

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Father Thomas had calculated that his rumour would spread and that the ripples would eventually lap on the shores of Eastgate and come to the notice of the offender, if that was where he resided. He had not mentioned this part of the strategy to Stephanie because it would reinforce her view that there was where her problem lay. He had reasoned that if she thought it was just a local matter, a question of envy and jealousy, she would feel better than she would if she believed it was being perpetrated by the man she admitted she loved. He had, of course, no idea that his message would be so promptly relayed as it was by Wormley. Even without the grave digger's help, and in this respect Miss Logan made no mention of her meeting with him to anyone at the office, the rumour was being recounted to Richard the day after his visit to Bromley. Unfortunately, it was not in the presence of Miss Logan.

"It might explain her rather eccentric behaviour," added his father. "You know, I have still never laid eyes on the woman."

"This Miss Bernstein? What is she like then? Someone must have seen her. Is she some kind of recluse?"

"I don't think so. It appears that she just goes into hiding as soon as there is any stranger around, at that includes me and most of our workforce."

"Well, someone must have seen her - I mean, she does exist?"

"Oh, yes," said his father. "She does exist and if I am to believe the architect's description I regret not having been able to meet her. He says she is young, vivacious and very good looking. But it must be an ordeal for her, and it must have been going on for some time. I am wondering whether they will want to introduce some form of security measures, such as passes or identity cards."

"Wouldn't it be better if she went away somewhere safe while the whole thing is sorted out? That would be the most sensible thing to do."

"That is what I said, but it seems that the police have so little to go on they are using her in the hope that whoever it is will expose themselves. She's what they refer to in the films as a stake out. And speaking of going away, how did you get on yesterday?"

Richard had promised himself that he would proceed straight from Bromley station to the cottage. He would take a taxi and, when his visit to see Mr Pennington was over, he would take another taxi straight back to the station. There would be no detours, no flirting with the past. It would have been so easy to keep to his resolution had he not just missed a return train and found himself with a lengthy wait. Mrs Pennington, wearing a slim, short, navy blue dress, and with the snakes entwined around her wrist, opened the door. "Oh, Richard!" she exclaimed. "Thank you so much for coming. Please do come in and I will see if he is awake."

"I was worried that I might arrive too late," he said, sheepishly.

"No, no," she said, turning on her heels and crossing the main room, "I think he has been hanging on especially for you. He will be delighted that you are here."

A few minutes later he was at the side of Mr Pennington's bed. The former mathematics teacher's face looked grey and drawn, but his eyes were still bright and alert. His wife busied around him, tucking another pillow at his back and smoothing down the turndown of the sheet. "Richard," he said slowly, "you see, she is just the same, fussing over me. A remarkable woman, my Joyce." Mrs Pennington made some kind of noise indicating mild disapproval.

"I will leave the two of you alone for a while. If you need me, Richard, I will be in the kitchen."

"I wanted to talk to you," began Mr Pennington, feebly. "I wanted to see you again after that unfortunate incident."

"You know about it, what happened?"

"Joyce told me."

"Of course," said Richard. "I had completely forgotten that she was there."

"I still feel that you should not have left."

"I don't think I could ever again have looked the Headmaster in the face had I stayed."

"Maybe not," wheezed Mr Pennington, "but times change and so do personnel. He has gone now, and Mr Crompton is Head. You remember him?"

"How could I possibly forget him? Who could? Dennet lived in constant mortal terror of him and was convinced he was the root cause of all his problems. But then, I recall that Crompton was the only one who was supportive in one of my greater moments of need."

"I would have been supportive," said the old man. "I would have been as supportive as a father would have been to a son. I never had any children. I had to draw my comfort from the boys as they passed their uncertain way through school life, but it was a poor substitute. I can see that now. I simply did not meet the right woman until it was too late. Don't make that mistake as well, Richard. Your life will seem empty and meaningless if when you come to look back you have no children. It is a sign of old age, looking back. When you start doing that rather than looking forward, you are getting old. When you find that you look back because there is nothing to look forward to, you are like me, fit only to die."

"Surely not," protested Richard, though a little half-heatedly.

"A few years ago I would have calculated my chances on living beyond seventy to be very good. Now I could not advance myself odds on living until the end of the week. It has all come upon me terribly quickly, much too quickly to let me adjust and order my life."

"It cannot be that bad, surely?"

"I am afraid that it is, and you will humour a dying man by taking his word for it? My mind, it is as sharp and as active as ever it was. I cannot help but think that it is a dreadful waste of a brain, but it is this body. It has failed me, let me down. It is as simple as that. Thank God that I met Joyce when I did. She is such a woman! Oh, yes, don't look so doubtful. I know all about her carrying on, her escapades, her weaknesses. I knew about it before I married her. She also has a lover as well, you know. I shouldn't be telling you this, really, but she has loved this one man almost all her life! Can you imagine that? Years of unrequited love, year upon year! Yet she carries it. She never loved me in the way I adored her, but she has been faithful to me in her way. Respect her, for my sake. She is a most remarkable woman. But I didn't bring you all this way to hear some old fool rambling on about his untidy life on his death bed."

"I have always liked Mrs Pennington," said Richard. "And I am glad that she let me know. I am only sorry that things did not work out better at the school."

"Ah! That is what I wanted to talk to you about. That is why I asked her to contact you. I would not want to have died without saying to you what I am about to say." He paused, closing his eyes. Richard thought he was falling asleep and was just beginning to wonder how long he should sit there before going down to the kitchen, when the eyes opened again. "Where was I? Ah, yes. I was going to say that I spent over forty years in teaching. I saw all kinds of teachers in that period, good, bad, indifferent, autocratic, anarchic, but there was also a small band who were naturals. They appeared to have been born with a latent instinct for it. I believe that you are one such, Richard. I think you may have been born to be a teacher; that it is your vocation in life. I wish - Richard - will you promise me that if the opportunity arises, you will go back into teaching? Good teachers are few and far between, goodness knows. You will make a good teacher." Richard smiled and shook his head.

"I don't know that to be true," he said.

"I know it is true, believe me. And you shouldn't argue with a dying man. Joyce is still there, you know."

"At the school?"

"Yes, although I expect her to have other plans once I am gone - her lover, you know." Richard thought that regardless of what Mr Pennington said, his experience of the school secretary was not exactly savoury and he visualised the possible orgasmic life she might now lead. "But, I must return to why I wanted to see you. Will you grant a dying man's wish? You know - I have told you - I look upon you as the son I never had. Will you grant me one thing?" Richard felt a sense of *deja vu*. He had heard this before, sitting at his father's bedside not two years before. Then he had been full of fear, remorse, duty and love, ready to

promise anything. Now he hesitated.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Promise me - promise me that if the opportunity arises, or if your circumstances change, you will go back into teaching. I would like to ask you to promise to return to it as soon as possible, but that would be unreasonable, and you wouldn't be prepared to consider the lesser request that I am now making. But will you, for my sake, keep it before you, as an option, as an aim, even?”

Richard sat by the bed in silence. He had not expected to have to answer such a question, certainly not one he had not really asked himself. Matters in his life since he had left teaching had been hectic and had fully occupied him; courting Eileen, getting married, going home, buying a house, having it altered and extended, settling in at the business, and thoughts of Stephanie. And here was this link, this unpleasant association of ideas - Joyce, Stephanie, the Headmaster, and teaching. Yet when he thought about it and looked back, it was an occupation he really enjoyed, something he felt at home in. If he examined his reasons for leaving he knew he would find they were emotive and had nothing to do with teaching mathematics. There was no logic in what he had done, and this was a flaw in his character, an Achillean heel. How should he now answer? “I must admit I have never really thought about it,” he said slowly, seeing disappointment appear on Mr Pennington's face.

“If you do think about it, you must remember, and I trust you will excuse me if I say this, that your reasons for leaving and giving up were not exactly professional?”

“No, they were entirely personal,” said Richard, finding himself compelled to relive the incident and feeling still the searing pain of betrayal.

“All I am saying,” said Mr Pennington with great patience, “with great modesty, that those are not the criteria on which to base a decision which affects a lifetime's career.”

“I couldn't leave the business now. My father depends upon me.”

“I am sure that he does and I am sure that you can be depended upon,” said Mr Pennington, rallying and waving a bony hand. “That is not the issue. All I am saying is that you should not lose sight of your profession. You once told me your reasons for not going into the family business. Do you remember? No one is indispensable. I might even suggest that you should be planning your exit from the building industry and returning to teaching just as you would any career move.”

“I cannot commit myself to something I might not be able to carry out,” said Richard, feeling uncomfortable.

“I would not wish to seek to commit you to do anything you did not feel that you could not carry out. Perhaps it is impertinent of me to be suggesting that you make any kind of commitment towards me. Is that how you feel, Richard?”

“No, not at all. I just do not want to make you a promise that I cannot keep.”

“And I understand that, perfectly. I never put you down as someone who would promise a dying man anything. I am only asking you to keep in mind your vocation and try to follow it. Young men can drift, take a wrong turning and before they know it, it is too late. They end up in the wrong job, frustrated and unhappy, and it seems such a waste of potential. I would not like to think that it might happen to you. How is that little wife of yours?” Richard was taken aback. “Eileen?” he said. “She is all right.”

“What would she prefer? How does she see you in twenty years time? How do you see yourself? A local jobbing builder, or a headmaster?”

Richard had to admit to himself that he had not given the subject much thought. He had thrown himself into his father's business to try and purge the memories that were now being resurrected. Now that he did consider matters he was ashamed to have to admit, to himself at least, that he did not want to still be a local builder, scratching around for work, when he was fifty. It might have been fine for his father to do, but he had built the business up from scratch. There was something to achieve there, but where would he take it? “I don't really know,” he said weakly.

A partial smile appeared on the dying man's face. It was as he thought. He had applied logic and deduced correctly. This young man, of whom he thought so highly, had change his career due to superficial motives and it might not be too late to guide him to

realise that. "So," he said, "will you promise to grant a dying man's wish? No!" He waved a hand, "ignore that last statement. It is unfair of me to trade on my predicament, but I will pass on happily if I know that you have not abandoned the thought of returning to teaching all together."

"Yes," said Richard. "I can assure you that -." He stopped and smiled. "I must chose my words with care. I think I can say that if the circumstances permit, I would be prepared to consider going back into teaching. I don't think I could say more than that."

"Will you work towards it?"

"I won't promise that. When I left the school and went home I thought that I would never ever go back. I have come some way in my thinking since then, largely thanks to you. The business, my father, needs me, certainly for the foreseeable future. We have a lot of work in hand and the business is growing thanks to my efforts. I couldn't think of moving out now."

"Do not leave it too late. You may find that you become trapped, unable to escape from the business and unable to get anyone to take you back in teaching simply because of the time that has elapsed since you left."

"That may happen," said Richard. "It is a risk I may have to take." He was not prepared to admit that he had felt a tinge of excitement at the thought of returning to teaching, or that he now recalled with pleasure his early plans and aims. When he looked back, he had enjoyed the first few months. It had all started to go wrong after he had met Stephanie. Ah, Stephanie! How strange that he should be sat there with her step-father! Could he risk asking after her? Mr Pennington might not know, but Joyce would be bound to.

"Just keep it in mind, and don't wait. In the long term I am sure that you will be happier in your chosen profession than you would be in the one you are being forced into. You will remember what you told me when you first started; the reasons why you left home and started teaching. Those reasons are as valid today as they were then. Now, I will change the subject. I have nagged you enough. How are you getting on, and how is your wife? Are the two of you happy?"

Richard found Joyce in the kitchen as she had predicted. He thought that she looked strangely out of place there, but did not say so. "Have you seen Stephanie lately?" he asked nervously. She gave him a strange look, then smiled seductively, causing his spine to tingle.

"I thought that you might ask me that," she said. "I haven't seen or heard from her for some time, but I believe that she is fine. It would not have worked out, you and her, you know," she added, looking him straight in the eyes. "She will never marry. She is not the marrying sort. Now, come and have some tea. He will sleep for about twenty minutes and I am sure that he would like to see you again before you go. Have you the time to stay?" It would be the last time ever he saw the Senior Mathematics teacher.

"Of course I have," said Richard, following her out onto the patio.

He had just missed a train back to Eastgate and there seemed to be more than a little doubt when the next scheduled service would actually run, though he was assured that it would not be earlier than in forty-five minutes time. The ticket collector was vague, but confident about what would not happen, so Richard decided he would walk around. He wandered down familiar streets, past where the small restaurant had been and where he and Stephanie had met so many times. It appeared to be a carpet shop now. It was inevitable that he would come under the shadow of the block of flats, wondering if she was up there, looking down on him as she had once done. It all seemed so sad, that it had come to nothing. Perhaps she was there. He certainly did not see her amongst the young women in their brightly coloured summer dresses he encountered on the pavements. It was inevitable that having come beneath the shadow of the block, he should approach the bell push. He never intended to ring it, but when he looked, her name was not there! Instead what had been her flat was now occupied, if the labels were to be believed, by a man with a suspiciously foreign name. Joyce had said nothing about Stephanie moving but, then, he had not asked her.

Feeling guilty about being there, and convinced that everyone was watching him and guessing his intention, he walked on and sat on a bench in the park. He wondered what was happening in his old lodgings and whether Mrs Morgan's kitchen still housed the beast from the bottom of the Black Lagoon. He was sure that it was one on which they had once sat on

together. On that occasion she had first given him the slightest of hints of what kind of person she was, trying to dissuade him. But he had not listened. Blinded by her beauty he had blundered on, regardless of the harm it was eventually to cause both of them. Yet, would it have made any difference had he known earlier? Probably not. It would probably have made no difference at all. Things would have still turned out the same way, or the might have turned out better. Now she was gone - they could not have turned out worse!

Eileen was waiting for him when he arrived home, the question there, ready, on her lips. "Did you see anyone else whilst you were in Bromley?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Well, there were quite a few people on the platform and the High Street looked very busy," he said flippantly.

"That is not what I meant. Did you see anyone else you knew whilst you were up there? Anyone from the school or where you used to stay?" Richard knew what she was asking, though he could not hide a note of disappointment in his voice when he told her that other than Joyce Pennington, he had not. There was something there, in his tone, in his stance, that made his wife conclude that he had withstood the temptation to go and see Stephanie, and this missed opportunity was what was upsetting him.

Richard was indeed disappointed and his feelings had crystallised on the way home. Until now he had comforted himself with the thought that at least he knew where Stephanie was, even if he did not know what she was doing or who she was with. Now he was suddenly faced with the fact that she was gone and he felt empty and frightened. As he sat on the train, he did not think about what Mr Pennington had asked him or what he had promised, he thought only of his wife and Stephanie. He concluded that his feelings towards Eileen were quite different to those towards Stephanie. When he thought of her, his feelings might have been sexual, but they were more and ran right to the core of his soul. When he thought of Eileen he felt a different emotional excitement. Although Eileen's campaign might have aroused and satisfied his appetite, his feelings were not sexual, but were in some way superficial and inferior. Why had he been so blind, so stupid, so misled? Why had he married her, for he now had no doubt - he could never forget Stephanie. He would love her forever.

"I have to go into hospital for an operation," said Eileen precipitously, gambling on her inaccurate assessment of her husband's current state of mind. "I should have told you before, but we never seemed to have the right moment." For a moment she caught a glimpse of the old Richard, the one who had patiently comforted and supported her, the one who had sat up all night with her ailing son. Yet to her dismay, in the fleeting moment she saw only pity, not love.

"An operation?" he cried. "What for?"

"They have found a growth in my womb. Something that should not be there. It has to be removed."

"Eileen? Why on earth did you not mention it before? Are you in pain?"

"I didn't want to distract you from all the problems you had at work," she replied, noting that again there were no expressions of endearment, no indications of love. "I know that it has been hard and a worrying time for you, getting the new contracts up and running. The right opportunity never seemed to arise, but now I cannot delay telling you much longer. There is one other thing that I must tell you."

"Yes?"

"I may not be able to have children."

"My mother will be upset."

"And you?"

"I? I am more concerned with your health. I know so little about these things. Is the operation serious? Risky?"

"I think there is an element of risk in all operations," said Eileen coldly. "I think this one is pretty routine." She wondered what he was really thinking. Perhaps he was pleased at the thought that she would not have children. It would be easier for a man to leave just a wife

rather than a family.

“When do they think it will be?” he asked.

“Very soon I understand.” She guessed he was now working out how to keep his cost analysis going whilst she was in hospital and convalescing. “That is why I cannot delay telling you. The letter came this morning. I will be in for only a few days, but I will have to take things easy afterwards.”

“And are you sure there is no risk?” She shook her head. “I had better think about getting someone in to look after you when you come out, unless you could go to Mother's.”

“I would rather be here,” said Eileen softly. “I was worried about the work at the office.”

“There's no need to worry about that. Miss Logan can take it on or we will get someone in temporarily. We will cope with it somehow.”

“And I am also worried about the un-vouched cash payments. Will you speak to Gwilym? It is amounting to a tidy sum and I don't want to see it incorrectly allocated as overheads if it not.”

“Why on earth are you worrying about something like that at a time like this? It will take care of itself. Now, about you, is there something I can do or get you? Is there something I should do?”

“Just hold me, Richard - close. I feel a little frightened about it.”

“Perhaps we could consider adoption,” he whispered in her ear as she rested her head on his shoulder. “A boy, to keep the company running and support us in our old age, and a girl to keep you company?”

“We could think about it, when this is all over,” she whispered. The load that so weighed down her heart was beginning to lighten. Perhaps there was hope, for her, for the two of them, after all.