

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"It is all very strange," said Arthur Brown. "Very strange indeed."

"If it is as strange as you appear to make out, Arthur, you appear to be both delighted and excited about it. Please remember your condition."

"All right, Moira, all right. I will take it slowly."

"Good!" she said, turning back to the sink and that evening's vegetables. "I must say," she continued, "I am finding it hard to adjust to there being only three of us now, instead of five. I keep preparing too many carrots."

"I like carrots," he complained.

"Then you can have a bonus this evening. Do you want a raw one now? What is strange?"

"You remember me mentioning the work to be done to Newington?"

"Of course I do! It is not the sort of thing I would forget and I keep on meaning to ask you about it."

"But you forget to do so? I know! Well, I put in a tender with quite high rates, thinking that would be the last I heard of it. It upset me to have to price us out of it, I must admit, but I couldn't run the risk of us getting a third tightly priced contract on top of the two that Richard has lumbered us with."

"Lumbered, dear? Is that the right was to describe them?"

"You know what I mean. They removed the flexibility I would have had to price Newington keenly and that's what annoyed me more than anything else, although I have not said a word to Richard. If he had won one only we would have been all right, but he was just a little greedy and went for the two of them. That is what I meant by lumbered."

"So what is strange?" said Moira over her shoulder, tumbling the carrots into a saucepan. "You sure that you don't want one? It's your last chance."

"What is strange," said her husband, ignoring the vegetables which were being thrust upon him, "is that I received a telephone call today from the architect asking if we would go to a meeting at the House next week."

"At the House? May I come? Just to see what it is like?"

"I suppose you could, though thinking about it, it wouldn't seem proper. Not on this occasion."

"Arthur!"

"Perhaps you could go down later, if we are successful. I assume that we are. Why else would we be asked to a site meeting?"

"So what is strange?"

"That we appear to have won the job at what could only be described as very comfortable rates."

"Arthur, are you so sure that they are so comfortable? How did you work them out?"

"You are beginning to sound like Richard. In this instance we are talking only of daywork and prime cost sum rates. It is hard, although not impossible, to calculate those incorrectly."

"And what does Richard think about it?"

"I haven't told him yet. I knew that if I did I was likely to say that I was annoyed that we had not heard earlier. If we had, I could have withdrawn from one of the conversion contracts. That would have made everything manageable then."

"Are we going to have trouble managing three large contracts? I don't want you having something to worry about. We have to think of your health."

"I have thought it through. I needed to do that before I talked to Richard. I think the most sensible thing is for him to concentrate with Gwilym on the conversion contracts and get this analysis system that he claims is the solution to everything, going. I will look after the Newington contract."

"Oh Arthur! It will mean a lot of driving for you. Is that wise?"

"Oh, it isn't too far. I've had far worse and if I put Walter Jackson down there he will

look after the day to day matters. And the work will be interesting; indeed it will be a most interesting contract.”

“And Richard's system? Is it worth the trouble?”

“That I don't really know. I suppose if it is done accurately it will throw up some useful information in a couple of years time.”

“Then it is a waste of time. He cannot wait that long.”

“At least if it demonstrates that fact to Richard, it is not. He needs to get this particular bee out of his bonnet. He has to learn and he might as well learn now and quickly.”

“And in that time it is putting you under stress.”

“No it will not be, Moira. In fact I am quite looking forward to it all. It could all be very interesting, especially with Eileen working at the office.”

“At least it will give her something to do and get her out of her house.”

“Get her out? Isn't the new house enough for her to do, and why would she want to get out?”

“You know what I mean. There's only her and Richard, and no sign whatsoever of that changing. I think she needs another, external, interest; something to relax her, to ease matters. Then something might happen.”

“Are you telling me that with a new house and garden she cannot find enough to occupy her? What do you do all day?”

“I find things,” she said with a chuckle.

Mrs Brown was correct when she said she considered that Eileen needed something to do. She needed something to take her mind off the matters that were continuing to occupy her thoughts during her waking hours and disturb her sleep at night. There was the solicitor's letter to be responded to, a matter on which Richard had failed to be at all helpful. The latest visit to the Specialist had not been encouraging. She sat at the small desk in the consulting room and had written out a prescription for stronger tablets for the physical pain and said there needed to be further tests before she could be sure of anything. Eileen had bravely asked whether it was serious. The Specialist had simply replied that it could mean an operation. Eileen collected the tablets from the pharmacy and buried them deep in her handbag. She was beginning to wish that she had told Richard earlier, right at the beginning when she first started to feel the discomfort. He had other things on his mind; the business; the house; and possibly more besides. It would be difficult to tell him now, before the tests were complete and she knew the full story. The tablets were powerful and they worked, but they did make her feel even more lethargic than the ones they replaced.

He had brought home details of his scheme for analysing the costs on the conversion contracts and described them to her one evening after dinner was over and they had washed up and cleared away. Arousing herself, Eileen had made some suggestions and said that she thought she might be able to make improvements as time went on. Yes, she said, she was willing to do it; not for pay; just to make a contribution. She hoped, but did not tell Richard so, that getting out of the house and undertaking a regular task like this might improve her mental state and make everything a little easier to cope with. Not only did she look forward to starting, but she began to wonder if she could persuade her husband to take her with him to see the work so that she would have a better understanding of what was entailed.

She also had a new worry which started with the arrival of Gwilym. She had suggested his coming and therefore she felt responsible for the things he did and the consequences of him being there. For a start it was clear that Richard's reaction was ambivalent and she had quickly adjusted to it. He did not want Gwilym living with them, but was more than happy to work with him. That was fair enough. It was understandable that he would not want to share his new home with anyone else especially as it was their first opportunity to live alone together. For a short while she wondered if he was also jealous of Gwilym, but decided this would have been childish and that it could not be. Now a potentially more serious problem was emerging. She had excused Gwilym when he had asked Sandra to go out with him. He was new to the town and lonely. It did not appear to be an unreasonable request. Now he had asked her out again, which bathed matters in a more serious light. What

would Megan think if she knew her husband was going out with a single, not unattractive, woman? Had she not had experience of what could happen between married men and single women, even those as outwardly virtuous as Richard's sister? It was not just Megan who had to be considered, it was what might happen within the Browns if something did go wrong. And, as she saw the man from North Wales as her ambassador, she felt responsible and increasingly anxious.

"Why did you ask me to take you out this evening?" asked Gwilym as he walked, arm in arm, with Sandra along the promenade and away from the pier and the town centre. The sun was now low in the sky and glistening on the pools of water left by the retreating tide. Where they were, away from the sea-front with its amusement arcades and ice cream parlours, the promenade was almost deserted. It had been Sandra who suggested that they walked. She could not confess to Gwilym that she had a morbid fear of going to the Odeon in case they had encountered Ken or his boss. He knew she was going out, because she had told him. She also knew it was his night off as he had asked her in the first place. She had no doubt he would be there, waiting, looking for her.

"I just wanted someone to take me out," she said as lightly as she could.

"Someone? You mean anyone?"

"No, not anyone. Someone who I would like to be with."

"So, you like being with me?"

"Yes, I do!" she exclaimed as if the question had no need to be asked leave alone answered. Gwilym chuckled and pulled her tighter to him.

"We probably make a fine couple," he said. Sandra did not resist or answer and they walked on in silence until they came to a ramp leading down from the promenade onto the wet sands. "Have you ever been deep sea fishing?" he asked. "Way out there? It is great fun and, of course, when you're out there on a boat no-one can see what you are doing."

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "Shall we walk up to the Foreland? We will have to watch the tide as people can get cut off when it is high."

"Oh, I don't think it will be back in for quite a while now," said Gwilym, leading her down onto the wet sand.

"Would you turn away for a moment?" she said suddenly.

"Why?"

"I can't walk across the sand in these heels and I don't want to ruin this pair of stockings."

"Tell me when I can look," he said, turning his back on her.

She did, and they continued their ambulation, leaving two series of footprints behind her. If Ken was out looking for her and picked up her trail, she would not be hard to follow. "It does look as if we are the only people out this evening," he added. "We have the entire beach to ourselves."

"Isn't that strange? A lovely evening like this and no-one is out."

"We are."

"Well, no-one else," she said stubbornly. A flight of slippery concrete steps led up to the breakwater that protected the chalk headland. For Sandra it presented a dilemma; whether to paddle through the shallow water at the foot of the wall or risk the steps.

"We could turn back," suggested Gwilym, but Sandra would not hear of it and opted for paddling, forcing Gwilym to remove his shoes and socks and follow, trouser legs rolled up, in her wake. Beyond the Foreland they came upon a small bay where, under the steep white cliffs, the sand was soft and dry. "Shall we rest a while?" asked Gwilym.

"Just so long as we watch the tide," she said, looking anxiously towards the gentle breakers. "It reaches the headland quite quickly and it wouldn't do for us to be trapped here although I think there may be a spot further along where you can climb the cliff, though with difficulty."

"What would happen if we got trapped here? Would the Air Sea Rescue come and rescue us?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," she laughed. "This bay is tide-locked but the sea doesn't

come right up everywhere here. We would just end up spending the night trapped here, together, which is not something I want to have to do!"

"Not spend the night? Not even with me?" Sandra did not comment, but turned to look at him. "This Ken bloke, is he anything to you?"

"A nuisance," she said, smiling. "He used to follow me around at school and he seems to have taken up doing it again."

"I can understand that," said Gwilym, leaning back on one elbow. "You are very attractive. I find you very attractive, very attractive indeed."

"I don't think that you should say anymore," she said cautiously.

"You may be right, Sandra, but I feel that I should get it out in the open, the way I feel."

"I wish you wouldn't," she said softly.

"I would like to make love to you. There! I've got it out in the open," he said abruptly, looking out to sea and not daring to give her the slightest glance. Sandra remained silent and he was then uncertain how to proceed. "I would like us to make love, you and I. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said quietly, "and I find the thought quite repulsive, almost filthy!"

"What?"

"It! Doing that. It is repulsive. I would rather we did not talk about it."

"You find making love repulsive?"

"Yes!"

"Between men and women?"

"Is there any other way? I don't agree with this free love idea. It makes me feel sick. It is always the same, isn't it? That is all you want, men! They ask you out a couple of times and they then ask for everything. Some don't even have the decency to ask you out! They just paw you."

"I didn't ask you out this time," he said defensively.

"Are you suggesting that because I asked you to ask me out that gives you some kind of licence?" she said, bursting into tears. "What I want is someone to love me for what I am, not what they can do with me in bed or what I look like. And you are married, anyway."

"I cannot help the way I feel. That's the way men are, the way they are made."

"You could at least have kept it all to yourself," she sobbed.

"So why did you go out with me, then?" he asked.

"Not for this," she said, sniffing. "I don't know. Companionship, like when Richard and I used to go out together when we were younger, before he left home. But now he's gone and got married to that Eileen. I bet she thinks of it as repulsive also." Gwilym breathed in deeply.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I just thought it was better to say what was on my mind, so that you knew the way things are."

"Well," she said bitterly. "I have told you what is on my mind, and the way things are. I find the idea of going with a man utterly repulsive and I certainly intend to save myself for my husband."

"And when you are married? What then?"

"That'll be different. If ever I am married I will do my duty."

"The act will be just the same," he said, lowly, reaching out for, but not touching, her hand. "I am sorry, Sandra. I wish I had understood better the way you feel. I would have said things differently then."

"But with the same thing in mind?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "Not really. Perhaps there are things that I could have told you as a man of experience and a friend, things that might have helped you. Now I have spoiled it."

"Helped me?" she said with horror. "Helped me in what way?"

"It is meant to be enjoyable and enjoyed, you know."

"That is just what men say!" she said curtly. "That is just a line used by men to trap

unsuspecting women.”

“No - see now I have compromised myself, but I am not speaking for myself. I am speaking for you, so as to speak. You will now think that anything I say will be purely selfish, simply to advance my cause. That is not so.” Sandra ran her palm across her wet cheeks and stared at the breakers. The tide had turned and each wave edged nearer, closer and closer to where she sat.

“Making love is supposed to be enjoyable. It's natural that it should be else there would be no babies and the human race would die out.”

“I suppose you are going to tell me that having babies is enjoyable as well?”

“That isn't what I mean. Perhaps I should just apologise and leave matters at that. I shouldn't have said what I did. It was unforgivable, but you are a very attractive and loveable person, Sandra. So will you let me give you one piece of advice? Don't ever tell an unmarried man that you find the idea of making love repulsive, especially if he is a man who you might one day marry. Simply tell him that you do not believe in making love before you are married.”

“I don't”

“Then say it. If he isn't prepared to wait for you, he isn't worth having. Nothing turns a man away like a woman who admits she is frigid.”

“I would like to feel differently,” she whispered. “I suppose this is why single girls should not go out with married men.”

He sighed. “There may be a lot that married men could teach single women,” he said reflectively. “Life is not as simple as getting married and just pressing the button, but we had better move unless we want to get more than our feet wet!” This time she took the proffered hand and rose, brushing the sand from her clothes with her free hand. “I would like to think that we could put this conversation behind us,” he said as they retraced their steps. “I won't ever mention it or the subject again and I will honour your feelings. I trust we can still remain friends?”

“Friends?” she echoed softly, as if she did not understand the meaning of the word anymore. Gwilym appeared not to have been affected at all by her rebuff, but she, forced to reveal her most intimate fears and feelings, felt crushed and humiliated. It was almost as bad as him having gained carnal knowledge of her. How could he be so calm about it? This feeling of failure and inadequacy would remain with her for a long time and it would have been easy to banish him from her life. At the very least she would have to be cautious in future, but there was another threat, a bigger threat, which had to be countered and she still needed her knight to carry her colours and assist her in the combat. “I suppose so,” she said quietly, and with some regret.