would have to swallow completely. There was also some comfort in that Eileen was pleased by the letter and that she did not appear to be concerned about Gwilym's decision to find lodgings. There was still the assimilation of a new person into the business and into the family circle to be faced and dealt with, but there was this slight hint that matters were changing course, and perhaps he should be thankful for that.

Mr Brown had been surprisingly active since Richard had given his brief after dinner address. Since the heart attacks, he had not been the vigorous, energetic, man he had been before, a fact that Miss Logan pointed out to Richard on the comparatively scarce times that she was prepared to talk to him. Now Mr Brown had spent several days telephoning around and visiting contacts. He had found potential work in all manner of unexpected places. "We will look within a fifteen to twenty mile radius," he told his son, then proceeded to come up with likely work at twice that distance. Richard was not perturbed by this because he knew that the greater the number of tenders they submitted, the greater the chance that they would be successful. He did have some qualms at the thought of a flood of tenders arriving on his desk at the same time but, as things transpired, this was never to happen. Tenders for two new major flat conversion contracts did arrive, complete with their return envelopes and thick, closely typed, specifications. Richard sat and studied them, and was still reading one of them when Gwilym arrived, shepherded in by a curious and slightly hostile Miss Logan. He was carrying a single suitcase, was eager to go immediately in search of lodgings and to write to Megan. Perversely, Richard started to talk to him about the tenders, going over their history and stressing how important he thought it was that they should win at least one. "Can I take one with me, to look at?" asked the Welshman, fidgeting and edging towards the door. "Only I must find somewhere to stay. When I've done that, and let Megan know that I've arrived safely, I can read it. It'll give me something to do."

Richard handed him a spare copy and watched him walk across the yard to the road and turn towards the Town Centre. He felt slightly guilty in that he had not offered Gwilym any help towards finding accommodation. It would have been so easy to tell him where to look, or accompany him. He could even have taken steps to find somewhere for him to go to upon his arrival, even if it was only temporary. Instead something had held him back and he had done nothing. For a moment he was tempted to run after the Welshman, but he told himself that would be silly. He would find somewhere. It should be relatively easy. As for the tender, he wondered if Gwilym would understand all that he read. Megan had often referred

to her husband as a "late starter" as he was one who had left school without any academic achievement and gone straight into the Army. He had learnt a trade and acquired a self-esteem which had unlocked the doors to latent talents he had never expected he had but, as Gwilym had often remarked, it was hard to move from the hourly-paid to salaried staff. Whether he had the potential to make this switch would soon become apparent.

"I think I may have found you another contract," said his father, triumphantly, at dinner. "And this one is something special!"

"Special?" asked Richard, wondering why there was a sad smile on his mother's face.

"Very special, for us both, your mother and I."

"I don't understand," said Richard.

"Mark you it will be very high quality and specialist work," continued Mr Brown. "Nothing like the six inch nails and sawn timber of your flat conversions. And it is mostly internal work."

"So are the flat conversions," said Richard, irritated. "What kind of work is it?"

"Restoring a Stately Home," said his father. "Quite a large Stately Home."

"My father worked there," said Mrs Brown. "Before the War."

"Grandfather?"

"It was before I met your father. Even I worked there for a while as secretary to one of the daughters who went on to become a popular novelist in her day, although I don't think she is read much nowadays. And her husband, well I don't really want to talk about her husband."

"Where is it? At Dover?" asked Richard.

"I think I've found a job!" exclaimed Sandra suddenly.

"Sandra!" cried her mother.

"I'm sorry. I waited until dinner to tell you all and I simply couldn't keep the news back anymore!"

"That's wonderful!" said Mrs Brown. "Don't you think so, Dear?"

"Indeed I think I do," said Mr Brown. "Richard?" Richard was looking at Eileen who, in sharp contrast to his sister's ebullience, was looking demoralised and depressed.

"Yes," he said. "That's great. How did you find it?"

"I bumped into Ken, quite by chance."

"Ken?" said Richard. "I thought he was still away. Is he back for good?" He turned to Eileen. "Ken is an old school friend who is a bit sweet on Sandra," he explained.

"But I am not sweet on him," said Sandra, pulling a face. "You wait 'til you see him, Eileen. Then you'll understand why! Anyway, he is back and with the local force. I think they must have changed the rules because he says he is back permanently and he has asked me to go out with him, although I am not sure whether I will go."

"What about this job?" persisted Mrs Brown.

"It's secretarial, you know."

"I don't."

"Or perhaps I should call it clerical?"

"Sandra! Where is it?"

"At the Police Station. It involves typing up notes and statements, filing, and that kind of thing. I have an interview on Thursday. Apparently one of the girls there has got herself into some kind of trouble and is having to leave. I hope that I will replace her."

"Will you have to join the police force?" asked Mr Brown.

"No," said Sandra, scornfully. "I will be a civilian attached to the force, if I am successful in getting it."

"What is the competition like?"

"I do not know," she said gaily. "I haven't seen any of them! Seriously, Ken thinks that there may not be any competition but I will have to pass a test so I have started brushing up on my shorthand and typing."

"Is that what you were doing this afternoon?" said her mother. "You haven't much time."

"Can I help?" said Eileen, quietly. "I could give you dictation."

“Would you? That would be a great help. Could we start after dinner?”

“Of course,” whispered Eileen.

Richard looked at his mother and thought how things had changed. Two years earlier she would not have entertained the thought of her daughter taking a job. She would have fought it tooth and nail, but now she not only appeared to support the idea, she seemed to be positively enthusiastic about it. He turned his attention back to Eileen who had lapsed into silence again. “Are you all right?” he asked softly. She nodded. She could not tell him that Sandra's sudden announcement had unexpectedly filled her with envy. It was not that she wanted a job herself. It was just the thought that Sandra would be off, doing something that was different to the everyday routine, making a change in the pattern of her life.

“Shall we go away for a holiday?” she said quietly, almost without thinking.

“A holiday?” hissed Richard, reacting with obvious horror.

“Make a break, just you and I. Just go somewhere for a couple of weeks?”

“I couldn't. Not with all this work and Gwilym starting down here. After all, his coming was your idea!”

“Couldn't your father manage for a couple of weeks?” she whispered. Richard was suddenly conscious of his mother's attention. No doubt she was wondering what they were whispering about. He turned back again to Eileen and shook his head. She lapsed into a brooding silence and did not say another word until dinner was over.

“So Gwilym is here?” said his father. “You should have invited him to dinner.”

“He wanted to find some lodgings and get settled down, and to write home to his wife. I thought it would be pushing it a bit to invite him up here as well, on his first night. I did give him a copy of one of the latest flat conversion tenders to look at.”

“What is he like?” asked Sandra.

“He's Welsh,” said Richard, as if that was the answer to everything. The Browns laughed, but Eileen did not join in.

“Arthur, there was something you were going to talk to me about,” said Mrs Brown as, later, they were alone in their bedroom.

“Oh? What was that?”

“I don't rightly know. I just have this feeling, you know - a niggler - that earlier this evening you started to tell me something, then stopped and said you would tell me later!”

He stared across the bed at her with an air of vexed puzzlement. “When?” he asked.

“When what?”

“When did I say that I would tell you later?”

“I don't know. I just have this feeling of anticipation. Don't say you've forgotten it!”

“I haven't forgotten it any more than you have. If you could remember when it was I said it I might have a chance of remembering what it was I was going to say. I suppose I won't be allowed to go to sleep until we've discovered what it is, if it is anything.”

“I know I won't sleep with this hanging over me,” she said firmly.

“Was it at cards?”

“What did we talk about when we were playing cards?”

“I am damned if I know. Was it Sandra going out to work?”

“What were you going to tell me about Sandra going out to work?” she asked with expectation.

“I don't know,” he grumbled. “Nothing!”

“Well, it cannot have been that, then. It must have been something else!”

“I am not so sure that it is a good idea,” he complained.

“What? Me trying to find out what you said you were going to tell me? Really, Arthur, you shouldn't begin to tell me something and then stop, leaving me in the air.”

“I was talking about Sandra going out to work.”

“When?”

“When? Just then!” he hissed with exasperation. “I-am-not-so-sure-that-it-is-a-good-idea. For her to go out to work.”

“Lots of women go out to work these days,” said Moira, pulling a face. “It is not as if

she had a family to look after. It'll give her an interest and perhaps she will meet a nice young man. Certainly one nicer than that Ken. Were you going to tell me something about him?" Arthur groaned and got into bed, pulling the sheet up over his head.

"No I wasn't," he muttered.

"What could it have been, then?" she mused.

"Was it during the News?"

"What news?"

"The News!"

"What was the News about?"

"I can't remember. More of the usual, I suppose. And I'm tired."

"I am not. I feel wide awake! Come on, Arthur. You must tell me what it was you were going to tell me. I don't understand why, if you were prepared to tell me at dinner, you are not prepared to tell me now!"

"At dinner?"

"Why, yes! It was at dinner and - it was about - something to do with Newington House!" Arthur Brown sat up, now wide awake himself.

"Yes! Now I remember. I had started to tell you earlier but we were interrupted. Then at dinner, Sandra announced her news in the middle of what I was saying, and it then went completely out of my mind."

"And what were you going to tell me?"

"You remember that I told you that I had spoken to Lennox and Hartly, the Architects. Well they have been taken over by a much larger consultancy practice. And, as you may have guessed, the principal partner of which is none other than one Michael Bernstein!"

"Not our Michael Bernstein again? The one you worked for and who - I cannot go on!"

"As far as I know, the very one! But there's more. It seems that after the War the House was neglected and allowed to run down. Lady Helen died a couple of years ago and Lady Christina died last year."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Moira. "Neither ever did me any harm, in fact I greatly liked Lady Helen. And I always got on well with Christina."

"Anyway, once Lady Christina was dead the House and Estate passed in its entirety to Michael. And what do you think he has done with it?"

"I cannot imagine! Probably sold it to be demolished to make way for a building development?"

"No," said Arthur, enthusiastically. "He has given it to his daughter, lock, stock, and barrel. She is to have it and the House is to be completely restored! It's a superb contract for whoever lands it."

"His daughter? Did they have children?" Arthur chuckled and made a face at his wife.

"Think, Moira. Of course they did not have children, but Michael had a daughter, didn't he, although it was denied at the time that it was his?"

"Felicity's girl? She has been given Newington? Goodness me! I do not know what to say. Do you know I was only thinking of her the other day when Richard said something about that pretty girl he brought here a couple of times. You know, the one he did not marry."

"Who, Stephanie?"

"Trust you to remember her name! Yes. You will remember that for some reason she reminded me of Felicity. I wonder where she is now. And, as for this contract, are you really interested in going for it. Do you think that you could trust him after what happened before?"

"I do not think it is a matter of whether we can trust Michael. It will be a contract and he will be bound by its terms, but it will be a large and difficult job. And what happened before was a long time ago."

"He was bound by the terms of the contract then and I need not remind you what happened. I have never forgiven him for that!"

"I do not think we will be faced with that as a problem. Finding the right craftsmen

could be difficult. We would have to bring in a number of specialist skills from as far away as London. I think we will do well to get on the tender list, but it will be worth trying. It would be a far better job than these cut and shut flat conversions.”

“It would be ironic,” she said slowly, “if after all this time we end up renovating work that my father did, or rooms in which I sat and worked. Clearest of all I remember the library. Goodness me, that seems so long ago!”

“It was,” said Arthur, yawning. “May I go to sleep now that I have told you? We can discuss it all further in the morning.”

“Yes you may,” she said, settling back and pulling the sheet up to her chin. “Imagine that. Going back to Newington House after all these years. Goodness, it brings back so many memories, both good and bad. There was the way that Felicity carried on and behaved so badly! And the night of the party at Canterbury. Do you recall when - .”

“Moirira!”

“Sorry,” she whispered and lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Arthur was soon asleep at her side but Moira was back in the library at Newington, nervous, being interviewed by Lady Christina, and it was a full half hour before she closed her eyes.

Gwilym arrived early at the Browns' office next morning. Richard found him waiting for him when he arrived, a fact that Miss Logan was quick to point out to him. “That Welshman is waiting for you in your father's office,” she said sharply. “He claims that he is coming to work here,” she added in a tone of disbelief, “but I know nothing of it.”

“Hasn't my father told you?” said Richard, knowing that this would both defuse a frontal attack and greatly annoy her.

“No!” she said, her face turning white.

“Oh, I expect that he will. I had better go and talk to him.”

“I will need all of his papers,” she said sourly. “His National Insurance details, P45 and Holiday Stamp card.”

“I expect he has them and will let you have them later,” said Richard, adding to her discomfort, and relishing in it. Gwilym leapt up from the desk at which he had been sat when Richard entered.

“I was just reading this flat-conversion document,” he explained. “It looks pretty straight forward to me.”

“It is. We just don't seem to be able to win any.”

“On price?”

“We have been as bad as twenty percent above the winning one. The last one was eight percent and that was after cutting everything to the very bone.” Gwilym whistled through his teeth. “That is a big margin when you are trying your hardest. When are you going to make the site visit? That is, if you have not already done so.”

“I thought we could go this morning, but first of all, have you found suitable lodgings?”

“Perfectly suitable,” said the Welshman. “They could not be better.”

“So we don't have to worry about those?”

“Not at all. We can concentrate on these tenders if you like.” As they discussed the prospective contracts, then other contracts and the business in general, Richard began to get the pleasant feeling that Gwilym knew much more than he had given him credit for. It became clear that he understood pricing and had a philosophy akin to that adopted by Richard and ridiculed by his father. He understood overheads and non-productive costs. He seemed to have a good knowledge of outputs and what unit costs should be in certain circumstances. Gwilym demonstrated his knowledge of craftsmanship, a knowledge which turned out to be far more extensive than Richard's, as soon as they went to the visit the hotel that was to be converted and started discussing the practicalities of the conversions. In the space of a morning, Gwilym, unknowingly, transformed himself in Richard's mind from a potential threat to an asset and ally. Richard's sole remaining fear was that he would have to show the Welshman too much deference - his father would have been better equipped to defend his corner.

Gwilym was not out to score points off Richard or anyone else. He had often found himself working for bosses who were significantly less knowledgeable than he was. He knew it was necessary simply to impress them and establish confidence. Richard was a boss, so he had to be impressed and there seemed no doubt that his confidence had been built up. As a consequence, he was more than ready to praise the Welshman's talents that evening at dinner, much to the controlled delight of his wife. "Have you invited him to come to dinner with us yet?" asked Mr Brown.

"Would he be suitable?" asked Sandra, suppressing a grin. "Would he know how to use a knife and fork? After all, he is Welsh."

"Sandra!" scolded her mother. "What do you think, Richard? I would not like to invite him and make him feel uncomfortable."

"I think that Gwilym knows how to conduct himself in most kinds of society," said Eileen coldly.

"Yes," said Richard, taking her side. "I don't think he would have any kind of problem at all. I am very impressed with him."

"Thank you, Richard," said Eileen softly. So it was settled that Gwilym would be invited to dine at the Brown household the following day. Richard spent the evening feeling pleased and smug. A matter of days before he had cast a pebble into the middle of the Browns' personal lake and he could now see the ripples spreading positively in all directions. It was all very satisfying and the best of it, it appeared to have cheered up his wife too. Perhaps things were about to turn for the better?