

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I think that I may have cracked it!" said Gwilym, striding in to the office and dropping a thick document on the desk in front of Richard. "Look!" Richard opened it, picking a page at random. It was clearly a copy, a rather poor copy. The print was blurred yet it was distinctly familiar. There was nothing on the cover and the title and several other pages were missing.

"It is incomplete," he complained.

"Don't you realise what it is?" said Gwilym, excited, clearly bursting to tell him.

"It's a copy of a tender document although I am not sure which. Or whose, for that matter."

"It is Marley and Ellis's tender for the Marina contract," the Welshman hissed. Richard frowned but his heart leapt.

"How did you come by it," he asked.

"Well, there's this fellow I've bumped into a number of times in the evening. We have found ourselves in the same bar a number of times and we got talking. At least, he does the talking. I just listen, and buy him drinks. Anyway, it turns out that he works for them although he is not exactly enamoured with them. It didn't take too much persuasion to get hold of their rates."

"But why should he let us have a copy?" asked Richard, suspicious.

"He hasn't. It is his copy. I have borrowed it!"

"Borrowed it?" said Richard, now anxious as he did not like the tone of Gwilym's voice. "Without he knowledge?"

"He had it with him last night, you see. And as he likes his drink, so I bought him a few and asked if I could look at it. Then I offered him a fiver if I could just borrow it, just for a day, you know. He took the money and when he went up to the bar I took the document. He was so paralytic last night he probably doesn't know what he did with it, but I'll return it to him this evening. If he doesn't remember, I'll say I found it after he had left, or something like that. You don't have to worry. He doesn't know who I am or who I work for, or what I do. You do not have to trade many confidences with an alcoholic. It is mostly one way traffic. Just keep them topped up, you know. Can we use it?" Richard flicked through the pages and his face fell.

"I don't know about alcoholics and confidences," he said, "but I do know that we couldn't possibly match some of these rates. Look at them!"

"Ah! I have not told you about that yet. There's the missing key," said Gwilym triumphantly. "I think we may be able to. Once I discovered who my man was and who he worked for and where he worked I gradually plied him with questions. Nothing overt or rushed, you know. I just teased the information out of him, piece by piece, a little at a time so that he would not become suspicious, patiently."

"And?"

"He told me a number of interesting things." Richard frowned. He wondered if Gwilym was deliberately prevaricating and whether the quality of the information he had would justify the wait. "Firstly," continued the Welshman, "he understands that Marley and Ellis are making plenty of money on this contract."

"At these rates? He has to be kidding!"

"At these tendered rates, and it appears that it is easy money. My drinking companion says that they do not know what to do with it."

"He does? How does he know?"

"He is in charge of the contract."

"In charge?" exclaimed Richard, blinking. "You mean he's the Site Agent? Is he at all sober during the day?"

"I do not know. That's not the issue here. They are making money on a contract won at these tendered rates."

"How on earth do they do it?"

"It is very simple," said the Welshman, sitting on the edge of the desk. "The first thing is that only a handful of the rates are ever used. The remainder appear to have been included for tender evaluation only. And the second, in a word, is extras."

"Extras?"

"He says that the work is constantly being varied by the Clerk of Works and they are getting star rates or dayworks for most of the work they do."

"Well," said Richard bitterly, "that is not what the contract says. At least, that is not my reading of it."

"According to my man, that is how it is applied and that is how they get paid. They win the contract on rates which they can cut simply because most of them have no further significance!"

Richard sat in contemplative silence trying to assess and assemble what he had been told. It seemed unbelievable, but it did explain what had happened and he wanted to believe it. It seemed so plausible now. How else could it have been done, and why had he not thought of it himself? Yet, was it safe to go on the word of an alcoholic? "I don't think my father would allow me to go in at this level of pricing," he said. "I think he would crucify me."

"That is the level at which you will have to tender if you want to break into this field. Thinking about it, you may have to go in even lower but, think of it this way. The tender rates get us the job then a whole new ball game starts."

An element of panic appeared to seize Richard's mind as he looked back at the rates. They slipped out of focus as he contemplated what he should do. There were several days before the next tender was due in, and he certainly had time that day to go through their competitor's tender and abstract their rates. "I am not sure that we would have to go in lower. I think M&E will be tempted to put their rates up, partly to earn a little more on those rates that are applicable, and also to dispel the client forming a view that the contract is highly profitable. I think we could go in ten percent above these."

"Ten percent?" said Gwilym, horror struck. "You said that you were only eight percent high on the last one."

"All right, five percent above these rates on both of the tenders. I cannot suggest that we could go lower than that. That should bring us pretty close to M&E, maybe close enough to win one."

"And what about your father?" Richard looked thoughtful.

"The tenders are due in next Wednesday at noon. I'll leave the pricing until first thing Wednesday morning. Perhaps he won't even come down to the office that morning and I'll file our copies away somewhere other than in the usual place. In that way he is unlikely to see them until late in the week."

"He is going to find out if you win the work."

"We can worry about that then, when it happens." The truth was that Richard did not believe that, even with a large discount on the rates originally submitted by his father which were, according to him, the minimum they could afford, they would win either contract. These smart London contractors seemed to know exactly where to pitch their rates to ensure success. It had occurred to him more than once that all might not be on the level, but Gwilym was dispelling that view. And he had been to the public tender openings, seen the tenders opened, and had heard M&E declared as the winners. Even so, he felt nervous about the prospect of tendering that much lower and rehearsed how he would respond to the inevitable questions his father would ask. In addition, if they were successful he had to find the money to pay Gwilym out of the contract earnings. There was a bottom line. The contracts had to cover Gwilym's costs and their prime costs. Perhaps he could put the rest down to experience.

"Perhaps you would let me take your sister out to the pictures," said Gwilym, "as a reward of sorts?"

"That is up to Sandra," said Richard casually, his mind being on other things.

Mr Brown did ask about the tenders on the Tuesday morning. Richard tried to appear normal and told his father that he had not had time to look at them closely yet, although Gwilym had been doing some preliminary work. Mr Brown was surprised as Richard was normally ready in good time and took price in that fact. He told his son so. Richard found that

he felt even more discomfort, but he stuck to his line, saying that he was thinking of going in at the same level as before, or slightly lower. The truth was, in private he had become bolder as the days had passed since he had seen his competitor's rates, and he was on the threshold, mentally, of matching them, something he dare not tell his father. Nor was he prepared to admit as much to Gwilym. His father grunted and Richard assumed this to constitute some kind of assent.

For the first few days of that week, most of the time at dinner was taken up by Sandra's description of her new job and her account of those events of the day that she felt she could relay to her family. She described the work she had been asked to do; the two other girls, as she termed them, in the section; and the various men that she had so far encountered. Ken, of course, had been a frequent visitor, anxious, he maintained, to ensure that she settled down. To Richard, his sister's work sounded rather mundane, but she placed great emphasis on its quality and importance to the criminal justice system.

"So you have seen quite a lot of that Ken?" said Mrs Brown, a little concerned as to what her daughter might be exposed to.

"Yes!" she said lightly. "He called in again today to see if I was all right. Already the girls are talking about it but I said that it was nice of him to think of me. In fact they are all nice, all except for - oh, I have forgotten his name - he's got an odd name, and he's a bit uggghhh. You know what I mean," she said gesticulating. No-one at the table did exactly, but they all nodded agreement.

"It looks as if we should start making arrangements to move into the house," announced Richard. He had told Eileen earlier that their house was virtually ready but was not certain whether she was pleased or not.

"I thought there was another couple of week's work?" said his father. "That's what Evans told me."

"Well, I think he is stringing it out a bit. It's only minor odds and ends. We really ought to be getting in there, getting the furniture out of store and start making our own home." The truth was he was thinking of his father's reaction to the rates he was inserting in the latest tenders. It would be bad enough facing him during the day without having also to do so every evening. "I also think that if we make a positive move it will get the workmen out; put a little urgency into the situation."

"This house will not seem the same without you," said Mrs Brown sadly. "Especially with Sandra now going out to work. What will I do with my day, left alone here?" Eileen wondered what she would do with her day left alone in the new house. She thought of saying that she would call around to see her mother-in-law as that might be what Mrs Brown expected of her. The houses were little more than a quarter of a mile apart. Yet she remained silent.

"You have always got the garden, Mother," said Sandra.

"That's it! Pension me off into the garden, but what happens when it is raining?"

"You could learn to operate the trains!"

"That is enough of that kind of talk," said her father, gruffly. "Anyway, with Richard at the office, I would expect to be at home more myself."

"Operating the trains," said Sandra, softly.

Eileen was both pleased and puzzled by what Richard had to say about them moving into their house, although she did not tell him. She had thought that moving into the house was akin to a mirage that had floated before her in the desert of her life from the day they had decided to buy it and have it extended. Every time it appeared that a move might be close at hand, Richard had thought of something else to be done, or something else was discovered that had to be done, and her plans would be frustrated. At first she had been fully prepared for what she had to do once they moved in. Now that it was suddenly upon her she found herself totally unprepared. "When do you think it will be?" she asked him later.

"As soon as possible."

"Why the sudden haste? There is a lot I need to do!"

"Oh," he said casually, "it seemed that it was going to go on for ever and I felt it

needed a decision like this to bring it all to an end. As for the things you need to do, so long as we have a bed in which to sleep and the services are turned on, you can do them as easily from the house as you can from here. I think we should move in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? That is ridiculous!”

“Thursday, then? Friday at the latest. It ought to be this week. You do want to move, don't you?”

“Of course I do,” she said, “but I do not understand the haste.” The truth was she did not understand his attitude. He seemed very tense and business-like. There were no terms of endearment or talk as to how happy they would both be in a home of their own. In fact he talked of it as the house and never as their home, but she knew that there were problems at work and he had a lot on his mind. That, she thought, might explain it. It did not explain why he was suddenly in such a hurry to move. His mother would be horrified if she knew that her son was contemplating leaving with only a day's notice! What could have happened to precipitate this? Eileen wondered if he had quarrelled with his father but there was no sign that relationships were strained. It could be Sandra's job, but she could not see how. Nor could she see how it could have been provoked by anything that Gwilym had done or said. Perhaps Richard was just being impetuous. “I will start the preparations and stocking up tomorrow,” she said coolly. “We can move in Friday.”

It was a sheer coincidence that as Eileen was making her preparations to move to a house in Eastgate, Stephanie was finalising her plans to move to Newington. She had accepted an offer on the flat which the Estate Agent, clearly anxious about his fee, had said was too low. Her unwanted furniture had gone to auction. She had paid her bills and settled every affair she could think of. Perhaps some of her clientele were less than happy to see her leave, but she had been firm and had entertained no-one since the day she had written to her mother and accepted her father's gift. Lying in bed for the last time in the flat she paid a last mental visit to the town, following the streets where she had so many memories, some of them good, some of them bad and, she wished, forgettable. Half asleep, she paused here and there to reflect scenes from her past; her walk to her school; now pausing outside a small poorly lit restaurant that had once served inexpensive and unappetising meals in the High Street. It was there, encouraged by the proprietress, she had made her first mistake, if it was a mistake. Had she not gone to his table, so many things would have been different. Yet, it was worth it. The pleasant memories more than cancelled out the pain although she could not help feeling that had she been more attentive and less defensive he might have been accompanying her to Newington.

Where had she gone wrong? He was, perhaps, too gullible, and had been taken in by that woman and her dark, plaintive, eyes. She knew he was gullible and trusting. He had even believed her when she told him that it was her aunt who ran the restaurant! It was a kind of half-truth. She had been use to calling the proprietress “Aunt”, but the plain truth was that she had no aunts nor uncles, at least none she was aware of. There was this growing suspicion that the housekeeper at Newington might be related to her mother in some way. Joyce had been very evasive about her. Yes, he would still be believing that it was her aunt, if he ever thought about it now. She checked her thoughts. Perhaps now, now that she was starting a new life, was the time to rein in those thoughts. She should cease to dwell on him or the times spent with him. All that was part of what would be left behind there when she moved.

Some distance away, through the park, beyond the bandstand, the bushes and the lake, she came in her thoughts to a large dark house, brooding in its own large grounds. She could feel the malevolence and the sense of doom. She had done something terrible there, something that she would regret for the rest of her life. No, she would not enter that house, not even in her thoughts. It was better to think only of the future, of meetings with the quaint, almost comical, Mr Brodie; of going for strolls in the cool of the woods, or in the walled garden; of having tea in the enclosed garden; and visiting the ruins she could see across the valleys. As she lay there she tried to reach them but they remained elusive. Perhaps she could walk there this weekend? Her heart raced at the thought; that it was real; that tomorrow she would take a taxi to the station, get on a train, and probably never come back. And it was silly

thinking of what she would do at weekends. They would cease to exist for her. Everyday would seem like a weekend! She would have no cares, no worries. She would have everything in the World that she desired, except love.

Richard was less fortunate as he lay beside his wife, fearful to go to sleep. A spectre had haunted him ever since he had seen the vision on the landing. She visited him in his dreams. She was there in his waking moments, so vividly he expected to find her lying beside him when he awoke. He half expected her to manifest herself at breakfast, or dinner, or appear at the office. In the street he scanned every woman he saw in case one was she. The pain was acute and he was mortified at the thought that he might give himself away. It needed only one word out of place; something said in his sleep. He could easily betray himself, and never know. He had tried to forget her, eradicate her and her charms from his mind. He had all but succeeded, until that night. Now he seemed to be right back where he started, if not worse. It was all a fancy, he told himself. She was not really haunting him or the house, and would not haunt their new house, either, but she was miles away and probably never gave him a moment's thought. And if she did, it would be with spite and malice, vindictively, unforgiving and with revenge in her heart. But why should she think of him like that? What was there that he had done wrong? She had been the one who was to blame if anyone was. He was the injured party.

Yet the passion that had been released by the vision burnt uncontrollably inside him. The more he tried to suppress it, the more he remembered and dwelt upon, and the more he fanned the flames. This is what Hell must be like, he told himself. And to think that just the other side of the bedroom door lay the landing where she had stood that night!

He turned. Eileen appeared to be asleep, breathing heavily, murmuring occasionally as something disturbed her tranquillity. He tried to concentrate on other matters. He thought of work and the flat conversions, but there was little comfort there, and he soon found himself thinking of her flat. He tried to think of his wife as she lay there, innocent of the turmoil he was going through, warm, curled like a cat beside him. If only he could confide in her but under the circumstance and all that was past, how could he? What was there he could do to erase the memories? Did he really want to erase her memory, or should he set out to live with it and enjoy what he could? There was a world apart in there, inside, cut off from all other worlds, cold and isolated. Fantastic things could happen; almost unimaginable things. Awful, terrifying, things could happen, and he was trapped in it, unable to summon help, unable to escape. It did not matter what he did or thought, there was no escape.