

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Eileen was discharged from hospital a couple of days before Christmas, eight weeks to the day after Mr Brown had been sent home. The contrast between the two of them could not have been more marked. Mr Brown came home lively, happy, overflowing with enthusiasm for life and dismissive of the shadow of the charges that loomed over them. But Eileen, as the curtains were drawn against the dark winter nights that constricted the brief grey days, became more morose and withdrawn than before. Gone was the vivacity she had assumed at the Dinner-Dance. Gone was the drive and rugged determination she had applied to dealing with the question of Sandra's involvement in the police case. In their place Richard found a wall of disinterest, of apathy, as she withdrew into herself. After a period of convalescence she went through the motions of living as each day touched another, cooking his breakfast, ironing his shirts, going to the office, everything she had done before, but it was all as if she had no involvement in any of it. It was as if all the characteristics, all the features, that made Eileen a living person had been removed on the operating table and retained there, in the hospital, or disposed amongst the surgical waste.

"I am afraid it is something that might be expected, Mr Brown," the family doctor told Richard when he went to see him. "It is partly the psychological effects of the nature of the operation itself, partly post-operative depression. It is not at all uncommon in cases like this. I will treat your wife with drugs and would expect her to eventually come out of it. Mark you that can take weeks, even months, in some cases. It is too early for me to form an opinion about Mrs Brown."

Eileen was left, isolated, to pass the Winter in a twilight, suspended somewhere between the living world which she could see but could neither touch nor be an active participating part of, the dark, inner, world that had consumed her in the past, and which now returned to torment and devour her once again. The physical pain slowly subdued but the mental suffering, the realisation of the awful truth, that this was all real, final, irreversible, possessed her as never before. She felt overwhelmed and crushed when she thought of the trial, or of the Lorelie who was, she was sure, even now, serenading, seducing and entrancing her husband from her. And the more she thought of it, the greater became the problem and the weaker became her strength and resolve to do anything. Boiling a kettle appeared to be an ordeal. How could she possibly cope with a problem of the magnitude that another woman presented?

Of course Mr Arrowsmythe might try to cheer her up by appearing cautiously optimistic when he summoned her to his conferences, but she now saw it as all a front, a tactic he employed to stop them pleading guilty, to extend the, no doubt, enormous fees that he would extract from the mysterious Miss Bernstein, and to ingratiate himself with Sandra. It was a charade and she would have had none of it had the decision rested with her. The truth was that the defence was flimsy, based upon hearsay, speculation, or no more than the denials maintained by the accused. From her detached position, Eileen could now see through all this. They would all be found guilty. They would all go to prison. Except Richard for, in her nightmares, his guardian angel would appear at the last minute in the court, armed with masses of incontrovertible evidence that would exonerate him, and would then reach down and bear him off. Only him. No-one else. She, Mr Brown, the others were dragged from the dock and thrown into a pit from which escape would be impossible, never again to see the unbarred light of day. Gradually, as the fantasies increased the identity of the guardian angel emerged and revealed herself to Eileen, triumphant at the end. It was history repeating itself. It was *she* who would rescue Richard and leave the rest of them to their fates. It was *she* who would carry him off, wrap him in her arms, take him to her bed and have and console him. It was *she* who would win in the end. It was all hopeless, quite hopeless.

Richard and Eileen went to the Browns' for Christmas. The assembled family were joined by Gwilym and Megan and their children who had, two weeks earlier, moved into a rented house in Eastgate. Megan had declared an intention to move down permanently if she and the children liked it but faced expressions of doubt at the Browns in view of the

uncertainty that faced all of them in the foreseeable future.

"I don't understand their reasoning at all," said Eileen slowly, sitting wrapped in a blanket, buried in a chair by, and supposedly guarding, the fire. "Unless what Megan wants is to be nearer to Gwilym when he is in prison, but there is no guarantee that he will end up in Maidstone."

"I am sure that none of you will go to prison," said Mrs Brown soothingly. "I think that everyone will get off. The worst that might happen is a fine or some sort of suspended sentence. I mean, there was a story in the papers last week about a youth who robbed a pensioner of her life savings. That's all he got - a suspended sentence! If he can get one, so can you."

"The judge will want to make examples of us all," insisted Eileen. "You will see."

"But you can't be found guilty any more than Arthur, my dear," said Mrs Brown. "I mean, not if you haven't done anything. No I will not believe an English court would send an innocent woman to prison. I do not think you have anything to worry about, personally. Now, can I get you anything before I go and attend to the children?"

The words "arsenic" and "hemlock" sprung into Richard's mind as he came up and overheard his mother's question. He did not hear his wife's answer as he turned to Megan who was sipping a small, dry, sherry. "Oh, it is a matter of great concern," she said, "but Gwilym does not think he will be found guilty or go to prison. It has all come as a most unpleasant shock, just when we thought we were getting everything sorted out. And it is not nice to have something like this hanging over your head, especially for the children, but you learn to live with it. I reckon you can learn to live with almost anything." Richard turned to look at Eileen who was now looking grim-faced, her mouth tightly shut and her eyes downcast. He was contemplating and beginning to regret all the lost opportunities during the all too short period of her vivacity, but he had been too engrossed in his work and then overtaken by the problems associated with the case against them. It seemed that she had slipped through his fingers, back to the state she had been in when her son was ill and she had been nursing him. He could remember the harrowing task when he had guided and supported her then. Was he really prepared to carry and guide her through the long ascent again? "Don't worry, my dear," said Megan, catching the look of anxiety on Richard's face. "She will come out of it. You have to remember that she has been through an awful lot, starting with my brother's death, then Jonathan's, the police matter, and now this operation. But Eileen has always struck me as being strong. She has hidden reserves. Just give her time."

Richard nodded, but he was uncertain whether he was in agreement with either the concept that Eileen would recover or that he should give her time. Something prevented him from telling Megan how he felt about it at that moment; that it was like living with a large, damp, black, negative sponge which soaked up everything he could give, always demanded more, and yielded nothing in return.

"You have to be patient with her. It is very hard for a woman, this kind of operation. I mean, how would you feel if - well you know what I mean."

"Yes," said Richard, studying Megan's face and wondering what she was like to live with. She was not unlike Eileen in appearance, short, dark, not unattractive, with a tendency to be plump when, as now, she was not watching her diet; but Megan was mercurial and he could never say that of his wife. It was a pity, he thought, that he could marry only one woman. There might be something to say for polygamy if only the cost could be met. Then, again, there might be something to be said for remaining a bachelor, as Mr Pennington had done for most of his life. It must be better than having to deal with the moodiness, inconsistency and irrationality that he appeared to find in women and his marriage.

There was his mother, poised and ever ready to single him out and blame him for anything that happened when no-one else was at hand and things went wrong. There was his sister who had been acting very moodily lately, to whom he could barely say a word she would regard as civil. She was not the carefree sister he had once known. And there was Eileen who was now virtually unapproachable.

Yet, somewhere, no doubt having a lovely Christmas, probably laughing and dancing, no doubt overwhelmed with presents from admirers, was Stephanie. Was she the exception?

Was she all that he wanted? Or was she everything to all men? Richard knew that he was not going to have a lovely Christmas. He told himself that he should be happy just to have his wife safely out of hospital and home. He knew that he should have rejoiced that the operation had gone smoothly and was, as the specialist had described it, a total success. He should have been giving thanks that the growth had turned out to be benign and that they had been able to remove it completely. But there, at the onset of the dark mornings and the bitter cold that betrayed the wind's Nordic origins, he felt that they had not given him back his wife, not the one he had married, not the one that had become so desirable, but some other woman, some woman who had been raised from the dead into a sort of half life.

"It is early days," pleaded Megan, looking up into his face. Was she actually reading his thoughts? Was she some kind of telepathic Welsh witch? If she was, perhaps she could muster and use her powers to restore his wife to the person he had known and - no, he would not use the word "loved". His thoughts stopped short of that.

"I suppose so," he murmured. Megan was still talking, saying words that Richard did not hear. He was lost in dark, desperate, thoughts, thinking how much he despised this pathetic, weak, figure that crouched before the fire. He could not bring himself to tell himself that he loved her. What did it mean, anyway? What was the acid test? What made him now think he loved Stephanie and not Eileen? Yet he had loved both of them at times. Yes, he had loved Eileen, but not this creature he was now contemplating. This was not the Eileen he had loved. "And if you don't mind," Megan was saying, "I'll come around and see her every day once the children have started school. I know what to do to look after her. I have done it before."

"That's very kind of you," he said without thinking.

"She needs your strength now, Richard. Before she had lost everything, but this time she will need your support and encouragement, in particular for the next few weeks. Don't expect anything from her in return, and don't expect miracles."

Miracles? The only miracle he would want was for her to change into Stephanie. Megan might well ask him to give this creature his strength, but he was unsure that he could do that which was asked of him. "I suppose I don't expect miracles," he said. After all, miracles appeared to be out of fashion. Life appeared to be just one setback after another. One step forward and upwards was inevitably followed by an uncontrollable slip down the slope, and every such slip brought him closer to the precipice. Life was a never ending spiral downwards and his life followed this pattern closely. Why should Megan be telling him what he had to do for Eileen? Who was going to do something for him? When he thought about it, as now, it all seemed to be an utter waste. Each failure, each set back, did take him just that little bit lower, nearer to utter abject misery. Everything he touched simply fell apart and collapsed; his teaching, his father's business, and his marriage. It probably would have been the same with Stephanie. Oh, it needed a miracle! How he needed a miracle!

"It will be all right in the end, you'll see," assured Megan. He wondered what her concept of "right" was. By and large he appeared to have lost his vision of what was "right" in his world. Perhaps everything would come "right", and he would not know it, nor would anyone tell him.

"I suppose so," he said. She was studying him closely. Megan did not know Richard well, but she had witnessed his dogged courtship of her sister-in-law and had assumed that he possessed great inner strength and determination. Now, as they stood there under the decorations and beside the glittering tree, she began to have doubts.

"Are you all right, Richard?" she whispered.

"All right? Me? Yes, I suppose I am. I was just thinking that this should be a time for thanksgiving and enjoyment. But Eileen, she cannot share in anything."

"And you feel guilty at the thought of you enjoying yourself whilst she cannot? I understand."

Richard nodded, but he knew this was not the truth. It was convenient to have Megan believe this, but his thoughts were centred on himself and someone else, and not his wife. But, then, sometime, sooner or later, he had to think of himself and his future. He could not remain selfless for ever. "Won't she resent us all enjoying ourselves when she is not?" he

asked, keeping the pretence alive. He knew he did not have to ask the question, but why should everyone have a bad Christmas simply because Eileen could not enjoy herself? "We can hardly leave her out of things," he added. "I mean, what do you think she is thinking?"

"I don't know what she is thinking, but I know that she is felling pretty miserable."

"She is not the only one," he said bitterly.

"Oh shame on you Richard!" cried Megan, standing on her toes. "She has been home only a few days. Look at her! It would be bad enough just for her to get over the effects of the anaesthetic, but think of the psychological consequences, too."

"I know," said Richard weakly, feeling that he was about to start sliding again. "The doctor told me it could last weeks, even months."

"And you vowed to love her in sickness. I know. I was there. I heard you!"

"I know."

"Then what is the problem?"

"I don't know. I suppose that I am worrying about the uncertainty and the possible consequences."

"Do you mean her remaining childless? Eileen told me you had it in mind to adopt. Have you changed your mind?" Her eyes narrowed. "Have you told her that you have changed your mind?"

"No!" he said firmly. He did wonder whether his wife would ever be in a fit state to adopt children and then there was the case against them. If they were found guilty would they ever be considered suitable candidates for adoption?

"I am pleased to hear that. I was beginning to wonder just what was going on. Now look at her. Is she not pitiful?"

There it was, that word, or almost it - pity. He did not want to pity his wife. If he wanted to do anything, he wanted to feel warmth and love for her. There was something cold about pity. That was the core of his problem. He recognised it now. He had been afraid of feeling simply pity for her, and no more. How could he give up now, after all they had been through; could he think of it as together? Without saying another word to Megan he went across to where Eileen was slumped and crouched at her side. "Can I get you anything? Would you like some wine or something slightly stronger and more festive? Would you like something to eat or would you rather go home?" He glimpsed the faintest of smiles on her face. There was no more than a tiny upwards movement of the corners of her mouth, but it was the first time he had sensed such a thing since she had come out of hospital. It was enough to lift his spirits and afford him some comfort.

"I don't think I ought to drink anything," she whispered. "And I think I'll stay here, for the present."

"I am worried about you."

"Are you Richard? I know. There's nothing I can do. All I see in the future is a wall of darkness; insurmountable problems, mountains rearing up before us, unscalable. I dread the thought of one day following another, all the same. I feel that there is nothing to look forward to, nothing left for me to live for anymore."

"Don't say things like that," he hissed, looking around to see where Megan was. Everyone else, even Sandra, appeared to be playing blind man's bluff, and no-one appeared to be paying any attention to him. "You've got me." Even as he said it, he realised it sounded presumptuous and made him appear to be a consolation prize for not being able to have and enjoy a full normal life.

"Yes," she said, doubtfully, as if she could not grasp the full implication of what he had said, "I have you."

"I am here," he added, softly.

"Are you Richard? Are you really here?" He could not begin to understand the drift of her thoughts or the perils and terrors that filled them. Her line of thinking was far removed from his and would remain so.

"Yes," he said, "of course I am here. I will always be here." Somewhere distant, standing far off in the future, Richard heard a heavy door crash shut, the echoes reverberating around the galleries of his mind.

“Sometimes,” Eileen was saying, “it seems to be just too much trouble, all this, everything, one day, then another, just too much trouble.” Her voice tailed off and she looked away from him, into the fire. From behind him came the sound of laughter as his father trapped and caught one of the children by the Christmas tree.

“I’ll take you home?”

“No,” she whispered, looking back and up into his face, “just let me be. Go and enjoy yourself with whoever you chose. Just leave me here. I might sleep a little.” Richard stood and crossed the room to where Megan was evading one of her own children.

“She is going to sleep for a while,” he said. Megan looked beyond him.

“Perhaps that is for the best,” she said.

“Caught you!” said a small voice from his side. “It is Uncle Richard, isn’t it?” The mask was stripped off and it was Richard’s turn to go forth blindfolded on that Christmas Day.

Outside the air was still as large flakes of snow fell methodically onto the dark earth, onto the outstretched leaves of the laurels in the drive making the boughs droop and creak under the strain. “If it gets very much deeper you may all have to spend the night here!” announced Mrs Brown with ardent glee, busying herself with the goodies for the afternoon tea. “Isn’t it good, Arthur, to have the house full again? And with children too?”

From the beginning of February, Richard reduced the number of visits he made to Newington House as his father progressively took over his work again. In a way he felt sad because he had gained great satisfaction from the work and from the thought that he was doing something for their benefactress, even if she was paying for it. He clung to the hope that he might meet her, if only by accident, and be able to go home and brag to his father about it but no such encounter took place and he kept to his avowed intention of not seeking her out. He would only attempt to do that when the court case was at an end. Perhaps he would be able to bring her good tidings? If the pattern of his luck changed! Of course, he told himself, this was all based on the presumption, based solely on her demonstration of generosity, that she was, in some as yet un-revealed way, materially interested in the outcome of the case. There had to be a reason there, for her action. “You, young Dick,” he would tell himself as he pointed the nose of the Rover up the drive and waited for the roof line to come into view through the trees, “are a man of Great Expectations.”

It was a setback when the Council passed a motion withdrawing the company from future tender lists until the outcome of the case was determined. Richard wanted to get Mr Vincent, or even Mr Arrowsmythe, to seek an injunction against the decision although no-one was certain on what grounds this might be obtained, if at all. Mr Brown counselled against it, and prevailed. “At least no-one else has taken a similar line,” he said. “As long as we can keep picking up small jobs, we should be all right.”

Richard was pacified, but was faced with what he saw as another threat when Mr Arrowsmythe warned them that as the early June date for the committal proceedings approached, they would each have to devote an increasing amount of their time to the case. “Mr Arrowsmythe may say that he wants to ensure that we are properly prepared for the hearing although he also said it will depend entirely on the judge. I see it as just one obstruction after another,” he complained.

“Actually, it is all the same,” said Eileen. For her the short dark days and long black nights of Winter did not last for ever although they might have seemed to be endless at the time. Gradually, as the dawn peeled back the start of each day and the trees gathered buds, she edged her way back into the living world. No-one, not even Eileen herself, noticed any dramatic change as she followed her slow, relentless, procession towards a new summer. And gradually Richard learned to live with her, to accommodate her moods and ride the daily changes in her attitude and outlook, simply by becoming indifferent. He knew he should have felt concern, or more, but it was not there. It was easy to say things and, in the darker days of the Winter, it had been easy to go to work and hand the problem over to Megan who appeared to know exactly what to say to Eileen, and what to do to make her as comfortable as was possible. It was harder to come home, but frequently when he did he would wonder at the

powers wielded by the Welsh witch in his absence. He once called her that, and she forcibly reminded him that she was not Welsh by birth, only by upbringing. Wherever she had acquired her art, her spells and incantations, spread and liberally laid about the house when he was absent, appeared to work.

Another watched Eileen's slow path to recovery with a worried eye. Mr Arrowsmythe did not want her or any of his clients to appear in court looking or acting as if they might be guilty. He knew that the Eileen he had first met would, in his opinion, be a solid, dependable witness who would resist cross examination if it came to that, and was anxious that she would emerge in time. But what of Eileen herself? At first, with her senses numbed and her perception dulled she did not respond to the many times when Richard was demonstratively cool towards her, but as her Spring edged towards Summer, she was increasingly aware and hurt by his attitude. Megan was there, at her side, trying to smooth things over, telling her that there was the business to run and he had worries about the trial. "He has a lot on his plate, my dear," she would say, "and men are not all that demonstrative at the best of times. You have to ignore it and not let it worry you. Take my Gwilym - ."

Eileen did not want to be lectured by Megan or regaled with stories of her matrimonial crises. After all, she had been married and betrayed before. She recognised all too readily the symptoms. Yet, Owen had returned and remained with her the first time. How ever alluring and exotic that other creature might be, how ever many charms and potions she might have prepared and scattered in the paths of her victims, she could not make a home with them. Here was some comfort as she patiently listened to Megan without contradiction or complaint. And what was it Richard had said on Christmas afternoon? Was it that he would always be there, at her side?

Megan also remembered what had been said on Christmas Day, by her and by Richard. She had thought that the problem had been solved but it rapidly became clear that was not the case. She also thought that Gwilym would not have treated her so badly as Richard appeared to treat his wife; at least she hoped he would not. But she did not know about Richard's inner guilt which compounded each day, increased by the guilt of the previous one. Nor did she realise that there was still the lingering magnetism of Eileen's other woman, the woman who had entrapped and, as far as Megan was concerned, made a fool of her brother; the woman whose fragrance pervaded and sweetened Richard's thoughts whilst it poisoned his wife's. He was still almost paralysed by his fear that he would look at her and feel nothing but pity. No love, only pity, and if that happened, he would know that it had been pity all along, ever since the first occasion they had met when she had appeared and sat before him in the School Hall on Parent's Evening and looked up at him with those sad, beseeching, eyes. If that was true, how could that form a proper basis for a lasting marriage? And, if it were true, did Eileen suspect it? If he concluded that it was the case, how could he conduct himself towards her without revealing how he felt?

Perhaps his mother was right in what she said; that children were essential in a marriage to divert the parent's attention away from one another and to stop them thinking too much about and questioning each other's motives and feelings. It made Richard wonder whether he and Sandra were all that had held their marriage together. To hear her talk that could not be the case, but if it was true, it was now unthinkable in the short term for him and Eileen. What other remedy was there?

Stephanie emerged from her hibernation and the winter to see her first Spring burst and blossom at the Estate. The builders had worked steadily throughout the Winter months and over half the rooms had now been re-plastered and were in the process of drying out or being decorated. Mr Brodie was beginning to press her for decisions about the furnishings and the furniture, joining her for several expeditions into the cool, cold, but dry spaces of the hay lofts. Mr Barnes's lists were consulted and pieces uncovered, moved, identified right down to their final orientation and location, and then re-labelled. There was, at last, progress. It was very interesting. It was very inspiring, but she found that her thoughts were frequently elsewhere, far off at Eastgate, at other times much closer to home. No word came from her father or his solicitors. She waited, day after day, for the blow to fall, for him to confirm that

the Estate and House were no longer at her disposal, or for news of his marriage, but no word came. She decided that she would not ask. She had learned long ago not to court disaster.

Father Thomas became a regular visitor to the cottage, a fact that aroused a good deal of interest with the patrons of the Newington Arms, especially as their Mistress still did not appear at the Chapel on Sundays as it had been generally predicted amongst them that she now would. He always asked her whether she had received any further letters, and whether she had read the small prayer book he had given her. To the first question she could answer "no" with confidence, but she was more circumspect when dealing with the second. Yet she found herself addressing God as a supplicant on behalf of her lover, beseeching him to intercede and have him found innocent. She did this almost unconsciously, without reference or exhortation to Our Lord Jesus Christ or the blessed Virgin Mary, or the Communion of Saints, to whom many of Father Thomas's prayers were directed. And she made a compact with herself, being careful to ensure it was with herself and not a unilateral bargain with God. If her prayers were answered, she would read the prayer book, all of it, cover to cover; each and every word, and out loud.

Father Thomas never once omitted to include Stephanie and, as he had for many years, her mother in his prayers. He, and virtually everyone on the Estate, now accepted without question that Miss Bernstein's reason for moving to the cottage was to escape the effects of the building works. Miss Lightfoot was never slow to tell anyone who would listen just how bad it could be as, in the same breath, she told them, how good the House would be. Gradually the talk of threats to Miss Bernstein's person diminished, subsided, and died out. Only Wormley, secreted in his corner, would mutter dark secrets under his breath, but no-one was any longer interested in listening. Now, as the evenings stretched out and the air grew milder, Stephanie would appear and show small groups of local people around the House so that they could witness the minor miracle that was taking place there. She would have liked to have told them this was all for their heritage and that they should feel a part of it. She would have liked to have announced an intention to open the House and, if Jack Barnes could arrange it, part of the Estate to the public, not to fund its upkeep, but to allow others to admire it and share in the beauty and quality of work that English craftsmen could produce. She had already raided the library and drafted a short pamphlet cataloguing the Estate's history although she was careful not to refer to the Monastery or the gardens there. Neither figured in her grand plan.

Although she might have planned and drafted, and been ready, she could not proceed. Although she could now see that there was a possibility that the work on the House would be completed much earlier than originally thought, and Mr Brodie was talking of August or September, she felt she could not proceed because of the uncertainty she had concerning her father's intentions. They were there to frustrate her every move, to deflate her every plan. There were days when she looked at her effort and asked herself why she was doing all this for him and his wife, why she was there at all. Why was she not back in her flat, or one like it, consulting her diary, preparing for the next client. That was what she had done for many years. That was what she was good at. But it was always the same answer. She had no wish to go back. She longed for a better life and, most of all, she longed for a companion, one companion, to come and share it with her.